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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with

Mike Masterson
Fayetteville, Arkansas
21 August 2005

Interviewer: Tim Hackler

Tim Hackler: Well, as you know, this is the [Arkansas] *Democrat* Oral History Project, and I need to get your permission up front for the [University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History] to use this tape in their oral history.

Mike Masterson: Yes, you have my permission.

TH: Let's do just a short overview and then come back.

MM: Okay.

TH: You were from Newport, is that right?

MM: No, I'm from Harrison originally.

TH: Oh, that's right.

MM: I was born in Harrison. And I finished college—my parents, my father rather, was a military officer, so we moved a lot. I ended up coming back to Arkansas in 1968 and finished school at the University of Central Arkansas [Conway] in 1971 and then went to Newport as the editor of the *Newport Daily Independent*.

TH: Okay, and that would have been what years?

MM: 1971 to 1973. In 1973 I was hired by Walter Hussman, Jr. to come to the *Sentinel Record* in Hot Springs as a special writer. I was in that capacity for about several months until I was named managing editor of the paper. Then I became executive editor, and I was there until 1980, at which time I left to go to the *Los Angeles Times*

TH: Okay. So it was 1980, and you were at the *L.A. Times*. What did you do there?

MM: At the *L.A. Times* I was a staff reporter. I covered all of Inland Northern San Diego County, which was Borrego Springs—all the Indian reservations—for the *Times*. I lived in Rancho Bernardo. I was there for about a year. I was never really happy at the *L.A. Times*. I mean, they paid well, and they had, of course, the status name, but coming out of Hot Springs—I'd had a lot of fulfillment in that job, just making a difference in the community and the lives of people. And it was different being—I often use the analogy of feeling like a guy who'd been a captain on a PT boat—a little PT boat—who became a deck hand on an aircraft carrier. And they never really understood that. I think people at the *Times* felt, “Well, if you're here, then that means that you've made it to here, and you should be happy to be here—thankful.” And I understood that concept, but it just wasn't me. Ralph Otwell from Arkansas was the managing editor of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, which at the time was probably the best investigative paper in the country. They had just done the Mirage bar and Cardinal Cody, and they had a reputation internationally for doing great investigative reporting. In a great news town. Probably the best news town in the world. He called and made me an offer to

come to Chicago when Pam Zekman left. She had been their investigative reporter who'd gone off to TV. I went to Chicago and had a great time as a reporter. That would have been 1980, 1981. Then the word got out that Rupert Murdoch was buying the paper from Marshall Field, and all the great Pulitzer Prize winners and the fine reporters there—Mike Royko was there at the time—and guys and women who had been there their whole careers and done great work all began abandoning ship. And that's when I came back. I decided that I wasn't going to work for Rupert Murdoch, either, and I talked to Walter Hussman, who had hired me in Hot Springs. Walter said, "Well, why don't you come back here and work for all of our papers? Or all the WEHCO [Media, Inc.] papers," which included Texarkana, Camden, Hot Springs, Eldorado, Magnolia and the *Democrat*. So I did. I came back, and they found a place for me over at—not in the *Democrat* news room, but over in the WEHCO building which adjoins it. I was able to write investigative pieces there for, oh, a number of years. For all the papers. The *Democrat* and—most of what I wrote was published in all the papers because I tried to do a statewide view of issues and problems. And it was at that time that I had my first encounter with John Robert Starr. I'd known John Robert from being the editor in Newport and Hot Springs, and he'd been Associated Press [AP]. So we had known each other for a long time. Anyway, I was pretty much alone, a maverick over there, kind of a lone wolf. They did let me hire an assistant, someone to help me. Max Parker was one. She later went on to work with Jim Guy Tucker. And Max was great. I don't know how many stories I produced then, but I would say, looking back on my career, that was the most intense and produc-

tive—those years that I was back—I think there were four years, 1982 to 1986—were the most productive of my career in many ways, as far as significance. But the stories, and the impact of those stories—James Dean Walker story—series--a hard look at the state crime lab again for the second time, and all the failings of the state crime laboratory. And the Marvin Williams case in Conway.

TH: Why don't you, just for the record, give me a few sentences on each of those articles.

MM: Well, James Dean Walker was the most notorious convict in the history of Arkansas to that point. He'd been in prison for most of his life—had escaped once. He was charged with killing Patrolman Jerrell Vaughn of North Little Rock in 1963, I believe. And every time he'd come up for parole, the officers at all the posts—they'd [get] on buses and they'd come. He was [a] cop killer. What I found was, as I looked at it—took an objective look at it, and a hard look at it—that that really wasn't the case. At least from what I found it wasn't, certainly wasn't—that he'd been shot five times on the highway and left to die, and he didn't die. That was the problem. And the more I wrote, the more came to light, until Judge Henry Woods was told by the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals to hold an evidentiary hearing, which he did. The Eighth Circuit overturned Walker's conviction as a result of that, and Chris Piazza, who was the prosecutor at the time, chose not to take him back to trial. They ended up working out an agreement where Walker was set free, and, I understand, moved to Reno, Nevada. I only met James Dean one time in prison in Oklahoma.

TH: Was the real killer ever discovered?

MM: Well, there'd been an incident in a Little Rock club, and James Dean Walker and an accomplice or a buddy of his, Russell Kumpe, had left the club, and there was—had been a fight that Walker was involved in, and an all points bulletin had been put out. Jerrell Vaughn had spotted their car going to North Little Rock, after a taxi driver had notified the police that he'd seen it. He followed them out on the highway, pulled them over, [and] walked up to the side of the car. And from what all evidence shows, and can be determined from the record, Vaughn asked Walker to get out of the car, and if he had a gun, to give it to him. Walker says that he reached over, picked the gun up between his thumb and his forefinger, swung around to open the door, and when he did the dome light came on, and Jerrell Vaughn screamed, "He's got a gun," and started shooting through the window and shot Walker five times. And he slumped out onto the ground with his loaded revolver still in his left hand beneath him. Unfired. Meanwhile, another patrolman, Gene [Barrentine?], had pulled in behind and was standing back, and he started firing wildly. Shots in the back of the trunk, the back window was blown out. Jerrell Vaughn ended up being hit one time through the heart. The official police version was that Walker's gun—according to the taxi driver who followed them out and rolled Walker over—was found beneath him, loaded—fully loaded. But there was another gun found beneath the back of the car, a Model V revolver, Navy surplus, just like the North Little Rock Police Department had received a month earlier—they'd received dozens of them—this one had its serial number filed off. It also had six expended cartridges in it supposedly, and the initial version was that Walker apparently had fired this gun six times with his left hand,

striking Vaughn once through the heart and then throwing it, I guess, as he fell—
underneath the back of the car as he fell on his own revolver that was fully
loaded. And the preposterous nature of that story became more—as I looked at it
anyway, it became more and more evident.

TH: And what caused you to take a look at it?

MM: Russell Kumpe brought in the diary entry that his wife had found and given to the
attorney in Little Rock—the man who had been Walker’s attorney. She was
Kumpe’s ex-wife. She was cleaning out a closet and found this diary that Kumpe
had kept in prison. He and Walker both ended up in prison together. And Kumpe
worked in the office, so he wrote on one day—I can’t remember the day—he said,
“I look at him”—meaning Walker—“and feel much remorse that I fired too high
on 4/16/63.” She gave that to Walker’s attorney, who in turn talked to me about
it--showed me--and I called her and discussed it. Then I went down to talk to Mr.
Kumpe, and he didn’t know that I had that diary entry, and I asked him about the
events of that evening. He was eager to talk about them, and I asked him if he ev-
er had a gun that night, and he said, no, he didn’t have a gun. I asked him if he
fired a gun that night, and he said, no, he hadn’t. Then I asked him—I showed
him some entries in this diary—that wasn’t the key page—he said that was his
handwriting. Then I laid that in front of him, and I said, “Can you explain this?
What did you mean, ‘You feel much remorse when you look at Walker, that you
fired too high on 4/16/63?’” And he got very nervous and upset and said he
didn’t want to talk about it. So at that point, I knew that that was a story that I
needed to tell and needed to write, that the public needed to know that was said.

Now, whether or not that means Russell Kumpe accidentally shot Vaughn, I don't know. Russell Kumpe had fled the car.

TH: Is that K-U-M-P-E?

MM: Yes. K-U-M-P-E. [He] had fled the car that night and was found in the bushes over at the side of the road as other police officers arrived. Gene [Barrentine's?] gun was confiscated within a couple of days, but he had already sawed the barrel off of it, saying he'd always wanted a snub nose. So it couldn't be tested for ballistics. So you can start to see the ludicrousness of the story. Over the years, Walker became one of Arkansas's most notorious convicts. So that case . . .

TH: What year would this have been?

MM: This would have been 1984, probably—1983, 1984.

TH: And the federal district . . .

MM: Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals.

TH: . . . Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals told the district judge to conduct an evidentiary hearing . . .

MM: That's right.

TH: And on the basis of that, what happened?

MM: The Eighth Circuit overturned—with Richard Arnold casting the deciding vote—overturned the conviction—ordered another trial, a third trial. Because Walker had already been tried twice and convicted twice. And Chris Piazza, like I say, chose not to go back to trial with it. There were other deeply disturbing aspects to this case, too. For instance, Gene Worsham, who's dead now—he was attorney for James Dean Walker—had never noticed—even during the second trial—that

two different officers testified that they brought the fatal bullet back that had been fired through Vaughn's heart from the crime lab to the police department. So my question was, obviously, if one bullet went out, how could two officers have brought the bullet back? Unless there were two bullets that came back; one fired from who knows what weapon to make it fit ostensibly, and the other perhaps being the original shot. Did nothing but raise questions. It resolved nothing. And that was this whole case. As I looked at it, it was just filled with these kinds of discrepancies, contradictions, and . . .

TH: I think you've—a lot of the investigative reporting you've done has been about crimes that were not actually committed.

MM: Yes. Many issues of justice and injustice such as Shelby Barron of Hot Springs, Millicent Lynn of Beebe, David Michel of Little Rock, Ronald Carden of Bigelow and Marvin Williams of Menifee.

TH: Do you feel that—let's talk more philosophically for a moment. Do you think that articles like this have any effect on the justice system other than overturning a specific occurrence now and then? Have the prosecutors or judges involved in any of these cases you've written about ever suffered any consequences?

MM: No. Not that I can tell. Not in this lifetime, anyway. I know that in the Marvin Williams case there were interesting developments afterwards among those who were allegedly involved in either committing that crime or covering it up. Health-wise, you know, [there were] just very strange occurrences after that case ended up in court. No. And that's troublesome to me, in that if the system doesn't really change, or the system doesn't take stock of itself as a result of all these cases—

and there have been a bunch—then, you know—we’re doomed to repeat the same stuff. We get—I call it the “Old Boy System of Justice.” And as many small towns as we have, and counties, rural counties, the sheriffs and local law enforcement, the opportunities for this sort of thing are ripe. And if you get a crime lab that’s not stringent and absolutely reliable in its integrity, then it just further opens the door to this sort of thing happening. A case that I’m involved in right now with the *Democrat-Gazette*—this Janie Ward case—it’s just reminiscent of all these other cases that seem to always track back to the State Crime Laboratory, the State Medical Examiner’s office and occasionally a State Police person. And I want to say that I have a lot of respect and regard for the Arkansas State Police, I really do. I’ve had some close friends that are state policemen. And still do. But there are those—like there are journalists who are less than principled who get caught up in this system because they feel that’s how it works. “This is what the good ol’ boys want, and this is what we’re going to do.” So, no, to answer your question, I don’t think the system’s changed. Sadly.

TH: Yes. I don’t want to get off on a tangent, but I think, as I mentioned to you, I’ve gotten involved, not at my pleasure, particularly, in the West Memphis Three situation. [Editor’s note: The West Memphis Three refers to Damien Echols, Jessie Misskelley and Jason Baldwin, who were tried and convicted of the murders of three eight-year-old boys—Steve Branch, Christopher Byers, and Michael Moore—in West Memphis, Arkansas, in 1993. Criticism of how officials handled the evidence and the case have prompted some filmmakers, musicians and others to call for a new trial.]

MM: Yes, that's another great example.

TH: Some of that stuff is just—almost—well, it wasn't until I actually looked at the photographic copies of the interviews. And there it is. You know, you can't . . .

MM: Yes. You can't deny that, can you? Same thing in the Janie Ward case. All these cases, when you look at them, when you break them down, just get a little bit beneath the surface. You don't have to dig too deeply. Tim, what you're talking about, the things that bother you and drove you to look at it and feel any kind of passion about what happened, that's identical to what's driven me. I mean, I see these things, and I see the injustice, and I go, "What in the world? Is this the kind of society we want? That we need to have?" I mean, one that's unprincipled, that's not rooted in character, integrity and truth and honesty and all those qualities that should represent a justice system? But in who you know and how much money you have and your political influence? I don't think so.

TH: Have you run across any roadblocks from your employers anywhere along the way?

MM: No. Particularly the *Democrat*. Even Hot Springs. I remember when I was the editor in Hot Springs I was doing a series on a former sheriff who apparently condoned illegal cock fighting, and a man came forward and said he'd paid off the former sheriff, who had gone on to become a prominent state senator. I called the state senator and asked him for a response on this, and he denied it with every fiber of his being. I remember going in to Walter Hussman—we were both in our late twenties at that time—and told him what I had. And I said, "You know, I feel like this is a story that ought to be told to the people in Garland County. I believe

it to be true. This man signed a sworn statement. And there's been a denial. The Senator's denials are in here. He's a public figure"—he was a public figure at the time—"on the payroll. And if he was allowing illegal stuff like this to go on in exchange for payoffs, it's a story. Definitely a story." So Walter thought about it and called the attorney, and I read the story to the attorney. The attorney said, over the speaker phone, "Well, I don't think we ought to run the story, because I think the damage to this man will be great. It's one person's word against another. So that's my advice." I remember Walter hung up, kind of rocked in his chair for a minute and then he said words to this effect, "Well, you know, if attorneys ran newspapers, we'd never publish anything. So I say, let's run it." And that, to me, from that day on, is exactly what Walter's represented. He's been one hundred percent, one hundred ten percent supportive. Through every case I've been involved in. I think he's trusted in me to know that I know what I'm doing. He has never called me down, has never sat on me, has never admonished me, or asked me not to publish anything. He's been just the opposite; he's been encouraging of good, solid reporting. So I would say that working at both the *Arkansas Democrat* and the *Democrat-Gazette*, that was my experience. Now, I did have some rather negative experiences I didn't expect in dealing with John Robert Starr.

TH: Yes, I wanted to get back to that. So that brings us back to what year?

MM: Well, we're back to me being back at the *Democrat* in 1982. I was living in Hot Springs; I moved back to Hot Springs. I drove back and forth from Hot Springs to Little Rock for a year and then I moved to Little Rock, out to Otter Creek.

TH: Let me just ask a question here while I think about it. Did you say a minute ago that WEHCO has a separate newsroom from the *Democrat*?

MM: No. WEHCO Media did not have a newsroom, they had—you know, they own—that's the umbrella organization for six daily papers—seven, I guess, counting the *Democrat-Gazette*. But, no. They just had me.

TH: I misunderstood you.

MM: Walter basically carved out a position to bring me back home because I think he recognized that I could be valuable in the war with the *Gazette*, number one. Number two, I think he liked me and valued and respected me as a person, as a journalist. Based on those two things, I believe Walter decided, "We'll bring Mike back to Arkansas. It's where he belongs. It's his native state. He wants to come home." So he did.

TH: Then you met John Robert Starr.

MM: No, I'd known Starr. I'd known Starr from Newport when he was Associated Press bureau chief and from Hot Springs, both. So I'd known John Robert for almost ten years. Or about ten years. So when I came home, he was across the way there at the *Democrat*, and I was over in the WEHCO building where Walter had made a space for me. I was doing my thing, and giving my stories, feeding them to the *Democrat* and to the WEHCO papers. I was doing a variety of investigative pieces, everything from weights and measures to these cases of justice and injustice. And all the while the *Gazette*—you know, we were locked in battle with the *Gazette* at that time. One of the first things I heard when I got back home was that John R. Starr—and, of course, I never substantiated this, but the

results, I think, proved it to be pretty accurate—that John Robert had called his lieutenants in—his editors—and told them that he had heard that I was coming back home and back to the *Democrat*. He didn't know why or to do what. He guessed I just couldn't cut it in the big time and [said] that if anybody was caught talking to me or associating with me, they'd be fired on the spot. And you probably know, Tim, that John Robert had a reputation for doing that, for firing people on the spot. So I think they took him seriously. At any rate, I just know that for a long time nobody would talk to me in the newsroom; I was isolated. And that was okay. I was just doing my work, what was expected of me, and turning it in to Starr. I had to route all my work through John Robert. At that time, Tommy Robinson was in the news, Bill McArthur—all that was unfolding. And Robinson and Starr—I wouldn't call them friends, because I don't know the nature of their relationship—but they were certainly close associates, I think. I think that they dealt with each other fairly regularly. The first case I got involved in, this case of Ronald Carden from Bigelow, who'd been convicted of murder—and before I was even on the payroll—two weeks before—I'd had lunch with a former medical examiner who left our state in disgrace years later, Dr. Fahmy Malak.

TH: Can you spell that?

MM: M-A-L-A-K. F-A-H-M-Y. And at that time, I don't think Dr. Malak had fallen into the trap of—what I call the “Good Ol' Boy” trap, the political entrapments that occur in that job that are inevitable because it's a politicized job. It's run by a crime lab board that's appointed by the governor as opposed to an independent agency. But anyway, Dr. Malak had told me he was very disturbed by this con-

viction. I didn't know anything about the conviction, having just come home from Chicago. He just said, "Mike, I think there's a man—there's a real questionable conviction here." At any rate, I had gone back to his office. The file was closed; the man was convicted. I sat and looked through the file and found a photograph of the victim. Yet to be identified. All through the trial, this girl had never been identified.

TH: Which case is this?

MM: This is the Mildred Honeycutt case. Ronald Carden of Bigelow. Anyway, I asked Dr. Malak if I could borrow the black-and-white photo. There were numerous photos in the back of the file, color and black-and-white. Most were color. There were about three black-and-white pictures. And I had noticed, in looking through the file, that the description of this woman, the one that was found—actually the photo—let me see how this went. The photo, to me, seemed to match the description of a missing person named Mildred [Honeycutt?] from Pocahontas, Arkansas. It talked about a birthmark. And this woman had been missing since about that time. It had been over a year earlier. So it looked to me, just on the black-and-white pictures anyway, that there was such a birthmark there. The color photos were all discolored and it was difficult to tell, but the black and white kind of cut through the color to what was there. The record described a cherry birthmark on her upper chest, and this picture, this black-and-white picture of this girl, Jane Doe, showed a circular area in the proper place. I thought, "Well, I wonder if this girl, this Jane Doe, is in fact Mildred Honeycutt?" That matters, because a man had confessed to murdering Mildred Honeycutt—choked her to

death and deposited her in the outskirts of Little Rock. And this is how this girl was found, dumped outside of Little Rock. So, at the risk of becoming confusing here, the bottom line is I took the picture—I drove on my own time and expense to Pocahontas on a gut feeling, found the family of Mildred [Honeycutt?], showed them the black-and-white picture, and they looked at it. And they both—I showed it to them separately—they each said, “That’s our daughter.” I said, “How do you know?” They said, “That’s her birthmark.” I mean, the body was kind of disfigured, and it had been out there for a couple of days, but they noticed that birthmark I had spotted in the picture, and they both said, “That’s our daughter.” So Jane Doe turned out to be Mildred [Honeycutt?] from Pocahontas. And that mattered to Ronald Carden because another man who was already in prison confessed to murdering Mildred Honeycutt in his apartment and dumping her body. Of course, Tommy Robinson had convicted this man, Ronald Carden, wrongly. So I called the sheriff before I wrote the story—and I wrote the story before I was ever even on the payroll—and I told him that I had gone up there, and the parents had confirmed this woman is actually Mildred Honeycutt . . .

TH: Now, why weren’t you on the payroll at this point?

MM: Did what?

TH: Why weren’t you on the payroll at this point?

MM: I wasn’t supposed to start my job until a certain date. I still had a couple weeks . . .

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TH: This was in 1982?

MM: I had planned to spend a while decompressing from my Chicago stint.

TH: Okay.

MM: But I wasn't decompressing. I was doing this instead. I stopped by the sheriff's office in Pocahontas on the way out of town [and] asked if they knew Mildred [Honeycutt?], and there was a young man there who said, "Yes, I know Mildred." "Do you have anything in here in the files about her?" I said. He said, "Well, she filled out a statement a couple of years ago because her place had been burglarized up here." I said, "Do you still have it?" And he looked in the file, and there it was, written out on yellow. I called Dr. Malak and said, "Can you request this to have a fingerprint check done if I bring it back?" I couldn't bring it back, but they could send the statement down there, so they did. The check for fingerprints came back. Jane Doe was in fact Mildred Honeycutt, according to fingerprints and according to her parents. Then I confronted Tommy Robinson, and he told me—his exact words were, "Masterson, what are you doing jack legging back around the state again? You know, if you write that story, you're going out on a limb that's going to break off behind you." And I said, "Well, Sheriff, you do what you do, and I'll do what I've got to do." And I wrote the story. It basically said that this Jane Doe was Mildred Honeycutt and that matters because a man who's in prison has confessed to murdering Mildred Honeycutt—choking her exactly how Jane Doe was found and dumping [her] outside of Little Rock. And that the sheriff made this case against—Tommy Robinson made this bogus case against Ronald Carden. Anyway, to make a long story short, Ronald Carden was freed. A judge read all the evidence and took the new evidence in the case, and he was set free. So he was—he was on appeal getting ready to go to prison at the

time, so that was my introduction back into the *Democrat*, that case. But during that case, I noticed that as I was writing—as I got on the payroll, I continued to write probably four or five months—and there were the predictable denials by the officials who were embarrassed and didn't want to admit that they were wrong. I also would submit such newsworthy stories to Starr, and they'd also end up being played on page 10B, and they'd end up kind of being rewritten to make Tommy Robinson look good. You know, the phrasing of the stories. And not at all what I had written. That happened a few times. And every time it did, I complained.

TH: To Starr?

MM: No, [to] Walter Hussman. “Why are we putting these stories on page 10B? This is important; it's an innocent man, you know. And our sheriff was involved in this. Why are we putting them on page 10B? Number one. And number two, these are being rewritten to say things that I didn't say, or that I didn't intend to say, to make Tommy look good.” And poor Walter, you know, he was caught in the middle between his editor, who he valued—and should have—and me, who he'd brought back. And that was not a comfortable position, and I don't blame him. So in the end, when Carden was free. I went on to other cases: the James Dean Walker case, the David Michel case. There were numerous—the Marvin Williams case—numerous stories and series. And all the while it was like—for me, from my perspective—it was like pulling teeth having to deal through John Robert, who was, for whatever reason, determined that he did not want me to succeed. Perhaps because he thought it would make him look bad, which is ridiculous because all I ever cared about was doing good work in this war with the *Ga-*

zette and making a difference at the paper and in the state of Arkansas. That's all I wanted to do.

TH: Starr's title was managing editor?

MM: I think he kept that title managing editor. He was writing what, seven columns? He was writing a column every day. And you know, he would do little things to send messages my way. For instance, he had the cartoonist—they did a series of cartoons called "Spanks." Do you remember that, Tim?

TH: Yes.

MM: "Spanks, the Cub Reporter." He did one and it showed Spanks knocking on my door in the first frame, saying, "Mr. Masterson, can I have a few minutes to talk to you?" And the second frame was something like, "Sure, kid, come on in." And the last frame was a big hairy hand with a ring on it sticking out in front of the kid's face saying, "But first you've got to kiss the ring." And that series, I think—that cartoon—really summarized Starr's approach toward me, his whole perspective of me. And he did his best in columns—I know he used to talk about Mike Masterson's ego. He wrote one that said, "There's three people," let's see, "the three biggest egos I know are Frank Broyles, Bill Clinton and Mike Masterson." And frankly, I never saw it. I thought I had a healthy ego, but I never thought that I was excessively driven or egocentric.

TH: Well, a former high editor at the *Democrat* and later the *Gazette* once said, "John Robert Starr's ego would fill the entire universe."

MM: Yes, I believe that. Yes. But he wanted to project this impression of me to the state of Arkansas. It was important to him—because John Robert was highly in-

telligent—to try to find a subject that wasn't outright hammering me, but simply to cast an aspersion. He used the ego thing, which is probably because that's what he knew so well. "Kiss the ring, kid." Just kept trying to drive that into the public psyche. And I was happy and proud—I was young and full of drive and vinegar. Yes, I tried to get to the top of my craft. Every journalist—why would any worthwhile journalist not want to get to the top? To challenge themselves to be the best they can be? Prove it to themselves that "I can do this. I can be right here at the *L.A. Times* or *Chicago Sun-Times* and hold my own just fine with all these colleagues." You know, if you've got any kind of healthy drive in you as a journalist, you want to see if you can do those things. Especially when you're young.

TH: Another person whom I've interviewed as part of this series talked about—he was upset that Starr had made a habit of criticizing staff people publicly in his column.

MM: Yes. Publicly and frequently.

TH: And he felt that was very bad for morale.

MM: Yes. As a former editor of three daily papers in Arkansas, I would never consider doing that. I would never hold up one of my employees for public ridicule, especially if I'd had to discipline them. I don't feel that's the public's business. And besides, if I'm trying to redeem that person, or I'm trying to eventually restore them, or encourage them, to be what they can be to fulfill their potential, that's the worst thing you can do.

TH: Did that have any demonstrable effect that you could see on the staff at the *Democrat*?

MM: Well, what it does—you only have to do that about once or twice before it instills a climate of fear. And John Robert, to a large degree, I think, tried to manage by fear. And it's easier, frankly, to do that, than it is to motivate by having to put time and effort into constructive approaches to motivating people. That was always my approach, frankly. I tried to use a motivation [that was] constructive, sit down with them side by side, and say, "Look, say it this way. It's going to sound better. It's going to sound smoother." And hopefully, over time, after doing that several times with them, they'll start to get the feel of it and go on to bigger and better things.

TH: Did you feel that tactic of Starr's had any effect on what was covered by the paper and how it was covered?

MM: Oh, yes. I think that how stories were played—I think he had a large role in that. And I think the tone of stories—and I witnessed how my stories were changed to somehow cast a favorable light on Tommy Robinson when, in fact, I'd written almost just the opposite.

TH: Did you hear from other reporters at the *Democrat* that Starr was making that kind of change to their copy?

MM: Yes, I believe I did. I can't recall specifically, but I believe I do—and one of the things I do recall specifically is that he would use the reporters as information gatherers for his personal column. The paper would provide the basis of information that would end up in his column. And I believe, Tim, that he was changing the copy, as I recall. But he could, since he was the editor, after all. There weren't many reporters who would talk to me, but what I kept gathering—one who

did, who dared to face his wrath, was Maria Henson, who went on to receive a Pulitzer Prize in Kentucky. Maria, unbeknownst to the folks over in the news-room, sometimes would sneak over and visit with me just about reporting and writing, because she really wanted to learn. She was trying hard. And she ended up, as you know, leaving and going to Kentucky and winning a Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing.

TH: Was she an editorial writer at the *Democrat*?

MM: No, she was a reporter. On [maybe?] education, as I recall. But she was one who dared to risk his wrath. And there were others I became friends with who just saw what was going on, the injustice of it—didn't feel like it was right. But I never asked any of them to come by. So that was the climate I came into. Extremely hostile.

TH: It sounds almost as though Starr was on a—did not really report to the publisher. It almost sounds as though he ran his own show.

MM: Well, you know, it was always Walter's show. I think overall Walter was pleased with the job that Starr was doing, because he was attracting attention and readership to the paper. And that was good. That was a war, you know. You had to win it. I do think that Walter's style is to try to hire people that he trusts and respects and let them do their thing and not micromanage them. It's always been that way. You know, technically, right now, I answer to—I send my copy down to Meredith Oakley, who does the line editing on it for me. I have my daily exchanges with Meredith just about when my column will be there, deadlines, and all those type of stuff. And the next step would probably be Paul Greenberg, if I

had a question. But technically, the arrangement that we had when I came back to do this column in 2001 was that I'd be answering directly to Walter. And it almost has to be that way. If I'm going to be up here challenging and questioning and taking on who knows who, you know, Walter has to be behind me to support me. And he always has been.

TH: One more word on Starr, I guess. Starr was—you were giving your copy to Starr.

MM: Yes.

TH: Who was managing editor and writing a column every day.

MM: Yes.

TH: How many people in the *Democrat* newsroom gave their copy directly to Starr? Or did you have an unusual situation?

MM: I don't know that. I suspect my situation was probably unusual in that Walter may have asked Starr to handle my copy. To give it more—because of the nature of what I was doing, it was more sensitive issues I was taking on. Trusting that Starr would put a skilled eye on it, an objective skilled eye on it, which is fine. I never had a problem with that. But that wasn't my experience, unfortunately, and it caused conflict.

TH: So Hussman hired you to come back and be in engaged in the newspaper war.

MM: Yes.

TH: Which was certainly widely covered by journalists in the country.

MM: Yes.

TH: Even in Washington I would read articles now and then about the war. What was your relationship—or what kind of relationship did you have with the *Gazette*?

What motivated you to become a soldier in the war?

MM: Well, for the most part, I'd always had a great relationship with the *Gazette*. You know, when I was in Newport, right out of college, I was their stringer for that part of the state. I would cover tornadoes and other breaking news for them. I'd do Sunday features for them. I came to know a lot of them—Matilda Tuohey, Leroy Donald, Wayne Jordan—and I had a great relationship with them. I got a check from them every month from being a stringer. And, in fact—it was the very week that Walter had offered me the position in Hot Springs—I had had lunch with a former managing editor, Bob Douglas, in Little Rock. He'd asked me to come down and have lunch with him, and he had offered me a job . . .

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

TH: Okay, Side two. Mike just said that was 1973.

MM: It was 1973, and we'd met at the Waffle House in North Little Rock, Bob Douglas and I. Bob told me that he'd felt I'd done really good work for them in Newport, and he'd like to offer me a position, a reporting position, on the state desk. And I was a little torn. I'd just accepted—he didn't know that—I'd just accepted the job in Hot Springs with Walter. My parents lived in Hot Springs. My children—actually my daughter wasn't born yet—my son was young, and it was a chance to go to where my wife's parents lived at the time, and my parents. It was a chance to kind of go home, in that respect. So I had to tell him that I'd already accepted a job in Hot Springs, and that was fine. Bob and I parted friends, and remained friends over the years. I went on to Hot Springs. So I had a—I would

say a solid group of friends over there at that time. As the *Gazette* folded, they all had gone to different places. Leroy's at the *Democrat* now, business section. I don't know whatever happened to Matilda Tuohey. I know Wayne Jordan's at the state police now. But everybody went in different directions, including me. I spent eight years, almost eight years, in Hot Springs as executive editor. So I would say, looking back, I became—my loyalties in Arkansas journalism were basically to two publishing families: the Richolsons in Newport, who gave me my first job—Orville and Betty—wonderful people—and to the Hussman family, to Walter , particularly. I did know his father before he died, and certainly respected him. But Walter Junior—I was the first editor he ever hired. I don't know if he's told you that, but I was. We were both twenty-six years old at the time, and he'd just read a piece—*Editor & Publisher* had done a piece about the work I was doing in [Little Rock?]. I feel my career went from Arkansas the first ten or eleven years to the West Coast, then up to Chicago, then back to Arkansas and then to Phoenix to head the investigative team at the *Arizona Republic* for three years. Then [I went] to Ohio State for five years as the Kiplinger Chair director and professor [and then] to the *Asbury Park Press* in New Jersey, the East Coast, to head their investigating team. And, by the way, I hated New Jersey. The paper was good, but I can't tell you how bad it is to live in New Jersey. Then [I got] the opportunity to come back as the editor of the Fayetteville paper in 1995. George Smith brought me back here to be the editor, and he left shortly after that. So it was coming home. I guess my point is that I left here, made a big circle around the entire country, then chose to come home. I really longed for the hills—being

born in Harrison—and I just had this drive to come back home and try to make a difference. Try to finish here, finish my career.

TH: Why don't we say a few words about the *Northwest Arkansas Times*, since we're there . . .

MM: Sure.

TH: You came here in 1995 and then—remind me, when was the big trial . . .?

MM: The trial was previous to that, a year earlier. I wasn't here for that. But I got the effect of the trial, because the day I came to work—George Smith was gone for two weeks and had told me that the court had said that the paper had to be given back—had to be sold back to Thompson Publishing—that Jack Stephens had to sell it back to Thompson. But Thompson had already cut a deal . . .

TH: Can you back up a little bit? What were the—who brought the suit? What was the issue?

MM: Gosh, not being here, I'm not up to speed on the suit, other than they were—Jack Stephens bought this newspaper from Thompson. It was challenged in court by the *Morning News*, the Springdale paper on the grounds that they'd have an unfair monopoly—Stephens by owning this newspaper. Stephens felt pretty comfortable that that suit was not going to be upheld. However, it *was* upheld, and the court said, "Stephens has to sell it back to Thompson. Stephens cannot own it." Thompson, meanwhile, had quietly negotiated a deal with American Publishing Company to sell it to them. So this is probably the only newspaper in American—the *Northwest Arkansas Times*—to have had three owners in one day. And I was there when it happened. I mean, that morning, Stephens sold it back to

Thompson. So Stephens owned it that morning, then he sold it to Thompson, who owned it for a few hours and then Thompson turned around and sold it to American that afternoon. In the course of one day, this newspaper changed hands three times. You know, this poor paper had just been whipped every which way with ownerships, and it was really hard to maintain stability. And the whole time—and I was going through this. I was new. I was back here wondering what was going to happen to myself, to the newsroom. I just kept telling the newsroom staff, “It doesn’t matter who signs your paycheck. Let’s do the best job we can do. Let’s do the best work—let’s put out the best community daily we can put out. The best one in the country. Why can’t we?” And they bought into my vision. They realized that there was validity to that argument, and they really busted their tails because—you’ve got to remember, at the same time we were in a war with the *Bentonville County Daily Record*, *The Morning News of Northwest Arkansas* and the *Arkansas Democrat*—which I found myself for the first time on the other side of Walter Hussman, fighting him, his organization. [It was] not personal. Never. I always respected him enormously. But we were locked in a four-way struggle up here and then you had Tulsa coming in on the streets, trying to put in new machines. So this was a huge newsroom battle. And I realized that we had limited resources. Of all of them, we were more like the *Benton County Daily Record* in resources. And all I could do was hope that American Publishing would recognize that and give me the resources to really fight, which to their credit, they did. I ended up with a newsroom of thirty-four people, which is unheard of for a newspaper with 20,000 circulation—probably the largest for its circula-

tion size anywhere in America. And we put out one heck of a newspaper together. Anybody who saw that paper, subscribed, read it, in that period will tell you, We were motivated. My young staff was—they would not be denied. I think Paul Smith, and I think Walter and all of them at the *Democrat*, to this day, likely will say, “Man, that was a lot tougher battle than we expected to have with the *Northwest Arkansas Times*.” And I credit the staff and their morale. I think morale was as high as you could get on a paper, especially one this size. You know, we were not top rung. You were not at a destination paper. You were a small community daily. But we did great work in those five years. It was the golden age of this paper, I’m convinced, other than the Fulbright years. But for what it was, and the stresses and pressures that we were under, it was just a great time to be at the *Times*.

TH: So you had—in the mid-1990s, you had—fighting for Northwest Arkansas readership . . .

MM: Yes.

TH: You had American Publishing . . .

MM: They had 135 dailies nationwide, and a bunch in Canada.

TH: And you had the *Morning News*, which was Donrey [Media Group].

MM: Yes.

TH: And you had, of course, the *Arkansas Democrat*, which wanted its presence up here.

MM: Oh, yes. They were putting in a printing plant.

TH: And to a certain extent the *Tulsa World*.

MM: *Tulsa World*. The *Benton County Daily Record* was trying to make a difference. Of course, they were owned by CPI, Community Publishers, Inc., which is Jim Walton, basically.

TH: What year did the *Democrat* buy the *Northwest Arkansas Times*?

MM: Well, it didn't. It struck an agreement with Community Publishers, Inc., the Walton group. That would have been 2000, I suppose—the year 2000. As I understand the agreement—and I'm probably wrong on some of the points—but the fundamental agreement, as I understand it, is that CPI runs the news operation here at the *Times*, [and] the rest of the operations are all the *Democrat-Gazette* responsibility. And that seems to—that's the alliance, the so-called alliance. That seems to work fine, up to this point. Who knows what the future holds, but I know that I'm really glad to be working with the *Democrat-Gazette* with Walter Hussman and his folks, because he's got a good group of people who have been there with him for a long time—all of whom I've also known and respected since the 1980s.

TH: Okay. So “buy” is the wrong word. I guess “merge” . . .

MM: It's a strange—it's an alliance. It's a strange animal—hybrid animal. I don't know that's ever [been] done before in newspapers. It may have been, but I just don't know. It was an unusual approach, and I think it was one that they geared up to realize that the way to win this war is not to divide, but to unite and form one group against another group—one-on-one with the *Morning News of Northwest Arkansas* and that group.

TH: So now we have the Hussman family, or the *Democrat-Gazette*—however you

want to put it.

MM: Yes.

TH: In association with CPI.

MM: Yes.

TH: And the major competitor now is the *Morning News*, which was the Donrey paper, or still is a Donrey paper.

MM: I think it's still Donrey

TH: But Donrey was untimely purchased by . . . ?

MM: I'm not sure. I know it's out of Las Vegas, which is where Donrey is ultimately managed. It's locally managed, but its corporate—Jack Stephens still owns—is still the primary stockholder, of course. So you've got Jack Stephens [and] Walter Hussman with Jim Walton locked in a media struggle up here in Northwest Arkansas.

TH: So it's still going on?

MM: Oh, yes. Still going on with all three. And the alliance has done well. It really has. All the expensive surveys that they've had done—and the latest one shows that the alliance continues to gain ground. They're doing better than expected, I think. We'll see. Time will tell. I know one thing, and I told this to the publisher of American Publishing who flew in here one day—David Radler, who's since been in big trouble with the *Chicago Sun-Times*. Radler strutted in here one day and sat in the conference room to lecture us about how they don't lose and how Walter Hussman was just a “pipsqueak.” [He said] that they made something-billion dollars last year, and Walter made only millions. And [he said] that they

never lose and, “We’re never going to sell this newspaper.” Blah blah blah. I sat there and listened to that and then I raised my hand and said something to the effect [of], “Mr. Radler, I probably know Walter Hussman and his group of associates better than anyone in this room, and, to me, the ultimate question here, since this company’s publicly held, is not how much money we’re going to make here, it’s how much are we willing to lose? Because Walter doesn’t lose either, and he’s willing to lose. How much are the stockholders going to be willing to lose?” And he harrumphed and [said], “Well, yes, whatever,” and moved on to something else. But the point I was making was I wouldn’t want to be on the opposite side of Walter Hussman. You know, he was underestimating Walter.

TH: He might not have been familiar with the history.

MM: You know, I think he was, but I think the arrogance factor was so high—like it is among most people who end up falling flat on their faces—that he didn’t want to listen to anyone else, because he knew it all. He’s one of these—KIAs, is what I call them, the Know It Alls in life. David Radler. Guess what? He’s now fallen on his face.

TH: In what sense?

MM: Well, the SEC [Securities and Exchange Commission] and . . .

TH: I know about Conrad Black. Is he . . .?

MM: He was tied right in there with Black, yes. He’s prominently mentioned.

TH: Just for the record, we’re talking about Conrad Black. And he was convicted?

MM: I don’t know that he’s been convicted.

TH: But investigated by the SEC.

MM: SEC. And I think it's more than an investigation now. I don't know if an indictment's [been] handed down, but he and Radler were both arm in arm in what was happening up there in those newspapers. [Editor's note: Conrad Black faces several criminal and federal charges relating to racketeering, obstruction of justice, money laundering and wire fraud. His trial began in March 2007. David Radler entered a plea agreement and testified as a witness for the prosecution.] I remember hearing David Radler say at one of the American conventions that I attended—calling everybody to silence, standing up there and talking about all these daily papers in Canada they owned, and how their latest acquisitions would give them a complete dominance across almost one entire section of Canada. He made the statement that caused me to take a deep breath. He said, “And once this deal is closed, our thoughts will be their thoughts.” And I thought, “Boy, this is not good at all. This is not the right philosophy.”

TH: Well, let's get back to the *Democrat* for a second. You came in 1982.

MM: Yes.

TH: And bring me up to—let's just very quickly do a chronology up to the current day.

MM: Okay. 1982 to 1986—those four years I was at the *Democrat* and in the war. [From] 1986 to almost 1990, I was heading the investigative team at the *Arizona Republic*. [From] 1989 to 1994, I held an endowed chair, the Kiplinger Chair, at the Ohio State University, teaching the graduate students and undergraduates. Then I was at the *Asbury Park Press* heading their investigative team. I came back out of academe, back into the mainstream and then returned in 1995 to be-

come the editor of the *Northwest Arkansas Times*. I was there for five years, left, spent a year—not quite a year, ten months—back home in Harrison as the director of communication for American Freightways, which was an interesting experience. It's the only [time] in my career I've ever been outside of journalism. But it did give me some good insight into the corporate world and the way corporations think and operate. Then Walter called one day and asked what I was doing. I said, "Well, I'm sitting here, scratching my head, wondering the same thing, Walter." And he said, "You're a journalist; we need a good columnist for Northwest Arkansas. Someone who's respected. Someone who's read. And someone who can speak for Northwest Arkansas and write an interesting, must-read column." He said, "You're the one whose name keeps coming up. Does that interest you?" And I said, "Absolutely." I was ready to get back to journalism. Actually, I shouldn't have left it. Although, again, like I say, it was a really good learning experience for me. So I came back in 2001, and have been writing basically four columns a week ever since. Mainly—dealing with various issues, but predominantly, heavily, on Northwest Arkansas.

TH: Let's see, now some of your columns are published statewide, and some are not?

MM: Yes. Tim, I don't even know how it works. I do know that Sundays are always statewide. Saturdays, depending on what I'm writing about, often are statewide. Tuesdays and Thursdays can be statewide if they deem in Little Rock that there's some statewide interest. Otherwise it runs up here in the Northwest edition. So I never really know when I send my column down where all it's running. Except on Sunday, I know that for sure. I know the Janie Ward case I've been writing

about here since last October—every one of those stories and columns goes statewide. So issues like that, that maybe involve state agencies, state issues, things that people in Pocahontas or Smackover might find interesting. Meredith usually is good about putting those in statewide.

TH: So you were teaching at Ohio State when the *Times* and the *Democrat* entered in-
to their alliance?

MM: That's right.

TH: Did you have any inkling that was coming?

MM: No, I didn't. I was surprised to read it. I did—my feeling was that I sat in the courtroom during the federal suit filed by the *Gazette* against the *Democrat*, the antitrust suit.

TH: And that was in what year?

MM: Well, let's see, that had to have been about the late 1980s, maybe 1987, 1988? But I remember sitting there listening to testimony and the results—seeing the Pattersons come out that day—and I just had a real strong gut feeling that that was the beginning of the end of the *Gazette*, that that was a lawsuit that the Pattersons probably should never have filed. I don't know if they've told you, but Walter—and this is pretty close to the truth, I mean, pretty close to accurate. Walter, at one point, when he purchased the *Democrat*—I'm the one who actually wrote the story for Walter when he bought the *Democrat*. He called me in Hot Springs one evening and said, "Could you come down here and write a story for me?" I said, "Well, sure." So I came down, and he said, "I just bought the *Democrat*." Of course, at that time, it was a dying dog—afternoon daily—losing circulation. It

was already under 100,000, and his dad had told him not to do it. But he said, “I decided I wanted to do it anyway.” So I wrote the story that went to the AP [Associated Press], and I said, “Are you sure you really want to do this?” And he said, “Well, you know, I’m going to give it a try. I think it’ll be fun to do, and I think I can make it work.” But he wasn’t over there very long before he went to see Mr. Patterson just to try to work out a joint operating agreement—the JOA—to see if they’d be interested in helping keep the *Democrat* alive, to preserve two voices in the state of Arkansas. And, as I understand it, he was rebuffed; Mr. Patterson basically looked down his nose at him and said, “Why would we want to do that? What do you have that we would want? How would it help us?” You know, “No, we’re not interested. Good-bye.” And a very—again the pre-fall arrogant approach. Well, I think that was just arrogant enough to where Walter went back and said, “You know what? I’m going to go to Chattanooga, Tennessee, and I’m going to figure out how the afternoon there caught the morning daily paper and passed it.” And he did. He figured out several things, including opening up the paper, being willing to lose money, opening up sports, free classifieds, any number of things. Calling attention to your paper. And enter John Robert Starr. A lot of people don’t know that Walter—at that time, Bob McCord was editor, and Walter called me in Hot Springs and asked if I would be interested in coming over as managing editor. I believe Jerry McConnell might have been managing editor at that time. But Bob McCord was the editor. I told Walter that Hot Springs was home, [and] that I didn’t know that I had the experience he needed to fight that battle, to do it for him right, because I really didn’t. I didn’t

know that I knew how to win a newspaper war. Coming out of Hot Springs, I was still young and inexperienced. I told him that I'd support him anyway possible, but I wasn't sure that was a good move for him or for me. So I turned it down. And that's when he went and found Starr at Tennessee in graduate school and brought him back. And, as it turned out, that was a good move because Starr was willing to climb on newspaper boxes with a knife in his teeth. He was willing to jump up and down and scream and shout to get people to look and notice and find it interesting enough to start taking the paper. That, combined with opening it up—free classifieds—all the other tactics that slowly began to work. And you can see the turnaround with each progressive chart. Things started shifting. I think that as they began to gather one major advertiser after another—pull them over—as readership built, that the tide began to turn. Then I think that the Pattersons—all of a sudden their arrogance slipped a little, and they realized, “Uh oh, we may be in trouble.” And I think the bulk of their suit, the basis of the bulk of their suit, was that Walter was using these smaller dailies around the state—Eldorado, Texarkana and Hot Springs—to help deal with that, and that was supposedly unfair. But they were unable to prove that was going on. And that—I think at the point where they were already sliding, and they'd lost that lawsuit—I think that was the beginning of the end. Then they sold to Gannett, and Gannett was just the same. Just arrogant—I'll tell you, that arrogance, by God, gets you every time. This arrogant approach, “We're Gannett, we'll whip anybody.” They came in and realized that Walter was willing to lose whatever it was—tens of millions of dollars—and their stockholders weren't. So there they were, caught in that trap.

They brought in McIlwaine, as I recall, as editor. And they took a whole different Rupert Murdoch approach. They were no longer the *Gazette*. They tried to be this Gannett, happy—*cartoon paper* is what I call it. And that's not what the people of Arkansas wanted or were used to. It didn't work. They didn't want a different animal. And they sure didn't want Gannett's style of journalism. Some people can blame Walter for doing it. It wasn't Walter. I think it was the Pattersons' arrogance, their unwillingness to even join with him. They could have taken control of it from the very beginning. If they'd entered into this JOA with Walter, they would have controlled the whole situation. [The war] never would have happened. The *Gazette* would have been the predominant paper today. But it was the arrogance that drove them into the pit. And Walter just would not give up. Uninformed people underestimate Walter Hussman. I think he probably hopes they will, because it gives him the distinct advantage when they do. And they do. History has been written now.

TH: I was going to ask—he went over to—which was the afternoon newspaper in Chattanooga? It was the *Times*?

MM: He went to the afternoon paper that had passed the morning. He now owns the Chattanooga paper.

TH: Right. And what is that? I forget. Is it the *Chattanooga Times*?

MM: Oh, you know, I'm not sure which one it is. I can't remember the name of it; I just know it was the afternoon paper. I think it became morning then.

TH: There's now one paper in Chattanooga?

MM: I think so, yes. I believe so.

TH: So he went over to study how it had—as an afternoon newspaper had surpassed the morning newspaper.

MM: What tactics it had used.

TH: Then he bought it.

MM: Eventually he bought it. I think he became close to the family. And, again, I don't know what I'm talking about, other than what I heard. But I think he became close to that family, and I think they had a mutual respect. I think when the time came, and they were willing to sell it, Walter saw potential there. You know, to me, when I look at all the papers I've been at—the major papers, the smaller papers—I honestly believe this—I don't know where you can find—where an editor can find a better publisher than Walter Hussman, as far as being supportive of good journalism, of not sitting on anyone, of not micromanaging. I don't know if it's possible to find one. Maybe it is, but I've never seen them at the places I've been. Most of them are fairly insecure people who feel guilty about being where they are, so they try to manage by intimidation or fear, or aloofness, rather than expose their humanity to the reporting staff. And Walter—I don't know. The first month's profit we made here—this Northwest section—he flew up here personally and announced he was taking that money—I forget, it may have been several thousand dollars—and dividing it equally among all the reporting staff who made it happen. All the people who made it happen. Does Gannett do that? I don't know anybody who does that, Tim. But, again, that only validates my impressions over the years now, and how he's been, and how he is, the honorable man he is. He's a lot like his dad, in that respect. But I think even

amplified. Even more—I don't know what the right word is. He has a lot of his father in him, but he has a determination to succeed that is stronger than any I've seen of any publisher anywhere.

TH: What I hear a lot about the *Democrat* from journalists, ex-journalists, is “It's putting out a good newspaper, but why does the editorial page have to be so one-sided?”

MM: Yes. I hear a lot of that, too. You know, here in Fayetteville, which is heavily Democratic, you hear a lot of that. My feeling is that's up to Paul and the publisher and how they want their voice to be. I think the state of Arkansas, in my personal opinion, is better served with a moderating voice that shows balance and reason rather than blind allegiance to any party or person. But that's not up to me, so I just write my columns. I write what I honestly feel and believe, which on any given day may be right or wrong, or could change the next week. And if it does change, then I try to write that, too, if I was wrong, and I feel I've made a mistake.

TH: Well, your column—and let me know if you have a different interpretation—it really is not that political a column. I mean, you're really writing about current events.

MM: Yes. Common people and what affects their lives.

TH: It's reportage with point of view, which you don't have in the news pages.

MM: Yes. That's exactly right. And that's why I'm probably perfectly suited for this at this stage of my career. I always try not to be predictable. I think it's deadly for a columnist to become predictable. I read Gene Lyons regularly, and I think

Gene Lyons may be the finest writer in the paper. I just think he expresses himself clearly, very well, eloquently. But he's also so predictable. My thinking is that a columnist from time to time may offend half the state or more, but I'm not going to do that unless it's really necessary to offend them. Then I will.

TH: To get back to your predictability point.

MM: Yes.

TH: I have not talked to Gene or anyone at the *Democrat* about this, but I just always assumed that Gene Lyons's assignment is to represent the other point of view. I don't know if that's true or not.

MM: I think that's accurate. Walter believes in diverse viewpoints that inevitably lead to the larger truth.

TH: And Gene may just feel that that's what he needs to do.

MM: I think he's supposed to represent that voice, and he does. I'm just saying that that's not the approach that I want to take. When Walter asked me to come and do this column—we had lunch in Little Rock—and he said that John Brummett had left. He also said, "You know, we need a voice. I believe in having voices, not just one voice." Which he does. And he said, "Now, I don't see you as necessarily a liberal; I also don't see you as a conservative. I see you as a populist." And I said, "I think that's exactly right. I believe in writing about the people of Arkansas, the everyday people who make all these corporations work." So in that respect, I'm probably a little bit more liberal than conservative, because that seems to be a more liberal view. But that's really not the case, either. A kind of humanitarian view of life. But I'm not either one. I still don't think I'm a liberal.

And I come from a Republican family. John Paul Hammerschmidt is my uncle.

TH: I didn't know that.

MM: Yes. [He] is very conservative [and] the Third District Congressman for twenty-three or [twenty]-four years up here in this district.

TH: He was a different kind of conservative than Republicans are today.

MM: Well, he doesn't hold fundamentalist, extremist views. But he's conservative fiscally, and he's very much oriented toward service, the military service. He was on the Veterans' Affairs; he was the majority member on that. And Transportation. Anyway, I come from that background, and my father was a military officer. So I feel I've got this side that sees both. I try to be reasonable, but you also have to have some passion and empathy in this lifetime. So that keeps me writing different issues from different perspectives on how I feel about any given issue.

TH: Mike, let me ask at this point if there's anything you want to talk about that I haven't?

MM: Well, you know, the *Democrat* years—this is for the *Democrat*, primarily. And the years of the *Democrat* before it became the *Democrat-Gazette*. I think it's an interesting time. There were such interesting characters there. Colorful characters. Bob Sallee, I remember, the city editor. Hawkins, David Hawkins, the editorial page editor, was a character. There was a lot of energy at that time, and the war helped fuel that energy. I always think—I'll always believe the *Democrat* saw itself as the underdog and fighting, trying to overcome, editorially and otherwise. It was, in fact, the huge underdog to begin with. And slowly that role changed. Now the biggest challenge for the *Democrat-Gazette*, for me, is to keep

from adopting and embracing that deadly arrogance. You know, when you're the only game in town, there's a real temptation to succumb, "To heck with you, we're the boss, we're in charge." And arrogance, to me, is such a deadly force that lays open like a trap just ready to spring. If the people in charge aren't sufficiently humble [and] grateful to the point where they don't take the people of Arkansas and others who are involved with them for granted, then it can spring shut.

TH: Yes, arrogance can take many forms. For instance, in a way you wonder, okay you've won the war; you're the only newspaper, so why do you feel like you have to be so harsh . . .

MM: Yes.

TH: . . . a good portion of the people in the state?

MM: Yes. Shrill and harsh. I don't think shrill and harsh ever gains you points in the long run; I think if anything it tends to alienate—that approach. It's kind of like managing by fear. I believe a newspaper needs to write for the widest possible audience, the reader. Not for your colleagues in other states. They don't matter in the long run; they come and go. Not for yourself. That's also deadly over time. People don't want to read it anymore because it's just mental masturbation, frankly. That's what it boils down to. I spoke to Democratic women here a few weeks ago, Tim, on a variety of things, and at the end there were some questions. One of the women said, "You know, tell me if I'm crazy, or if I'm wrong, please." But she said, "I find today when I read the newspaper, I read—and I don't even—there's nothing interesting. I don't know," she said, "I just look at things, and I think, 'oh, this isn't interesting, either.'" And I said, "No, I don't

think there's anything wrong with you. I think that we're becoming homogenized; we're becoming bland." Do you see it, Tim? Did you see what was going on ten, fifteen years ago, when we were actually digging into what was going on and telling people, and writing stuff that was relevant and interesting, for gosh sakes? And I told her, "What I see happening today is us covering process"—what I call process stories, where we go to the meetings—we're like stenographers. We sit there. We write down what someone says. We come back. We put it in the paper, and we have three or four meeting stories on our front pages—school board, planning commission, council. And everybody yawns; everybody glances and maybe reads the lead paragraph, flips on through, looks at the comics, looks at the sports, maybe—maybe, hopefully, reads what's being written on the column pages, glances at the editorial—if it's too long they don't read it, because they don't care. I said, "You know, you've got to be in touch with, in tune with, what's on people's minds"—is what this woman was trying to say in her way that if people don't read, you have zero impact or sales.

[End of Tape 1, Side 2]

[Beginning of Tape 2, Side 1]

MM: Journalists are supposed to be journalists, not stenographers. You're supposed to ask the tough questions. If you don't ask them, who's going to? In the public interest. And I see it waning in public interest reporting and journalism. I see a tendency to go along with the corporate mentality of "Let's all be friends, and let's not question anybody who's elected or appointed to lead us, who's drawing all this public tax money." And it's disheartening. It's disillusioning to a lot of

people.

TH: Of course, one reason we don't have much real investigative journalism anymore is because it costs money. Because if you're going to do it right, it takes time; it takes a lot of time.

MM: Sure it does. Yes. But it also can pay big dividends in the long run.

TH: You know, you can always do the cheap shot.

MM: That's right.

TH: Which some people consider or try to pass off as investigative journalism.

MM: But it's not, no. You know investigative journalism when you see it. And I do, too. And you're right; it does cost money. But you know what? We did put that money—in the seventies [1970s] and eighties [1980s]—we put the money into it, or newspapers did.

TH: Nobody thought twice about it.

MM: No. It was part of the expense of doing business; it was okay. And now, the bean counters have figured out, "Well, wait"—because the newsroom is an expense department—considered an expense department by those who count the beans—and they can just take their screwdriver and tighten down just a little tighter. "We can cut back here; we can cut back there. We can get down to the very minimum. We can hire the cheapest people we can hire, who know the least, who can write the worst, and who have the least number of sources and ability, and we can put this out, and call it a newspaper." That's not what lucrative and distinguished newspapers have been. It's what they've become, sadly, to a large degree. I don't know what's going to turn journalism around back to where it's serving a

valuable purpose for the state. We've just become this mindless blather, for the most part. Occasionally you'll see an interesting story, but you just don't see it like you did in the seventies and eighties [1970s and 1980s]. Unfortunately. And the Internet looms as an enormous threat to papers. Once again, you are back to "the people."

TH: Okay, well, on that note—I sure appreciate your time.

MM: Well, Tim, you're most welcome. Thanks for asking me.

TH: Okay.

[End of Interview]

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