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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with

Wally Hall
Little Rock, Arkansas
9 June 2005

Interviewer: Frank Fellone

Frank Fellone: Wally, this interview is a part of the [University of] Arkansas [Pryor] Center for Oral and Visual History's project on the *Arkansas Democrat*. We will transcribe this interview and make it available for those interested in Arkansas history. We will give you the opportunity to review the transcript, at which point you will sign a release. All I need you to do now is tell me your name and indicate by spoken word that you are willing to give the center permission to use this tape and to make the transcription available to others.

Wally Hall: My name's Wally Hall and you may use this tape, this interview.

FF: Wally, thanks for doing this. Let's start out by you telling me where you were born, where you grew up, about your family, and about life in Little Rock, and at Central High School, specifically.

WH: I was born in Searcy [Arkansas]. My family immediately moved to California for three years and we moved back, I think, to Newport. My dad was a meat cutter, and we lived in Newport. That's where I went to first grade, then we moved to Little Rock. I went to Robert E. Lee Elementary School, West Side Junior High, [and] Little Rock Central High. I have two sisters. I graduated in 1968—hail to

the old gold hail to the black—still love my alma mater. I went to UCA [University of Central Arkansas, Conway] for a year. I quit UCA and started UALR [University of Arkansas, Little Rock] in 1969. In December of 1969 they had the military lottery reenacted and I won—I was number 121—and my boss, Orville Henry, encouraged me to join the [United States] Air Force. He said [that] it's harder to get shot when you're 20,000 feet above ground than it is when you're on the ground. So I took all the military tests and decided on the air force. I was an air traffic controller. I was honorably discharged after three years, seven months, seventeen days, two hours and twenty minutes. [It was a] great experience, but it wasn't what I needed to be doing. At that point, I went back to UALR and started selling real estate part-time. In my journalism class—I had no intention of going back into journalism, but I needed one more class to be full-time. I took a news-writing class. They announced the *Democrat* was looking for part-time help. Since I was a horrible real estate salesman, I needed the money. The GI Bill wouldn't pay all my bills, so I came down here on Friday nights, and Friday nights grew into Fridays and Saturdays, and the next thing I knew I was working full-time. In 1975, I took a job for The United Press International [UPI] in New York City. I moved up there—first month was great, like a paid vacation. The next six months were hell. I just didn't blend in too well. At that point, I returned to the *Arkansas Democrat* and started school again. I worked here about two years and I got fired. They said I missed an assignment, which I didn't, but it was a wakeup call for me. I spent two years working for the Arkansas School for the Deaf, and John Robert Starr hired me back as investigative reporter—not

sports. About five months later, the sports columnist, Jim Lassiter, left, and his job came open, as did the cCapitol bBureau. And a little known fact here—Starr called me in and he said, “You can have either job you want, sports columnist or the cCapitol bBureau chief, and I’d rather you went to the capitol. I will give you a raise if you go there. If you take the sports job, I won’t.” I took the sports job. I had broken a story on a chain-letter thing and had some threats. I was newly married at the time, and it made her a little nervous when people camped out in front of our house. I took the sports job in 1979, and in 1980, I believe, Todd Gurley, the sports editor, went to work for Southwestern Bell [Telephone Company] and Starr called me in and said, “You know, this would be a great way to be your own boss. You can do both jobs”—I was writing five columns a week and thought that was pretty taxing—“plus I’ll give you a raise,” and he did. And I assumed the sports editor’s role, too. He gave me a \$5-a-week raise.

FF: Wally, a \$5-a-week raise to what?

WH: I think that put me at \$210 a week. And that was in 1980 and 1981.

FF: You mentioned working for Orville. Tell me a little bit about working for the [Arkansas] *Gazette* while you were in high school.

WH: This was actually in college. I was full-time. I was more of a glorified agate clerk than anything. I took call-ins. I never went out and covered anything. I wrote stories from information people gave me over the phone. I would take dictations, usually from some of those wild and crazy guys that just rambled as fast as they could and you were supposed to keep up with them. It was a great learning experience.

FF: Now, tell me a little bit about being at Central High School in the 1960s. Who did you go to school with? What was the atmosphere like? Was there any lingering—was there any—I'm searching for the word here—any lingering aura of the crisis ten years earlier? [Editor's note: The crisis referred to here is the 1957 integration crisis at Little Rock Central High School.]

WH: Yes, things were a lot different then than they are now. We had not made the greatest progress, but *Look* Magazine came in—I was there for the ten-year anniversary. They gave us a great passing grade in the progress we had made.

FF: You grew up in Little Rock . . .

WH: Yes

FF: What was Little Rock like growing up in the 1960s? A lot different than it is now, I suppose.

WH: Sure. It was much smaller, safer—you could walk to the swimming pool, War Memorial Park. I think we would save our allowance starting in January so we could get a season-long swimming pass for \$5. You know, save that quarter-a-week allowance. I also had paper routes for both papers growing up. I was a delivery boy in high school for a drugstore. I've always worked.

FF: You said that you worked with the Deaf School for a couple of years. Tell me how you wound up over there, and tell me about working with and for Houston Nutt, senior.

WH: When I left here, I went to work as a copywriter for a kind of real estate [and] public relations company. And they put out a nationwide magazine poll,

“Homes,” I think, was the name. I was writing the copy. I don’t know if you remember the short story we read in college, “Bartleby.”

FF: “Bartleby the Scrivener?” [Editor’s note: “Bartleby the Scrivener” is a short story by Herman Melville.]

WH: That’s what it reminded me of. Every day I’d go in and I was staring at a blank wall with no windows. I was miserable. They were nine months behind. I took the job, and a month later we were caught up. There was nothing to do but work, so I just cranked it out as fast as I could. I was talking to Houston Nutt, Sr., you know how it is, he said, “Oh, you can’t do that forever. You need to come over here and work for me,” and so I went over there as a dorm parent. A year later I got promoted, and I was kind of like the dean of boys, overseeing the dorm parents. And it was a great experience. It was tremendous, I really enjoyed it, but then I had the chance to come back here and, as they say, the rest is history.

FF: Back to 1980, you were writing five columns a week and you were the sports editor in the beginning years of what some people call the “Great Little Rock Newspaper War.” Tell me what it was like to work here and to have to be as hotly competitive as you were every single day.

WH: Well, in sports, we—I guess I came up with this strategy—we—nobody could touch the *Gazette* with the Razorbacks. Orville [Henry] was in tight with [University of Arkansas Athletic Director] Frank Broyles. The *Gazette* had that sewn up. Everybody expected to get the Razorback news there. We weren’t going to surrender any ground—we tried to make up some, but we took more of a grassroots approach starting when I became the sports editor. We really stepped

up our high school coverage, the old AIC [Arkansas Intercollegiate Conference] coverage. We started putting on softball tournaments. We did a lot of things that were just grassroots.

FF: Do you think it worked?

WH: We won the war, so it certainly helped.

FF: Well, do you think it—that may be a leap—do you think it—are you saying that people were tired of reading about the Razorbacks, exclusively, and they wanted to read about other sports?

WH: No. I think we offered more than just the Hogs. We offered the equal coverage to Razorbacks, although people didn't know that. We had the same 100-inch front page stories on Mondays as the old *Gazette* did. And it wasn't Orville—it wasn't his take. He was a master at what he did. But we began to step up, and we hired Bob Holt. Bob was a Missouri graduate. We put him in Fayetteville full-time and Bob really brought a new element. Things began to change in Fayetteville. When I began [as] sports editor, Lou Holtz was the coach [of the University of Arkansas football team], and everything was the same. A few years later, he was gone and Kenny [Ken Hatfield] came in. Kenny and I hit it off and developed a good professional relationship. [Eddie] Sutton and I hit it off because I love basketball. And he used to really like the fact that I liked basketball more than football. That meant a lot to him. Some trust was developed between the University of Arkansas and the *Democrat*. Then Sutton left and Nolan [Richardson] came in. Of course, we weren't close. I don't think he was really close with anybody, and probably shouldn't be. But that beat began to change—

and I don't want to get too far ahead of myself, but the *Gazette* sold, and shortly after it did—or maybe even before it did—I think before it did—well, let me back up a little bit. We made a critical hire in the early 1980s. We hired Randy Moss, from the *Gazette*.

FF: The horse racing writer . . . ?

WH: That's right, and Randy was considered the best. We made a run at him [and] we were able to hire him. I think he stayed four years before moving to the *Dallas Morning News*, and that kind of was a statement. I don't think the circulation went up a lot, but it made a statement to the people that we weren't going away, that we were for real. Now, we were doing other things in the newspaper, too, but I wasn't as worried about them. I was worried about what was going on in sports. And they gave—they pretty much gave Randy *carte blanche*.

FF: Was Randy at the *Gazette* at the time?

WH: He was.

FF: He was hired from the *Gazette* to come to work?

WH: Right.

FF: And it was not typical for people to go from the *Gazette* to the *Democrat*. It was typical for the other thing to happen, for people to leave the *Democrat* for the *Gazette*.

WH: Exactly.

FF: Let's talk for a minute about some of the colorful characters you encountered maybe before the newspaper war, which had its own colorful characters. Tell me a little bit about Fred Morrow.

WH: Fred was eccentric.

FF: He was the sports editor?

WH: Right, and a columnist.

FF: And a columnist.

WH: And he hated administrative stuff, so he wouldn't come into the office. He pretty much worked from home and mailed stuff in. I remember one time—and he was a truly gifted writer—a talented, talented writer—we hadn't heard from him or seen him in three or four days, and somebody got an envelope in the mail that had four columns in it. He had mailed it from somewhere in—I want to say maybe Missouri, but it might have been Iowa. And, you know, he was just *there*. He sometimes mailed his columns in, and we continued to not see him for another ten days. But he was truly gifted.

FF: Any other particular characters from that time before the newspaper war started that you recall working here who were memorable and want to tell us about?

WH: Well, let's see, Kim Brazzel was here, and he eventually went to the *Gazette*. He was a piece of work. His claim to fame was [that he was] the loudest belcher in the world. He was a practical joker and he was always getting up poker games. I remember we were working late one Saturday night, and we finally got the paper out, and one of the owners came through—not Mr. Hussman [Walter Hussman, Jr.]—this was in the seventies [1970s]—one of the owners came through, and Kim said, “We got a hot seat for a cold butt here, sit down!” He was very colorful. Of course, that was the same time you were working here! You were

quiet, though, you weren't that colorful. You were studious. Tony Moser came on the scene about that time. Pat—forgive me, Pat—Pat . . .

FF: [Bannigan?]

WH: McHughes.

FF: Yes, I remember. He was colorful.

WH: Yes, always drifting in and out—here—gone. You know, we were such a distant second in the newspaper war in the mid-1970s that we—before Mr. Hussman, and especially before Griffin Smith came, if you could breathe and get to work—and would work cheap and work hard—you had a job.

FF: Which says something, I think, about the both of us, but never mind.

WH: Exactly.

FF: That may be. Then Walter Hussman bought the newspaper and, eventually, brought John Robert Starr in here, and things began to get tumultuous. How tumultuous, and in what ways—how was it working for Starr? Tell me.

WH: It was the best of times and it was the worst of times.

FF: Tell us the best.

WH: The best was his spirit of adventure, his fearlessness, his love for the written word. You know, the man was the managing editor and wrote seven columns a week, which I always thought took away from his administrative part. But he and I—he, not me—he became very competitive with me. That was later, that was when things began to change, but I'll never forget we had a consultant come in the early 1980s. Starr came into my office—or my cubicle—and he said, “What are some of the things you've always wanted to do?” I said, “What do you

mean?” And he said, “You know, I’ve always wanted to climb Matterhorn,” he said, “but I’m old now and I’m not going to. What have you always wanted to do?” I said, “I’ve always wanted to run with the bulls in Pamplona, Spain.” He said, “See how much it costs!” I said, “What?” He said, “Our consultant thinks you have a smidgen of talent and [we] need to start taking advantage of it and doing things the other newspapers are not doing.” Before that—the year before I did that—I did that in 1985—in 1984 the Razorback basketball team went to Japan and Hong Kong to play in a tournament, and we were the only newspaper that went. I remember dictating columns every day long-distance, and it was fun. Those were some good times.

FF: You went—ran [with] the bulls in Spain?

WH: Right.

FF: That’s a dangerous thing.

WH: I won’t do it again.

FF: You did it once.

WH: I did it once, they—the Spanish people didn’t like American people very much at the time, which I didn’t know. [President Ronald] Reagan was hung in effigy on almost every corner there. I think it had something to do with our politics with Cuba. But as we were about to turn—you only run this thing about a hundred yards because there were so many people and—I hadn’t really intended to run the first day. I was going to watch. The first day was always the most crowded—I was going to watch, and I was sitting on this barricade and was pushed into the street. They had three rules back then—I don’t know, they may still have them—

no drunks, no women, and once your feet touch that street, you're not getting out. You had to pay the tax. I think it was twenty-five *pesetas*, or something like that. As soon as my feet hit that ground there was a guy there. He took my money [and] gave me a red scarf, which, you know, you tie around your waist. I still have it somewhere at home, I think. But as we were turning the last block—and for some reason this is part of the sport, the women sit on the balconies and spray water on these cobblestones which get real slippery—[as] we were turning the last corner, this guy tripped me. We were maybe forty or fifty yards ahead of the bulls—maybe less than that—and I caught myself on my hands and came up and I saw him duck into a doorway. As I was running by, I reached out, grabbed him right around at the shoulder, and he came out, and I jumped in the doorway. And a bull nicked him right in the shoulder. I thought, “I’m dead. This whole crowd would turn on me.” [But] it was the Red Badge of Courage. He was so proud of that.

FF: Oh, because he was wounded?

WH: Yes.

FF: He was hurt by a bull, so he was the guy.

WH: Typical male—started showing it to all the females that were coming out of the houses. He showed them he had been gored.

FF: You also ran—rode a bull for this newspaper, in a rodeo.

WH: Old Dracula.

FF: That was Starr’s idea, too.

WH: That was Starr’s idea—he was pretty brave with my butt.

FF: Yes, he was.

WH: He set it up when Paul Denton brought in the World's Toughest Rodeo. I actually trained on those mechanical bulls and got some lessons, and the night that we were supposed to do it—I'm a little competitive—and I intended to stay on the bull. They were cinching me up, and they put a lot of resin on the glove to help you.

FF: To make it stick?

WH: Yes. And for some reason, the guy started cinching me right across the last joint on my hand, where my fingers would just be barely on it. I said "What are you doing?" He said "Well, that's tradition. We do that with all first timers." And I thought, "Okay," you know, I'm naïve, I didn't know. I think I lasted two and half seconds.

FF: And you were trying to stay on for seven to ten seconds?

WH: Seven seconds. I was going to stay on, but when I lost that grip—I mean, I was flying. In fact, I landed in horse manure.

FF: You weren't hurt?

WH: No, just my pride.

FF: Just your pride. Of course, that was another—that was another technique, dare I say, stunts to get the attention of readers in this town because nobody paid any attention to the *Democrat* at that time.

WH: Right.

FF: Why was that?

WH: Well, we were still an afternoon—no, I guess we'd gone mornings by then, but we just—there was a stigma.

FF: A stigma about reading the *Democrat*?

WH: I think so. We were considered more blue-collar and I don't think back then that—I think by 1980 or 1981 people began to notice us, but I'm not sure they really took us seriously until 1983, 1984. When we were publishing in the mornings and did things like hire Randy Moss, and started stepping up our coverage in other areas, and Starr beefed up political coverage because that was his love, people tended to notice.

FF: One of the things that was happening in the newspaper war newsroom was an explosion of the size of the staff.

WH: Oh, yes.

FF: And it happened in sports as well, right?

WH: Yes, it did.

FF: Were there lots of qualified sports writers and copyeditors out there? Or were we hiring people who may not have had all the qualifications?

WH: I think there were a lot of people hired right out of college with no experience and we became a training ground. People came and went fast.

FF: Some of them worked for the *Gazette*. Do you recall any [in] particular that were bitter or anguished when they left us to go to the *Gazette*?

WH: It was so long ago, I really don't know.

FF: Kane Webb?

WH: Kane left. I think we are so fortunate to have him back over here, he is so gifted.

Oh, you know, I need to tell you this. I'm a little out of order here. You know who my first boss was, when I came to work here in 1973?

FF: I have no idea.

WH: John Brummett.

FF: John Brummett!

WH: He was the assistant sports editor for the *Arkansas Democrat*.

FF: He was the assistant sports editor? What, as assistant sports editor, did he do?

Was he—was he mostly an administrator, or did he cover games, or what?

WH: He did the layout and design.

FF: He did the layout and design.

WH: [He] came to work at 4:00 in the morning.

FF: Because it was an afternoon paper?

WH: Right. I think he was nineteen—I was twenty-three or something like that. I

knew his name because I think he had worked in Conway—I knew his name.

And I was hired as a wire editor. I was just out of the air force, I had six months experience—talk about [being] green.

FF: He was the sports writer.

WH: Yes, I would come in and—it was pretty simple what we were looking for back

then—but I told John, “John, I really want to be a writer.” And he said “You

know, what you need to do is write.” So I would come in the mornings—on the

payroll—and work, and at night I would go out and cover games on my own time.

I remember the first feature story I did, and it was a great lesson. John just took

it, crumpled it up, and threw it away. He said, “That was awful. That wasn’t even a good start.” He made me rewrite it about five times, and he was right, it was awful. And he—in a way he was not real personal about it, but he was a good teacher. Now he’s a great political columnist.

FF: Now, back in 1973, Wally, was this before the newspaper was computerized, even?

WH: Oh, yes.

FF: So things were being typeset upstairs by guys on Linotype machines, essentially.

WH: I remember we’d go to a road game—like to a Razorback game in Lubbock—and we all had to take our own—we had to buy them ourselves—portable typewriter, and I think—I can’t remember—Telefax—Teleram? Remember that thing we’d stick paper in?

FF: Some kind of a fax machine.

WH: Yes, but this was pre-fax like we have now. It took six minutes for one sheet of paper—and more times than not, we had to re-send it.

FF: Seems like you would want to be dictating instead of using that.

WH: Well, that’s what—when ours broke, we ended up doing that because they didn’t replace it. I would say—I think that weighed forty pounds. It was really delicate. You couldn’t check it, so you would end up with maybe fifty pounds worth of luggage on every flight, not including your suitcase, which you had to take, too.

FF: That must have been really tough on deadlines.

WH: I’m sure it was. [It’s] probably why I write so fast now.

FF: You were talking about taking dictation of people in the field. Can you remember the name of an old boy from Conway who used to call in all the time with sports scores and information on games?

WH: Yes, [a] crotchety guy.

FF: Yes.

WH: Joe . . .

FF: Joe something. [Editor's note: His name was Joe McGee. He worked for years for the *Conway Log Cabin Democrat* newspaper.]

WH: Yes, and he didn't slow down. He just talked like we're talking right now and you were supposed to keep up, and if you didn't, he would yell at you.

FF: Right.

WH: "You call yourself a newsman, and that's as fast as you can type?"

FF: So, it would be easy to say that things are easier now because of technology and so forth?

WH: Oh, yes. Absolutely.

FF: No doubt about it.

WH: My computer weighs four pounds.

FF: Yes.

WH: And I can send a story in twenty seconds.

FF: Talking about Lubbock—of course, one of the things we did back then was take the Southwest Conference football and basketball tours.

WH: Absolutely.

FF: But help me remember, was it mostly the football? I mean, was basketball—were there basketball tours, *per se*?

WH: No, they had basketball days. We would go for two days and you had to have everybody interviewed quickly. It was a football conference.

FF: Sure, sure.

WH: If you were football, you got on that bus and went all over Texas.

FF: You went to Waco, and Lubbock, and . . .

WH: We would fly to Lubbock and fly to Fayetteville; everything else was a bus trip.

FF: When you say “we,” that was you and a bunch of other sports writers?

WH: Twenty-five to thirty.

FF: Twenty-five to thirty sports writers from newspapers, television—and radio people as well, or mostly newspapers?

WH: Mostly newspapers. There would be some television people.

FF: So you probably knew some of the—gosh, let me think—you knew Blackie Sherrod?

WH: Oh, sure. He was my hero.

FF: Tell me the names of some of those other famous Texas sports writers, if you can.

WH: Let’s see. Well, who was that man? Jack something from Houston—it’s been so many years. He was the Orville Henry of Houston. Jack Gauaghen?

FF: Mosely?

WH: Not, Joe, Jack . . .

FF: I’m thinking of Joe Mosley.

WH: Yes. I can't remember Jack's last name. Of course, Randy Galloway and I became really good friends over the course of the years with all the travels.

FF: Skip Bayless?

WH: I got to know Skip. So many of them are still there, and when Arkansas played Texas at Austin a couple of years ago, I got to go. It was like a homecoming. It was great. You could drop me off at any Southwest Conference town, blindfold me, and I could find great Mexican food. That's my love—my passion for food is Mexican.

FF: I recall us dealing with something funny in the sports section once. Of course, you were a lot younger then.

WH: Oh, yes.

FF: You went on one of these trips, and in a column you described how grueling and tough it was. [There] was a "before and after" picture, and the before picture was the photo of you, and the after picture was a photo of David Hawkins, our chief editorial writer at the time. Whose idea was that?

WH: I asked him if he would do it.

FF: And he agreed, of course, because he had a sense of humor, too.

WH: Sure. I was probably thirty-five and he was sixty-five, so it was an obvious difference, and he scrunched his face up and tried to look as old as he possibly could. It was funny.

FF: We could—well, here at the newspaper it was possible to be funny.

WH: We definitely had to have a sense of humor.

FF: Because . . . ?

WH: People didn't take us as seriously at first, and we used to always hear—I got so sick of hearing—three things are forever in Arkansas: the Arkansas Razorbacks, the *Arkansas Gazette*, and Worthen Bank.

FF: What do we have left? One out of three, right?

WH: Right.

FF: And that's a state-supported institution, so it's likely to be here forever.

WH: I think so.

FF: Yes, yes. The landscape has changed in journalism here.

WH: Oh, you know, I worked at the *Gazette* in 1969, as I told you, and it had an air of professionalism. You saw a lot of ties and white shirts. I came here in 1973 because if I had gone back to the *Gazette*, there wouldn't have been the opportunity to write. I don't remember—because I went during the Vietnam crisis, I think they would have had to hire me back. I wanted to be a writer, and I would have been back on the desk. So I came here with that intention of learning to write. But, you know, I was—I remember one morning we were hiring a new copy editor or layout guy and the door flung open at 4:00 in the morning, and he skipped into the room. He had a ponytail down almost to his behind, he was wearing overalls with no shirt, he had no shoes or socks on . . .

FF: His name was Bob.

WH: Bob Merrick, and he ended up being the best man at my wedding. Now he's the chief designer for the *Kansas City Star*. [Laughter] He was the kind of guy the *Gazette* would never hire—gifted [and] talented—but he was one laid back hippie.

FF: He was, indeed. Tell me about Orville coming over here. That was a huge development in the newspaper war. You were sports editor at the time.

WH: [Laughs] Yes, I was. I remember I walked in the front door—this is something nobody knows, this has never been told before—I was scheduled at 3:00 that afternoon to have a vasectomy.

FF: [Laughs]

WH: I walked in the door that morning, and Starr was waiting [for] me at the elevator. Waiting—and he [said] “We’re going to Walter’s office. You’re going to have the final say.” I said, “In what?” He said, “Just shut up, and listen, you’d better say ‘yes’.” I said, “Well, I thought I had the final say.” And he said, “You do, and it had better be ‘yes’!” So we walked in Mr. Hussman’s office, and he started complimenting me on how well our sports department was doing. We had really grown. We had hired a lot of—basically we were going around hiring a bunch of Mizzou [University of Missouri, Columbia] graduates—and they put out a daily newspaper in college. And the only pay they get is their beat, so they are very competitive. The harder they work and the better they are, the better their beat. We had really, really started to improve, I think. The circulation gap had closed. Anyway—long story short—Mr. Hussman said, “Wally, we have an opportunity to hire Orville Henry. I do not want to do anything to disrupt your staff, because you have built a good staff. If you think this will hurt it, let’s not do it.” And I said, “Well, I think I can handle that, and I think it would be good for us to hire Mr. Henry.” He said, “Well, he’s—he knows—it’s clear to him that if we do this he works for you.” And he said, “We’re going to do it. We’d like to have a press

conference at 3:00.” Well, there’s no way I was going to say, “No, we can’t do it then! I’m having a vasectomy!”

FF: [Laughs]

WH: And I took that as a sign from God that I wasn’t supposed to have that surgery.

FF: [Laughs]

WH: I was relieved; I might have wanted to hire him so I wouldn’t have to have that vasectomy.

FF: Wally, was that 1985 or 1986—do you recall?

WH: I do not remember specifically, the late 1980s, though.

FF: And what kind of a seismic shock was that in this town?

WH: I think it caused a huge stir, verbally. I think—I remember that [right after we] hired him on that Sunday, we inserted in every newspaper—that we put into racks, not the ones that went to homes, but were in the racks, in the convenience stores and on the corners—a card to subscribe—a prepaid card, all you had to do was fill it out and mail it in—and if I remember right, we got two back. If my memory serves—and I may have just dreamed it, but I think that I asked Larry Graham, [in] our circulations records, “Well, did we have any cancellations?” And he said, “Two.”

FF: So, it evened out.

WH: It was a wash. But it was a statement to the people of Arkansas that we were for real. We weren’t going away. And I think what that did probably helped us with advertising. It gave us credibility. Orville Henry was, I think, forty-eight years in

the business when we hired him. I drove to Fayetteville to meet with him, and we were out [in] the sunroom that he had . . .

FF: I guess he lived in Fayetteville . . .

WH: Yes, he lived in Fayetteville. Shortly after that he moved to Malvern, but we met and he said, “I understand that I work for you.” And I said, “Mr. Henry, you will never work for me.”

FF: A lot of people have no idea [who] we think this guy was. So, describe what kind of an institution he was in Arkansas.

WH: Well, a lot of people give him credit for the survival of the *Arkansas Gazette* during the integration crisis.

FF: He was.

WH: They supported integration, and the old *Democrat*—I guess it was the owners back in 1956, 1957—were against it. Or maybe they were neutral on it—I don’t remember. But circulation in the *Gazette* just plummeted. And that was the beginning. I think Orville had been there four or five years by then, and they gave him *carte blanche*. They said, “You do whatever it takes to sell newspapers.” He became an institution. He and Frank were close to the same age . . . [Editor’s note: Orville Henry had been at the *Gazette* for fifteen years in 1957.]

FF: Frank Broyles?

WH: Frank Broyles. The athletic director, who was football coach at the time. In 1957 his career was just starting in Arkansas. They both loved golf; they both had large families; they had a lot in common. Frank always flew to Little Rock on Sundays for his TV show. Orville was always the one who picked him up, sat through the

show, and took him back. The rest of the media only got Frank for about ten minutes after the show. So Orville had exclusive material every Monday, and became an institution. In fact, I still believe he did more to build the name of Arkansas Razorbacks than Frank Broyles or anyone else because he took the Hogs into everyone's home.

FF: You mentioned earlier that every Sunday after a football game, both newspapers would have a 100-inch story. For those who are unfamiliar with the way newspapers work, that is an enormously long news story on any event, not to mention a football game. You don't see that now. Tell me why it was done then and why it's not done now—how things have changed in the way newspapers cover sports.

WH: Back then, it went on page 1A. You know, like [if] the president had been assassinated or something. And no other state did it but Arkansas. You didn't go to Houston—see the *Houston Chronicle* with a front page [phone rings] story on—can you turn that off, I'm going to get this call.

[Tape Stopped]

FF: Alabama? Would newspapers in Alabama ever . . . ?

WH: Not on page one. No. Not in Nebraska.

FF: It was unique to Arkansas?

WH: I think that started in 1957 when they were trying to sell newspapers, and we had to emulate it. Actually, I was the one who campaigned to get the game stories off of page one because I didn't—I have never seen a sports story that warranted page one coverage.

FF: Wally, let's get back to that 100-inch thing. That is a huge story, and what I . . .

WH: The average game story now is probably thirty inches.

FF: Right. And I wonder how many words 100 inches would be?

WH: 2,700? 3,000?

FF: 3,000 words, maybe, could be. I mean, that's not exactly a novel, but it's definitely in the short story category.

WH: And consider this, when we had that old Teleram—or whatever it was called—when you could only send one page and it took six minutes, that was about six or seven pages worth of copy. You were talking an hour of sending, if every page went through the first time.

FF: Did people read that stuff?

WH: I think so. But back then, there weren't as many games on TV. You know, you had one ABC Saturday game of the week. So the only way people could really keep up with the Razorbacks was through the newspaper. And I think the coaches' shows were vastly more popular back then because they showed so much video of the games that people had not seen—had not been able to get a ticket for. You know, probably the majority of the Razorback fans have never seen more than two football games in a row. But they love them—you know, they can sit there in Crossett [Arkansas], and they can cheer for them, and pull for them, and love them. I think the advent of TV—their expansion—especially ESPN [Entertainment and Sports Programming Network] has changed the way a lot of people view newspapers. We've had to change the way we do things, too.

FF: One of the changes from where I sit is that we cover a lot more of what we used to call minor sports.

WH: Yes we do.

FF: We cover a lot more girls' and women's sports. We cover a lot more participatory sports. Tell me why that is.

WH: There's been a huge growth, especially of soccer and softball, and there are Spring sports, and, you know, even though there are more sports, more teams, more games, there are not a whole lot more sports writers. So we're stretched pretty thin at times. The cost of—the average person doesn't know, but the cost of newsprint—what we print the newspaper on—has gone through the roof in the last fifteen years. So even though we've had to cut back in the number of pages, as have papers all over the country, we've had to increase our coverage because there's an interest.

FF: Tell me about some of the mistakes you made during the newspaper war.

WH: No. [Laughs] I made tons, I made tons of mistakes.

FF: Something stand out?

WH: You know, I don't know if this was a mistake or not, but it was the beginning of the end of the relationship between John Robert Starr and myself. Arkansas had just lost to Texas Tech. Jack Crowe was the coach, and just he and I were standing there, and he said—everybody else had left. . .

FF: You mean Crowe and you are standing there?

WH: Yes, outside the locker room. All the other reporters had left. And he said, "We've got one game left, and I'm not sure what to do." They had a quarterback,

a good kid, but he just couldn't pass very well—his name was Peanut Adams. I think he's a state trooper now. Good kid, but couldn't pass. And I said, "Why don't you run the option? You've got one game left, you could put the option in one game." And he said, "Will you keep that off the record?" I said, "Sure." You know, no big deal. Word leaked out, and [Texas] A&M was completely prepared for it. The Razorbacks lost, and in my Sunday column I wrote, "We sat on this all week, and it still leaked." Starr was livid that we sat on what he considered was a huge news story. I told him it was off the record, and my word is my bond. He wrote a column that said he was considering firing me.

FF: Which he did not.

WH: I think there was a little outcry from the public. Plus, the column probably violated a lot of my rights.

FF: He never did fire you for anything.

WH: No, [he] threatened a lot.

FF: I think he had a reputation for firing people that, in some ways, was not justified. I think he fired . . .

WH: I don't think he came close to firing as many people as you have, Frank.

[Laughter]

FF: There were times. What did you do right during the newspaper wars? That was something you did wrong; tell me something you did right during the newspaper wars.

WH: I think we put a lot—put the right emphasis on high school athletics. We hired a young man in the early 1980s named Mark Potash, another Missouri graduate.

He absolutely revolutionized the coverage of high school basketball in the state.

FF: How?

WH: He worked so hard. I'll never forget—he went to so many games. He would have gone every night if they had one. He would drive to Prescott. He didn't care; he was going to a game. And he was detailed, meticulous. He had been working something like five straight weeks, seven days a week, and it was right before the state tournaments, and I said, "You are taking this weekend off. You will not go to a game in Arkansas." He said, "Okay." He got in his car and drove to St. Louis to watch a high school boys basketball tournament up in St. Louis.

FF: So he was addicted?

WH: Oh, more conscientious. He's with the *Chicago Sun Times* now. The Chicago—which one's the tabloid?

FF: *Sun Times*, I think.

WH: Yes, *Sun Times*.

FF: Wally, one of the—when Gannett bought the *Gazette*—tell us about that.

WH: There was more than a ripple of fear. When the CEO [Chief Executive Officer], came, he said, "We have deep pockets." Mr. Hussman had already, you know, sunk a ton of money into the *Democrat*. But you talk about competitive. I had no earthly idea that he was that competitive, and such a staunch believer that this state needed two voices—political [and] editorial. Of course—and this will be covered somewhere else in this documentary, whatever this is, but—you know, he

had actually gone to the *Gazette* and offered to do a JOA [Joint Operating Agreement] and take a very minor—like maybe five percent or ten percent of the profits—and they turned him down. And he could have easily—he’s a very successful businessman—he could have closed the door on us at any time and still had a good living. He has a lot more investments in companies than just the *Arkansas Democrat*—the [*Arkansas Democrat*-]*Gazette* now. We just—the very first editor they brought in—I don’t remember his name—but he absolutely terrified Starr.

FF: McIlwain?

WH: Yes.

FF: McIlwain.

WH: There used to be a bench right across the street from the *Democrat*, and he would sit there and eat his lunch out of a paper bag and stare at our building—specifically at Starr’s office—it was a corner on the second floor at the time—and that just—Starr never had anybody that was as fearless as him.

FF: So, in his own way, he was talking trash to Starr?

WH: Yes, yes. And Starr was the king of trash talkers in the media.

FF: He was, but McIlwain didn’t last very long here.

WH: No. Supposedly he got sideways with—among people, Orville Henry. He wanted to change the way they covered the Razorbacks. He wanted to make a more progressive newspaper—[to] bring it up to date. And he didn’t make it.

FF: He had a reputation as an outstanding editor.

WH: You know, I think maybe the Pattersons [owners of the *Gazette*] hired him. He came before Gannett bought it [the *Gazette*].

FF: It may have been—yes, yes.

WH: And I remember when it was announced [that] Gannett bought it, I was worried.

FF: Were you here in the newsroom or were you somewhere else?

WH: Yes.

FF: You recall Walter's speech to the staff, or were you here at that time?

WH: I remember he made one. I was here. I don't remember the exact words, but it was—he was very, very courageous, and gave us all a confidence that we could win this thing.

FF: Did anyone from the *Gazette* ever approach you about going over there?

WH: No. I had a lot of job offers over the years, but that was one that didn't come. I was told when we bought the assets they had a lot of files with my name on them, but—no.

FF: You were probably too closely identified with the *Democrat*.

WH: And Starr.

FF: . . . and Starr, but if Orville could come over here . . .

WH: See, now that may have been a big advantage for us. We didn't have the ego they had. They never—I don't think they ever pursued anybody. I think they expected people to apply. And everybody who left here had applied over there.

FF: Sure.

WH: I never applied there.

FF: And they did. The routine was to get up, put your stuff in a box, and leave immediately.

WH: Right.

FF: None of that two-weeks' [notice] stuff.

WH: I know. We were talking about making a mistake. One lady that worked for me—she came in—we had just sent her to Puerto Rico or somewhere, and she knew she was going to the *Gazette* before she took the trip—she said, “I’m going to work for the *Gazette*.” And I said, “Well, you know there’re the stairs—you’re going out the back door, not the front.” I was—that was—that was bad. I was ticked. That was wrong; I shouldn’t have done that.

FF: So how did the *Democrat* eventually win?

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning Tape 1, Side 2]

FF: How did the *Democrat* win when it was so far behind?

WH: Sports was the first place we put an emphasis on in the newspaper war. We became the largest sports section in America on Sundays.

FF: How big?

WH: Twenty-four pages.

FF: Huge.

WH: Huge. And, you know, in retrospect, we burned out some really good newspaper people putting that out because we didn’t increase staff. We went from a sixteen-page section to twenty-four, and we began to really make inroads. In 1984 when I went to Japan with the Razorbacks—that was a big statement because we had

exclusive coverage. One of the players, Charles Balentine, got quoted saying he was really tired of the food, and needed to call King Pizza in Fayetteville—they delivered—and we were in Tokyo. It became an international story because the owner of King Pizza flew to Hong Kong to meet us, and he brought pizzas. That kind of thing just really helped us. As we pulled ahead of them [the *Gazette*] in sports, we were able to start concentrating on other areas of the newspaper. And you remember, we had a lot of news people. We were doing a lot of news stories—a lot of investigative pieces and a lot of features. I think—this is just my opinion, but I think when Gannett bought the *Gazette*, we became the people's paper. The *Gazette* was no longer locally owned and we were.

FF: The momentum changed.

WH: Yes. Then they began to make changes. The old gray lady wasn't the old gray lady anymore. It wasn't what people had been waking up with for thirty-five years.

FF: Speaking of change, newspapers are in an environment today that is remarkably changed from even a decade ago.

WH: Absolutely.

FF: Cable television, a zillion channels, the Internet, radio—more radio stations than ever—there is a saturation of news media in America, and newspapers don't have the monopoly on news coverage or the attention of the readers.

WH: Exactly. We have no way to be as timely.

FF: So how do newspapers thrive in an era of hyper-competition?

WH: I think that we've become much more creative in our—not just in our writing but in our interviewing techniques. We can get deeper, spend more time—you know, a feature with a player is going to be ninety seconds on ESPN. For us, we can spend two hours with the guy—we can spend all day, we can talk to his parents. Multi-dimensional stories have become very big in our business, where we interview several people about this one person. We have to do that. We are still the old “who, what, when, where, why, and how”—we have to also answer “why not?” these days.

FF: Where's our sports coverage going from here, do you think?

WH: Gosh, Frank, I hadn't thought about it. I think we're putting out a really good product, and like everybody, I wish we had more space, but that's just fiscally impossible to do right now, and physically tough, too. I don't see any drastic changes coming right now in the way we cover news. You know, the Razorbacks are our most important beat. High schools are probably second. We do a lot of things—cover a lot of areas—probably some which we could cut back on a little bit, and may have to some day.

FF: Is there anybody out there who will challenge the Razorbacks for the attention that Arkansans pay for sports? Is UALR coming up, is ASU [Arkansas State University] going to break out—that kind of attention?

WH: Nobody will, in my lifetime, ever challenge the Razorbacks. The public opinion is it's the number one school. UALR has done some really good things with their basketball [program], opening a new facility this month on campus, which is huge for them, and it's just given the whole campus a real eye-appeal. And UCA is

changing conferences. They're going to become a division one-double A football, and a division one basketball school. But the Razorbacks, in my opinion, are totally entrenched here.

FF: Wally, what do readers want from our newspaper sports coverage now?

WH: I guess—from the feedback I get—they want more of the spring sports. You know, the soccer, softball, baseball—which we do a tremendous job with, but we can't cover every game. We do a very thorough job on the Razorbacks. We take, I believe, six people to every game.

FF: Every football game?

WH: Every football game. We don't for basketball—I think, basically, other than tournaments, we take two, the beat writer and myself. We don't always send a photographer. It's a football state, but basketball is very popular, too, and we know that.

FF: People seem very much interested in recruiting, as well.

WH: That's one area that has changed dramatically from when I first got into this business. It used to be recruiting day was okay. They name the players, here they are, and we're going down the list. Here's who signed. Now we have a full-time recruiting columnist, Otis Kirk, who is without peer in this country. Nobody covers recruiting like he does. He has a passion for it. It is not only a beat of its own, it's a sport of its own, and there are thousands of people—and I'm not one of them, that's why I'm glad I got to hire him—there are thousands of people out there—that's all they really care about. Once they get on campus, they don't care.

They like that element of who they recruit. That's just been a huge change in newspaper sports coverage.

FF: Do you attribute that to electronic media?

WH: You know what I think it is? I think that it would have always been there had somebody like Otis come along earlier. It's all the football they have between December and February. If they want football news, it's the only news you're going to get, because it's off-season until spring. In the summer it's an extension of football season.

FF: Wally, what are your goals now?

WH: I have definite goals. I can honestly say I've never written anything that I was completely happy with. I work harder to do better, and to remain objective, and honest, and fair. And I would like to be a better writer. I would like to be a better administrator, parent, person. Once you quit striving to do better, you should just go ahead and retire.

FF: Any final thoughts about your career here at the *Democrat*?

WH: I've been truly blessed.

FF: Is this the *Democrat-Gazette*, or is it the *Democrat*?

WH: It's the *Democrat-Gazette*, but from time to time, I'll be in—I'm just using this as an example—South Carolina—and someone asks, "How are things at the *Gazette*?" And I don't like that. I don't like that at all.

FF: Anything else you want to say?

WH: Can't think of anything.

FF: Thanks, Wally.

WH: Thank you, Frank.

[End of Interview]

[Transcribed by Jake Edwards]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]