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Interview with

Phyllis Brandon  
Little Rock, Arkansas  
2 July 2005

Interviewer: Jerry McConnell

Jerry McConnell: This is July 2, 2005. I'm here with Phyllis Brandon doing an interview for the [Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History] for a history project on the *Arkansas Democrat* and the [Arkansas] *Democrat-Gazette*. The first thing we need to do, Phyllis—I need to know if we have your permission to make this interview and to turn this tape over to the University of Arkansas.

Phyllis Brandon: You absolutely have my permission.

[Tape Stopped]

JM: Phyllis, let's just start out from the beginning. Tell me when and where you were born.

PB: I was born July 31, 1935, in Little Rock.

JM: What were your parents' names?

PB: My parents were Vera Burt and Calvin A. Dillaha [pronounced Dill-a-hay].

JM: Where did you go to school?

PB: I went to Little Rock Public Schools. I went to Mitchell Elementary, Westside Junior High, and Little Rock High School before it became Central.

JM: Okay. Did you get interested in journalism in high school, or was that later?

PB: I got interested in journalism in junior high. I was working with a journalism class. We talked our English teacher, Eleanor Cook, into having a journalism class. We wrote and we had a newspaper. I wrote a story about my dog, which I had entered in the dog show. She had won several ribbons and a silver cup. I wrote it like it was a person, and I won an award.

JM: Oh.

PB: So, I guess that sort of encouraged me. Then, I went on to journalism at Little Rock High School, where I was editor of the newspaper.

JM: Which is the *Tiger*—is that the name of the newspaper?

PB: The *Tiger*. I worked on the newspaper, interestingly enough, with Wesley Pruden  
...

JM: Oh, did you really?

PB: ... who is now, as you know, editor for some time now of the *Washington Times* in Washington. Edna Middlebrook was our teacher. She was marvelous. Wesley wouldn't work after school like I would. He, of course, was working at the *Gazette*. So, I did [work after school], and I got to be editor-in-chief. I graduated and then went to the University of Arkansas [Fayetteville].

JM: Okay. You graduated from high school in what year?

PB: 1953.

JM: 1953. Okay. And you went to the University of Arkansas and majored in journalism. Is that correct?

PB: I majored in journalism.

JM: Did you work on the [Arkansas] *Traveler* [the campus newspaper at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville]?

PB: I did work on the *Traveler*. I was associate editor of the *Traveler* under Ronnie Farrar.

JM: Okay.

PB: I ran for editor of the *Traveler* and I didn't get it. I've always felt that the reason I didn't get it was because I was a girl.

JM: Yes. Who did get it?

PB: Ken Danforth from El Dorado.

JM: Yes, I know him.

PB: He had never worked on the *Traveler*.

JM: Hmm.

PB: That made it a very easy senior year for me. I arranged my classes so they were in the morning. I had nothing to do in the afternoon but play around. So, then I graduated.

JM: So, you did not work on the *Traveler*, then, in your senior year after you ran for the editor's job and lost?

PB: Yes.

JM: And then you graduated with a degree in journalism. I assume that your instructors were probably Mr. [Walter J.] Lemke and/or was he gone by then?

PB: Mr. Lemke was sort of on his last legs.

JM: Yes.

PB: He taught one class that I had in advertising.

JM: Okay.

PB: Most of our classes were taught by Smokey Joe Thalheimer.

JM: He was my favorite in school.

PB: Yes. And I'll never forget the time that—the reason he was called Smokey Joe is because he always lit the wrong end of his cigarette. He always lit the filter, which made, of course, a great big flame. That was a legend. And, sure enough, one day in class it happened. And, I'm sorry, I have little poise, so I laughed big. Ronnie Farrar was sitting next to me, and he bit his hand rather than laugh. Anyway, those were good days. We were at Hill Hall. We had the hot-lead type, and we picked up the type and moved it where we wanted it on the page, you know, on the stone. The paper came out four days a week. We had sort of a wire service, and we had a way to do pictures. One of the members of our staff was [Charles] Buddy Portis.

JM: Okay.

PB: Charles Portis, of course, who wrote *True Grit*.

JM: Yes. You had some pretty good journalists in school at that time, didn't you?

PB: Yes, we did. We did. I'm trying to think who else—anyway, we had a great time. We worked on the *Traveler* and went to the Union and drank coffee.

JM: Yes. Oh, yes. After you finished at the university, did you go to work for the *Democrat* right away? Did you go to the *Democrat* then? Tell me about that.

PB: I did. While I was at the university, I had worked a couple of summers for Channel 11 [television station]. They had taught me how to use the news camera, which, of course, was *heavy*.

JM: Yes.

PB: But I did a little of that, and I did a little filing for them and stuff, so that was fun to watch the television. Those were the days when the election returns came in and we wrote them on a board. [Laughs]

JM: Yes.

PB: So, I did a lot of that. I had worked for B.G. Robertson at Channel 11.

JM: Okay.

PB: Then, after I graduated from the university, I immediately went to work for the *Arkansas Democrat*. I was a general-news reporter. I think my salary was \$55 a week. Ronnie Farrar, who was my good friend, also went to work at the *Democrat*. He was a *boy*, so he got \$60.

JM: Hmm.

PB: This was an interesting time. Bill Whitworth was also a reporter at the *Democrat* at the time. Of course, he went on to *The New Yorker* and the *Atlantic Monthly* and all that. Another reporter was Bob Trout.

JM: Yes.

PB: I thought, you know, he was a poor, little guy, trying to get ahead. He shot the pictures of my wedding.

JM: Bob Trout did?

PB: Yes.

JM: Did he really? Okay.

PB: Of course, later on, he sued the *Gazette* and won, and the next thing we know, he's in jail for having a disc jockey beaten up. Anyway, let's see—and then there was Bobbie Forster, who was a little spinster lady who wrote all the—seems like the state capitol—no, it was the city hall stuff, and then George Douthit did the state capitol stuff for the [Governor Orval] Faubus years and everything.

JM: Yes. Let me ask you something. Was John Ward there at that time, too?

PB: No.

JM: So John wasn't there, okay.

PB: Gene Herrington was the city editor, and Marcus George was there. Anyway, we were on the second floor of the *Democrat-Gazette* building. There was *no* air-conditioning.

JM: Right.

PB: The press room was at the back, so that building just held all the heat from the presses. It was *hot*. We went to work at 7:30 in the morning and worked until 3:30 in the afternoon. The first thing I did when I got to work was I went to my mailbox and took out all the stories that had been clipped out of the *Gazette* for

me to rewrite. Then, Mabel Berry was on the phone and did the obituaries. Let's see, who else? Rod . . .

JM: Rod Powers?

PB: Rod Powers was on the rim.

JM: Okay.

PB: We actually had a *rim*. We had a round desk there, and everybody was seated there. Well, Rod Powers's wife was my brother's secretary. My brother was a dermatologist, but he [Powers] made a lot of fun of me. The floor of the second floor was some kind of metal. And, of course, I had on little heels and a little girl dress—professional, and so forth. As I walked up to the rim, the heels on that metal—well, he'd sit there and mock that.

JM: Who was this, Rod?

PB: Yes, Rod. It embarrassed me. Then, along came the school crisis [reference to the integration crisis at Little Rock Central High School in 1957]. The plan was that I was to go out there as a student. I was young. I was just out of college. I put on my bobby sox and my National Honor Society pin, and got my books from high school, but the editors didn't think the black kids were going to show up the day they did. So, they didn't get me out there in time. As I was approaching the gathering of what we called the mob—which it pretty much was—the first thing I heard was this guy saying, "Let's go get our guns." Then, I went up to the door to try to go into school. They weren't letting even the students go back in.

JM: Hmm.

PB: So, I stayed there with the mob and watched a lot—saw the Little Rock police guy throw his badge down, and lots of stuff. They were all really misbehaving, pretty much. I called my story in from the Magnolia [gasoline] station, which is now the museum.

JM: Hmm.

PB: Marcus George said he was the one who rewrote my story, and it was on page one. I was in line waiting to use the phone because the people were calling in to the school to say, “Get my child out! I’m going to take my child out! Those black people are in there, and I don’t want my child there.” They were getting their children out of school. They asked me who I was with. I said I was with the *Democrat*. They said it was a good thing because if I had been with the *Gazette*, they wouldn’t have let me use the phone. Anyway, I only got to go out there that one day because they were afraid that something would happen to me.

JM: Yes.

PB: And everybody was worried about me. I wasn’t worried, but they were worried. Anyway, that was that. Then, I was writing stories and stuff. Some of the pages I have framed. I did some of the church stuff—the mediation stuff. Then, that sort of settled down. They were getting ready to have an execution at Cummins [State Prison]. The guys all said they were going to send me down [laughs] to cover it, which may or may not have been true. But there was enough there that I decided

that I needed to find another job. At the *Democrat*, we worked seven days a week. I was getting ready to get married, and I didn't think working seven days a week was very conducive to married life. So, I got a job at the AIDC [Arkansas Industrial Development Commission]. I helped them—they did an Arkansas encyclopedia at that time. Then, I got married. Then I left the AIDC.

JM: Let me ask you a couple of questions. So, you went to work for the *Democrat* in the summer of 1957, I guess?

PB: Yes, June.

JM: June. Okay. Then, when did you leave and go to the AIDC?

PB: Probably October.

JM: Of the same year?

PB: Yes. I didn't stay long.

JM: And the AIDC is the Arkansas Industrial Development Commission. Is that right?

PB: That's correct, but now it's the Arkansas Economic—something.

JM: Yes.

PB: It was at the state capitol. Then, I think I left the AIDC to go to work for Betty Fulkerson at the *Gazette*. I really liked that. I had never thought that I would be in women's news.

JM: Yes.

PB: I thought I would like hard news, you know, that I would never do that. But I feel

like during—I was there not too long—that I sort of felt like a sponge. I can remember everything she [Betty] said. I had *tremendous* admiration for her. Carolyn Moorman was there, who was a good friend. You know, you get to know everybody. I knew Richard Allin, and A.R. Nelson would come through. We had fun writing obscene heads for [the syndicated newspaper column] “Dear Abby” and reading them to him [A.R. Nelson?] when he came through to embarrass him. [Laughs] He became embarrassed so easily. We had fun with that. I remember Mr.—the publisher.

JM: [J.N.] Heiskell.

PB: Mr. Heiskell. One day I was going up the steps, and he said, “Now, young lady, you know we do have a lift.” [Laughs] And I’ll always remember that. I got to know all these people. I guess Jim Powell and—who’s the one who won the Pulitzer [Prize]?

JM: Harry Ashmore.

PB: Harry Ashmore. I got to know a lot of those people. But, all of a sudden, I was pregnant.

JM: Hmm.

PB: With complications, so that I had to go to bed. I had to resign my job because they needed someone to do the job. So I did that, and then I did various things.

JM: Excuse me just a second. How long were you with the *Gazette* before you had to resign?

PB: I think a year—maybe a little over a year. Then I did various things. I worked at what was then First National Bank and various things until I finally got back to the *Gazette*. This time, I was working for Millie Woods in [the] food [section]. Millie had gotten sick or something, so she hired an assistant. The assistant was Harriet Aldridge, who, of course, then became the longtime *Gazette* food editor. Then I got pregnant again. [Laughter]

[Tape Stopped]

JM: Okay, now. You were in the food section working, and they brought in Harriet Aldridge. And then you got pregnant again. Is that okay?

PB: Yes.

JM: Okay. Tell me about that.

PB: After a few months, I resigned and had my first son. I stayed home sixteen years and raised boys. I had Alex and Phillip. I feel very, very lucky that I could stay home until they got to be teenagers and responsible, sort of [laughs], young people. Then, I started back working at the Pulaski County Council on Aging, and decided that—you know, you sort of lose your confidence when you've been out of the workforce for a while, so I went back. I went to the Council on Aging, and I was doing all that, and I decided, "I can do something better than this." [Laughs] So I went to work at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock at the Graduate School of Social Work, which was a momentous thing for me to do. I was editing the professors' papers that they were working on. During the whole

time I was surrounded by social workers, the divorce came along, which was a nice place to be. The job there was a grant, so the grant ran out at the same time the marriage ran out. Here, I didn't know if I was going to have a place to live, any money, or what was going to become of me. So, I got a job at what was then Systematics, as a technical writer. Systematics was bought by Alltel—was part of Alltel—anyway, I did that for almost four years. I absolutely thought I was going to die, I was so bored. It was a lovely place to work. It was so convenient and so lovely. It was a nice, quiet, calm place for me to be while the storm of the divorce raged out there. In the meantime, my son, Alex, had graduated from the University of Missouri. His goal in life was to be a photographer for the *Arkansas Democrat* with his friends, Clay Carson and Barry Arthur, that he was in high school journalism with.

JM: Who was the last one?

PB: Barry Arthur, who's now the head of the photography department at the paper—the *Democrat-Gazette*. Alex came home and went to work for the *Democrat* and lived in my garage apartment. While he was there, he came home one day and said, "Mother, I understand they need someone to cover parties at the *Democrat*. I told them my mom could do that. I want you to go down there and talk to them about that." After a while, I didn't do it, and he came back around again. He said, "I want you to go talk to them about that." I said, "Okay." So, I went down and talked to Jane Dennis, who was a style editor at that time, and, I guess,

probably John Robert Starr. I had known John Robert Starr when he was with the AP [Associated Press] when I was at the *Democrat*. I liked John Robert Starr. We were friends. So I did, so I started—we were poor as church mice. I started covering parties at the second job. I'd go to the party at night and write them up on the weekend [ ]. I did that for a while, and then next thing I know, John Robert Starr was calling, and he wanted to talk to me. I said, "Okay." He called me in and said, "Phyllis, would you like a full-time job?" I said I already had a full-time job. [Laughs] He said he didn't know that. But they were interested in starting a new section for the paper called "High Profile," and wondered if I wanted to work on it. I said, "Well, it's just a matter of money. We've got to survive." So, they called a meeting one evening. It was a pretty amazing meeting. This was, of course, nineteen years ago. It was in Walter's [Hussman, Jr.] conference room. Walter was there and John Robert Starr was there and Lynn Hamilton was there and Paul Smith was there—all the honchos. And we planned that section—what was going to be on the cover, what it was going to be about—that we were going to have the top six houses, that we were going to have volunteers, that we were going to have those two pages of color weddings, and it has pretty much remained the same, except for the design, since then. And, of course, the first one they started with . . .

JM: Well, did they make you a job offer at that time?

PB: Yes.

JM: Okay. So they made you a satisfactory job offer.

PB: A satisfactory job offer.

JM: And it was more than the \$55 you had started out with.

PB: Yes, years ago. Right. It was a lot more than that.

JM: So, what year was this? That was nineteen years ago—was it 1986 or . . .?

PB: Yes. Well, it will be twenty years this January that we have had “High Profile.”

JM: Okay. So it would have been January of 1986.

PB: Yes. I gave up my pension. You have to work for Systematics for four years to be vested, so I gave that up because this was what I really wanted to do.

JM: Okay.

PB: We started doing that, and then Alex was still there. He and I decided that it would be a very good thing if I could take my own pictures because if there's a party and a fire, the fire is going to get the photographer, you know? And I'm going to be up a creek. So, he picked out my first camera and taught me how to use it, and then he critiqued my work from time to time.

JM: Hmm.

PB: So, I got two educations for the price of one.

JM: What kind of camera was it?

PB: Oh, it's a Canon.

JM: Okay.

PB: I still have a Canon. It's really good. Of course, now it's digital. Everything is

digital now.

JM: Okay. Go ahead.

PB: We were on the second floor—I can't think what else happened. [Laughs]

JM: Okay. Well, let me ask you this. How soon did it take off? I mean, how soon did it start catching on with the public. Do you remember?

PB: It caught on really fast because at first it was only distributed in western Little Rock.

JM: Oh, I see. Okay.

PB: The whole goal of the section was to make the *Democrat* socially acceptable, so it was distributed in west Little Rock. Well, everybody started yelling. Park Hill, North Little Rock—they said, “We want it!” And then downtown said, “We’re being discriminated against.”

JM: Yes.

PB: [We] gradually added more places that it was distributed. Then, when—I know that Blanche Lambert [Lincoln] was the first one who went statewide. I suppose that’s probably after the [newspaper] war [between the *Democrat* and the *Gazette*] ended.

JM: That was after the *Democrat* bought out the *Gazette*.

PB: Yes, I think that’s true. Of course, the war was so interesting. They were copying everything I was doing.

JM: Okay. Tell me about that. Didn’t they start a similar section?

PB: They started a similar section. They made some *very* bad mistakes. Thank goodness this has never happened to me, but they had brides' pictures with the wrong write-ups, and that sort of thing.

JM: Yes.

PB: And they would just copy everything I would do, which, you know, I didn't care for.

JM: Was Gannett the owner at that time?

PB: Yes, Gannett. Of course, I had also followed the trial when Hugh Patterson sued the *Democrat*. Phil Anderson [the *Democrat* attorney] is a college friend, and I had watched the trial and had been there for the closing argument and for the verdict. That was interesting. One thing I would like to go back on—when I was home for sixteen years, I was president of the Cathedral Church Women at [Trinity] Cathedral. I was president of the Little Rock PTA [Parents and Teachers Association] Council. I was a member of the Pulaski County Election Commission, representing the Democratic Party for five years. I was a member of the Garden Club. I think everything you do builds on everything else, so that I have never gone to a party where I didn't know at least one person.

JM: Hmm.

PB: By living here so long, by going to the university, and being involved in the city—that's what has helped me.

JM: You had made a lot of connections through all those activities and everything.

PB: Yes.

JM: When did you know—I don't know whether there's any way to tell this—that the *Democrat* was becoming socially acceptable? I think that was because a lot of the wealthier people sort of thought the *Gazette*—in previous years, at least—that it was sort of the upscale newspaper and was top of the line, so to speak.

PB: Yes.

JM: When did it start becoming obvious that the *Democrat* was being accepted? Do you remember that?

PB: Accepting this section made it because people were calling and inviting me to the social events.

JM: I see. Okay.

PB: And it has become a coveted honor to be on the cover.

JM: Yes.

PB: I mean, people just died to be on the cover.

JM: Do you still get a lot of calls from people wanting to get on the cover?

PB: Yes.

JM: Who makes that decision?

PB: I do.

JM: You make it yourself.

PB: Yes. In the first years, I would supply Walter with a list, and he would pick who he thought would be good. But he finally just got too busy, so now I make the

decision and pick the weddings that we're going to feature. The weddings part just goes to Pulaski County. We feel that the small-town papers do a big deal about their weddings. This is our Little Rock weddings—Pulaski County and all.

JM: Yes. Was there a point in time—how did the advertising go as far as running advertising in the section? Did advertisers start wanting to get into the section?

PB: Yes. Well, we've always had a problem with too many ads. [Laughs]

JM: Oh, really?

PB: Yes. We don't have enough space for all our good stuff.

JM: Well, I know that.

PB: We have to remember that they are paying our salaries.

JM: But when you first started, you probably didn't have a whole lot of ads in it, though, did you? Did it take a little while to build up?

PB: I think it took a little while, but not long.

JM: Yes. Okay.

PB: It was surprising. Very surprising.

JM: Did you ever hear any feedback that—well, of course, it would kind of cover that—but that the success of this section sort of made the *Democrat* more attractive to advertisers in general, or did you get any . . .?

PB: Oh, yes, I think that's true.

JM: Okay.

PB: I think it's true.

JM: I remember—and I assume that the *Democrat* did this—that they started putting out the big framed pictures of the front page of the “High Profile” section, and you displayed it several places—the Camelot, or not the Camelot, the one that was before the Peabody. What was the name of that hotel?

PB: They had a room.

JM: I remember seeing that.

PB: They had a room that was called “Profiles,” and they took our covers and framed them, and also added some of John Deering’s caricatures all around the room.

JM: Okay.

PB: They had a big party. That was about the time of the tenth anniversary. That was fun to go in there and see all that. But when the Peabody bought it, it was the Excelsior. When the Peabody bought it, they took that space for something else. I have recently done something else. I have a collection of all the “High Profile” [sections] in the garage apartment. They are sort of like my children. As I said before, some of them are more perfect than others. We decided it might be a fire hazard. I was getting ready to get rid of them, and it was suggested that I give them to the Little Rock Public Library for their Arkansas thing they’re going to build. So, sure enough, they came and got them.

JM: Hmm.

PB: So, I think they’re sort of a history. There are so many biographies. There are so many leading people that it will be good to have them preserved.

JM: Yes. How many people do you have helping you in this section now?

PB: I have two. I have a reporter and I have a woman who handles the weddings and anniversaries, et cetera. We think it's good that there's more of a variety of writers. All the feature writers from time to time write cover stories for us. We think that gives a different air and a different tone. Scott [Johnson] and I don't write them every Sunday. Also, it takes a long time.

JM: Yes.

PB: These stories can run up to 110 inches long.

JM: Sort of like an Orville Henry Razorback story. [Laughter]

PB: That's true. The one tomorrow is quite long, and it's quite good. Well, then, the one the next week I'm thinking about is 110 inches. I get mixed up with time because you work ahead and work behind.

JM: Yes.

PB: It's very exciting. I've gotten acquainted with so many wonderful people, and everyone has been so very nice to me.

JM: At some point, could you tell when the tide was beginning to turn as far as the newspaper war? Were you getting any signs that the thing was beginning to turn in the *Democrat*'s favor?

PB: Oh, just working and working. You know, just doing the best we could.

JM: Yes.

PB: I have a tape that has been transcribed of Walter's statement to the staff

announcing that the war was over that I hope will be included in the . . .

JM: Well, if we don't have it, I know we'd like to have it.

PB: It just surfaced.

JM: Who has a copy of it?

PB: I have it.

JM: Oh, you have a copy of it.

PB: I have the tape. I don't know who has the copy. I imagine Walter has it.

JM: Oh, okay. Did you make a copy or more than one copy?

PB: I didn't—but I don't know.

JM: I can ask Walter, I guess, if he's got a copy, and somehow . . .

PB: Yes. It's wonderful. He said, "Today we could all be out of our jobs . . ." You know, it's serious business. Serious business.

JM: Yes. Do you remember the date? That was sometime—I can't remember the dates, either.

PB: I never could go back to the *Gazette* building. People were going over and—people just put down their pens and walked out. I couldn't do that. I couldn't go see that.

JM: Let me ask you a question. When you worked for the *Democrat* the first time and then you later wound up going to the *Gazette*, what was your preference on the newspapers then, and how did you feel about the newspapers—the *Democrat* and the *Gazette*?

- PB: We always read both of them, but the *Gazette* was a much better newspaper. There's no question about that. We *all* knew that. The *Democrat* had some things that you had to read, but the *Gazette* had more local stuff going on and was more attuned to what was going on in the city. And then, of course, Gannett ruined it.
- JM: Yes.
- PB: Gannett ruined it completely.
- JM: You could tell that? After Gannett came in, as far as you were concerned, the paper started going down.
- PB: Yes.
- JM: Yes.
- PB: They ruined it in more ways than one—financially, advertising, and the front page was just a tragedy.
- JM: And I assume that the *Gazette*—before this happened, the *Gazette* had more people and probably spent more money.
- PB: Yes. Oh, and another thing that happened during the war was—every day we'd go to work—this was when Gannett was at the *Gazette*—we'd go to work, and somebody else was cleaning out their desk and going to work at the *Gazette*. It got to the point that I was in tears. They offered so much more money that they just walked out.
- JM: They were raising the *Democrat* salaries.

PB: Yes. We were told that that was the way they operated, and they did.

JM: Yes.

PB: It was *so* sad to me. I was approached—it's a secret, and I've never told anybody, but a couple of us were put under contract with the *Democrat*.

JM: Oh, okay, including you. Do you care to say who the other one was?

PB: It was Wally Hall.

JM: Oh, was it? Okay.

PB: Yes. I don't think it matters. I have never told anybody.

JM: I think that's significant—just the same as Gannett getting startled and putting [Charles] Allbright and [Richard] Allin under contract. So, when the competition got fierce, you wanted to make sure you kept your top people. Do you remember when that was?

PB: No. It was a couple of years before the end.

JM: It was while Gannett was in charge at the *Democrat*. And they also made an overture towards you. Is that correct?

PB: There was some sort of people—I had a call that they'd like to talk to me, and I said, "I'm not interested."

JM: You never did go talk to them.

PB: No.

JM: Okay.

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

JM: This is Jerry McConnell here again with Phyllis Brandon. This is side two of this tape. Phyllis, can you tell us a little bit what the reaction was around the *Democrat* when you started “High Profile”?

PB: Well, some of the people were not too friendly and sort of resented our being there. The first reporter was Judy [Rains?], and Michael Storey was our designer. We had some conflicts at that time. We had conflicts with the photography department. And, of course, we were causing more work there, and there was maybe a little jealousy or something. Once the war was over and Griffin Smith came in, all that changed. Those who were the troublemakers were gone. It has all settled down now.

JM: Okay. Was some of the resentment in the nature of—that they just didn’t think this was serious-enough business for a newspaper?

PB: Yes. Exactly.

JM: Is that what it was?

PB: Exactly. I want to show you something.

[Tape Stopped]

JM: Now, some of the resentment was just in the sense that, I guess, some of the purists or something thought that the *Democrat* should be doing more serious stuff . . .

PB: I think that’s true.

JM: . . . than that social thing. Is that right?

PB: Yes. All this was just fluff.

JM: But what kind of reaction were you getting, say, from the upper management, on how to . . .? I think you mentioned about getting one note. Can you just read that note to me that you received?

PB: This is the note I received and have saved that was from John Robert Starr. It is dated August 14, 1987, which is almost twenty years ago. [Laughs] It's amazing. I had gone to a party on Edge Hill, and everybody was in costumes. I had taken pictures of each of them, and the pictures ran down each side of the page. He said, "Phyllis B., 'High Profile' is a piece of fluff, but it is the best piece of fluff I've ever seen. You should be proud of it, especially the current issue. Page ten is really great."—that's the one with the party—"J.R.S."

JM: That was the one that had the people in costumes on it.

PB: Yes, prominent people on Edge Hill. [Laughs]

JM: So you did have several other people complain about it being fluff, but . . .

PB: Yes, at the paper.

JM: But there were a lot of the powers-that-be that I suspect knew what kind of reaction it was getting. [Laughs]

PB: Right. Exactly. See, I had the full backing of Walter Hussman. Therefore, I had the full support of John Robert Starr. I have been very lucky I've gotten to do pretty much what I wanted to do. [Laughs]

JM: Yes. That's right.

PB: I am very lucky. I've been to many places abroad. I went to Paris to a wedding.

JM: Did the *Democrat* pay your way?

PB: Yes.

JM: Oh, they did? Okay.

PB: Yes. I've been to London. I was in London when Princess Diana died by coincidence. I had a front-page story from London for four or five days there. I stayed over for her funeral. I went to Mons, Belgium, and interviewed [General] Wesley Clark when he was head of NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization]. I've been to New York many times to interview Arkansans who are working up there. Elizabeth Williams, who produces plays, and people with Ralph [ ] and all that. I've been very lucky. They let me go where I think the story is.

JM: Yes.

PB: I think one of my things that I've been very lucky with is I have a nose for news. We don't write the stories in the old-fashioned, gushy way. We write the party stories as real news stories. There is always something new and different at every party, and that's how we write them.

JM: So you don't do a whole lot of "hoop-de-doo" in . . .?

PB: I don't gush and say that, oh, "exquisite dress" or all that junk.

JM: Yes. Okay.

PB: We don't do that. We don't gush.

JM: So you write it, as you said, just as another news story. This is different work.

PB: And it's work. Also, I've pointed out that we don't really have society anymore. It's more just that people like to have their pictures in the paper. It's not a society thing. We don't worry about that.

JM: You don't worry about their status in life, right?

PB: I select the brides to be featured, and they're selected on their accomplishments, not who their parents are. They are selected—they must have gone to college, both the bride and the bridegroom, and they must have family or someone living in Pulaski County.

JM: And, certainly, your "High Profile" person is selected on *their* accomplishments.

PB: Yes. I do not like to have retiring people. People say, "Oh, he's going to retire. Put him on the cover." I don't want to put him on the cover of "High Profile" and give him a watch. I want people who are *doing* it, you know?

JM: Yes. Currently.

PB: Currently doing it, and not retiring. It's been fun to find these people.

JM: Do you feel anytime like saying, "Oh, I'm running out. I've done everybody now."

PB: That's what everybody says. When we started it, "Oh, you'll never, ever—" I have files and files and files of suggestions. Right now, my issues are planned for [about] three months. I have many more suggestions lined up of really wonderful people.

JM: How many of the “High Profile” articles do you do yourself now?

PB: Probably one a month.

JM: Is that less than you were doing at the beginning or about the same?

PB: It may be a little less.

JM: Okay.

PB: But that's okay. I've got plenty of people now to help me do that.

JM: And who lays out the section, now?

PB: The section is now laid out by Doug Grimsley, who is marvelous—absolutely *marvelous*. He used to be in sports, but he sort of reads our minds, and we like that. He is very talented. He is a master at doing the “High Profile” section. We hate it when he gets a day off. [Laughs]

JM: How did you feel when the war was over—when the *Democrat* bought the assets of the *Gazette*, and the *Gazette* closed? What kind of reaction did you have to that?

PB: Well, it was sort of a relief that we have our jobs. I said, “I could have been a great bag lady had it been the other way around.”

JM: Yes. [Laughs] You could have been out working and looking for tin cans or something, huh?

PB: Yes.

[Tape Stopped]

JM: I don't know if this is a fair question or not. Have you given any thought to

retiring? Maybe you don't want to answer that. [Laughter]

PB: Well, someday I am. It's hard to know. I am afraid I might be very bored.

JM: Yes.

PB: I will be seventy years old this month. [Laughs]

JM: You will. I guess that's right. Boy, I hadn't thought about that. Amazing.

PB: It's amazing. I can't believe it myself. I suppose retirement is on the horizon, but I don't know when. I haven't planned it.

JM: You mentioned [having] a nose for news. Do you know how you developed that nose for news?

PB: I think I was born with it.

JM: Do you? Okay.

PB: I think some people just have it and some people don't. And I've seen some people at the paper that *don't*. [Laughs]

JM: Yes.

PB: I know what people are interested in. And, of course, I have so many—I have multiple interests. I'm interested in just about everything, but of that, I know what people are interested in, I think. I don't mean to be bragging.

JM: Are you a big reader?

PB: I am. I don't read enough books, but I read newspapers and I take the Sunday *New York Times*. And I love magazines. When I went off to college when I was a freshman, I had the *Gazette* delivered to my dormitory.

JM: Okay.

PB: My day is really messed up if I don't have a paper first thing in the morning.

JM: Okay. But you've always kept up with news and . . .

PB: Yes, I'm a news nut. [Laughs]

JM: Are you? Okay. That's nice.

PB: I'm a news nut. I like the TV news. I like CNN [Cable News Network]. I'm a news nut.

JM: So, you still follow all that stuff.

PB: Yes.

JM: I think it's interesting—curious—maybe not curious—I think that was normal because the *Gazette* was more widely circulated out in state—that it was the *Gazette* that you say you had at college. It was probably easier to get than the *Democrat* up there.

PB: Yes. Right.

JM: Did you have a preference for the *Gazette* in those years?

PB: Oh, yes. Yes.

JM: As you said, it was the better and bigger newspaper. Did you notice any way in yourself and over the years that—and this might be an unfair question—how the *Gazette* begin to change as far as what you were reading in the *Gazette*? Or did most of that happen after Gannett took it over? Or did any of it happen before then?

PB: Oh, I think it happened with Gannett.

JM: Do you? Okay.

PB: Yes, I think Gannett messed it up big time.

JM: You think they just ruined it? [Laughs]

PB: I think they ruined it. I think they ruined it in many ways.

JM: Yes.

PB: Yes. It was *shocking* what they were putting on the front page.

JM: Their play of stories and pictures and everything else.

PB: Yes.

JM: I remember somebody—the classic example is they still talk about the picture of the [UALR] cheerleaders in Spandex suits or something.

PB: Okay.

JM: Phyllis, is there anything else that you can think about that during your career at the two newspapers and primarily at the *Democrat* and the *Democrat-Gazette*? Is there anything else that comes to mind?

PB: I'm just grateful that I've had this wonderful job. I've worked a lot. I've worked day and night, but I'm grateful that I've managed to survive and do what I really, really love to do.

JM: I guess you did put a lot of hours into it, since you go to parties at night, and you're still taking your own pictures. Then you go back into the office, I assume, and do planning and writing.

PB: Right. And I download my pictures. I had to learn how to do all the digital stuff.

JM: Yes.

PB: And the new computers and everything.

JM: Is that handier?

PB: It's great.

JM: And the pictures are just as good?

PB: Or better. Yes.

JM: Or better. Okay. All right.

PB: Yes. I think my pictures are amazing.

JM: How many parties do you go to on average anymore? Do you have any idea, or does it just depend from one week to [another]?

PB: Yes. Well, it depends on the weeks, but we usually cover five or six or seven parties a week.

JM: Okay.

PB: And I usually go to three or four or five.

JM: Okay. And then do you go into the office the next day?

PB: Oh, yes. I keep office hours five days a week, 9:00 [a.m.] to 4:00 [p.m.].

JM: Do you really? And you still shoot the parties at night, right? You're working 9:00 to 4:00.

PB: Yes.

JM: [Laughs] I assume that you don't draw overtime, that you must be on a salary

rather than overtime, or you'd be making big bucks on overtime.

PB: Yes. I leave at 4:00 because if I'm going to be out late, I come home and take a little ten-minute nap—a little power nap.

JM: Yes. That's not a bad idea for a lot of us. [Laughter] Okay. Is there anything else that you can think of?

PB: No, I can't. It's been really an interesting time. I can't believe it has been this long.

JM: Okay, let's stop right here for just a minute, and then we'll come back. Then we'll see if we have anything else to add. But this has been very informative. Just a minute.

[Tape Stopped]

JM: Phyllis, you've had a lot of interesting things happen to you, but you worked for Millie Woods for a while, and she's sort of a legend in a way in her time. What was it like working for Millie Woods?

PB: Well, Millie and I had a little bitty office in the hall at the *Gazette*, with desks facing each other. Millie was very petite. She had a wonderful figure, and she always wore a hat. She was very particular. She didn't like for me to make a mistake. I was not very good at describing insides of houses or even maybe writing [about] food. She and I would go to lunch every day at Blass' on the balcony, which, of course, no longer exists, but it was a really good place to eat in those days. She had two daughters, and one of them still lives here in Little Rock.

Her name is Hannah, and another daughter was killed in a car wreck abroad.

JM: What was her name? That wasn't Robin, was it?

PB: No, Robin lives here and Hannah is the one who was killed. I am not sure that Millie didn't at one time work in the theater in New York. She knew what she was doing and was very good at it. I thought it was so interesting when Harriet was hired because Harriet's husband, who was the pilot of the plane that crashed over Little Rock—Harriet had not worked at a newspaper *ever*. But she did a wonderful job, and everybody was crazy about her, and everybody was very sorry when we lost her.

JM: Yes. How about Betty Fulkerson?

PB: Betty Fulkerson was, of course, high society in her day. She ran around in those circles—Edwin Dunaway—and her husband was killed in the war [World War II], I believe, in an airplane crash. She had at least one daughter. My favorite story that I have to tell is that one Sunday the brides on the front page of the society section had gotten mixed up. So, the next morning when she got to work, she looked up, and A.R. Nelson, the managing editor, was standing at her door. She looked at him and said, "Mr. Nelson, you do not have to fire me, I quit." And he said, "Miss Ferguson," which he called her, "I am not going to fire you today. I'm going to wait until some cold, snowy Christmas Eve." [Laughs] He was an old Marine, and he just sort of walked around unsmiling and was an interesting character for us to get to know.

JM: Yes. How about any people who worked on the *Democrat* when you were there the first time? Do you remember anything that particularly sticks in your mind about any of those people?

PB: Well, Gene Herrington—they were all nice to me. Gene Herrington and Marcus George—I don't know.

JM: Was Ed Liske still the managing editor at that time?

PB: No, I don't think so. I think Bob McCord was there.

JM: Yes, but I don't think he was a managing editor.

PB: He was the magazine editor. I wrote a story for the *Democrat* magazine when I was at Fayetteville.

JM: Okay. I think maybe Herrington probably replaced Liske as managing editor when he retired, and Marcus replaced Herrington as city editor, I think. I don't remember just when that was. Some of the people that you've mentioned and that you knew didn't stay at the *Democrat* very long. Of course, at that time that was a malady going around, but neither [Bill] Whitworth nor Ronnie Farrar were there.

PB: Yes. Ronnie Farrar went to the *Gazette* and covered North Little Rock, and then went on to the University of Missouri and got his doctorate [degree]. He has retired from being chairman of the department and teaching at the University of South Carolina at Columbia.

JM: And then, of course, Whitworth didn't stay long, either, and wound up eventually

back at—he may have—I can't remember—what time he had his band—he had a band that played around town then. He worked at that band quite a bit [      ].

PB: But you know he's back in Little Rock?

JM: Yes, I've seen him a few times. Okay, Phyllis. Is there anything else you can think of that we haven't covered about the papers—particularly, about the *Democrat-Gazette*?

PB: No. When we moved to the third floor and we got carpeting on the floor and we had air conditioning, and my desk was by a window, the world was good.

[Laughs]

JM: When was that, incidentally? When did that happen?

PB: That was shortly after the [newspaper] war was over. In fact, Walter stood on a desk on the third floor before the desks had been moved in to announce that the [newspaper] war was over.

JM: And is that the tape that you said you have?

PB: Yes.

JM: Yes. You have that tape of when he made that announcement. Well, we'd certainly like to have a copy of that tape for this project.

PB: Oh, I'd think so.

JM: At any rate, Phyllis, I want to thank you very much. This has been a very informative interview. Thanks for your cooperation.

PB: Thank you.

[Tape Stopped]

JM: One other thing, Phyllis. You just mentioned you had talked about some of the other fun trips you got to make, and working and everything. What was this other area that just occurred to you?

PB: Well, I never would have thought that we'd have a president of the United States from Arkansas, so I was very lucky that I went to the White House several times to cover events. I've covered several state dinners and other things. I have covered four [presidential] inaugurations, and I've covered two Democratic National Conventions. Of course, Democratic National Conventions are just parties, and all the parties around all these things, and the inaugurations and the inaugural balls and all that. The first inaugural ball I went to was for Daddy Bush [reference to George H.W. Bush]. Mary Ann Stephens, Jack Stephens' wife at that time, was on the committee. I was determined that I was going to get a picture of Daddy Bush and Mary Ann Stephens. I went to the ball, and they had a stage there. I took my place right there in front of the stage because I knew that's eventually where they were going to be. We had heard that Bush was going to come to the Arkansas ball first. Well, he had some intuition, and he came last. So, I stood in one position, I think, for six hours. And the only thing that saved me was that I had a friend who had told me not to wear high heels. If I'd had on high heels, I'd have been *dead*. I have met [former British Prime Minister] Margaret Thatcher. I told Margaret Thatcher to smile. She didn't. [Laughs] And Colin Powell and lots

of people who have had interesting careers.

JM: And you covered—which inaugurations did you cover?

PB: I covered Daddy Bush and the two [Bill] Clinton inaugurations, and the current George [W.] Bush.

JM: First inaugural or the second one?

PB: First.

JM: Okay. Very good. That's an interesting little note to all the things that you got to do in this job. A lot of history-related stuff to identify that.

PB: Yes. But I think people enjoy seeing that. I don't think it's just me. I think it's everybody.

JM: Yes. Okay. Thank you again, Phyllis.

[End of Interview]

[Transcribed by Cheri Pearce]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]