

Interview with
Charles Allbright
Little Rock, Arkansas
March 30, 2000

Interviewer: Michael Haddigan

Michael Haddigan: My name is Michael Haddigan. I am sitting here with Charles Allbright, currently columnist with the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* and, previously, a reporter and columnist for the *Arkansas Gazette* and also an author. And this interview is part of the Arkansas Center for Oral and Visual History project on the *Arkansas Gazette*. We will transcribe this interview and make it available to those interested in Arkansas history. We will give you the opportunity to review the transcript, at which point you will sign a release, and all you need to do, all I need you to do now is to tell me your name and indicate that you are willing to give the Center permission to use this tape and make the transcription available to others.

Charles Allbright: I am Charles Allbright. I am glad to be here, and do with me what you will.

MH: So you do give . . .

CA: I do agree to this and wish us all well.

MH: Okay. First of all, Charlie, can you tell me, all together, how many years you worked at the *Arkansas Gazette*?

CA: I went to work at the *Gazette* in 1955, and, in 1966, joined Winthrop Rockefeller in his bid for governorship. And when he died, Washington's Birthday 1973, in California, I brought his ashes back. I returned to the *Gazette* the fall of that year, 1973, and I was there so long as the *Gazette* existed. And, subsequent to that, I have been at the *Democrat-Gazette*.

MH: Let me ask you a little bit about your background. Where were you born, and what did your parents do, and where did you grow up?

CA: I was born in Oxford, Mississippi, which has nothing to do with my life except that that is where my mother's parents were. And, in those days, it took two weeks to have a baby, and you'd go where your parents are, and they'd take care of you, so I was born at Oxford. My parents, at that time, were English professors at what is now the University of Arkansas at Monticello, and I have no recollection of that. My first recollection is a childhood in McGehee, where my father was recruited to be superintendent, and that is what he did. My mother taught English and Latin at McGehee High School. My childhood was there for the first twelve years, so kind of still is. You know, those were dear days to me. And we left McGehee in 1941—my dad was already up here in Little Rock—and have been here ever since, except for time in the service and knocking around, traveling with the Win Rockefeller.

MH: When did you go in the service and what?

CA: 1953 was the Korean thing. My brother was over there, and I thought—my older brother—and I thought, “Well, maybe I can catch up.” But it was over before I got

over there and spent until 1955—those two years in the Army. And then came back to the *Gazette*, or came to the *Gazette*. I hadn't worked there before. I had worked for the *Democrat* summer times while I was going to school in Fayetteville. And I was with the Little Rock High School *Tiger*. I was the sports person with that and got a call from Jack Keady, who was *Democrat* sports editor, and he said, "Come to work," so I did. And that is basically the whole thing about what I wound up doing. I was going to be an All-American football player at Georgia Tech. I couldn't do arithmetic, and I couldn't play football.

MH: So you went to the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville?

CA: Yes.

MH: And were you in journalism?

CA: Yes. English and journalism.

MH: And you also worked on the *Arkansas Traveler* newspaper?

CA: Yes. I was editor.

MH: What year were you the editor of the paper?

CA: 1951-52.

MH: And did you graduate before you went in the service?

CA: No.

MH: Did you complete your degree at any time?

CA: No. No, I didn't.

MH: You just went straight to work.

CA: Yes, I was—I burned out being editor of the *Traveler*, and I didn't want to go back

to school. After that, my editorship, the spring of that year, was over. But I went to the *Democrat*, where I had been doing things, as I said, during the summers, and a guy came through town, a show business guy, Horace Heidt, and he had what you call a “youth opportunity,” whatever. It was show business, singing and dancing and carrying on, a good wholesome thing, but the *Democrat* sent me to interview him, and I did interview him. And he was on his way south and southeast, and he got down in Jackson, Mississippi, and called back and said, would I go to work for him? So, yes, I did, and I was due to go on the Korean thing at the time, so I just decided, “Yes, I will just do this.” And spent a brief time traveling with Horace Heidt. That is entertainment a long time ago.

MH: Right. Right. What did you do? Did you do sort of PR work? Advance work?

CA: Yes, yes.

MH: And your job at the *Democrat*, what did you—did you start out—did you go back to the sports department?

CA: No. When I finished up in Fayetteville, as long as I could go, at least, I hadn't graduated, John Barnhill, who was then AD, Athletic Director, said, “Come on and finish your work and do something for me in the PR area.” And I had just had it with school because, as I said, I burned out that editor year. And so I told him, “Thanks,” but that I wasn't going to do it. And I was doing the *Democrat* thing at that time, and that is when Heidt came through. And with Korea, the obvious next thing, it didn't much matter where I went or did because it was a matter of months. Finally, to expedite, they got volunteers that, you know, volunteered to

be drafted.

MH: Right.

CA: So that is how that happened. Got out in 1955. Went to the *Gazette* then. I had an application in at Associated Press and the *Gazette*, and they both called the same day, and I had a nutty decision to make.

MH: Who hired you at the *Gazette*?

CA: A. R. Nelson was managing editor.

MH: And what did he, where did you work? On the city desk, initially?

CA: I worked as general assignment. And also helped cover Federal building and North Little Rock at that time. Spreads you pretty thin, but at that age, too, you can handle it. So a fellow named Carroll McGaughey was doing the "Our Town" column, and he left, and A. R. Nelson said, "You want to do this?" And I did. I got rid of three beats and, in 1956, took the "Our Town" column. Kind of been that sort of thing ever since, except for the years out in politics.

MH: Can you describe for me what the *Arkansas Gazette* news room was like physically, for starters?

CA: Yes. Yes. I treasure that, that picture, that sound. Typewriters in those days. You go in the news room today, you don't hear anything, you know? People punching on the monitor. In those days, we would come in noon, maybe 1:00, get assignments, go do the assignments. It was really quite a wonderful time in my life because they were superb people. And we got along well and hoped for the same things, and after working, working hard all week, then we would get

together at night. So it was more than the job. And I treasure knowing the people that I got to meet there. Bob Douglas is one. Roy Reed is one. We sat side by side, Roy and I, in the city room. In the mornings, after I started the “Our Town” column in 1956, there was a period of time when—nobody is there in the mornings except columnists and janitors and whatever, and it is a good time—so Harry Ashmore then was the editor of the editorial page and would get a Pulitzer for his work on the 1957 thing. But he would come out for a while, and we would sit around, very informally, in the city room, discussing whatever. And, again, this was a good time, and Harry would often break it up by saying, “Well, I must go think large thoughts.” And, and he did. And we all felt that way. And it was a, it was really a blessing for me to be in that.

MH: So, in the course of your day as a columnist, you would get there earlier than everyone else, and you would probably leave at the height of activity in the late afternoon when the reporters were coming back?

CA: Yes, yes. In those days, Michael, I could turn in the column at 5:30 or 6 the night before it was going to appear in the paper. Since we have become such wizards, I have to have it in four or five days ahead of time. So I would turn it in, and I would leave, vowing to myself to do better tomorrow. I still do that. I mean, I got a chance to do better than this. I have never turned anything loose that I thought was just right, but time would run out.

MH: Well, when you first started the “Our Town” column, what sort of guidance or advice did you get on how to do it, how to write it?

CA: None.

MH: None.

CA: None. Just get it. I know when I was called back to write editorials for two years during that time, and my replacement was Buddy Portis, Charles Portis. And he got no direction or guidance or whatever. I remember coming in out of the—I was writing editorials—I remember coming out and seeing him sitting down at the desk of A. R. Nelson one day, and Buddy told him, “I can’t do this. I don’t know what, have anything to write about.” And Nelson said, “Get your ass out there and do a column.” And he did. And it was a good column. I remember the column, about a woman outside, frightened by the weather. She had looked through her oval front door, you can imagine that—of course, he is a genius, Buddy Portis—but she went out, looked at the sky and did her hands and her apron and went back in. To me, when you don’t have anything to write about, that is when you can really see whether a guy is a writer, and he did. I don’t know where I got off base here, but after a while, Buddy went to *Herald-Tribune* in New York, and editorials were not for me. I didn’t know what I thought, much less what other people ought to think. I believed in Jesus Christ, and that was about it. And so I never knew what others ought to think or do or feel or do what.

MH: Well, the editorials that you worked on, can you remember some of the topics and some of the directions of the editorials?

CA: Yes. Harry Ashmore and Jerry Neal did most of the Faubus stuff in those days, which was fine with me. I would do local, a local thing about this situation here

or that one there. I remember that Mr. Heiskell, J. N. Heiskell, who was the heart and soul and owner of the *Gazette*, told Jim Powell, who replaced Harry Ashmore, that an editorial I had written—he didn't know who wrote it—was the best that has ever appeared in the *Gazette*. And it had to do with water. Wood and water. Trees and water. It was a stunning thing for me to hear from Jim Powell. I don't know how you can spin and weave about wood and water. But I didn't like writing editorials, because I wasn't comfortable with it, and I wasn't qualified to do it. Mr. Heiskell thought, on the basis of what he read in the paper that I had done, "Here's a guy with some sort of depth." It wasn't the case. It has to do with, I guess, the English language. If you don't kick that around and you don't abuse it, you can be mistaken for a thinking individual. My mama and daddy both had been English teachers, and that is all I heard growing up, was decent stuff in the house. So I think that he thought—he kept reading things that I had written, and he thought that I should come back and do editorials. In fact, when Harry told me about this, Harry Ashmore, he said, "I have an indecent proposal to make to you. Will you come back and write editorials?" And so I said yes, but it was a long two years for me. I am not, I am not persuaded that I improved the human condition in one way or another. Wood and water, yes. I improved that.

MH: What can you—can you give me your own thumbnail description of, first of all, what Mr. Heiskell looked like, and, second of all, what his habits were, and third, what sort of person he was?

CA: He was, in a way, almost a royal entity to me. He drove himself to work well after he was ninety, and he was small and fragile. But, you know, if I get to be that old, like he said, "If I knew I was going to live this long, I would have taken better care of myself." He was a slight man and a commanding thing. He told Orville Henry, Orville was then sports editor of the *Gazette*, he said, "Mr. Henry, I read the sports section one time of the year. Your problem is you don't know what day that is going to be." And there were many things, many examples of that. He told a reporter, who, in fact, had married his daughter, he said, "What you are doing here?", meaning a piece of his work, "You are doing [it] at your own peril," meaning, do something about this. He was an elegant man, and, as I said, he drove to work, I guess, when he was a hundred. I remember he had an operation, a prostate operation, and, around Christmas time, we all got back together, and this was a Christmas open house. And I hadn't seen him, and I said, "Mr. Heiskell, you are looking great," which I thought he was. "Mr. Allbright, the operation was not on my face." He was backed up to the fireplace at that time. There was no way you could ace him. He was a stupendous man and treasured what newspapers were supposed to do.

MH: What is your memory of his appreciation of what newspapers are supposed to do?
How did he approach newspaper work?

CA: How did he?

MH: Yes.

CA: I think the 1957 situation is a very good and hard example. The paper lost

millions, taking the position it did on law and order in the land. He thought it was, you couldn't "kind of" be a newspaper. You had to be a newspaper. You had to, he would quote Saint Paul, "I have run the course, I have done the best I can, so on and so on." And that is how he—he put it way above all of us, including himself, that it was a tremendous obligation and a tremendous opportunity. It is kind of hard for me to talk about him because I regard him with such affection and esteem, and I haven't known anybody like him. But I was lucky I got to be along while he was there. You went out, and you got the facts, and you printed the truth. Nothing less, nothing more. So it was interesting to me because I was not a good reporter. I would cover, say, North Little Rock city council on a Monday night, and while the invocation was being given, I would peep. I would look around, and here were these aldermen, conniving somehow. I couldn't get down and get reverent, Michael, over covering things. At that same time, I went to a neurological institute at Fort Roots. Big guys were there. Dr. Karl Menninger from wherever. Doctors from everywhere. Shrinks. And I was sitting, sitting toward the back with the man who ran Fort Roots. Right in front of us was a doctor from New Jersey, I believe, and the topic at that time was hypnosis and treating with that. This was a large man. I could see him begin to weave and bob in his spectator's chair. And he snapped his head back, and he got up to go to the fountain to get some cold water and put it on his face. That happened three times. And I am such a *good* reporter, I didn't know what was being said up there. I am watching this guy. So I go back to the paper and Bill

Shelton, William T. Shelton, the city editor, and I write about the guy who gets hypnotized or stoned or something. And he calls Dr. Thompson, with whom I was sitting, said, "I have got a young reporter here who says one of your delegates," he said, "the reporter is not saying anything about the institute, but he has got a report how one of your delegates virtually fell over on his face during the hypnotherapy session. Did that happen?" The doctor said, "Yep, it did." So it wasn't long after that, Michael, that they put me on nonsense altogether, and that suited me fine.

MH: Well, as a member of the staff and as a columnist and, I guess, an editorial writer during part of the time, can you tell me what the atmosphere was like during the 1957 desegregation crisis at the *Gazette*?

CA: Yes. Well, I think we all got very, very close at that time. We knew we were right, and we also knew we were in some sort of peril because, well, I got—I was doing the column then—but I would get calls: "Allbright, stay out of this," from people I didn't know. And being met out back at the alley, maybe, by some, you know, burly folks. "Stay out of this. Stay out of this." It was a very special time, Michael. And at that time I knew that I was the luckiest guy on earth to be with the people I was with. And it was frightening, in a way. I went out there one day, at Central. There were, by police estimate, two thousand people in the street between 14th and 16th Streets, in front of Central, and they were really restless, because nothing had happened all day. And, at that time, the *Arkansas Gazette*, *The New York Times* and *Time* magazine were reviled by the people in that street.

And, with nothing happening, they were looking for something to unload on.

There is a guy over here, an author that I knew and a professor at Arkansas Tech, Francis Irby Gwaltney. And he said—I will never forget this—he pointed at me and said, “Well, there is a *Gazette* guy right there.” And it was like this.

Something to fix on. And I will never know why he did that, and he died. I never got to talk to him, but I have never been more frightened than I was at that moment.

MH: So, then, when he pointed you out, the crowd sort of gathered around you.

CA: Yes, yes, yes. I mean, breathing distance, and I thought, well, here it is. I had some notes and pencil, and I just dropped them, and I freed myself up to do whatever. And back over here somewhere, I was tapped on the shoulder, and it was a major in the Army, and he was in uniform, and he announced, “This man is going with me.” And he got me out of there, and I don’t know what would have happened. But mob psychology is a fierce thing, you know. I mean, we had been sitting out here, standing out here all day, and nothing is happening. Now we have got us a live one.

MH: And this, this was a major with the 101st Airborne?

CA: No, he was local. His name was Hunter, and I had played football with his brother, but he was—I don’t know why he did what he did, but he saw something bad. I didn’t know whether to wait until I got hit or try to hit somebody first, and then bring it all down, you know. He got me out of there. I don’t know how I got into that, Michael. It was just one of those things that happened while I was at the

Gazette. And, of course, 1957 wasn't just one of those things.

MH: Were other reporters similarly threatened?

CA: I don't know. I am sure they were, because they were all there. Sander Vanocur, mainline TV people. The AP guy. I will never forget being out there, and he has got notes, and he is standing in a phone booth, and he is dictating to the AP. I know the guy as well as I know anything, and I can't think of his name now.

[Relman Morin] I was dumbstruck that a guy could do that, dictate while he was doing. He won the Pulitzer. He was the mainline guy for AP. There were other, a lot of TV people, and John Chancellor was there. Johnny Popham from over in Tennessee. Special time.

MH: So, now, was there ever a time when you or the other folks on the staff thought that the existence of the newspaper was threatened by its stand?

CA: I think something real was threatened, and I guess it was that. But there was not another course to take. There was no other way to do it than, than to do what Mr. Heiskell and Harry Ashmore and Bill Shelton and Bob Douglas were leading us in. Such fine people, too, we were working with. I don't think, I don't think we had an easy feeling at all, but I also think we would never have changed. We would go down in flames, you know. But I know it cost the company millions in ads not run and subscription losses and what all. I referred earlier to Harry Ashmore, saying, "Well, I will go back and think my large thoughts," and it was during those days that this was happening. I never thought—it was inconceivable to me that the *Gazette* was going to disappear—and I never thought that what

happened did happen. The Gannett *Gazette* was not the same thing at all. And I was off in Michigan, visiting my daughter and family and came back in the afternoon, got off the plane and went downtown to pick up mail, to go home, and as I did, people coming out the back door with their belongings and possessions. And it was an incredible spectacle to me.

MH: This was in the last, last hours.

CA: Yes, it was the last day. And there was no last edition. There was no anything. It was just BOOM! And they were coming out of the building crying, and I can't imagine it, even now, that that happened. And I know, and I say to myself, well, it was the Gannett thing, but Walter Hussman really dug in and stayed with it. It is still hard for me to believe that the *Arkansas Gazette* went down. I think that the newspaper now, the *Democrat-Gazette*, is infinitely better than the Gannett *Gazette*.

MH: The post-1957 period, tell me some of the stuff that you did during that time.

You continued doing the "Our Town" column until when?

CA: Until 1965. And politics was—I had three small children, and Orval Faubus was in his twelfth year in office. And I said, "I can't do this. I can't do it. I have got to get my kids out of here, go somewhere else." I could have gone to New York, but, in a way, that was worse to me. So I thought, "I have got to do what I can, if anything, to salvage something for my family," and so that is when I went with Win Rockefeller. That is quite a leap from "Our Town" to politics, which I detested. I had to believe in him, and I did, big time. So seven years I was with

him, and I was fortunate that way, too, to have been associated with whatever—with high hopes. And the “Our Town” thing, it just kind of, from 1956, when I went out—I mentioned to you being in the street out at Central High—that was not as a reporter. I was just getting the sense of this thing. So the “Our Town” thing was what I did up until 1965, when I went to do this political thing.

MH: Well, let me ask you this. You weren't, weren't all that interested in politics, but Arkansas being a solidly Democratic state at that point, and you being somebody who is associated with the newspaper that often supported the, usually supported the Democratic candidates, I would assume, then we have Win Rockefeller coming on the scene, a Republican—did you have any trepidation at all about going to work for a Republican?

CA: I never thought about it that way. Win went to Harry Ashmore, and they visited and talked and talked and talked, and Win said, “Should I run as an Independent?” And Harry said, “No. We have got to get two parties going.” And so he did that. I am not a Republican, whatever that is, but I had no problem with that because the other thing was so ominous to me.

MH: Was race the main thing that was at issue for you?

CA: Yes. Turmoil associated with race. During the worst of this thing, if I were walking down Main Street or going to my car or something and meet a black person, I couldn't look him in the face and, certainly, not in the eye. Yes, it was a huge problem for me. I felt, I still feel, to the extent that somebody is hurt, I am diminished by just that much.

MH: Rockefeller could have spent all of his life at leisure, and he didn't. What kind of a guy was he? And why do you think that he, you know, kind of inserted himself and asserted himself?

CA: He ran into something that he couldn't figure out. When he moved down here and set up on Petit Jean, they, the farmers up there, said, "You're not, you're making a mistake. There is not enough rainfall up here." And he said, "What is that down there?" "Well, that is the Petit Jean River." He said, "I am going to bring it up here." And he did, with pumps and things. I forget what you asked me.

MH: I asked you what, just to give me a general appreciation of what kind of a guy he was.

CA: Win Rockefeller, yes.

MH: He was a rich guy who could have spent his time playing. Instead, he . . .

CA: He was a remarkable individual, and, like Scott Fitzgerald said, "They are not like us," you know, the wealthy. But he ran into something that mystified him. That was an inferiority complex about the state. And that bothered him, big time, and this is how he first began to talk to people. "Well, let's change it. Let's do this." The Arts Center came to him, "Would you give us a donation so we can add a wing or paint or something?" He said, "Let's start all over. Let's build one." And so he gave them the money to do that. He recalled for me about the inferiority thing. He left Yale as a student and went to work in an oil field, I mean as a roughneck, roustabout, whatever, and one evening, somebody asked

him over to supper, one of the guys, and he got there, and here was this little family around the table. And a teenage girl was sitting over here, and what about her? They didn't have silverware to go around for an extra person. This thing really bugged him. Silverware. We were a big—the oil fields and Arkansas—were a big education for him. You know, he wasn't accustomed to any of this way of thinking, but that, basically, is what got him into it, Michael. "We can fix this. We can do better."

MH: What sort of work did you do for him? What did you do?

CA: Speeches.

MH: You wrote speeches for him? Did you do any sort of policy advising? Did he bounce ideas off of you?

CA: No. In fact, he didn't want the people who were advising, he didn't want me to talk to them. Tom Eisele, John Ward, Marion Burton. Good people. None of those guys was a big political individual, and the Republican guys were in there, too. He didn't want me to know things that he didn't know. I remember one night at the mansion, the doorbell rang and somebody, one of the mansion staff, went to answer it, came back and said to me, whispered, "Can you meet a guy out front?" And I did, and here was a really prominent figure in Arkansas, and he had a sackful of money. And it was campaign time, and I know he had a sackful of money for Marion Crank, too, on the other political side. Win didn't want me fooling with any of that, so he said, "Give it back to Billy," Billy Sparks, his number one guy to help out. He didn't want to know about those contributions,

and he didn't want any obligations in anything, so those went over to the political people. There was one time when I did get involved in a big decision for him that had to do with capital punishment. And he was leaving office. He had been defeated. I hated for him to run that third term because he said he wouldn't, and I knew he was going to be down on himself so bad for turning around and running. He wanted to know how to suspend the death sentence for people on death row, and he got a guy in from Stanford and all the experts on this thing who were not for capital punishment or who were dead set against it. And he wanted to make a statement, and so, so much of this happened late at night, either here or in Winrock or, people thought that, or the Democratic politicians said, "He never comes to the office." And that is true. At home he could get a lot more done than by blessing Granny somebody's fudge or a proclamation of some sort, so he could work much better at home or at the mansion. So he wanted to make a statement about why he is commuting these death sentences, and that is where I got in with him. He never traded on his religion. He was a spiritual guy. He was a Baptist. He wanted something to say with the act of commuting these things, and it came out, "who among us is omniscient enough to say who shall live and who shall die? I am not. Moreover, I won't go back on the lifelong teachings of the church to prolong what is a failing system of justice. Fallible and failing." And it still is. I was very proud to be with him when he was doing that. I will be glad when we solve that thing, too, because it doesn't work. I don't know where I got tangled up with that, Mike.

MH: Well, let me, I have said, from what I guess I know or from reading and whatnot, that he could have been a man of leisure, but instead worked in politics, etcetera.

But you guys had fun, too, right? I mean, was he a fun guy to work for?

CA: When we weren't exhausted, yes. My problem was meeting with him, say at night, discussing what he wanted to say, in some form, the tired head nodding, you know, getting later and later, and then, when we would break up, he goes to bed and I go to work. And then, I get back, have it ready for him in the morning. So it was, I never knew whether I looked forward to a day or dreaded a day. I never knew which it was going to be, but you got really tired. Fun, yes. Yes. We went a lot of places, all over creation. After he was out of office, that was more fun. He kept working. I mean, he put together a thing called the Coalition for Rural America, trying to, mainly, define rural America. What is it? He decided, with all his experts, that it is not Bos-Wash, Boston-Washington, it is not Chicago, it is not L.A., it is not Houston. Everything else is rural, he decided. And, in a way, he was right, but we would go to these places, and he would talk. And he had a lovely home in Palm Springs, which is where he died in a hospital. One next-door neighbor was Kirk Douglas. Over behind the swimming pool was Dinah Shore. Across the street was a musician for Tommy Dorsey's big band. That sort of thing. Up the street was Don the Beachcomber's, and in comes Sinatra with his retinue of platinum blondes. Same thing happens in New York at the—he had an address—how about this for an address?—One East End. A three-level something. It had elevators and a guy standing out front. But to go to—

liked to go to Twenty-One and relax, and you would see all the people there. You know, here I am, a kid proud to be from McGehee, Arkansas, and I am meeting all these celebs. Eisenhower—we were at Eisenhower’s home in Palm Springs, Win and me and the security guy. Ike, retired, cooked steaks. He said to Win, “What about the security man?” Win says, “If he doesn’t eat, I don’t, either.” I loved him for that. And then Ike throws the steaks on the coals, not a grill, just over the coals. I reach out and I try to catch mine before he could do that, and I don’t know what that is, but then you got to turn the steak over and scrape and scrape and scrape it. Those things got to be kind of a way of life. I ate with four Presidents. To look back on it now, some people at Doubleday wanted me to write something, a book. I couldn’t do it because I couldn’t—back then, I couldn’t get the personal stuff out of it.

MH: Right. There were probably some things that you knew that were, you knew, in confidence.

CA: Many things. Many, many things. There would be a hell of a book in it, but I am not going to do it. I don’t know. For one thing, I like “Little Win,” and I decided, some years ago, after 1973—he died on Washington’s birthday in 1973. At this Palm Springs eye bank, he gave his eyes. I said, “I can’t write this. I can’t do it.”

MH: So you then came back to the *Gazette*?

CA: He died in February of 1973. I was, I stayed around for the memorial service. Nelson was here. Nelson came down and David and other Rockefellers. I stayed, and then, in May of that year, I just pooped out. I did nothing until September of

that year. Well, I stayed home and watched—what was it, Watergate that year?

Watched that all day every day and just sat, kind of vegetated there. And I went, I called Bob Douglas, and he said, “Come on.” And he said do “Arkansas Traveler.”

MH: Who had been doing it up to then?

CA: Ernie Deane. Ernie Deane. Oh, wait a minute. And following that, for a while, Bob Lancaster, and following that, Mike Trimble. And Mike Trimble was doing it when I went back to the paper. They all had profound things to say. I don’t. And I was fortunate that I didn’t have to go back to the courthouse and Federal beat, whatever.

MH: Now, the “Arkansas Traveler” column had been in the paper for quite a while, and it remains an institution in the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*.

CA: Yes. In fact, Michael, it was, it came out of the 1957 thing. Harry Ashmore decided somebody should go around to the various spots in Arkansas and represent the paper and so-and-so. That was Ernie Deane. He did that. And then, Ernie left. I don’t know why, but after that, Bob Lancaster for a while, then after that, Mike Trimble for a while. So it never has stopped since the 1957 thing. It was sort of a public goodwill thing, somehow. I haven’t handled it that way at all. In those days Ernie was writing about chambers of commerce and money in the bank for local whatever.

MH: It has become, I guess, in the hands of Lancaster and Trimble and yourself, it has become a way to illustrate the character of the people in the state.

CA: I think the other three felt that way about it. I am not trying to sell anything. I am trying not to be *bad*. That doesn't sound like much of a goal, but there are so many ways I can be bad. I mean, poor. Bad writing. Like I said, I have never turned anything loose that I wouldn't like a little more time with. I don't have any sense of mission, other than not embarrassing my dead parents, or not embarrassing my family now or the people of Arkansas. I haven't set out to do anything. Somebody asked me, "What is the philosophy of your column?" There is not any philosophy of the column. I get up every day, and here is, here we are, we are all living here, and nothing happens in it, Michael.

MH: It is a column about nothing.

CA: Yes. Yes. Yes. Of course, I think you would be stunned by the readership. I don't know, maybe old folks looking back. I have been really blessed to get to do it in another way, to be aware of that every day, which, you know, gets kind of geometric in what you think, how you feel about how lucky you have been. To feel that way every day, even terrible days and bad writing days, I don't have a sense of sitting down to write something. I kind of visit. I have no assignments. I am not told to do this or that or the other. I wonder what will happen to it, you know, when I fold up, and my kids say, "Dad, how are you going to know when you retire?" I wasn't that lippy when I was a kid, you know. How are you going to know when you are retiring? I work at home, send that thing through the air, like I told you. I would quit now except I don't know what I would do. There is some traveling I want to do and a whole bunch of reading that is just kind of

sitting out there now.

MH: Let me take you back to what is known as the newspaper war. There are some people—George Bentley, for instance, told me that he didn't from his position, he never believed that there was a newspaper war. Can you, can you tell me, one, do you think that there was, and two, if so, how did it develop and how did it carry forward to the climax?

CA: I was not really concerned about it until Gannett came. They were so visual—Spandex shots on the front page—the appearance of the paper meant more to them than what was in it. Something was beginning to go wrong then, and it never occurred to me that the *Arkansas Gazette* wouldn't win that so-called war. In a sense, I am like George, in that I didn't feel the paper was threatened, and I was unhappier about what we were doing than what the *Democrat* was doing. I mean, out page one, girls in Spandex, whatever, and a lot of souffle and a lot of meringue. I see, now, that is the direction of so many of them, but I mentioned to you, when I got off the plane that day in October, and I saw dear friends coming out the back of the thing with arm loads and crying, only then did it hit me that this is really happening. It is over. And, in a sense, I felt the *Gazette* had died before that. The *Gazette* that I knew—J. N. Heiskell and Harry Ashmore and Orville Henry and Bill Shelton and Bob Douglas—we were not that any more. I am not sure what we were, but I—the war was good for me financially. Bidding back and forth. I hated that. It got to be kind of giddy in a way, that, what each side, “Well, what do you want? How much? What?” The war, the *Gazette* shot

itself in the foot. I have met, of all the people I have met from Gannett in those days, and they went from Neuharth on down, there were only three I would have let in my house. I didn't, I still don't know what they were.

MH: You didn't like them personally? You didn't relate to them at all?

CA: There was nothing to them. I mean, here I am proud of where I have been working, where I live. I chose to stay here, when I could have gone anywhere. These people are "Now we have got deep pockets." What the hell does that mean? Deep pockets? What about the newspaper? They brought in people from wherever.

MH: Was there a reaction among the staff, you know, that you interacted with at the *Gazette*? What was that?

CA: Well, it was—we were bewildered that things were occurring. They had a lot of wine and melon ball retreats, the Gannett people did. The Red Apple, wherever. And they started calling the *Arkansas Gazette* "the product." Now, "the product"—Michael, do you hear me?

MH: I hear you.

CA: The *Arkansas Gazette* is not "the product." Yes, it is now. So we all began to total up how much time we had before retirement, you know. I know, but it began happening then.

MH: Let me, let me sort of fast forward a little bit to your move to the new *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*. When did you start there, and how did you? It was fairly immediate, right?

CA: It was that same day. I didn't know it, but Richard Allin and I had contracts, which was absurd, in a way. The Gannett people said to Hugh Patterson, "We have them under contract." And Hugh said, "But they don't need contracts." But that is the way Gannett did its stuff, so that very day that I came back from Michigan, I got a call from John Robert Starr. And he was then managing editor and said, "We have your contract." He still didn't know whether I would go under the contract, whether Richard and I would, so it happened all in one day. And the first day out, the *Democrat Gazette*—this was on page one—that Richard and I would stay. And so there really wasn't any transition. A couple of meetings with Walter Hussman. The contract had another year or so to go and, after that, that was abandoned. No contract. Doesn't matter. I am really muddled over that, Michael, because, I don't know, maybe there is something in me that still resisted.

MH: Did you have any reluctance to go to work at the new, combined newspaper? Was there any lingering sort of competitive feeling for you?

CA: Gannett had robbed me of that, so, no. And I went back, I went to the *Democrat* in 1948 as a kid and here, half a century later, I go right back to the same office. Same spot on the second floor. Now it is the third floor, but back then, when this transition occurred, I am back. I thought they were doing a good job with a lot of things. I had a problem with policy in editorial, but, like I said earlier, what do I know about what people ought to think? So there was no transition. Meeting with Hussman. "You guys do what you want to do. I don't care if you never come to the office." And that is the way it has been. Richard and I share an office

that neither of us occupies, but you have to have, you know, a landing place. At least a door with your name on it, whatever. There was a sense, Michael, of having been validated. The fact that this thing, the *Gannett Gazette*, was now gone, whatever they were doing, it is over. And at the same time, incomprehensible that the *Arkansas Gazette* didn't exist anymore. 1819. Come on.

MH: Well, Charlie, we are about to run out of time, and I don't want to stop without thanking you for talking with me and taking part in the project. It is always a pleasure to talk to you, and I always learn something.

CA: I have loved seeing you again. It has been a while, and I appreciate it.

[End of Interview]