

Gazette Project

Interview with

Scott Stroud
Columbia, South Carolina
28 February 2001

Interviewer: Dawn Hinshaw

Dawn Hinshaw: We want to focus on your years at the *Gazette*, and I know nothing about it. Please have patience with me. Let's first start by you telling me a little bit about your upbringing, your parents, where you were born, and anything I don't know about.

Scott Stroud: I was born in Pine Bluff. My dad was working at the newspaper in Pine Bluff at that time.

DH: The *Commercial*?

SS: The *Commercial*. My parents were both from small towns in southeast Arkansas. My dad grew up on a farm outside of McGhee. My mom grew up in Crossett. My dad is a newspaper guy. He started at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*. He was there the year that I was born. He then went to the *Gazette* in the early 1960s. He was there for about three years. He has told me a few times that his lifelong ambition was to run the *Arkansas Gazette*. That was the paper that he grew up admiring. That never happened. He was pulled away from there by the Winston-Salem paper. He then went up to Detroit.

DH: I'm sorry. His name is . . .

SS: Joe.

DH: Did he go by Joe?

SS: Yes. I grew up in Detroit from the time that I was eight until after college. I went back to Arkansas when I was twenty-five to start at the Pine Bluff paper. I had worked at the Detroit paper, driving trucks for a couple of years. I decided that I

had better do something. I wrote to the folks at the Pine Bluff paper. They remembered my dad. I did not have a journalism background. I hadn't taken any classes or worked on the school newspaper. I hadn't majored in journalism.

DH: It wasn't any kind of yearning?

SS: No. In fact, I swore it off at times.

DH: Why was that? Because it was so consuming?

SS: I guess so. It is kind of complicated. I love it now. After two-and-a-half years of driving trucks at night, I got tired of that. I wrote to the Pine Bluff paper.

DH: I should know this and don't. Did your dad run the Detroit paper?

SS: He was editor and senior vice-president. His domain was the editorial page. He did not run the whole paper.

DH: Do you have any other brothers or sisters who are newspaper people?

SS: My dad does. Both of his brothers were newspaper guys. His older brother, by seven years, ran the news desk at the *Gazette* for years. Through the Central High years. He went to the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* and retired from there.

DH: Who was that?

SS: George Stroud. My dad's younger brother, Bill Stroud -- I don't believe he ever worked at the *Gazette*. If he did, it was briefly. He worked at Pine Bluff and then went to Chattanooga. He was at the *Philadelphia Inquirer* during their glory years with Gene Roberts and those guys. I think he at one time was the features editor. He left later and went to work for a computer accounting company. That was probably about ten years ago that he moved away from the business. They are all fairly well apart. That was a neat thing that they were all in the business at one time. My grandmother was down in Arkansas still. They were in St. Louis, Detroit, and Philadelphia.

DH: You can't get much better than that.

SS: It was in my blood. I was resisting, I guess. It was an automatic, assumed path.

DH: No newspaper women in your family?

SS: There are some. I had a cousin who worked briefly in newspapers. My sister kind of toyed with it a little bit. She wised up, I guess.

DH: Pete [his 7-year-old son], I tell you.

SS: You would have to get him in law school first.

DH: You better watch out. By the time Pete grows up, who knows what newspapers will be like. You went to the *Pine Bluff Commercial* in what year?

SS: In 1985, and I was there for about a year.

DH: In 1986 you went to the *Gazette*?

SS: That is right. In the spring of 1986. The city editor up there called me and asked me to come up.

DH: Who was that?

SS: Max Brantley. I don't -- my memory is vague on that. I think they did not offer me a job at first, and then a few months later they called me back. That would have been the spring of 1986. I was there for about two years.

DH: 1986 to 1988?

SS: Yes.

DH: I guess the Pine Bluff paper is always a farm paper for the *Gazette*.

SS: There were a lot of people who had run through Pine Bluff and who had gone on to the *Gazette*.

DH: It was a natural move.

SS: I think it was one that the *Gazette* watched. [Paul] Greenberg was down there.

DH: When you came to the *Gazette*, what was the job that you were offered? Was it on the city desk?

SS: Yes, it was just a general assignment job. I worked Tuesdays through Saturdays.

If I had a beat, it was Jacksonville. It was sort of an off-to-the-side beat. The good thing about it was that the *Gazette* had a hierarchy structure, and you had to pay dues before you were doing stuff that was on the front page. Working Saturday, you got to cover decent stuff. You got to do a lot of political rallies. I probably, through Saturday duty, covered a lot of Clinton speeches, Dale Bumpers events, and stuff like that. I enjoyed that. It was fun. That was a better taste of stuff that I wanted to do other than stuff that I was doing during the week. A lot of it was fairly ordinary. They had a newspaper of record mentality thing. It wasn't a great paper at that time, but it was solid and credible. It was miles ahead of the *Democrat*. I remember one time that they sent me to a Boy Scout award presentation just because there was nothing else going on. I think that most newspapers had figured out that if you let people go a little bit, dig some on their own, and use a down day to find something out, it may be more productive than going to things like that. That was the mentality then.

DH: Did you push back against it, or was it the politic thing to do?

SS: I think they welcomed ideas. I was new to the area and new to the field. I was learning and needed some direction. It wasn't all that bad. It was a good training ground. It wasn't like they were hostile to the idea of you coming up with something on your own. It was just a matter of finding the time to do that.

DH: You had a real bent towards politics?

SS: I was interested in that. Arkansas politics, at that time, were real interesting. There were some real interesting folks.

DH: You mentioned the hierarchy? What was it? Max Brantley.

SS: He was the city editor. Carrick Patterson was the main editor. David Petty, I think, was the managing editor. I think the *Gazette*, at that time, was past its glory days in some ways. The early 1960s, when so many great people passed

through there, it had been a heyday. There were still a lot of good people there, folks who have gone on to other stuff.

DH: Who sticks out in your memory?

SS: There were a lot of people. Maria Henson was there. She won a Pulitzer at Lexington a few years later. John Brummett had just become the political columnist. He wrote a book about Clinton later. It was one of the best books about Clinton. Several people did things about Clinton-related stuff when Clinton made his move nationally. Anne Farris was there. She went to the *Washington Post*. She worked on the book *Blood Sport*. She was one of the main researchers for James Stewart when he wrote that book. Michael Haddigan, he went on to work at the AP Bangkok bureau in Pittsburg and all over. There are a lot of people who have fanned out. David Davies is now the head of the journalism department at the University of Southern Mississippi. Not all of it is based on credentials. There were a lot of good people and a lot of good energy. I am still nostalgic about that.

DH: What was the routine like? Whom did you report to, and whom did you interact with?

SS: Usually, when you go in, Max would have what you would call “yellow rains.” They were little yellow notes that he would leave in your mailbox. He would have a newspaper clip, and it would say, “Follow,” “Please check,” or “What is this about?”

DH: Why rain?

SS: Because it was raining down on you was the idea, and so you would have something to check on on a daily basis.

DH: Were they usually good ideas?

SS: Yes, they were usually blanket coverage of the town. It was something that

caught his eye. It was good training because it was diverse. It was real varied, and you would do a lot of different things. The first day that I started there, they handed you this thing called a style pile. It was a two-inch stack of parchments that had been typed up on one of these old typewriters by J. N. Heiskell, the old editor. They were all of these little rules for how we do things at the *Gazette*. I still remember a lot of them. That sort of formed my core as a journalist. There are probably some things in there that I do that I probably do not realize that I do. Examples that stick out in my mind: He had this tone that was sort of funny because he was so adamant and sure. One of them was “We don’t ever say someone feels or someone thinks. We don’t know how someone thinks or feels. We can say, ‘They said they feel,’ or ‘They said they think.’ We don’t say, ‘They think.’” A lot of it was based on ethics like that. I think there were things that I took for granted, that this was the way that it was at all newspapers. When I left there and went to Kentucky, I realized that wasn’t the case. This guy was attached to this community. He had thought about the craft of newspapering. It was important to him, and he wanted to do it right. Some of them were arbitrary. One of them was “We don’t ever go to a forum. Forums were in Rome.” You could not use the phrase, “At a political forum last night.” You had to work around it. That was what it was. What else do you call that? That was one of his rules, and they were sacred. They let me spend the first two or three days with the style pile. That was all I did, sit there and turn over parchment pages. It was important, and it means a lot to me now.

DH: You look at the style pile and you know it.

SS: There were things you would forget, like the forum. That came back to haunt me. I put it in a story, and someone said, “No, we don’t do that.” It was a lot to take in.

DH: How old were these documents?

SS: He was the editor for a long time. He was the one who brought Harry Ashmore and a bunch of other folks to the *Gazette*. He saw this as his institution, probably for twenty or thirty years, expanding the glory years in some way. I don't want to guess because I will get it wrong.

DH: That is interesting because it wasn't updated.

SS: There might be some add-ins or something from somebody else. They weren't all from Mr. Heiskell. There was a reverence about Mr. Heiskell and his rules. In terms of credibility, the difference between the *Gazette* and the *Democrat* at that time was unbelievable. The *Democrat* was dishonest. They did some of the most questionable, ethically questionable, things that I had ever seen. You are always competing. This is healthy, too. You would watch what the other paper did. You would be out on stories in Little Rock somewhere, with another reporter covering the same thing. He would say, "This is the story they want me to get." It wasn't what was always going on. Bending the story to what the editor wanted, the reporters were fairly open about it. The *Democrat* was a really bad newspaper. The political figures at that time knew that. I think that most people in Arkansas knew that. It was kind of lost on Gannett when they bought [the *Gazette*]. They didn't really realize what they had in terms of credibility in the community. David Davies worked at the *Democrat* years ago. He told me a story about when he first started at the *Democrat*. He called Dale Bumpers on a story, and the first thing he said was, "This is David Davies with the *Arkansas Democrat*." Bumpers said, "How about that?" That was an universal view. They were dismissed because they were unethical. They would do outrageous things.

DH: People would talk to them, wouldn't they?

SS: Yes, they would just pursue their agenda. One time -- this is a diversion I guess --

the mayor of North Little Rock got caught up in a little scandal. He was married and had been seeing this University of Arkansas cheerleader. He was traveling around the county. The prosecutor in Pulaski County, when he researched it, there were no ethics laws. There was nothing that he could point to that was illegal. He did kind of a document dump. There was a big news conference. He released all these documents about the mayor. We spent the whole day poring through receipts from trips and things that he had done with this cheerleader. There was a receipt from Florida. James Scudder, another reporter at the *Gazette*, and I were looking through the receipts. On the receipt it said, "Vaseline, LOT." We made a little joke, Vaseline, all right. It was a joke because LOT was hand lotion. It was bought at some drug store in Florida. That ended up in the headlines in the *Democrat* the next day. To me, you had a good enough story. You didn't need to heighten it like that. It was mean-spirited. It was John Robert Starr, and he had an idea of what he wanted. It was tacky. Most people who had been touched by that, in one way or another, were dismissed from the *Democrat* because they were so dishonest.

DH: Beyond credibility, the *Gazette* was – everyone in the community, not just politicians that you mentioned, did everyone just assume that the *Gazette* was the paper? I have never really understood because I wasn't in the state when the sale went through.

SS: I think that Gannett came in and applied their corporate formulas and gave away the franchise. The *Gazette* had down the left side, "In the News." It was sort of a predecessor to these little periscope columns. Sort of chatty, two-sentence columns. They were a big thing. They either changed them briefly or wanted to change them. There was this outcry of people saying, "No, you can't do that." It was just part of who the *Gazette* was. They had different ideas about how to do

journalism. It was light and bright, and there was a big controversy because we put a picture on the front page about cheerleaders wearing spandex at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. Everybody said, "Oh, we have never done that."

DH: Tasteless.

SS: Yes. I remember the woman who did the Wendy's commercials, Clara Peller. She died, and they put it on the front page. People felt that it wasn't front page news. That was during the transition period. Obviously, things have changed so much in journalism that it is sort of taken for granted that something like that can be front page news.

DH: Some of us still resist it.

SS: That is right. At times you come off silly because you take something that is just sort of pop culture and has no standing other than people know it from TV.

DH: Were there any particular stories that you wrote and remember being proud of? You made it sound like you were only doing daily dribbles and drabs. Is there anything that stands out in your mind?

SS: Yes. Whenever I put clips together now, I don't pull stuff from my *Gazette* days. It was hard to initiate something. I had a lot to learn, so my stuff was not that good. There was a story. A guy who was assistant superintendent in one of the Pulaski County school districts had been at the Woolworth's lunch counter as a sit-in demonstrator in the early 1960s. I interviewed him, and he was sort of, you know, "This is the same revolution. We are just trying to help through education, to fix things we were trying to work on then, too." I enjoyed that story. It is one that if I had -- I would do things differently, obviously. When I left -- This was new for them, too. I tried to put my arms around higher education and why some of the smartest kids from Arkansas go elsewhere for school. It was because it was

clearly funding. They weren't putting enough money into the schools. There weren't scholarship programs to speak of for in-state students. That was pretty ambitious. It was probably not that well read.

DH: How old were you in 1985?

SS: Twenty-five.

DH: You mentioned Max. I keep coming back to the hierarchy. There are names that I am familiar with but people I have never met. He would have been your direct line editor?

SS: Right.

DH: Was he a good editor?

SS: Yes.

DH: What was he like?

SS: He was rough and had sort of a bull-in-the-china-shop style. He was very opinionated and knew the community well. . . . The way that the *Gazette* did things there [involved] good things about the craft that a lot of people do not do anymore. You need to know about every corner of the community, and you need to find this out. I am not sure we went into as great a depth as we could have. In Jacksonville, there was some industrial waste up there that was left over from some plant that had been there years ago. In retrospect, I think I shouldn't have gone to so many Boy Scout awards meetings. I should have dug in and found out what was the deal with that industrial waste. Max had his way of doing things. We think of one day at a time and move forward. I learned a lot from him. He was smart and knew the craft. I think he understood Arkansas.

DH: The things you learned from him, were they more nuts and bolts writing things?

SS: Some of both. I learned from my colleagues. There were a lot of talented people there. I sat across from John Brummett and listened to him on the phone. He was

very good and had a rapport with people. People called him and told him things. Hearing him sketch things out, I admired his style, and I thought his writings were always topical and interesting. Michael Haddigan sat right behind me. John Reed was next to Brummett. There were a couple of other folks who came and went. Stephen Steed was back there. I was kind of on the edge of city and state desk. I talked to the state desk guys, Lamar James. They were all good folks. Will Greene, who was Brummett's best friend, sat not far away. He was a character. He was a real funny guy. All the good folks gave me good advice at times. It was a good group.

DH: Who was the most respected woman in the newsroom at that time?

SS: There were several. Anne was working part-time at that time. She had just had kids. She was one.

DH: Anne who?

SS: Anne Farris. Maria Henson was there. She had been there maybe a year ahead of me. She was on the State House crew. She was very good. Peggy Harris was on the city desk. She did some weekend or holiday editing. I worked with her a couple of times.

DH: Were there any women in management?

SS: No. They were probably pretty behind on that. In fact, I don't think they had anybody. Maybe on the feature side there were some. The *Gazette* was divided. There was the main city and state desk in the main newsroom. Then the feature staff was separated and on the other side of the building.

DH: We are in the mid 1980s. Were they recruiting black reporters or black editors?

SS: A handful. Gannett was pretty good on this. They got on to them about this, I think. There was a woman on the state desk who left about a year into my term [Jennifer Hopkins]. She was very good. She got married and took a job at

Southwestern Bell. That was a real loss to the profession. She was a good writer, a black woman who had stature at the *Gazette* and someone we should not have let get away.

DH: You mentioned, thinking back over the things you have talked about, you mentioned the style pile. That obviously made a big impression on you and is something that you carry with you today. Where did you go from the *Gazette*? I am curious whether this was the formative experience in your journalism career. I don't know where all you have been.

SS: I would say it probably was. I was there for two years. I wanted to stay. I love Little Rock. I think it is the nicest town that I have lived in. Gannett had bought the paper, and changes were afoot. I was the first of about fifteen people to leave the *Gazette*. There was a wave of folks who left. I went to Lexington, Kentucky.

DH: Tell me about that decision then. If you were the first, this was an intentional "I've got to get out of here."

SS: I was looking, I guess. I had met the editor of the Lexington paper, John Carroll. I had just gone with my dad to some meeting. It wasn't deliberate. I just wrote him, and it worked out the same way. I interviewed once and was not offered the job. I interviewed again, and when I was offered the job, it was a tough decision. I wanted to stay in Little Rock. I am not sure what made me restless then. It is hard to remember. There were changes going on at the *Gazette*. A friend of mine called me "a young man in a hurry." I wanted to move quickly to do the political stuff. I think the door was open for me at the *Gazette* if I had stayed. Walker Lundy, the new Gannett guy, took me in the side office. He said, "Bring your note pad." He brought me in there and tried to add up -- they had an *USA Today* loaner program in Washington where you could go for four months and work for *USA Today*. I was seeing a girl who was in school in Washington at the time.

That had some appeal to me. They had a cost of living allowance associated with that. They weren't paying much at the *Gazette* in those days. Washington offered me, not a whole lot more money, probably just fifty dollars a week more.

DH: Do you happen to remember your salary?

SS: I started at the *Gazette* at, probably, \$240 a week. It was pretty low. That is not right. That is Pine Bluff's figure. It was probably around \$300 a week, to start with. I actually took less money to go to the *Gazette*, and I had an offer to go to the Macon paper. I had interviewed there around that time. Lexington probably offered me \$340. It was still peanuts. Walker Lundy took me in this side office, and he added up the cost of living allowance for *USA Today* and our expenses. He added up driving around in your car, mileage and stuff – as though Lexington did not have any expenses.

[End of Tape One, Side One]

[Beginning of Tape One, Side Two]

SS: It did not add up. The funny thing about it was that only a few months before, Al Neuharth, the Gannett guy, had come to Little Rock after this big sale of the paper. He said that Gannett had "deep pockets" and we were going to win this newspaper war. The "deep pockets" were spent on advertising and community development. The most outrageous example, I think -- They had some big opening party and probably a \$2500 ice sculpture at this party they threw for the Little Rock bigwigs. Everybody in the newsroom knew about that. It was a point of concern. They did not back that up with newsroom salaries. I said, "You mean that you can't do anything more than that? You can't come anywhere close to Lexington? It isn't that much of a difference." He said, "Well, if I do, then I am going to have to do that for a lot of people in the newsroom." I asked, "What happened to 'deep pockets'?" It was a real terse conversation. At the end of the

conversation I told him, "Welcome to the plantation." That became sort of a watchword during this exodus. As far as I know about, they didn't do anything for anybody to keep them on staff. They were real cheap in terms of newsroom spending. It led a whole lot of people to walk out the door. It was really a shame because they had a talented crew. The other thing about that, and it ties into when Clinton ran for President, I was there in 1988 when he didn't run and we know in retrospect that it may have been due to his extramarital activities. In 1992, when he did decide to run for President, I think he declared his candidacy like two weeks after the *Gazette* closed. This may be sour grapes, but I really think that if that crew had stayed intact, and with all the contacts and credibility in the Arkansas community, I think that Clinton's history would have been different. All of these people had to parachute in from *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* and land in Arkansas and sort this out. They did not know who was who. They had to get grounded before they could get started. The *Gazette* took some raps because they did not uncover the extramarital stuff. In retrospect, I think we should have done that differently. I also think that, had the *Gazette* not folded, Clinton's history would have been a little bit different. One of those stories would have come out in a more credible way. I don't know what would have happened.

DH: That is an interesting thing to speculate about.

SS: In retrospect, I think what we should have done -- I remember there were rumors about him even then. Brummett knew some of them. I think that everybody assumes that journalists just want to get it and exploit something like that. There was a feeling that if it isn't in his job, then we don't want to know about it. We never looked far enough to tell whether it was affecting his job. In retrospect, which is something the *Gazette* in those days didn't do, we should have put

someone on it for six months or a year. Find out what is going on, and then we will make the ethical decision. Then we will decide if it is news. We made a mistake in that regard. When Jennifer Flowers broke in 1993 with all those other stories, I think if a skeleton version of the *Gazette* staff had been there, things might have been somewhat different. That sounds bitter and sour grapes, I know, but I believe there is some basis for thinking that way. I know what a gap there was in credibility between the two papers. Not long after Gannett bought the paper, my father had conversations with them about becoming the editor there – the thing he had always wanted to do. He had a meeting in Little Rock with John Siegerthaler, who seemed intrigued by the idea.

[End of Tape One, Side Two]

[Beginning of Tape Two, Side One]

SS: I think he would have been the right guy. He would have been a right guy for that job. The *Gazette* -- I sound bitter again -- I just wonder what would have happened. They had a meeting and talked about the editorship of the *Gazette*. I think my dad told the folks back at Knight-Ridder in Detroit, and then he never heard another word about it. They didn't call him and say, "You know, I don't think that will work." They brought in some regular corporate guys.

DH: How sad.

SS: Yes, it is. The sad thing about it is that I think my dad knew what the *Gazette* needed. There are sort of two ends to the spectrum. There is this newspaper of record. The *Gazette* at this time was dull. It was stodgy. But it was thorough and had credibility. There is this other extreme, the Gannett style, sort of entertainment like. It was silly some of the time. Maria and Scott Van Laningham and Bob Wells were on the State House crew. They were all good. Wells left after I did to go to the *Raleigh News and Observer*. He was a really

solid and thorough reporter. They covered the State House when I was there, legislative sessions, the most thorough coverage that I have ever seen for a legislative session. They had boxes of every bill that was filed. They sort of had a policy that every bill had to be read by someone. Max drove that. I would like them to find the reader that read every word of the State House coverage. It would be like two full inside pages with State House news, plus a couple of stories off the front page. It was way more than anyone could possibly read. There was some value of having that in the paper. The legislature knew somebody was watching. I don't know if it is the right approach to cover every last little bill and to overwhelm people with that material. There is a middle ground between a newspaper of record and the newspaper light. I think philosophically that my dad would have been a good fit in bringing the *Gazette* -- to take everything it had going for it and building on those to get it more dynamic and readable. They did not do projects at all. They did not cut somebody loose and say, "Go find out something." It was all sort of driven by a punch clock. It was a little more regimented than it should have been. If you have good people and you cut them loose, there are rewards for that. I am less bitter than wistful about that. I think that had Gannett seen the value of having an Arkansas guy who knew the state and who was also a serious journalist who understood the middle ground between the two extremes, the *Gazette* would have had a different history. My dad was emotional when the *Gazette* went out of business. He cried about it.

DH: I wondered if you had memories of that.

SS: He wrote a column about it. His prediction was – and it has come true to some extent – that Arkansas politics would lurch to the right. It would be less enlightened and sort of more lunk-head conservative instead of thoughtful.

Conservative is one thing, but thoughtful and having an interesting dialogue -- a newspaper is an important part of that. The *Democrat* hasn't done it, partly because of its history of credibility problems. That has a big impact on a state. It is not just a newspaper going under. The *Gazette* had something to do with the kind of politicians that represented Arkansas. The Dale Bumpers, the Bill Clintons, the David Pryor folks who weren't the run-of-the-mill conservatives. I have always wondered what would have happened. I had no idea why they didn't call back or why that fell apart. It wasn't long before the *Gazette* was folding altogether.

DH: Do you remember that event specifically?

SS: Yes, I was in Lexington then. I talked to them on the phone some. I still had friends at the *Gazette*. Not everybody had left. I think a lot of folks went through a much harder time than I did in dealing with that. Their jobs were on the line. Clinton was involved, briefly, in an effort by employees to buy the *Gazette* so the *Democrat* would not be able to buy the name. They could not assemble enough money. I don't know that whole story. One guy who had been at the *Gazette*, Michael Arbanas, who left the business, wrote a really beautiful story in the alternative weekly down there.

DH: In Little Rock?

SS: Yes. It talked about this candlelight vigil. As an institution, there probably was not an institution in Arkansas that had more -- you may disagree -- that had more impact on the state or more of a central role in everything that happened. I think the *Gazette* was sort of the center of things in Arkansas.

DH: I regret that I never worked there.

SS: Was that ever a possibility?

DH: Well, I was in the state and kind of like you. What was different for me was that I

was working in Paragould. I made a decision not to try and get a job at the *Gazette*, although I could have gone to work there, because my dad was a state legislator.

SS: Oh, is that right? I didn't know that. What was his name?

DH: Jerry Hinshaw. He was a Republican before the Republicans were cool. He was a distinct minority.

SS: A pioneering Republican.

DH: But, anyway, of course, it was an important institution. I think it is really touching that you feel so strongly about it.

SS: I don't have that for other places that I have worked. I have attachments of varying degrees and important things that have happened career wise.

DH: A lot of this is tied up in family history, I am sure.

SS: Yes, somewhat. It is personal, I guess. Maybe even more so, personal attachment to the folks at the *Gazette*. They were just a quirky, good group of folks. I had a sense of being in a historic place. I went, one time, on an assignment to Central High with an old photographer, Gene Prescott. He shot the Central High crisis. We were interviewing some of the kids in the school. As we were going in, he was like, "Well this happened here. Do you remember that picture of Elizabeth Eckford with the books?" He could tell me right where that was. "On this corner, they were just spitting at the students." It was chilling and a kind of living history. There were things like that that happened a lot. People were funny and fun. When Gannett bought the paper, James Scudder, who was this old Methodist minister, eccentric fellow, was the reporter assigned to interview Neuharth. He went up to the third floor in the editorial offices and came back in the newsroom. He walked with his arms out like a robot. He walked in, and people cracked up. It was really funny. It was just good folks. I think that is what I am more

nostalgic about than anything else.

DH: You mentioned the photographer. We didn't talk about photography specifically. I never thought of the *Gazette* as being a photojournalist's dream paper. Was photography important?

SS: It was, and they had a good crew. I think part of the reason was it was still in the black and white days. The *Gazette* had sort of a *New York Times, Jr.*, mentality. You would never see a five-column picture almost. It was very rare. They didn't play up their photographers. They were a talented group.

DH: It was a solid group. Does anybody stand out?

SS: Kelly Quinn was really good. She was good to work with. I have seen her at events over the years. She is just a good person.

DH: She and I worked in Paragould together.

SS: Oh, is that right? So you know Kelly. She is a wonderful person. Jeff Bowen, he was a good sports shooter. He shot a lot of the Razorback stuff. I remember being sort of dazzled by that. Art Meripole was good. That is an interesting thing. In 1988, when Clinton was going to run, he backed out at the last minute. We put together this special section, which I don't have a copy of and wish that I did. It was like a four-page special section. They let me do a story on Clinton's mother. I went down to Hot Springs and interviewed her in her home. She was this boisterous, eccentric, really flamboyant person. She had black hair with a white stripe. Art and I went down. It was on this lake by Hot Springs. She pulled out all these pictures of Clinton when he was a boy. I believe that I was the first reporter to discover the picture of Clinton with Kennedy. We never published it then. I guess somebody did four years later. We had pictures of Clinton on a horse. Art was taking pictures of the pictures. We did not take them with us. She brought out this big family album. We went over looking at Bill and

Roger, as they were boys. She was a nice person and very open. She probably closed up some in later years because of the overwhelming descent of national media. That was a fun story to do although it never saw the light of day.

DH: The story didn't?

SS: No, it was never published because he never ran. Brummett did the main story about Clinton's biography. It would have been the anchor of that special section. I did the story on his mom. I think I did a story on which Arkansas landmarks would become nationally renowned if he should happen to win. It was interesting because they didn't really have a home in Arkansas because they had lived in the governor's mansion since 1978, except for two years when they had a home in Little Rock. Chelsea was born in the governor's mansion. She has never lived in private housing. We kind of played around with that.

DH: You made it sound like you were writing all of this bullshit.

SS: I did some pretty good stuff. I interviewed Clinton one-on-one once for that higher education thing, at a party at the governor's mansion. I would interview him in groups of twos and threes for other stories. He is supposed to be phenomenal on memory. I always wondered if he would remember me just from two dozen encounters and speeches and little things like that. He is supposed to be very good at that. The first time that I met him was walking into the Excelsior Hotel, the Paula Jones hotel. He was by himself, which years later, in retrospect, I sort of wonder why he didn't have state troopers around. He is very personable.

DH: It seems like he would talk in these really long -- He got better about it over the years -- When he was governor, he would talk in these long, complex . . .

SS: You needed a tape. I think the Washington press corps was slow to learn the lessons of Clinton. There were a lot of things that folks above me at the *Gazette* knew and understood about him. The parsing of words. . . the story about one of

the Supreme Court nominees who got shot down because he smoked pot, that broke while I was there. Everybody was asking the “pot” question. When they asked Clinton, his first answer was “I have never violated the laws of my own country,” which was his slick way of not admitting that he smoked while he was in Oxford as a Rhodes scholar. There was all that strange -- He did that stuff all the time. I think somebody asked him before about Vietnam. He did some parsing of words that was a mental gymnastic. I remember hearing Maria and Scott and Wells talking about how careful you had to listen. You had to have tape because if you were just taking notes, you might miss the nuance or trick that he was laying between the lines. I think he is pretty brilliant. I think the Washington press corps, because he was from Arkansas, underestimated him for a long time. They thought he couldn’t be that smart because of where he is from. I think he is probably smarter than two or three Washington journalists put together.

DH: Not to go off too much on Clinton, but how do you feel about him now, today? I am so disappointed about all that has happened on his way out of Washington. It was so embarrassing.

SS: Yes, I think that Clinton bears the responsibility. There is all this discussion as to whether Gore should have turned him loose in Arkansas. Probably Clinton could not be elected governor of Arkansas now because there are so many yellow dog Democrats, little old ladies, who just don’t think that kind of stuff goes on in the White House. Yes, it is personal. Yes, it may not have as much to do with the way that he did his job. Ultimately, it did. It consumed so much of his time, defending himself. You could blame that on the vast conspiracy, I guess. I’m wistful about him because he had so much talent. He has never changed. He has always been this brilliant, but ethically challenged and undisciplined guy.

DH: Tying this back to the newspaper, do you think the *Gazette* portrayed him as the

person he was? Were they honest?

SS: Yes. Max's wife was friends with the Clintons. I think he knew them socially in Little Rock. I don't think he ever pulled back from covering him. I think the coverage was tough. I think the Washington press corps did not read enough of the old *Gazette* clips when they started. Some of the lessons that took them six or eight years to learn were laid out in some of that stuff. Brummett was very good in writing about Clinton. There is a long trail of people who were loyal to Clinton. When they became liabilities, he threw them overboard immediately and had no qualms about it. Bill Becker, the AFL -CIO guy in Arkansas, and Brownie Ledbetter was a leading Democrat in Little Rock -- she had a family connection with the Kennedys. She was very well connected nationally. Clinton stabbed them in the back on some piece of legislation. He made a promise and didn't keep it, that he would sign a bill. Brummett wrote about it. A whole lot of people who fit the pattern of Lani Guinier and folks who got thrown overboard when they began to cost him.

DH: The *Gazette* tied those pieces together? Did they portray him as the man he is?

SS: Brummett had a love-hate thing going with him, I think, because he knew how brilliant he was. I think I come down somewhere in that category, too. I think he did a lot of good things. The best line that I ever heard about Clinton was in that David Maraniss book. He said, "In Clinton's highest moments are the seeds of disaster. In his lowest moments are the seeds of triumph." He didn't say it exactly like that, but the idea was that Clinton is always on this roller coaster. The hubris gets away from him when he is doing well, and he gets arrogant and thinks he can do anything. When he is on the bottom, people underestimate him and write him off. They think, "Ah, Gennifer Flowers broke in New Hampshire. He will never survive that." He survived on sheer talent, I think. Somebody in

Arkansas around that time used the expression, “He could talk a cat off a fish truck.” Coming from where he was coming from, to maintain and survive as a Democrat and a somewhat liberal politician in what is becoming a conservative state is amazing in itself. One other thing that people do not realize, I think, he is overestimated for his governing skills. I think he is brilliant as a person, but I don’t think he -- he is a great campaigner, but he was not a great governor. He never figured out the Arkansas legislature. Those good ol’ boys would tie him up in knots and just leave him on the floor. He couldn’t figure it out. He would come with the penny sales tax or something he was going to do for education or teacher testing. He really did not get much accomplished. He couldn’t figure out how to get around them.

DH: It sounds like you might have a Clinton book in you.

SS: No.

DH: Would you like to write about him?

SS: I think he is a fascinating guy. I am sort of ready for him to mosey on off the stage.

DH: Really, give us some peace. For the record, how old are you now and what are you doing now? What are your aspirations?

SS: I am forty. I work at *The State* in Columbia on the projects desk. I have worked for two years on the legislative team here. I was real interested in politics and may go back to that at some point.

DH: It seems to be your niche.

SS: Yes, I love it. I like what I am doing now. I sometimes spin my wheels trying to get a direction on a story. As far as where I will end up, I sort of think early in my career I had more definite ideas. It had to go this way, or it had to go that way. Now I think there are a lot of paths that it could take. I could end up in a lot

of different places. What we've always said about Columbia -- It is a good place for us to be for now. I like it. Career wise, it has been the best three years of my career. I have had more fun and more opportunity than I have had anywhere else. We will see where it goes. We could stay here or not.

DH: You went from the *Commercial*, to the *Gazette*, to Lexington. . . .

SS: For seven years. Then we were in Asheville for three years. I was free-lancing then. I was working on some of my own stuff, and Martha was working at the paper. She was managing editor for graphics at the time in Asheville, North Carolina. I was picking my little boy up at preschool at 2:30 p.m. and roaming the mountains. I was working up to that time every day on various and sundry things.

DH: I feel like I went all over the map with you. It was very interesting.

[End of Tape Two, Side One]

[End of Interview]