

Gazette Project

Interview with

William Whitworth
Little Rock, Arkansas
2 February 2001

Interviewer: Robert S. McCord

Robert S. McCord: This is Bob McCord and I am interviewing Bill Whitworth for the *Arkansas Gazette's* oral history. Bill, you understand that this is going to be a part of the library at the University of Arkansas and you also understand that you will get a copy of this—it will be transcribed, and you will get a copy of it, and you can make whatever changes or alterations that you want to make.

Bill Whitworth: Okay.

RSM: Bill, what year did you come to work at the *Arkansas Gazette*?

BW: It was 1960. I think right about the beginning of the year.

RSM: And what had you been doing prior to that?

BW: I had just gotten out of the University of Oklahoma, and it was the beginning of the year. I had finished up not in the spring, but in the fall semester. I got out, I guess, in January and then came to work at the *Gazette*.

RSM: What kind of a degree did you get from Oklahoma?

BW: It was just a BA. I had a program that they let me put together—a combination English and journalism major. I had the hours for English and the hours for journalism, and a philosophy minor.

RSM: Had you had any kind of a newspaper job before you went to work at the *Gazette*?

BW: Yes, at the *Democrat*. I had worked—you know, I'm not sure if it was a whole year or not, but I had dropped out of school and worked at the *Democrat* mostly on the Sunday magazine. And before that I had summer jobs at the *Democrat*. I guess you would say general assignment reporting, although I didn't do anything that you could really call reporting. I still remember their giving me—in the morning, when you came in, they'd give you a little stack of *Gazette* things to rewrite. [Laughter]

RSM: That was the first thing you had to do.

BW: Yes, so that was my introduction to newspaper writing, except for working on the college paper.

RSM: What did you do at the *Democrat*?

BW: I was just writing feature stories for the magazine, and I did the daily television column in a very smart-alecky manner, I'm sorry to say. I had to do that every day. It was based on handouts from the networks about what was going to be on T.V. the next day. So it was those two things mostly, no real news reporting, but feature stuff for the magazine. This is when Roberta Martin was editor. And I worked quite a bit with Will Counts, the photographer.

RSM: Well, but then you went back to school?

BW: I went back to the University of Oklahoma, and I think maybe I just had a summer and a fall semester left. Then at the beginning of 1960 I came back to Little Rock and got a job at the *Gazette*.

RSM: You worked on the college paper at OU?

BW: Yes.

RSM: What did you do there?

BW: I did news reporting, such as it was. I covered Harry Truman's visit to OU, and I did a lot of entertainment reporting. I can remember writing about Andre Segovia, Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, and one of those Norman Granz jazz packages that was traveling around then.

RSM: So you came back to Little Rock and took a job at the *Gazette*, yet you had been working at the *Democrat*. Why did you go to the *Gazette* rather than the *Democrat*?

BW: I thought it was a better and more serious paper, and it would be a better place to get some experience, a better place to work.

RSM: What did they put you to work doing when you went to work there?

BW: General assignment, just little miscellaneous stories. I mean everything from something really small like a fire or police story to various low-level political stories. You know, I didn't have any real experience. Eventually I had two beats, at two different periods. One was the Little Rock School Board. The integration case was continuing, although the big fireworks were over by then, but it was still a hot story—still in court. Apart from the legal case, there was the politics surrounding the board—who was on the board, who was going to run for the board, and all that. And the Women's Emergency Committee was still in operation in some way. So it was kind of a big, local continuing story at that point. And then

the other beat that I had was North Little Rock, and I did that for at least a year and maybe two years. I don't recall now how long it was.

RSM: And all total you were there how long?

BW: Four years, 1960 through almost the end of 1963.

RSM: And weren't you still working in North Little Rock when you left there? Wasn't that your last job? Or am I wrong about that?

BW: I can't remember if I did the school board and then North Little Rock or North Little Rock and then the school board. I think maybe it was North Little Rock first and then the school board.

RSM: Can you remember what you were paid when you went to work there?

BW: Eighty dollars a week. [Laughs] That was pretty good. And if you got a raise back then, it would be something like five dollars a week.

RSM: Well, I think a big question in your life is that you were always kind of torn between music and journalism, and so is your taking this job out of college, when you finished college— is that a sign that you had made up your mind that it was going to be journalism instead of the music?

BW: Oh, yes. You know, I knew that I was not a good enough musician to make a career out of it. I could just barely have hung on in some way. Right before I left OU, I was promised a job on the Hal McIntyre band. Most people don't know that name anymore. McIntyre had been in the Glenn Miller sax section, and in the fifties and sixties he had a very modern, very good little band. And then after I went to work at the *Gazette*, I was offered a job on the Jimmy Dorsey band,

which was one of the early “ghost” bands. That is, Jimmy Dorsey was dead, but a trumpet player named Lee Castle, who had been with Dorsey, was running the band. And then when Stan Kenton was in Little Rock, in about 1961, he asked me about joining the band. I had known Kenton just from running into him a lot, and I had friends on the band and everything, but he had never heard me play and had no way of knowing whether I was a good enough player to work for him. But he asked me if I would be interested in joining this so-called mellophonium band, which he was then planning. You know, he loved brass. He had five trumpets and five trombones, and then he planned to add five mellophoniums. This was a horn that, I believe, was sort of invented for him—a combination of a trumpet and a French horn, I guess. He asked me if I would be interested in playing one of these horns. But I didn’t think I was good enough to play for Kenton, and I knew that music wasn’t going to be my career.

RSM: But you played, though, a little bit while you were at the *Gazette*.

BW: Yes, local stuff. I played with Tommy Scott. I played some of those concerts in the park with my own band, and I played in a band over in Hot Springs at a club where they tried out Las Vegas shows. The Mitzi Gaynor show was there for two weeks, preparing their Las Vegas show. I would do little things like that.

RSM: But it never was a big hard decision for you. [Laughs]

BW: It was not. No, because I knew that people who were better than me were a dime a dozen, literally, at this time, all over the place.

RSM: Well, tell me about your leaving the *Gazette*. Why did you leave, and how did it

happen, and where did you go?

BW: The whole time I was at the *Gazette*, I was obsessed with the idea of getting to New York, although I regarded the *Gazette* as a great paper. I think it was one of the great newspapers in the country at that time. The talent in that one little city room—it was unbelievable for a paper that size in a town that size. They sent two people to *The New Yorker*; one reporter, Charles Portis, became a best selling novelist; two or three people went to *The New York Times*; two went to *The New York Herald Tribune*. Portis, who before he left the *Gazette* was a columnist doing the “Our Town” column, preceded me at *The New York Herald Tribune*, and he put in a word for me with the city editor of the *Trib*. And when Portis was assigned to their London bureau, they brought me up there specifically to replace Portis. That was in the November of 1963. On my second day at work at the *Trib* John F. Kennedy was assassinated. So that’s how I remember the time.

RSM: What did you do at the *Herald Trib*?

BW: Well, I did every kind of general assignment reporting that you could think of, and I felt really well prepared by the *Gazette*. I had a front page byline my first day there.

RSM: Is that right? What was the story about?

BW: I don’t remember what the story was. It was some inconsequential little feature story of some kind that they just thought was funny, so they liked it and put it on the front page. I covered stuff like Bobby Kennedy’s senate race, John Lindsay’s interminable mayoral race, where he would walk all day, you know, from

downtown up to Harlem with these poor reporters trudging along after him.

Every kind of state and city politics and even a little bit of national politics. I can remember covering Lyndon Johnson when he was visiting New York. And I covered a lot of entertainment stuff. I covered the Beatles' first two trips to the United States. I was in the audience in the balcony somewhere for their Ed Sullivan appearance. And I was at the Shea Stadium concert, their second trip. In New York in the 1960s there was something happening every day.

RSM: I don't think you had been up there very long when we talked on the telephone, and you said, "The darndest thing is going on. They have a box in the paper, and they want me to write something to fit in that box." [Laughter] Do you remember that being a problem?

BW: Yes, they had a lot of weird things going on.

RSM: Well, they were fighting for their life.

BW: They really were. They were desperate.

RSM: You have good feelings, though, about your days on the *Tribune*?

BW: I do. It was not a good newspaper, you know, really. I mean we just didn't have the manpower or the space to cover the news the way that *The New York Times* did. We did cover a lot of news, though. We were just out gunned, and we were trying to cover it up with a lot of razzle dazzle—they would take ordinary stories and try to make something out of them that just wasn't there. And I had been trained by Bill Shelton, the *Gazette's* city editor, that it was just as important to know when there wasn't a story as when there was a story. I would come back

sometimes and say, “No story.” I still remember hearing a guy on the desk turning to the city editor and saying, “Whitworth’s pissed on another one.”

RSM: How long were you at the *Tribune*?

BW: I was there two years, 1964-1965. This was sort of the beginning of the Vietnam protests in 1963 and 1964. I covered the student anti-war leaders at Columbia University. I was in Chicago covering the beginnings of SDS, Students for a Democratic Society. And then they sent me out to California to cover the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley. I was tear gassed out there on the campus, running from the cops with the kids. I covered the first Harlem riots. That was in the summer of 1964 or 1965.

RSM: Gosh, you had a little bit of everything.

BW: It was tremendous variety. There was something fairly interesting to do every day.

RSM: Well, was Charles Portis still there when you left the *Tribune*?

BW: He left first. He went to London and reported from over there, and then he quit to write his first novel, to write *Norwood*.

RSM: So when you left the newspaper, you went to the magazine.

BW: I went to *The New Yorker*, yes. The person who helped me get a job at *The New Yorker* was Brendan Gill, one of the longest serving writers at the magazine. He did everything there—Profiles, Reporter at Large pieces, “Talk of the Town.” And he was their drama critic for years.

RSM: How did you meet him?

BW: I was working on the *Trib* with a girl, only nineteen or twenty, a woman photographer, Jill Krementz. We covered a lot of stories together. And Jill's family was sort of social there and knew Brendan. She showed him some of my *Trib* clips, and he showed them to William Shawn, the editor of the magazine, who called me up out of the blue one day and asked me if I'd like to come by and talk to him.

RSM: No kidding? [Laughs]

BW: Yes.

RSM: Just out of the blue.

BW: Well, for me it was out of the blue. I didn't even know that he had seen my clips. So we had several mysterious meetings—mysterious to me, because it was never specified why we were talking. We would sit around and talk about journalism and about the New York newspaper situation and about *The New Yorker*. But it was never “Would you like to have a job?” or anything like that. And finally one day I was in there for another of these wandering conversations, and he asked me what I was up to, and I said that I was going to the *Times*. A.M. Rosenthal, who was then the *Times*' metropolitan editor, had been after me as a replacement for Gay Talese, who was their main feature writer. Talese was quitting to write a book, and Rosenthal wanted me to come over there as his replacement. I said okay, and we had set the date for me to start. And when I told Shawn that, he said, “Well, I don't know if that would be a good idea. I don't know if that would do anything for your career.” And he said, “Have you ever thought about

working at *The New Yorker*? Would you be interested in working at *The New Yorker*?" I said I would, of course. And he offered me a job. So I had to call Rosenthal and back out. The *Trib* tried to talk me out of going to *The New Yorker* by offering to send me to Vietnam, which may not sound like much of a bargain, but that was a big thing then, you know. That was supposed to be your ticket to fame. But nothing could have kept me from going to *The New Yorker*. That was at the end of 1965, and I started at *The New Yorker* in February of 1966. So I was at the *Trib* two years.

RSM: Well, at *The New Yorker* then what did you do? "Talk of the Town?"

BW: I did some "Talk," but mostly I did longer reporting pieces—Profiles and Reporter at Large pieces. I did a lot of New York and show biz personalities and a few political things, but most of the time lighthearted stuff.

RSM: And then you worked into an editor's position. Tell me about that.

BW: After about seven years, I asked to switch to editing. Shawn resisted it and said I wouldn't like it, but, finding that he did need somebody, finally he said that I could do six months on and six months off. He wanted me to keep doing the kind of writing I was doing, so I would edit for six months and write for six months. But it never went that way, because at the end of my first six months of editing I had so many editing projects going on that there was no way to go back to writing.

RSM: In all you were at *The New Yorker* how long?

BW: About fourteen years.

RSM: And at the end several newspapers were saying that you were going to be the successor editor of *The New Yorker*, to take Mr. Shawn's position, and that didn't happen. What did happen?

BW: Well, you know, everybody has a different memory of this, and I have read several books recently that all had different accounts of what happened. The fact is that these people who write these books and think about this stuff can't believe that anybody would walk away from the editorship of *The New Yorker*, but that's what happened. Shawn took me to lunch one day—I forget what year it was, but it must have been about 1978— and told me with this heavy, regretful attitude, as though he were about to give me terrible news, that it looked like I was going to have to succeed him, and he wanted to prepare me for it. And he said, "Over the next few months I will begin to gradually turn over some of my duties to you." Which he did.

[End of Tape One, Side One]

[Beginning of Tape One, Side Two]

BW: A year or so later, Peter Fleischmann, the principal owner of the magazine, sent a message to me through a man on the business side that the decision had been made, and I was going to succeed Shawn. Of course, it was enormously flattering to think that I would be considered for this job, but I saw several negatives. First of all, I thought that whoever succeeded Shawn, no matter who it was and no matter what kind of job he did, was going to be absolutely killed in various ways in the court of public opinion. No matter what you did, it would not be seen as up

to what Shawn had done. Plus, a buildup of things that the critics didn't like about the magazine even under Shawn would now be kind of shifted onto the new guy, who would be blamed for every shortcoming of the magazine. In addition, there were a number of factions at the magazine. And it was my impression that the members of each faction believed I was going to change the magazine in exactly the way they wanted. Also, I couldn't imagine Shawn actually retiring, though he told me more than once that he wanted to. I thought, "He'll be sitting uptown in his apartment watching what I'm doing, and the first thing I do that he doesn't approve of, even though he's retired, he'll be on the phone to Fleischmann saying, 'Well, this was an experiment, and it didn't work.'"

Meanwhile, a real estate millionaire named Mortimer Zuckerman had bought *The Atlantic Monthly*, and—inspired, I'm sure, by the rumors that I was going to succeed Shawn—had asked me to become editor of *The Atlantic*. I said no at first, but after listening to his arguments for several months and continuing to brood about all the problems at *The New Yorker*, I finally said yes.

RSM: Were you ever sorry that you made the change?

BW: I had a period of doubt at one point when I thought the business office at *The Atlantic* was getting in my way and was about to get in my way even more, but that was straightened out before long.

RSM: You went to *The Atlantic* when, what year?

BW: In November 1980. My first issue was April of 1981.

RSM: And you left in 2000?

BW: Yes.

RSM: So you were there longer than any other place you have ever been?

BW: Yes.

RSM: And I don't want to wear you out, but did you come to really like working for a magazine like *The Atlantic* as compared to *The New Yorker*?

BW: Oh, I enjoyed my whole time there. As far as a comparison, the biggest difference between the magazines is simply that one is a weekly and one is a monthly. If you get up close to them, they're very different. But if you pull back and look at the whole magazine world, then they're practically twins. They're both interested in long, serious pieces; they're both interested in reporting; they both do fiction; they both do poetry; they're both interested in writing for writing's sake. They had all these things in common, so it was not a big change in that way.

RSM: So you came to like the job very much?

BW: Yes. I liked it from the beginning. It was fun, because people like to have their own way, and I enjoyed being able to do what I wanted to.

RSM: Financially was it a better move for you than had you stayed at *The New Yorker*?

BW: No. If I had become editor of *The New Yorker*, I would have made more money, but *The Atlantic* paid me more than I had ever expected to make. I was treated very well by the owner. He kept his promises to stay out of our hair, and I have no complaints at all.

RSM: Were you sorry to leave, or was it about time that you thought you wanted to do

something else?

BW: To leave *The Atlantic*?

RSM: Yes.

BW: Well, it was mixed. I was sorry to leave. I mean, if you do a job like that, you start thinking that you're the only one who knows how to do it, which is not the truth, but you feel that way, sort of. But *The Atlantic* was in a poor business situation and had been for two or three years. When I first went there, Mort Zuckerman owned only one publication and that was us, so we got all his attention, which was good. As time went on, he bought *U.S. News and World Report*, and he bought the *Daily News* in New York, and he financed the founding of a business magazine called *Fast Company*, which turned out to be an enormous success. So his attention was more and more divided, and in that situation *The Atlantic* just got lost. We became a step-child. We were not paid attention to, and that led to business problems. If our business people in New York couldn't solve their problem, whatever it was—newsstand sales or ad sales, it didn't make any difference—they would tend to start looking toward Boston and asking us to solve them in some way. So that part of it was getting me down. I enjoyed the magazine less for, say, the last two or three years than I had before, because I felt the business problems all the time. When Mort sold *The Atlantic*, in 2000, the plan was that the new owner would bring in his own editor and I would move to New York to become editorial director of *U.S. News*, the *Daily News*, and *Fast Company*. But I didn't feel that I knew enough about those publications to be of

any use to them whatsoever, so I decided not to take the job.

RSM: Well, I am sure you could have stayed at *The Atlantic* if you wanted to, but with a new owner that would have been an awful situation, wouldn't it?

BW: There was no way for me to stay. The new owner and the new editor were a package deal. They wanted to do a magazine together. And everyone assumed I would be happy with what amounted to a promotion, plus a raise. But I didn't want the New York job. In any case, *The Atlantic* has kept me around by naming me editor emeritus, and I still have a financial arrangement with them for a few years.

RSM: And you are doing some work for them?

BW: I haven't done anything substantial, but the idea is that, eventually, when I get set up here, I will do some reading for them and edit some pieces. I hope it works out that way.

RSM: You have good relations with those people?

BW: Oh, yes. Very good, with the new editor and the owner both.

RSM: Well, let's get back to Little Rock for a little while. You missed the 1957 desegregation crisis at Central High School, but you were here shortly after that happened. And, of course, you are very familiar with it because in the first place you went to school there, Central High School. What do you think that did to the *Gazette*? Did it make it a better newspaper, or did it harm it because of all the criticism and the loss of circulation and everything?

BW: You know, I really don't know anything about the business side of that. When I

was there, I was young and carefree. I thought we were in excellent shape financially, and I don't know whether that was the case or not. But there were a lot of people who hated the paper and felt that we were biased. And I think there was something to that, that we did let our opinions—or attempt to, anyway—drift into the news columns. And I think that Shelton and A.R. Nelson, the managing editor, were on guard against that, but still there was a certain tone to the paper. I am off your subject, though, of what the crisis did to the paper, because I just don't know. But in regard to the tone of the paper—Shelton was on his guard. I can remember his saying to me one day after I had turned in a piece, “Don't argue with the subject.” I think I was reporting something about a politician—he said this, this, and this. And I think I mischievously then pointed out that only two weeks ago he did or said something contradictory. It was pertinent, but it was also arguing in the news story with the subject of the news story. And Bill said not to do that. And I can remember when I was covering a school-integration court story, Nelson got real interested and was kind of hanging around and encouraging me. He wouldn't say, “Don't be biased,” but he'd say, “Let's do a careful job on this.” And I knew that meant, “Let's bend over backwards to make sure this is straight.” So I think the editors were trying to keep us straight. You know, some of us were young and were liberal Democrats and had our feelings, and I think it showed sometimes, not only on the editorial page but in the news to some extent.

RSM: Well, you've said that you learned all the basics of being a good reporter there,

for which Bill Shelton was primarily responsible?

BW: Yes, and, you know, he very seldom said anything to you. He never came to my desk and said, “Now, here is how you do this,” or anything like that. You learned by observation. I learned about reporting really from Roy Reed and Pat Owens, just reading their stuff. They were such good reporters and such good writers. And you learned from Shelton in various ways. Shelton, without ever saying it to me, conveyed this feeling from the very beginning that I had really better know what I was talking about when I got back from wherever it was he had sent me—that I might be grilled about it. He helped me get over my shyness in covering stories—hesitation about asking a question at a press conference, for instance. I was more afraid of not being able to meet Shelton’s expectations than I was of making a fool of myself on the street by asking a dumb question. So I would go ahead and ask the dumb questions in case I needed to. And Bill had a manner that I don’t think he was even aware of. There was something about his presence that seemed stern and demanding, sort of military. So the combination of seeing these real good writers every day and reading their reporting and worrying about pleasing Shelton, that was an education for me.

[End of Tape One, Side Two]

[Beginning of Tape Two, Side One]

RSM: You’ve given so much credit to the people at the *Gazette*, but as you moved on to these other magazines and newspapers, did you find better editors?

BW: Well, I worked with extraordinary editors at *The New Yorker*. But that was a

different sort of editing—hard to compare with newspaper editing. But Shelton would have been a valuable editor any place I've worked. He was a good pencil editor, and he had terrific judgment. He knew what a story was and how to get it and how to write it. He could have been an important editor anywhere he wanted to work.

RSM: And there were a lot of other people at the *Gazette* of that same quality that could have worked anywhere?

BW: Yes, I think so. And they did work anywhere. Let me back up and continue about Shelton. Another thing he did, he found news stories just in the air. He would see something on his way to work—some change in a neighborhood—and say, “Do you know what they're doing about that?” This conveyed to me that news was not just something official—you know, like a press conference or a p.r. handout or something like that—but it was stuff all around us.

RSM: In those last years that you were there then, the *Democrat* was on a steady downward track, like most afternoon newspapers around the country. What was your estimate of the *Democrat* at the time you left?

BW: I'm sure that I have a biased notion of it. I didn't read it carefully, but I would notice the worst things about it. There probably were good things about it that I didn't even see. We would tear stuff out of the paper to laugh at. It was so terrible sometimes. So I had a very poor opinion of it, but, as I say, I didn't sit down and really read the *Democrat* every day. They probably were doing good things that I paid no attention to.

RSM: Did you ever think that the *Gazette* would actually go out of business?

BW: I couldn't imagine it back then.

RSM: Even though you knew what the problems were and what was going on, it still seemed to be an impossible thing?

BW: Right. Of course, you couldn't imagine that kind of problem developing, of this guy with all this money setting out to destroy you. Newspapers have horrible problems everywhere, but this seemed to me to be a really unusual problem.

RSM: And I suppose from a distance it was even more difficult for you to understand?

BW: Yes, I didn't, really. I would check in with somebody down here once in a while, but I didn't really know what was going on and didn't understand it.

RSM: Had Harry Ashmore left when you joined the *Gazette*?

BW: He had. But he was still associated in people's minds with the paper and the prizes, and the editorial page, which I thought was really good. This was when Jerry Neil was writing editorials. He was a wonderful writer.

RSM: Do you think the *Democrat Gazette* is doing a good job now?

BW: I think it's a good paper, and the thing that is surprising to me is that they have sort of big-time coverage in the feature part of the paper—all this attention to movies, for instance. They have a real movie section, and it's probably comparable to the ones in many big-city newspapers. And they have all this health stuff and entertainment and home and style. That's today's paper, and you remember what newspapers were when I was here, in the sixties. There was the front section and the second section and that was it. And it was nearly all news;

there was very little feature stuff.

RSM: So you think that the *Democrat Gazette* is serving the community well.

BW: Well, I don't know yet. I just got back to town. So far, I've been impressed with the professionalism of the feature side. To tell you the truth, I'm still not up to speed on reading the news part of it. I'm still reading *The New York Times*, and I don't know anything about local politics. So I haven't completely connected with the news side of the paper, and they may be doing a wonderful job. I'm still kind of looking past them to the *Times*. I was talking to Shelton the other day on the phone, and he said that he thought the *Democrat Gazette* was a hell of a newspaper, and he's a pretty harsh judge.

RSM: Knowing Little Rock like you do and knowing the newspaper, too, did it surprise you that a huge cry didn't arise here from the local people and that some local people didn't come forward to try to buy the *Gazette* rather than the Gannett people coming in and buying it?

BW: It did in a way, but, you know, I just didn't know enough about the economics of Little Rock and whether there were people who might have taken it on. I didn't know enough about the city in that way to have expected such a thing. Also, the country, as you know, for years has been pretty conservative, and I don't know how the *Gazette* had been connecting with Little Rock and Arkansas. I don't know what the feeling toward it was, whether it was seen as too liberal and out of touch with the readership or what.

RSM: What is your thought about what's happening to newspapers in the United States?

BW: I don't read papers around the country like the ones that I grew up knowing about in some ways—the *Post Dispatch*, the *Courier Journal*. I haven't seen those papers in decades, so I don't know what's happening at that level. In the last few years the papers I read have been the *Boston Globe*, *The Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. I'm not a big fan of the *Boston Globe* in many ways, but *The Times* and the *Journal* still do a good job.

RSM: Did you ever think about comparing the Boston paper, which, of course, is one of the more liberal newspapers I guess in the world, with the *Gazette*? Did it let its opinions spill over into the *Boston Globe*?

BW: Oh, absolutely.

RSM: Even more than the *Gazette*?

BW: Definitely. Yes, I mean it is liberal to a fault. It will almost turn you into a conservative to read that paper every day. It just gets to be annoying. They can't help themselves. They are just relentless. I don't think they cover city and state politics all that well. I got the paper for the sports coverage and, you know, local goings on. I don't think it's a tremendous newspaper. But I don't know what is happening with newspapers. I'm living temporarily in an apartment building with people who appear to be fairly well off, and on my floor, there may be eight or ten apartments, full of young people, I guess young professionals. They're driving expensive cars, and if you happen to glance at their apartment as you walk by and the door is open, they look like they're living pretty well. And I'm the only person on that floor and maybe in the building who subscribes to a newspaper. I

know that because no matter what time you open the door in the morning, my door is the only one with a newspaper in front of it.

RSM: That's one of the reasons that these freebie papers like the *Arkansas Times* are doing so well all over the country.

BW: Right. And the *Arkansas Times* is very good. I pick it up. I think it's a good paper, and I can very well imagine that somebody with different interests from mine could rely on the T.V. and radio every day and on this once-a-week paper that deals with opinions and where to eat and local news. But I notice that people of my generation do read the *Democrat Gazette*, because somebody is always mentioning it to me. "Did you see this story about so and so?" But my friends are getting old.

RSM: They are not those young people who have those apartments.

BW: That's right.

RSM: Well, is there anything that you can think of about the *Gazette* to say that we didn't get into? I am supposed to leave some time here at the end for you to say whatever you want to say. [Laughs]

BW: Well, not really. I feel a tremendous gratitude to the paper and the staff for the experience and training that they gave me. I mean, they set me up for the other jobs that I had, and if I had to name the most influential editors in my life, it would be Shelton and Shawn. I think the *Gazette* was really a great paper at the time. It was amazing. I have often wondered how this came about. I don't know enough about the history of the paper.

RSM: Did you ever have any dealings with Mr. Heiskell?

BW: Not really. He was around, of course, when I was there, and I would see him come in occasionally with something he'd seen in the *Commercial Appeal*, and he wanted to know why we weren't doing it like that. [Laughs]

RSM: Did you have much connection with Hugh Patterson?

BW: Just to say hello to. The only time I remember having a real kind of journalistic encounter with him was when I was working on a story that had something to do with race. It was sort of like, "What is the black power structure?" And he stopped by my desk as I was working on it and asked to read the piece before I handed it in. I remember that he made several very shrewd journalistic points to me, and I was impressed.

RSM: Did he or anyone, either the ownership or your superiors in the newsroom, ever ask you to do anything that you found unethical?

BW: No. Absolutely not. The feeling I had from my superiors, from Shelton, was, "Let's get this right and let's get the whole story." As for Nelson, all of us twenty-one and twenty-two-year-olds had the attitude that Nelson was there just to make sure that we didn't do anything very interesting, you know. Just the guy who would say no. But in retrospect I think he knew what he was doing and that he had reason to be concerned. He was the watchdog and probably doing just what he should have been doing. But nobody ever said to lean a little this way or a little that way. They were real straight.

RSM: Well, for someone who was not there for a very long time, it seems to have had an

effect on your life.

BW: It was huge for me. That was my professional education. For the *Gazette* to turn me into an at least competent reporter in four years, I think, was an achievement.

[Laughs] I came in there with no real ability to report, and when I left, I could have easily walked into *The New York Times* and covered virtually any story that they would want me to cover. And it was all just the experience at the *Gazette*, observing how they did things and being given the chance to do them myself.

RSM: I think we are done.

[End of Interview]