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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with:

Carol Stogsdill
Little Rock, Arkansas
12 August 2006

Interviewer: Amanda Miller Allen

Amanda Miller Allen: I am Amanda Miller Allen, and I am interviewing Carol Stogsdill for the [University of Arkansas, Fayetteville] Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History Project on the *Arkansas Democrat*. This interview is being held in Little Rock [Arkansas] on August 12, 2006. 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 state your name, indicate that you are willing to give the Center permission to use this tape, and to make the transcription available to others.

CS: I am Carol Stogsdill, and I give the Center permission.

AMA: Okay, so let's get started. Start out—tell me a little bit about your background.

Tell me where and when you grew up, where you were born, and where you went to school.

CS: Okay. I was born on June 25, 1949. That was—not 1949 but June 25—was Custer’s Last Stand, and very symbolic of my life thereafter, I think. [Editor’s note: Custer’s Last Stand refers to the Battle of Little Bighorn, when the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne Indians emerged victorious over Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer in 1876.] I actually was born in Imboden, Arkansas. My parents were both from there—Ruby Smith and James Stogsdill. They both came from very large families, and their families were there. Every summer we would go back and spend the summer, so, when my mother was pregnant with each of her four children, we all—[laughs] she made the journey back to make sure that we were born in her home state of Arkansas. When I was thirteen in 1963, we moved back to Arkansas. We were living in Rockford, Illinois during that time. So I went to elementary school there and junior high, but in high school we returned to Arkansas. My dad had gotten ill, and they thought the weather there would be perfect for him. I came back to the South where my parents had gone to school. It was a little county school, actually. It was a consolidated district school [laughs] to bring up the school population. It was the same school that both of my parents had graduated from. The superintendent and the principal of the school—they were married. It was the same superintendent and the principal of the school that was there when my parents were there. So [laughs] . . .

AMA: That’s unbelievable. [Laughs]

CS: There was a lot of *déjà vu* in our family during that time. Because it was 1963, it wasn’t too—or there wasn’t a lot of distance from the desegregation actions in

Arkansas. My graduating class in high school was the first class to graduate a black person—in this case a young woman. I just want to tell this little story, because it was so indicative of the times, I think. This class used to take these fabulous class trips. My aunt—for instance—who had graduated from the same school, used to go to Cuba every year. She was there during the Bay of Pigs, so there was this history of going to wonderful places. [Editor's note: The Bay of Pigs Invasion was an unsuccessful attempt by the U.S. to overthrow Fidel Castro's government in 1961.] After Cuba, when they couldn't go there anymore, the class started going to New Orleans. They would go there for a week. The whole class would go on a bus, and a couple of parents would go. This had been going on for some years, so it came time for us to start planning our class trip. The superintendent and principal came into our class and said—and asked the black girl in our class to leave—to go out into the hallway. She did. They said, “We have an issue, because we always stay at the Fairmont Hotel which is a lovely hotel—and we love it. We know that you are going to want to go there, too, but they still will not take blacks. So we're proposing that we pay her the amount of money that we would spend on her, and she would stay home so as to not ruin the trip for everyone else.”

AMA: Oh, my.

CS: I remember looking and thinking, “I don't think that's going to happen.” [Laughs] And, in fact, my mother, when we lived in Rockford, had been quite an activist. She was always—I think I, unfortunately, followed in her footsteps a little—she was always the person who led the charge at the school board, and was always so active in politics, and an infamous letter-to-the-editor writer. So I went home and

told my mom what had happened. She looked at me and said, “Well, what are you going to do?” And I said, “Well, you’re not going to let me go are you?” And she said, “I think you need to decide.” Yes, right. [Laughs] Of course, I did the right thing. I went back the next day and said, “I’m not going to be able to go, either.” My best friend said, “Well, if Carol is not going then I’m not going.” I also saw my mom later at the—[laugh] at school in the superintendent’s office, so I had a feeling that there was another discussion on the side. We ended up going to Kentucky and Tennessee, for which I think the rest of the class never really forgave me, but those were the times at that point.

AMA: Did your black student go with you?

CS: She did, and she was my roommate on the trip.

AMA: Did you’ll have a good time?

CS: We had a great time. [Laughs] We had a great time.

AMA: Okay, so go on with your schooling after you graduated from Imboden.

CS: Well, you would know a little bit about my next step, Amanda, because I decided to go to Arkansas State University in Jonesboro [Arkansas]. It wasn’t too far away from home, but it was just far enough [laughs] that I could justify living away from home—living in the dorm.

AMA: I had a similar strategy.

CS: [Laughs] Exactly, but not so much as to break the bank entirely. I believe that’s where you and I met, which was a whole other story. We have to decide how much of that we will tell. We were on the school paper at the same time. I just came across this picture where you and I are picking up this guy, and we’re about to throw him out the door. The caption was—of course—the in-going editor and

managing editor throwing out the old editor. You were the editor, and I the managing editor. That was—I guess—our junior year or maybe our senior year. Yes, that was a great, great time. That was during the—you know, the Vietnam War was very—raging at that point. I was a student activist—[laughs] to say the least. I remember my parents were watching the evening news one night and my dad said, “Oh, that’s Carol.” And it was a policeman carting me off from one of the demonstrations. It really affected our town of Imboden of 400 people—you know, a small town. I don’t know how many of the guys I went to school with died in Vietnam. I mean, it wasn’t a huge number, but when you look at it comparatively, I lost some very good friends. It was troublesome—troublesome times. Also, I was kind of even then a little schizophrenic, because, even though I was very much the activist, my friend from—my closest friend from Imboden talked me into joining a sorority. I went through the rush, was accepted, and then went through the initiation. The initiation night I will never forget. I won’t say for these purposes which sorority it is, because it’s the only thing that I have ever given them, which is that I will keep my mouth shut about which sorority—but anybody can look it up. Of course, it’s public record I’m sure. At the initiation I looked—there’s a point at which you take off your blindfold and around the room in a circle these people were dressed—these women were dressed in Klan-like uniforms. I mean, the whole thing it was like—it was—I said, “Oh, well, this isn’t going to work.” I quickly decided that I wanted to run for student body—you know, vice president, because you had access to all kinds of things on campus that would enable me to make pamphlets and stuff like that for the demonstrations. They were of course—the sorority was putting up its own candidate. We

just parted ways, and I think they retired my number. It was kind of considered unlucky in this sorority to have a number of a bad seed. I was considered enough of a bad seed that they retired my number, and it will not be used by anybody else. That's my understanding.

AMA: So you never went to meetings? I mean, the initiation night was the end of it for you?

CS: That was pretty much it. The rush was fun. Got a few parties in, and that sort of thing. But, I never—never really participated in that year—in the sorority after that.

AMA: After you graduated, you got—what kind of degree did you get?

CS: What did we get? I was—I started out majoring in philosophy. I was home one weekend, and my mother looked at me seriously and said—I think I was in—after my sophomore year and I was going to summer school yet again [laughs] to take semester courses and she said, “What are you thinking? What could you possibly do with a degree in philosophy?” So that's why—and I loved to write. I loved writing. I actually liked the writing part of the philosophy classes. You know just—writing is so much fun for me, and so easy. It was kind of a—I think when you live in a small town, too, you learn to read and write. I mean you learn to love to read books, and you love to learn to write. I said. “Well, maybe I should major in journalism.” So I had a double major. We had a BS [Bachelor of Science] at that point. The degree was a BS and not a BA [Bachelor of Art] in journalism. I had pretty good grades, too, Amanda. I don't know about you, but I had pretty good grades. [Laughs]

AMA: I had a three-point-six. What did you have?

CS: I think it was better than that, but not much—[Laughs] but not much.

AMA: So after you graduated, what was your first job?

CS: Well, I came to Little Rock right away. I knew I would have to go to the big city to get a job. I didn't know how to drive, so I had to go home the weekend after I graduated and take a driving test that first I had to learn. My parents spent two days teaching me how to drive then we went before I forgot any of it, and got my license. [Laughs]

AMA: You mean you didn't know how to drive?

CS: Never had driven a car, until after I graduated and realized that I was going to have to drive. So I came to Little Rock, and I started applying for jobs. My first job, which only lasted a couple of months—maybe three—was at the State Tourism Bureau. I realized—well, there were two things that made me realize that this was definitely not for me. One was that Miss Arkansas couldn't make it to the—I think it was Hope [Arkansas] watermelon festival. I think that Hope has a watermelon festival every year. I think that's where it was. Miss Arkansas couldn't make it, but—well, we had to have Miss Arkansas. We'd already told them that she was coming, so they put the Miss Arkansas banner on me, and they said, "Just go there. Just stand there. You don't have to say anything. Just move around." [Laughs] There was only one person who—I think there were two people, actually, working in the State Tourism Bureau at that time—the guy who ran it, an assistant, and me. What really did it was [that] a few weeks later, I was asked to respond to a letter [that] was from a very, very important person whom you— [Dale] Bumpers was governor at the time—who knew him very well. He had sent this letter down to us and said, "Please respond." It was a woman who said, "I

have been going to Lake Catherine and Lake Hamilton in Hot Springs [Arkansas] all my life. I've read a story in the newspaper that they are so polluted that you can't even take your boat out there. Is this true?" I was supposed to respond, so I responded that it was sad, but true. And how despicable was it? I totally agree with her that we should care more about our environment, that the state should do more to clean up these two lakes, [and] that these are valuable resources.

[Laughs] I was right there with her in being outraged. I guess the word came down from the governor to my boss that I might consider another career, and maybe I should try newspapers. So I headed out and applied to the *Arkansas Democrat*. I was interviewed by Gene Foreman in what remains to this day the worst interview of my life. And I've talked to . . .

AMA: Not counting this one?

CS: [Laughter] Not counting this one, but this one is going to rank up there. I can tell. Gene Foreman was—he said nothing. He said nothing. He said—much as I'm doing now, I just kept talking and I couldn't stop. When I did, he just looked at me and said, "Is that all?" I felt he wanted more, so I kept talking. He said—at the end of it—he said, "Well, I don't have any jobs right now." I was like, "Oh, my gosh, all that energy I just expended." I also applied at the *Pine Bluff Commercial Appeal*. I went there, and I was there for just a couple of months. [In the] meantime, I'd heard that Gene Foreman had left. I think he went to *Newsday* at that time—*New York Newsday* or maybe the *Inquirer*. No, I think he went to *New York Newsday* first. Anyway, he went out East. I worked at the *Commercial* for a couple of months.

AMA: What did you do at the *Commercial*?

CS: I was a copy editor. It was my very first newspaper job. I was a copy editor, and, actually, they were cheap. Oh, I can't even remember what I was being paid, but it was outrageous. I was commuting from Little Rock, so all of my expenses—or all of my money was going up in gas and expenses to running my car. They had a guy there, Mr. [Paul] Greenberg—I can't remember his first name. He had won a Pulitzer for editorial writing. He would gather us together every day during our lunch hour, because the paper was not located in exactly a desirable area. There was nothing to do when we left the building. He would gather us all around, [and] we would all bring our lunch. We would just talk about the affairs of the day. I remember thinking, “Well, this is really nice.” It was like being at home around your dinner table. He really cared about what people thought. It was always a great discussion. Everybody—and it wasn't just people in editorial, because there weren't that many people in editorial. It was people from all over the paper. He would have people from—you know, the business circulation manager might come in. He would just have these discussions. It was great fun. Then I got a phone call from Jerry McConnell, who had just been hired at the *Democrat* to take Gene Foreman's place. He said, “Gene Foreman—I'm looking for some people and Gene Foreman left a note with your résumé that said if I ever have a job, I should give you a call.” So I came and went to work for Jerry. I was hired as a copy editor. I looked this up Amanda. I was making [laughs] \$4,400 a year. Today, I charge \$400 an hour as a consultant—as a media consultant. Do you realize that that means in eleven hours today, I make what I made working a whole year at the *Democrat*? That's all I have to say. You don't need to ask me now why I left. [Laughs]

AMA: Well, the cost of living was a lot less then, but still the wages were very, very low.

CS: Right. The wages were terrible. I just remember—and I remember you and I taking a vacation together once. That’s the only vacation [that] I can honestly remember taking the whole time that I was there. I’m not even sure that we got paid for it. Maybe we did? We must have, because I’m sure that we couldn’t have afforded to take it without pay. I don’t think you got vacation there for a long time. Certainly, there were not the holiday benefits and those kind of things that we get now. Right?

AMA: Yes.

CS: It was a sweatshop, but we didn’t know that then. I mean, I don’t think so. It was great fun, and you have to get older before you realize how abused we were.

[Laughs]

AMA: Okay, we’re going to come back to the *Democrat*. Go on with the rest of your career. What happened after—you became a copy editor at the *Democrat* and then . . .?

CS: I did a number of other things at the *Democrat*. I was a wire editor for a while. They were doing some new things that we can talk about later, because I know we will want to talk more about that. Then I was the deputy sports editor. Fred Morrow was the sports editor, and I was deputy sports editor. Drank my first cup of coffee while working my first Friday night sports stint. I then went on to the *Rocky Mountain News*, and was there for a little less than a year when the *Chicago Tribune* called. I had a friend there. They were looking for a copy editor, and said, “I know somebody you might want to talk to.” So I went to Chicago. I was in Chicago for ten years, and that was a great experience. First of all, Chi-

cago is such a fabulous town, but the newspaper was—you know, I think at its height of—greatness seems a big word to use, but they were certainly a really good newspaper then with foreign correspondents. Later they would pull back like everybody else, but certainly that was its heyday. I got to do everything. I mean, I wrote reviews. I was a page one editor. I was a weekend editor. It was just one of those times when, if I wanted to do it, I could do it. So it was just such a great experience.

AMA: What years were you there?

CS: I was there from 1976 to 1986. Then, in one of those dark moods that comes over me sometimes, I thought, “If I stay here another year, I’ll be here for the rest of my life.” That was scary, so I decided—where should I go? Someone said, “Have you ever been to California?” And I hadn’t. They said, “Well, LA [Los Angeles] is really a great place.” I moved to LA. At first [I] worked at the *Orange County Register*. By the way, everywhere I go there is disaster and mayhem. I mean, it just goes without saying. My first day at *the Orange County Register* was the day of the Cerritos, California plane crash that killed eighty-something people. My first day, and I was the news editor, so—and it was a holiday. It was Labor Day. So everybody—it was a very skeleton staff. Everybody was looking at me and saying, “So what do we do?” [Laughs] I barely knew where Cerritos was. In fact, I’m sure I had to look it up on the map, but it was a community very close to the paper—actually a few miles. The plane crashed in the community and killed people on the ground as well as people on the plane. That was a great story. I left there to go to the *LA Times*, and I was there for a long time—ten years.

AMA: What years were those?

CS: So that was—well, I left there in 1998—well, actually the first of 1999, so ten years.

AMA: Okay. And then, after that, what have you done?

CS: I have been a media consultant on my own, as well as with one of the—an international PR [public relations] firm. Now I do book consulting, and I'm executive director of media relations at the University of California at Los Angeles. Some of my clients have been—a religious organization, for instance, that has had problems—has been going through a child abuse scandal. I helped prepare a big technology company that was under federal investigation for treason. So I've had some very good cases. I've been able to get really good clients because my tenure at the *Times* was—you know, I was senior editor and vice president when I left, so I've built a lot of relationships and knew a lot of people. Most importantly is, I knew how it worked. I knew how reporters did their job, and I knew how stories got in the paper. I also knew how stories are created in the sense of I knew how things happened. Since I can't use expletives, I won't use the "s" word. [Laughs]

AMA: Comparing your job now with your jobs at newspapers, what do you think? I mean, are you better satisfied being a media consultant, or did you like working in the media better? Can you kind of tell me what you think about . . . ?

CS: I get asked that question a lot, because it's—you know, journalists really don't want to hear that you're happy doing something else. [Laughs]

AMA: Oh?

CS: But I—for instance, only last week I had two reporters ask to have lunch with me, and we did have lunch. They wanted to know how they could assess their skills,

and find something else to do. Because newspapers are—well, just yesterday the *Dallas Morning News* announced that it's laying off eighty-five newsroom employees. That's, sadly, been the story over the last decade. Really, the last ten years has been a story of layoffs, consolidation, and newspapers not squeezing out the profit margins they want. Although many of them are—by other standards are doing quite well, but not as well as the shareholders may want them to do. So I do get asked that a lot, and I honestly—there are some days [that] I'm not sure I know the difference between what I did before and what I do now because I'm on the phone to journalists, and because I do know what a real story is. I'm not going to zoom them. I'm not going to try to sell them something that's not newsworthy. I kind of kid the editor of the *LA Times* that I think I get more stories on page one [laughs] than most of his reporters do, because I know what is a good news story. I think that makes me good for reporters on the news side, but it also makes me good on the client side. I often tell clients that they think they want to be in the newspaper, but they probably don't. If I'm really doing my job, I'm keeping them out of the newspaper.

AMA: Okay, let's go on to other things. One thing that I'm curious about, since you have worked for so many really good newspapers, as well as starting your career at the *Democrat*, what was your favorite of those newspapers?

CS: Oh, I'm glad you asked that actually, because I was just thinking—as you were about to ask the question, “Gee, I didn't really dwell on what was really my favorite job.” When I was hired at the *LA Times*, I was hired to work in the Orange County Edition of the *Times*. At that time, there was fierce competition between the Orange County Edition, which had 200 editors and reporters, and the *Orange*

County Register. It was—you know, a lot of newspaper publications—or I should say journalistic publications—wrote about the competition between those two papers, and all that was going on. I mean, it was going on not only just on the news coverage side, but on the business side. All kinds of tricks trying to get circulation higher, and the marketing—they put a lot of money into marketing the paper. All these things were going on, including—like we would have 3:00 a.m. rallies for the 3:00 [a.m.] press crews, so that they would all feel part of it. Even though it was the *Los Angeles Times*, which was only forty miles away in downtown LA, as editor of that edition I got to do what I wanted to do. And I mean completely redo that paper from front to back. I could take a look at the whole news report, not just the local news report, but what was happening internationally [and] nationally. Not just from the wires, obviously, but from the entire *LA Times* staff at that time—1,300 of them, I think. Remake the paper so that it was attractive to the people in Orange County. At the time, the Orange County Edition of the *Times* was in itself—if you separated it from the LA edition, it was one of the top ten newspapers—circulation wise—in the country. It was just great fun, because I had all of these wonderful resources. I had the best writers in the world. I got to play editor with their copy, and I got to run a staff of 200 editors, reporters, and photographers. We could just go after anything, and, if we needed something, it was—“Yes, what do you need?” The “mother ship” forty-five miles away would make sure we had what we needed. It was just the most creative group of people. That was the other thing. And they’ve all gone on to do wonderful things, win Pulitzers, and all of that. You know, we [had] great reporters. They just uncovered a lot of wonderful stories, and it was just a really good time to be there. I’ve

never had such—not just control over something, but had such a super staff to make it happen.

AMA: That does sound like fun.

CS: [Laughter] It was fun. It was fun. So that was my favorite, but I have been able to look at some really wonderful places—again, great stories.

AMA: Yes, you have. You've had a really great career.

CS: O. J. Simpson, and, you know, the Northridge Earthquake for which the *Times* won a Pulitzer. [Editor's note: O. J. Simpson is the former professional football player charged with murdering his ex-wife and her friend in 1994. He was acquitted. The Northridge earthquake occurred on January 17, 1994.] I ran that coverage, and it was so—it was just so enormous. The *Times* had won a Pulitzer a few years before that for its coverage of the riots [reference to the 1992 riots that erupted in Los Angeles when four white police officers were acquitted of beating an African-American man]. It won for second day coverage. When I became the senior editor in LA, I said, "If we ever have a disaster like that again, I'm vowing that this newspaper is going to win it for first-day coverage." We did. For the Northridge Earthquake we won for first-day coverage, and to me that was: "Yes!" [Laughs]

AMA: That's so very exciting.

CS: Yes, it was exciting.

AMA: Okay, let's get down to the *Arkansas Democrat*. Let's talk about all of the jobs you held when you worked there.

CS: Oh, Amanda, my brain—I'm not sure—let me think. Like I said, when I got there, I was on the copy desk. It was kind of—I fell into a sort of—I think—the

tail end of what I called the [*Arkansas*] *Gazette* Mafia. There were a number of people who had come from the *Gazette* to the *Democrat*. I think Jerry McConnell must have hired them all. Or maybe not Jerry—I guess Gene Foreman who also was—I think was at the *Gazette* for a period of time. Certainly, Gene started the movement to really turn that into a great staff, and he hired a lot of people from the *Gazette*. I have to say that, as pleasurable as my two-month job at the *Commercial Appeal* was, this was, in some ways, just the opposite of that. In the sense that sometimes pain is pleasure. It turned out to be pleasurable, but I remember Richard Allen—I believe—was in the slot when I first started—my first few months. He later went to *Newsday* and the *New York Times*, and now he is at the *International Herald Tribune*. Oh, was he a grump. He made it clear from the get-go that this was serious business. There was no time to laugh, and we were there to work. He had such a—he was such a taskmaster, but he made learning fun at the same time. I just remember wanting to please him. If I could please him, then I must have really done a good job. You didn't get that many "at-a-boys" from the *Gazette* Mafia. Mostly, it was just, "Okay, and now, if you want to get better at this, this is what you're going to have to do." So even if they didn't criticize you for the work that you just handed in, they made it clear that there was a lot of room to grow. Which was exactly—now, many years later, exactly what you want—I guess—when you start out in something. I knew almost right away that I was going to love this. That it was just fun. That you—you know, these people, by the way, become your life. They become your family. You live with them. Especially when you work for an afternoon newspaper, the God-awful hours that we kept. I mean, how many times did you get up at 3:00

a.m. to be at work at 4:00 [a.m.]?

AMA: Often.

CS: Often. No one else in the universe was doing that; so we worked together, we ate together, and we played together. And these people really became a family. Also, I think that we were lucky that we were working with people who—I mean you look back at their careers, and so many of them went on just to do great things. In some cases just to live their lives—maybe they didn't leave Arkansas, but they're so respected and known for their journalism. It was a good time to be there. Again, the war was going on, Watergate was going on, [and] newspapers were undergoing just radical changes. All of that was being played out in the newsroom. I remember—do you remember that Martha Mitchell used to call occasionally and go off on her rants? I mean, what a great time. Of course, I'm sure we complained about it then—about who was going to have to take the call—unfortunately, not who was going to have to take it, but who was the unfortunate person to answer the phone when she called. There were so many historical moments. I'm sure it's the case for your first job—and I consider this to be my first job, really, because it was the one I loved—and the other two were for such a short period of time. What a great thing to be able to share it with people who you have a lot of respect for, and to have so much going on—to have so many historical moments going on. And the industry itself was changing. I remember when they brought in the scanners, and suddenly we went from glue pots and paste to . . .

AMA: Copy spikes.

CS: “COPY.” Remember how we used to yell that? Then it was some sort of electric

typewriter and scanners. I remember the [*Washington Post*?] news service and the *LA Times* news service, which were the same, put something in the newsroom that allowed the copy to go straight into the computer.

AMA: It was a ticker tape kind of thing.

CS: Yes. I remember that I was the one who had to learn how to use it first, and therefore I almost never got anyone else to be interested in learning how to use it—because it meant that you also had to fix it. I remember I read—a long time ago I read Jerry McConnell’s interview on the *Gazette*. He mentioned that when he was at the *Democrat*, they sent him away for a week to teach him how to use this stuff. He came back, and he was talking about how he was always on call because of that. I want to beg to disagree just a little bit. I remember me having to do that, and I think you might have had to do that a little yourself. So he was not the only one. He wisely taught a couple of us how to fix these things—these new gizmos that were in the newsroom.

AMA: Do you remember having to go down—and this may have been after your time.

CS: It got very interesting after my time. Didn’t it?

AMA: It did, and maybe this was after your time there. Was there a big computer down on another floor while you were there?

CS: Yes, while I was there.

AMA: And you had to go throw all these levers and switches.

CS: Yes. [Laughs]

AMA: And reboot it every night.

CS: Yes.

AMA: And half the time it wouldn’t reboot.

CS: Yes, and did you see Jerry McConnell down there very often?

AMA: Not at 3:00 in the morning.

CS: I didn't either, for the record. The other thing about the *Democrat* was that, like the *Chicago Tribune* for me, you could do anything, because, if you got impatient or you just thought, "I can't do this job for one more second," all you had to do was go in and say, "I can't do this job for one more second." Jerry would say, "Well, what do you want to do?" I remember being able to do a lot of things and try out a lot of things. When I would get bored, I could always appeal to Jerry to give me something else to do, something I hadn't done before, so I could learn.

AMA: That's how you became sports editor? [Laughs]

CS: That's how I became—it is. I don't even know what I was thinking that day, but I was bored and I thought—I always tell everybody now, when I have to interview for a job, someone nearly always asks, "What's the bad thing? What's your weakness?" I always say, "I get bored easily." When I got bored, my mom always said, "You're trouble." So, yes, I went in to Jerry and I said, "I want to go to sports." I think he thought that wasn't so surprising, because I had three brothers. I can confess now that none of my three brothers cared anything about sports. I always cared more about it than they did. I went to sports, yes. Fred Morrow was the sports editor, but he was writing a column at the time. It was taking up so much of his time, so he gave me—again, I was always lucky, I think, in having good mentors. It was very late in life before I ran up against anyone who tried to stop me. Everybody else was "go for it." Fred was really a great boss, but he gave me a lot of room. I just remember how exciting it was, really, to be on that sports desk on Friday or Saturday night, and have all of these things come in.

You had to—I mean it was a constant deadline. You were rewriting, you were answering the phones, taking sports scores from all over the state, and it was crazy. It was a lot of fun.

AMA: After you became assistant sports editor, though, your Friday and Saturday nights were tied up forever.

CS: Yes. Yes, but, you know, before that my Saturday nights—did we work six days a week? [Laughs] Now I'm beginning to feel like I worked seven days a week. Maybe?

AMA: We did work on Saturdays.

CS: Didn't we work Saturdays?

AMA: We did. We worked Saturday—I don't think we worked six days every week, but I think we had a Saturday rotation where we had some Saturdays.

CS: I think we must have, but I remember—I mean, if this tells you, it was no huge interruption to my life, because every Saturday night I did the same thing. When I wasn't working, I would open up a can of—what's that—Dinty Moore beef stew. I would cook noodles and put it over the noodles, and that was my Saturday night. Do you know to this day I crave that on Saturday nights? I think, "What if I just did that again." I don't allow myself to go there, but that was my favorite.

AMA: So that was your big gourmet meal?

CS: Yes, so having to work on Saturday night was not a big deal. When all it had to compete with was my having to forgo my Dinty Moore beef stew and noodles. You know again, we were such a tight-knit group that, if we did anything at all on Saturday night, we did it together, but the chances were good that, you know . . .

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

CS: We did a lot together outside the office. There were parties and there were home parties. I think that's true. Actually, though, I think that was happening all over the country at newspapers. I think journalists have always sort of hung out with each other. I mean it's—you know, most of us have found our relationships inside the newsroom, because, again, who else has to get up at 3:00 in the morning to go into the office? Who else would understand that? Who else would understand that you might get a phone call saying, "Honey, not going to be home at 6:00 [p.m.] like I usually am. In fact it may be midnight, because this has happened and I have to stay."

AMA: Yes, you better start the dinner party without me.

CS: Yes. Yes, exactly. The dinner party or, "I hope you're not at the restaurant already, because you'll be eating alone." That's not something that happens every now and then, but that's a routine thing. So definitely, I think we all had our close friendships and, like I said, in many cases our relationships—our partners and spouses—came from newsrooms.

AMA: Yes, because when you were off, you were too tired to go out and do anything else. You weren't out volunteering another six hours of your day somewhere.

CS: That's so true. I was there, and I know you were too, Amanda, when the paper was sold. When Walter Hussman [Jr.] bought the paper.

AMA: That was one of my questions that I wanted to ask you about. So . . .

CS: Go for it.

AMA: Yes.

CS: I remember, actually, that we threw a party for him so that he could get to know

us. And from . . .

AMA: It was at your house?

CS: It was at my house. That's why I remember it so well. He did not get a real warm welcome. Looking back on one of the things that I learned about the *Democrat* then, Walter Hussmann's buying it—with a big exclamation point on it and maybe a less positive way—but working there really taught me a lot about community journalism. I mean, I know I've mentioned Watergate, and the war, and those kinds of things—Martha Mitchell calling—but the truth is that the *Democrat* was important because of what it did locally. I know we all made fun—at one time or another—of the Answer Please column, especially when it ran out on page one. But it is local journalism. It is community journalism. So Walter Hussman bought the *Democrat*, and here was a guy who had—who owned a number of small papers. Little did we know then [and] maybe what we have learned since was that he—it was the beginning of consolidation. It was the beginning of synergy, if you will. People who did own a lot of small community papers wanted a paper like the *Democrat*. And the first thing that they would do—and the *Democrat* was losing money, so from a business stance you can't blame him, right? When he came in, he started trimming costs and then later—some time later—he wound up with the *Gazette*, too. Everything—and that was just a model of what was to happen all around the country, really. It was all about local, and it was all about community. It was all about getting the cost down. You know, using—I will never forget that—I believe at that party—he spoke very briefly, but he talked about how him owning the other papers could really help the *Democrat*, because now they had a source of news that they didn't have before. We were

appalled, of course, but now that's not uncommon. That's what many papers do.

AMA: I don't think we appreciated his business plans. I don't think any of us in the newsroom appreciated that he had given this a lot of thought, and that he knew what he was going to do with it. I think we were all just kind of—at least for myself—I was thinking, “Gosh, he's awfully young, and he's going to be my boss?”

CS: You are absolutely right. That was—I know we all felt that way, and yet we were young, too. But we were looking at him, and he wasn't sending any signals that were sounding good. He was questioning everything from how many of us were there to benefits. I remember that became immediately an issue. We were hardly getting—it was not like we were getting the Cadillac of benefits already, and so the thought that there would be cutbacks in areas like that—he didn't do a good job of pulling us in, or articulating that. I don't mean to be harsh on him, because, of course, people say that today—same circumstances—no one ever feels fully informed. But you are right. If there was a business plan, I don't think we really understood what it was, and certainly—the question, I guess, would be did he even, at that point, know what he wanted the end game to be? It was a pretty rocky road, and I was glad to have not had to have spent a lot of time on it. You spent a few more years with him than I did.

AMA: What years were you at the *Democrat*? You arrived in 1971?

CS: 1971 and I left five years later. So I left at the very end of 1975. I mean 1976. 1975?

AMA: Nineteen seventy-five?

CS: Yes, 1975.

AMA: So what—tell me—describe what the *Democrat* looked like physically when you

arrived. What did the newsroom look like? What do you recollect about it?

CS: Well, I remember—this is one thing that Walter did do. He redid—he sandblasted the outside of our building. [Laughs]

AMA: It was filthy.

CS: It was not sandblasted when I arrived. It was dirty. Then you walked in, and I remember that when you walked in the front door it just looked like something out of early [twentieth] century. Because we went to school in communications, our equipment, of course, was pretty modern and up-to-date at the university. You know, I remember some friends of mine went into advertising, and I would visit them. They always had these sleek offices. But this place—you walked in and you were underwhelmed from the get-go. And you went to the newsroom—and what can I say? It was like many newsrooms at the time, but, remember, people could smoke. So cigarettes were ground into the tables.

AMA: And into the tile.

CS: And into the tile. People just let their ashes burn out there, so it smelled, and it looked horrible. There was no one cleaning up. I certainly never remembered it [and] it's hard to believe this now, but I think when we left at the end of the day, people came by to get—to pick out the trash cans—you know, to throw out the stuff in trash cans. Everything else was untouched. I mean, dust—the windows, I remember you couldn't see out them. It was—they had not been cleaned [in] who knows when? It was a pretty disgusting place, but it was part of the charm at the same time. You didn't have to worry, if you went and got a burrito, where the bean was going to fall. [Laughs] And you know, the *Democrat* was the stepchild to a lot of other papers. I remember when I left there and went to the *Rocky*

Mountain News, its newsroom was considerably nicer—though not perfect. It was a huge upgrade from the *Democrat* newsroom, but Walter Hussman came in and I think one of the things he did was sandblast that building.

AMA: And he also painted the newsroom—I think.

CS: I don't remember that, but he probably did. He probably did, and, if he did, I'm sure there were a lot of wisecracks about whose job that was going to cost. Or what vacation—my vacation—that was going to cost. Another thing, though I—you know, just because I dropped some names—the Martha Mitchell thing and stuff like that—we cannot talk about the *Democrat*, of course, without mentioning Bill Clinton, right? I have—there's just one sort of short story that sticks out in my mind about Bill Clinton. Every year—or maybe it was only every two years—they would do the [Farkleberry] Follies, or what is the thing similar to the Grid Iron in [Washington] DC that maybe—for some reason, I thought we called them . . .

AMA: Farkleberry Follies.

CS: Farkleberry Follies, exactly right. I remember that he had caught all of our eyes—the women—because he was attractive. I remember him strutting out on the stage, and somebody—I can't remember who, but somebody from our little group—had written this particular segment of the Follies. He came strutting out on the stage, and he had on a pair of blue jeans really tight. He had a big can, and a spoon. He was spooning out of this can, and he said something to the effect that, "Hi. I'm Bill Clinton. I wear tight blue jeans, and I love my baked beans." [Laughter] So, even back then, he was known for his propensity to eat at all hours, to eat things like baked beans, and maybe to have to worry about his

weight just a little bit enough to make his jeans tight. I remember that—like it was yesterday, and I remember exactly where I was sitting. I was sitting in a corner table. There was a raised area—there were tables down on the floor, then there was a raised area, and I was right on the raised area in the corner. For all I know, you might have been sitting at the table with me, because I just remember that for every woman at the table we were like, “Right on.” [Laughter] We had a really good view of those tight jeans from the back. I can say that since I’m not a journalist now. I don’t have to be . . .

AMA: Proper.

CS: Proper.

AMA: Okay, so back to the *Democrat*. How did the ambiance at the *Democrat* change?

We went through a process of upgrading all of the equipment that we used. What was that like when we switched from manual typewriters and we went to IBM Selectrics [typewriters], [and] then it became fully computerized? I’m not sure it was fully computerized by the time you left.

CS: I think it may have been, actually—well, as fully computerized as it could be back then, because there were so many changes going on. You’re right, probably the pagination process had not been completed. Again, Walter Hussman was kind of out in front on many of those things in terms of newspapers—I know that—for instance, I mentioned the *Washington Post-LA Times* news service machine, and I think we were the trial for that. He was a great experimenter. I think one of the frustrations for me was that, having started out there, the focus was all on journalism. It was all on the story. It was all on the practice of journalism. By virtue of making a change so radical on the technology side, it became a lot about technol-

ogy. At the same time, you had people leaving because they clearly could get paid more almost anywhere else. The *Democrat* was still losing circulation. It was a tough place to work, and people were doing it for someone that they had not really warmed up to. I think in terms of morale and the actual practice of what we did, it became a tough place to be. “Tough” may be the wrong word. That may be too strong. It was harder to find pleasure in a day’s work. You looked up and sometimes all you did was spend time fixing some freaking machine that you just—we used to say, “Who used to do this? Didn’t the composing room used to do this?” How many times did we say that? It was rewriting how newspapers were going to be published, and that had its moments of “wow” like any new miracle will. But, if you’re right in the middle of it and the reason you went to work for a newspaper was because of the thrill of the news cycle and that thing that we all had that we could all make a difference by doing it, then suddenly you realized that sometimes your ten-hour day—I do believe they were ten hours—your ten-hour day would be just totally taken up with just learning how some piece of equipment worked.

AMA: Do you remember when we first got computers? How many there were?

CS: I do not. Do you?

AMA: Yes. There were four.

CS: Oh. My.

AMA: The copy desk kept four computers, and there were none out in the newsroom.

Reporters were still writing on Selectrics. We got these four terminals, and you had to—people would be sitting on the rim. You would read through your story, make some editing marks and then get up and go to the terminal. Take your piece

of paper to the terminal, and edit it on the screen. So you were doing it twice.

CS: Oh, man.

AMA: Plus, you didn't get access to the terminal, because there were more than four people on the copy desk. [Laughs]

CS: I remember that. I remember that.

AMA: It was so absurd. The computer itself was so unstable that it was always crashing. It would hit—they were so new and we were hitting all these keys. If you hit the wrong key, do you remember what it said?

CS: No. No.

AMA: Our computer guys had programmed it to say, "Fasten your seatbelt," then the screen would go black. I used to get so angry every time that happened. The first time it might be funny, but after that it was not funny. [Laughter]

CS: Well, I think we all had to have a sense of humor during that time, and I guess that was their way of showing their sense of humor about what was going on.

AMA: It was a very frustrating time.

CS: It was very frustrating.

AMA: Well, let's talk about something that's more fun. Who were your mentors at the *Democrat*?

CS: Well, I think I have—sometimes I get my mentors and my friendships mixed up. Certainly, Jerry was. Not only because he allowed me to do a lot of things, but also because he was more—he seems to be, on the face of it, a go-along get-along guy. But he had so much experience and he was so good at what he did, that he loved sharing it. You just had to kind of pick out that time. He wasn't a screamer. At least I don't remember him ever coming out screaming. I think that

Richard Allen, for his short period there, taught me—just from the very beginning—that it was a serious enterprise. That when something got into the paper your readers had to trust it, and you had to have credibility. Even a typo, even a bad headline would erode your credibility. I think Larry Gordon, who was the slot for part of the time that I was there—he taught me that—he taught me what a clever head really was. It's really funny, because we worked for the school paper—I did in high school and college. I thought that I was so funny. I thought I was so witty. I thought I was a great headline writer. The truth is—look through it with Larry's eyes. It was often—he would say, “Do you see where that doesn't really—that doesn't really make sense? I think it's only ninety percent there. If you can't come up with that other ten percent, you can't use it.” You know, it's just [that] you have to be complete. You can't “almost” be funny. You can't “almost” be witty. So I to this day am so hard—I'm so hard on headlines. Somebody will say, “That's a good headline,” and I'll say, “You know, it's really not.” It kind of misses the mark a little bit. So, therefore, someone was trying real hard to be clever, but they didn't quite make it. I guess I have exacting standards on headlines. Of course, you were such a good friend and advisor. I think—I often feel about us like—I don't know if you feel this way, but I felt we could share what we were learning. We could sometimes muddle through together if we didn't want to ask somebody else—for all kinds of reasons. [Laughter] We could kind of share, and we could kind of talk something through. Sometimes just create our own game plan or decision on something, because there wasn't anybody, maybe, who was around and we trusted—not trusted—we admired . . .

AMA: Well, sometimes there wasn't anybody to ask.

CS: Yes, because there was no one to ask, so I felt together we could work through. That was the thing about this place; you can make decisions. I don't remember being second-guessed too often.

AMA: Well, certainly at a newspaper as big as the *Atlanta Constitution*, someone who is an entry level copy editor who maybe worked there a year—they're not making any decisions like we made at the *Democrat*.

CS: Right. Right, exactly. We were able to do it, and, you know, I think we did a pretty good job.

AMA: The other good thing about this experience was you were hired to do the rim, but, if you did a good job on the rim, then you moved into the slot. You moved into other more responsible positions, and you learned from them. You got a real sense of what your role in the whole scheme of the newspaper was. What you—how you helped to get it out, and what other people were doing. Sometimes, until you sat in the slot, you didn't really appreciate how tough a job that is.

CS: Right, and back then it was without computers. It was really a tough job. I think computers have made that job easier—I think. It's changed it, but it's made it easier.

AMA: It has made it easier, because you're not pasting things, cutting stories apart, moving paragraphs around and pasting them back together.

CS: Right. Right, all those things were all room for error.

AMA: Exactly. I mean, you do the same thing with a computer, but it's easier to catch yourself if you make a bad mistake.

CS: Right. Right.

AMA: So [is there] anyone else you can think of as a mentor?

CS: Gosh, now I feel like I'm at a dinner, and I'm going to leave somebody out that was really important.

AMA: Well, you've already mentioned Fred.

CS: There was such a good quality of writing going on, too. There were just some people who I thought were really fast, good writers. I mean, I would watch people rewriting. Back then, I'd think the job as rewrite was probably one of the hardest jobs around. I'd watch people with such skills at it. Somebody who would take a story over the phone—someone would call out a story, and someone who took this story over the phone just did such a great job. It was that they were just such great people—great personalities. George Boosey, he was crazy.

AMA: I'd forgotten about George. [Laughs]

CS: Bill Husted was a little crazy. [Laughs]

AMA: I'll second that.

CS: Lots of fun, and really a good writer. Oh, my gosh, Patrick—on the city desk.

AMA: Ralph Patrick?

CS: Ralph Patrick. He was like—wasn't he everyone's father? He looked old when he was young, which was great because when you thought, "Oh, my God, has everybody gone crazy? Is the place falling apart?" You just have to look over at him and Mister Calm, Cool, and Collected—but not just calm, cool, and collected really. He was really a good city editor.

AMA: He was.

CS: It was just people like that. So I think—this probably can almost wrap it up—again, those were the kinds of people. You can virtually look in every corner and there were people who were willing to teach you, who were patient, and didn't

despair. Who really—if you were willing to soak it up, what you could learn was great, and you just watched good stuff being done—good journalism being practiced. I think it was a great—again, a great first job, because I see now kids who—well, first of all, a lot of people wouldn't work nights for just anything. They'll come, and it's their first job out of college. They'll say, "No. I don't work weekends or nights." I think about all I learned when there weren't that many people there, because, again, you could do anything. You really developed a confidence in your skills, your ability to make decisions, and to lead. I really feel that all of that was possible later because of this opportunity. And everybody was rooting for you. I don't remember sniping and competitiveness.

AMA: I don't either. You know, we were more of a family.

CS: Yes.

AMA: Kind of a sick and demented family, [Laughter] but a family.

CS: All the dirt.

AMA: Tell me, what's your fondest memory of the *Democrat*? Can you think of any story about anything that happened that makes you smile even now?

CS: Well—a story. I don't know. There's so—I remember that sometimes we would go—we would all go out to hear some musician, and it would be someone really great. It would be some really great singer—Jazz singer who would be just hanging out in some little old Little Rock bar. We would—again, we did it together. We'd just go hang out. I guess I have this—if there's just one picture in my head—Jerry McConnell and his wife Jo gave a party at their house, and I still have a picture of it. I am not a great collector of things where I save them and save them. I do save special pictures that represent things over the years, but this

is a poor quality picture. By all rights, I would have thrown it out years ago, but you are in it. We are sitting—as are several other people—we’re sitting up on their buffet, [laughs] and we have our legs crossed. There are all these people around us, and everybody is having a great time. I believe it is at this party that Mike Kirkendall—do you remember him?

AMA: Yes.

CS: Remember how he used to eat glasses? He could eat champagne glasses—wineglasses, I think they were?

AMA: Oh, yes.

CS: I believe Mike Kirkendall was doing his glass eating act. It’s a terrible quality picture, but everybody is just—there are heads thrown back and we are laughing. To me that was—that represents my time. It was such a time and place, and it is the perfect picture that sort of represents my time there—and the friendships. There were great moments.

AMA: It makes me smile, too. Is there anything that we haven’t covered that you’d like to talk about?

CS: I don’t think so. I think I’ve probably rattled on too much. I just looked forward to talking to you, Amanda.

AMA: To grilling me, is what you mean. [Laughter] Okay, well, thank you very much for your time, and for your contributions to the history project. I appreciate you sitting down to talk with me, and we’ll talk some more in a moment.

CS: Thank you.

[End of Interview]

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