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## ***Arkansas Democrat Project***

Interview with

W. J. [Jerry] Dean  
Little Rock, Arkansas  
20 July 2005

Interviewer: Jeanne Rollberg

[00:00:00.00] Jeanne Rollberg: This interview is being conducted in connection with the oral history project focusing on the *Arkansas Democrat* and the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* of the Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History, Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. The interviewee, journalist Jerry Dean, is a former journalist for the *Democrat*, the *Gazette* and the *Democrat-Gazette*. The interviewer is Jeanne Rollberg of the School of Mass Communication at UALR [University of Arkansas, Little Rock]. We both agree to allow the University of Arkansas full use of the audio tape

and transcript of this interview as agreed to in the written donation release form. Is that correct, Jerry?

Jerry Dean: That's absolutely right.

JR: Jerry, as we're getting started, could you [provide] us with a little context by telling us what the years were that you worked at the *Arkansas Democrat* and the *Arkansas Gazette*?

JD: Very good, Jeanne. I walked into the *Arkansas Democrat* at Capitol Avenue and Scott Street—its city room sometime in the late spring of 1965. I like to think I asked for a job there, but I sort of demanded one, actually. I thought I was an excellent writer with excellent qualifications to be a newspaper reporter, and the fact that I knew absolutely nothing about the business at the time didn't stand in my way. Gene Herrington was managing editor at the time.

JR: Of the *Democrat*?

JD: Of the *Democrat*—this is the older version of the *Arkansas Democrat*—Marcus George, who was the city editor was very, very helpful and patient with a young man who was still in college, and gave me an opportunity. I tried my best to live up to it. I worked for the *Democrat*, off and on, from 1965 until 1967, when I went into the air force for five and half years.

JR: Okay. Then the *Gazette*?

JD: Yes, when I came back from my military service, Jerry McConnell was the managing editor by that time at the *Arkansas Democrat*. They were kind enough to take me back on and allow me to go through a succession of responsibilities at what was still the *Arkansas Democrat*. This was the *Democrat* as constituted un-

der Stanley Berry and Marcus George, the publisher and editor at the time. The personnel had changed, but the place had not changed very much in my six- or seven-year absence. I started out as an assistant city editor, worked on the copy desk rim for a while, then graduated to the federal beat reporting job, state editing job, and ultimately was an editorial writer and covered the Capitol bureau for them. I left the old *Democrat* about 1979, when Bill Husted was city editor, to go to the *Gazette*.

JR: Okay. We are going to come back and talk about the responsibilities at both papers and let you expand on that, but before we discuss those years at the newspapers, help us by giving us a chronology—you grew up in Little Rock, is that right?

JD: That's correct. I'm a Little Rock native, born and bred. I grew up at around the Hillcrest--Pulaski Heights community. [I was] educated in Little Rock public schools, graduated from Little Rock Hall High School in 1963 and then went on to Hendrix College [Conway, Arkansas] for four years. There was not a journalism major, as such, at Hendrix at the time; but I did work on and edit the Hendrix College *Profile* with Tim Hackler and Bill Eddins. [I was] also an English major there—did a little dabbling in creative writing from time to time before I graduated there in May of 1967.

JR: Okay. So that's where you picked up your interest in journalism. Is that fair to say? Or had you done it earlier before you went to Hendrix, as well?

JD: Well, like a lot of people, I had a key teacher in high school who thought I had some potential for creative writing. Her name was Nancy Popperfuss—I think she was later a lecturer at UALR—she encouraged me in that direction. My test-

ing scores while I was in high school actually were higher in math, but I think she helped me realize that there was some potential—some prospect in literary fields, too. Journalism seemed like a good practical expression of that.

JR: As you took your talent forward in college and then graduated and decided to approach the *Democrat* about the job, was there any particular reason you were approaching that newspaper?

JD: There were a couple of reasons. One, I had worked the previous summer for a friend's father at a barrel stave mill making staves for whiskey barrels out around Pinnacle Mountain. It was an education in itself because the work was hot—physical—done out in open fields amid spiders, snakes, wasps' nests, splinters from the staves. It was a really good workout for the summer. My hair bleached out blond. I looked like a different person—got a nice tan out of it. But it also convinced me that that was probably not a valid career field to pursue. So the next summer rolled around and I went into the *Democrat* and told them I was interested in pursuing a career in journalism. I had read some of the best books on being a journalist and, of course, I felt I knew it all—I didn't. They were good enough to hire me. I discovered over the next few months that even though I wasn't making a pot of money at it, I was having a really good time and getting to interview people like Leonard Slye who was Roy Rogers; the Archbishop of Canterbury, who was Arthur Michael Ramsey, and Ken Curtis—Festus on “Guns-moke.” People like that made it fun and interesting at the same time. So I thought that would be a good career for me to pursue.

JR: So your initial responsibilities then, at the *Democrat*, were what, exactly?

JD: When I began there in 1965 I was a pretty green intern along with a couple of

other people. One of the other interns was Jack Hill, who has made career there at the *Democrat* and the successor *Democrat-Gazette*. I also worked with a couple of really nice interns. One I remember was a beautiful young woman named Gracie Hatfield who was a Baylor co-ed at the time. [She was] a preacher's daughter who we were all madly in love with. I would be lying if I said that her presence there didn't make me work a little harder—I think she made all of us work harder—that was part of the attraction. Also, when I started at the *Democrat*, it was a very loose, laidback community of reporters there. They were in direct competition with the *Arkansas Gazette*, [the] much more established old-line newspaper that was older than the State of Arkansas, of course. There was a nonchalance about putting out the paper. People would work very hard up until the final deadline, which was about 2:00 [or] 2:30 in the afternoon—I discovered early on that once that was passed, reporters often passed the time for the rest of the day by using their rubber cement paste pots on the desk—they'd pour out a puddle of rubber cement, allow it to congeal and roll it up into a really effective rubber ball and proceeded to bounce them around the city room to pass the time. So that was kind of an indication, I think, of some of the attitude that was there originally. The *Gazette* and the *Democrat*, in [1960?] I think, had been very close on circulation, for a number of reasons, but there was a disparity between the two that grew after that. Within a few years, I think, the *Gazette's* readership was nearly double that of the *Democrat*, and that's where I got in. I also worked with photographers like O.D. Gunter, Glen Moon and Les Beale.

JR: Well, as you were at the *Democrat* in those laid back years, it sounds like, who were some of the personalities who were dominant in the newsroom, besides the

young lady you mentioned?

JD: Right. I've already mentioned people like Gene Herrington and Marcus George. Marcus was about the coolest city editor you've ever seen in your life. He was completely unflappable. Nothing seemed to upset him. Not even when I committed grave errors in syntax or grammar in my stories. He was very patient and correcting, and so was Fred Petrucelli, an assistant city editor. Most of the people there were that way. The key writers at the time—Bobbie Forster, who was to become sort of my own personal definition of what [a] journalist should be, was a woman who had been educated at Mount St. Mary's Academy and had grown up in Little Rock. [She had] a brilliant mind—very quick reporter. She'd be sent out to cover something at the state capitol. Instead of [bringing back] one story, Bobbie would be able to bring back three or four solid stories that no editor had ever contemplated. She was extremely prolific and very efficient and also a sweet gal to get to know. One of the other key reporters at the time was George Douthit. George was a bit cantankerous. He covered [Arkansas Governor] Orval Faubus and state capitol news for the most part. He could be very easygoing and a likeable fella [fellow], but every morning when people started arriving at the *Democrat*, we had what the interns started to call "George Douthit Hour," because George would take the newspaper that had come out the afternoon before and take it apart page by page, column by column, and would [put in] vitriolic comment for everybody that, in his eyes, had screwed up the day before. He was a very interesting fella. He was middle-aged, I guess, by the time I started there. He was one of their key reporters. They had several other people in their late-thirties [or] early-forties. People like Roy Little who covered the "cop shop" [police station]

at the time. Roy was known for taking absence without leave from the city desk from time to time. He'd take off on a weekend and go to Mexico without telling editors, [so] they were glad to have a few interns like me to throw into the breach when people like Roy disappeared for awhile. So I got a good chance to work the cop shop at Little Rock city hall. I worked in North Little Rock some. Other people—there were very few women reporters in the newsroom at the time.

[Martha Ann Riley] was there on the city desk; she did a good job. I've already mentioned Bobbie. Most of the other reporters were male at that time. There was Bud Lemke, who covered the county courthouse for us. There was Joe Thomason who I helped out in North Little Rock while he was on vacation. That gave me exposure to some local political coverage. William F. "Casey" Laman, North Little Rock's very colorful mayor, was in office at the time and was always good for a few headlines—he was always stirring things up, keeping it interesting. I was pleased to be able to actually get to meet and know people like that that I had read about for years.

JR: Well it sounds like you were having a good time for yourself—it was kind of exciting. The question always arises—journalists really are not known for being paid very much. Do you remember pay scale or [what] the pay range was in that initial time at the *Democrat*?

JD: Well, of course, kids getting into the field now feel they're underpaid if they make minimum wage at \$5 or \$6 an hour [the minimum wage at the time of this interview is \$5.15 an hour]. At the time, the minimum wage was \$1.25, and that was the bad news—it was very low paying. The good news was that, especially for us interns, they would let [us] work just about as many hours as we wanted every

week so we could compensate for the low pay by working a fifty, or fifty-two, or fifty-four hour week sometimes. I do remember from the early *Democrat* that they had not yet discovered the convenience of checking; they still paid reporters in cash, weekly. Every Friday afternoon you could go downstairs to where the vault was—there was an elderly woman who sat in front of it at a desk and she would count out in dollars and cents whatever your pay was for the week, put it into a neat little yellow envelope, and hand it to you, and you had to sign for it. That was the way business was done at the *Democrat* at that time.

JR: So you stayed there for a while, then you left the *Democrat* because of a military responsibility?

JD: Right. Actually, after I worked a little while at the *Democrat*, I got married—still had a year to go in college, so I went to the *Conway Log Cabin Democrat* in Faulkner County only thirty miles up the road. Met a delightful fella named Frank Robins—everybody called him “Sonny”—whose parents had been the founders of the newspaper there and were the owners and publishers. He and Joe B. McGee took me on there as—they were the editors, I was the staff is the way we worked that. There were really only three of us in the news department. They let me get my feet wet by ripping AP [Associated Press] copy in the mornings off the Teletype machines, writing headlines. I would go to classes at Hendrix for the morning and then come back early afternoon—do research, write stories, and to make the day complete, I’d go around to all the news racks in the afternoon and collect the nickels that people had been putting in for the afternoon paper. It was pretty much a learning experience for me at the *Log Cabin Democrat*. It gave me a chance to do grassroots journalism, which I don’t think I ever would have had,



had I stayed the *Democrat* or gone on to the *Gazette* from there. I stayed at the *Log Cabin Democrat* only briefly in 1966 and 1967 before I went into the air force. That was the era of Vietnam and the draft.

JR: Okay. Then you went into the air force. What period of time was that? How long were you in the air force?

JD: I was in the air force from October 1967 until April 1972. During that time, Uncle Sam [reference to United States government] in his infinite wisdom, saw that I had some experience in journalism; so they immediately decided to make me a radar control officer—controlling jet aircraft. That was fairly typical for the military in the Vietnam years. They knew exactly what kind of career people they needed and weren't really accommodating about putting you in a career that you already knew or were comfortable in. Toward the end of my service in the air force, I also was protocol officer for a major general and did a lot of work in the information area publishing a newsletter for my squadron, that sort of thing—doing protocol work and information functions.

JR: You come back out of the air force and then once again go back to the *Democrat*?

JD: Right. By the time I got out of the air force, I'd started a family. I had a young son. [I] had purchased a house in Little Rock, hoping against hope that I'd be able to pick up where I left off at the *Democrat*. Thanks to some good folks who were still at the *Democrat* who knew my work, I was able to do that. Jerry McConnell, who had been a *Gazette* employee for years and had risen to managing editor of the *Democrat*, seemed genuinely glad to get me back. Ralph Patrick, who had worked at the *North Little Rock Times* for several years with Bob McCord, was city editor by that time. Ralph and I had covered some North Little

Rock city council meetings together and, I think, were friendly adversaries; at least that's the way I felt about it. We got along pretty well. The other assistant city editor, besides myself, was the Reverend James Scudder. Scudder was a fellow Hendrix alumnus who had been in the ministry and for reasons best known to himself had gotten into newspapering and seemed to enjoy it. He and I shared assistant city editor duties for a year or so before I went on to other things at the *Democrat*.

JR: Now, some period of time had elapsed from when you left the *Democrat* to when you came back. I wonder if there had been any increases in pay during this time, or what you were facing when you came back the second time.

JD: Well, the pay almost had to be a little better when I got back to the *Democrat* in 1972. The *Gazette's* pay scale, I believe, was still ahead of that of the *Democrat*, but having worked at the *Democrat* previously, and knowing some of the people, I felt more comfortable there. Also, during my years in the air force I'd risen from an enlisted man really to captain and was making better money than I ever had before. But in order to get back into journalism, which I really had developed a love for—I think I took a substantial pay cut to go back to the *Democrat*, knowing that if I did well, probably, I would be able to work my way back up.

JR: So the second time at the *Democrat* lasted until when?

JD: I stayed at the *Democrat* for about seven years, I believe, until about 1979. During that time, I went through a succession of responsibilities there. [I] worked a while on the rim of the universal copy desk, just to kind of get my feet wet—learn who the players were back in Arkansas. I worked as an assistant city editor. We decided to start a state-regional sort of desk, and I worked that with a gentleman

named [Arthur Halliburton]. For a while we went out in the state and did stories that we hoped were relevant to the readers. From there, I was asked to do the federal courts beat. I did that for a couple of years. Bob McCord had taken over as an editor at the *Democrat* [and] was kind enough to suggest me to Walter Hussman [Jr.]—who was the new owner—as a prospect for writing editorials for the newspaper. I was glad to do that for a couple of years until they decided to cut the editorial staff back to just David Hawkins—who was the editorial writer—at which time I went over to cover folks like [former governor and U.S. senator] David Pryor, [William Jefferson] Bill Clinton, Steve Clark, [and] Paul [Reviere] at the state capitol for the *Democrat*. That's the way I wound up my first association with the *Democrat*. I think I left there, probably, in October of 1979, right after a constitutional convention.

JR: Okay. So, after covering the state capitol and all of that, what led you to the *Gazette*?

JD: During the last few months that I worked as a state reporter for the *Democrat*, I had occasion to cover several fairly large stories out in the state, including the return of Vietnam refugees to Fort Chaffee in the aftermath of the fall of Saigon. Also, I was asked to cover a fairly sensational murder trial of doctor Porter Rodgers who was a prominent Searcy physician. Doctor Rodgers was alleged to have conspired with two other people in the death of his wife, I believe, in 1974. There was a succession of trials of the doctor and his alleged coconspirators, both in Searcy and in Helena, in the months that followed that [event] in 1975. During the course of that trial, it was my responsibility on several occasions to interview members of doctor Rodgers family. The association there was—a close relative

of doctor Rodgers was, I think by marriage, also Bob Douglas, who was the editor of the *Arkansas Gazette* at the time. Mr. Douglas called me aside one day and told me that he thought I was doing an exceptional job for the *Democrat* in covering the trial there. That I had been fair with the family and fair with the prosecution and that anytime things became difficult or untenable for me at the *Democrat* I should know that I had a place available for me at the *Gazette* as long as he was the editor there. I was, needless to say, very flattered by that representation. I was impressed by Mr. Douglas as a gentleman, and I certainly knew of the professional standards that existed at the *Gazette* at that time. So I filed that invitation away for future reference and then, along about the middle of 1979, things began to change at the *Democrat*, and I began to feel that I would be more comfortable as a professional journalist if I were able to cross Main Street and work for the *Gazette*—the competition—for a while.

JR: What specific things—was it a change of personnel at the *Democrat*?

JD: There was a major change in personnel. A person that I had known for years as the AP bureau chief in Little Rock, John Robert Starr—veteran professional newsman—became the managing editor. He was a very assertive, very aggressive individual and, at first, I think we were kindred spirits—we both were competitive, wanted to see the *Democrat* succeed and outstrip the *Gazette*—certainly, I had cast my lot in with the *Democrat*, and I enjoyed the fact that we were [a] pugnacious crew over there. We were trying every way we could not only to compete with the *Gazette*, but to beat them on a daily basis, and I appreciated that about Mr. Starr. For many years when I first got to the *Democrat*, reporters there were asked to try to do well on their beats, but on many occasions we weren't

able to compete directly. The *Gazette* would scoop the *Democrat*, and we would always have *Gazette* clips in our mailboxes the next morning when we got into the *Democrat*. We were expected to take those *Gazette* clips and either rewrite them or reconstruct their story to appear in the *Democrat* the next day. I always felt like that was a poor way to do business, and I was glad to see Mr. Starr arrive to change that around a little bit.

JR: So, at the point, though, you made a shift—or you reconnected with the *Gazette*?

JD: Right. At one point when I was covering the state capitol beat, I was the only *Democrat* reporter over there. The *Gazette*, by contrast, had some excellent news people whom I still respect greatly. One was Ernie Dumas, one was Brenda Tierney, who had previously worked at the *Democrat*, another was Carol Griffiee who was kind of the environmental reporter [who] covered matters dealing with the State Public Service Commission and Pollution Control and Ecology Commission. Doug Smith was in and out a lot—Doug was also a veteran newsman very much wedded to his craft. The four of those [people] were a very formidable force for one reporter to try to work opposite. I tried to do the best I could as an individual. I finally talked Mr. Starr into hiring two more reporters to round out the *Democrat* bureau at the capitol. They were Bill Dawson and Jane Blotzer, who I thought did an excellent job of helping me. We were, in fact, able to outdo the *Gazette* on the occasional story, but Mr. Starr felt he needed to have more insight into what went on at the capitol. So from time to time he would send other reporters in—unannounced to me—and they would start doing articles that I hadn't authorized and that I didn't know about ahead of time. It upset me that we would be doing business that way, so I brought it up with Mr. Starr on a couple of

occasions and, obviously, he and I didn't see eye-to-eye on that. So for that and other reasons I decided to accept the *Gazette's* invitation to move across the street in October of 1979.

JR: [00:24:00.13] Our focus here today really is on the *Democrat* and then the *Democrat-Gazette*, but it would be interesting to know from you what kind of atmosphere you found at the *Gazette* and how it would compare or contrast with where you had just been.

JD: Right. Very good question, and there was an obvious contrast. The *Democrat's* newsroom when I first started there was very bare bones. It had windows that were open to the fresh air. There was no air-conditioning that I know of. There might have been down in the business office, [but] certainly not in the newsroom. There was a very lackadaisical attitude among many of the people. The newsroom was typically littered and cluttered with news copy. The telephones rang constantly, as they should in any newsroom. For example, [if] a telephone rang for the sports department across the way, someone at the city desk would have to jump up and yell "Sports" at the top of his lungs for sports reporters to come over and retrieve the call. Generally speaking, the old *Democrat* was a converted YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association] building. It had a swimming pool in the basement at one time. [It] still smelled vaguely of old sports socks and had mismatched wood desks. [It] was not the kind of business that I would say would be conducive to a professional business atmosphere. When I went across the street to the *Gazette*—I had been in there on personal business from time to time over the years. They had done a fantastic job of remodeling the *Gazette* newsroom into a place that was both efficient and professional looking with new office

furnishings. It was carpeted and well lighted. The *Democrat* never had been. It was air-conditioned. The *Democrat* was not air-conditioned, as I recall, until they began using computers. The computers refused to work under the same conditions that human beings had for all those years; then we put in air-conditioning over there. At the *Gazette*, it was relatively well ordered [and] relatively quiet. They had a very efficient computer system in contrast to what I had left at the *Democrat*. The *Democrat*, at first, had an optical character reader—OCR we called it—to scan copy that was produced by IBM [International Business Machines] Selectric typewriters. It was very inefficient. At deadline time, you had long queues of reporters waiting to file stories. None of that existed at the *Gazette*. They had a Hendrix newsroom system that seemed to work very well and be very efficient. Obviously, they had very capable editors and many reporters who I came to respect over the years. It was quite a contrast to what I had experienced at the *Democrat*. I was glad to be there. [00:26:52.00]

JR: Did that also imply a better salary opportunity?

JD: I got a nice salary increase when I went to the *Gazette*. I think [for] most people who had formerly been at the *Democrat*, certainly pay was an incentive. I had a second child born into my young family at the time, and was interested in providing for both my sons in the future. Pay was a factor, but also the opportunity to work with people of the caliber that I found at the *Gazette*. I think [that] was at least as much an inducement as the financial aspect.

JR: Who were some of the more influential people that we may not have mentioned already in that newsroom at the time?

JD: Right. I already mentioned Bob Douglas who was managing editor. His wife

Martha wrote TV columns. Directly under him, Bill Shelton was the city editor. Bill had shepherded the *Gazette* through the years of the Little Rock [Central High School] desegregation crisis [of] the 1957 era. [He] was an old hand. He was an old bomber pilot from World War II—ran a very tight ship, and came down hard on reporters when we miscued. I used to get regularly copies of my stories crammed into my box for Sunday or Monday morning from Bill, whom everyone called “Mr. Shelton.” They were heavily blue-penciled. The *Democrat* observed the Associated Press stylebook. That was the bible over there. The *Gazette* also went by UPI [United Press International] [and] AP style, but beyond that they also had a giant folder of old memos—most of them yellowed and most of them penned by John Netherland Heiskell, who was the great progenitor of the latter-day *Gazette*. Mr. Heiskell had his own way of writing things. I recall a few of the memos in there that said things—for example—like you never referred to a “rock” in the *Arkansas Gazette*; it was always a “stone.” Anybody who wrote “rock” in their copy—unless they were saying Little Rock—was in big trouble. Also, there was some kind of a copy desk rule against hyphenating “Israel” for some reason. I don’t know why to this day. There was a whole sheaf of yellow papers that constituted the *Gazette* news style book that was made up of memos like that. We were told that anytime we had any free time on our hands—which wasn’t that often—we were to grab that folder up and go through it and commit those to memory, so we wouldn’t transgress any further. Other people that were around there—Bill Rutherford was an excellent, excellent chief copy editor over all the copy editors of the *Gazette*. He was very methodical [and] very meticulous and, on top of that, a very easy guy to get to know and like. I think everybody



around there liked Bill. I was working with reporters that I have worked with as friendly adversaries at the Capitol. I mentioned Ernie Dumas [and] Brenda Tirey. Carol Griffiee was my desk mate, along with Chuck Heinbockel, a courts reporter. She and I became very close friends, and still correspond to this day. Lamar James was a very good police cop shop reporter for them. George Wells and I had covered some stories on the federal beat together years before. His wife was a reporter, and he succeeded my friend Leslie Mitchell at the federal courthouse. George was the first one—when I walked into the *Gazette* newsroom—who stood up and yelled at the top of his voice, “Look out! We have a spy in our midst,” because they knew I was recently transferred from the *Democrat*. It was all in good fun. I really liked assistant city editors Jerry Jones and Max Brantley, who now edits the *Arkansas Times*. A lot of those people became fast friends in future years. I feel much the richer for having known those *Gazette* people.

JR: The time frame when you went to the *Gazette* put you there during the time of the newspaper war between the two newspapers. When that was heating up, how did that affect employees day to day either in morale, or changes in coverage, or whatever you remember about that?

JD: Right. I still remember back to my days at the *Democrat*. One of the veteran reporters there that I haven’t mentioned was a fine fellow named Bob Sallee who worked police and courts a lot—that sort of thing—but was also an excellent reporter for out in the state news. Bob Sallee always was Eeyore [a pessimistic character from the “Winnie the Pooh”] for the *Democrat* staff. He was always our Cassandra [a Greek mythological prophet]—the one who would draw me aside at the end of the day and say, “Jerry, things are just not going well for the *Democrat*.”

You really better get out of here while the getting's good, because I don't think we're going to last much longer." He was "Chicken Little" [child fable]. The sky was always falling for Bob. That's one reason why I was very amused when I went back to the *Democrat* as the *Democrat-Gazette* many years later. One of the first persons who was there to greet me was Bob Sallee, who had withstood all the storms of time and was writing editorials for them at the time.

JR: We are talking about how—when the newspaper war heated up—the morale in the newsroom or changes in coverage [that] occurred.

JD: Right.

JR: Or were you insulated from it?

JD: The newspaper war—no. The newspaper war had already begun in earnest with the purchase of the *Democrat* by WEHCO Media. The *Democrat* changed with the arrival of Walter E. Hussman [Jr.]—who was very young at the time. He hired John Robert Starr as editor before I left the *Democrat*. All those changes were very much in the wind at the time. By the time I got to the *Gazette*, the newspaper war had heated up considerably. The *Democrat* was hiring a lot of new reporters. They were offering free want ads to boost their classified listings. They had gone recently from being an afternoon paper, which was almost a death knell [the tolling of a bell announcing a death] for newspapers in the 1970s, to competing toe-to-toe with the *Gazette* as a morning paper. They greatly boosted their news hole at the *Democrat*. All of those things were noted at the *Gazette*, and the *Gazette* responded in kind to many of them. The *Gazette* was also interested in turning a profit. The Patterson family was running it, and they did not want to run a losing operation. That's understandable. Apparently, folks at the *Democrat*

were not as much concerned with the bottom line at the time as they were about making a really good showing and gaining ground against the *Gazette*. I know, in retrospect, that there had been joint operating agreements offered by Mr. Hussman and others to the people running the *Gazette* at the time, and those had been rejected. Apparently, Mr. Hussman decided that his choices were either to close the *Democrat* or to compete more steadfastly against the *Gazette*. He chose the latter. I think that's to his credit, but as a result, the *Gazette* tended to continue doing business as usual in many ways. They had an investigative reporting team, and they tried to continue doing good investigative reporting. They didn't change the look of their paper to any extent, just added some color. Meanwhile, the *Democrat* was taking on a completely new appearance. The *Democrat* was going over to color. All of the change was happening on the east side of Main Street. The *Gazette* seemed, if not complacent, then at least willing to continue its dominance in the market and to keep doing the same things over and over. That was true for the first two or three years when I got to the *Gazette*. The people there began to sit up and take notice. They did make some aggressive new hires like Steele Hays and Joe Stroud—I think—in the newsroom. In my own case, the *Gazette* started what a lot of people from around there, for want of a better name, called the “hot dog” desk, where four or five of us veteran journalists on the city news desk began doing stories in more depth that would hopefully have broader appeal to the readership of the *Gazette*. That really hadn't been done before there. Max Brantley was the capable editor of that. Mara Leveritt was also one of the writers. I had previously known her at the *Democrat*—I believe—as Margaret Arnold. Doug Smith who had come over from the capitol was doing very good

research and investigative pieces on state government and that sort of thing. We also had Will Green who was an excellent writer [and had] a great sense of humor. [He was] a good competitor. Max kept all of us pretty busy for a while there. That was destined to last about two years.

[Tape stopped]

JD: That lasted a couple of years until we went on to other things. I was asked to go to the *Gazette* “Feature” section, and try to write some broader, lighter features for what had been the Omnibus section, later called “Living.” I worked over there for Sally Kirby Hartman and her successor Bill Paddack, who were the features editors there. Others were Kelly Bass, Linda Bennett, Pat Patterson, Paul Johnson, Jack Weatherly, and Ralph Patterson. Karen Knutson and J.J. Thompson wrote well, too.

JR: Okay.

[Tape Stopped]

JR: Okay. So you have identified the fact that in some ways it almost seemed that the *Gazette* was—for lack of a better term—complacent, initially, or at least did not regard its competitor, perhaps, as highly as it should have, in terms of the changes that were being made—because, perhaps, of the tradition of the *Gazette*. When the newspaper war ended—well, first of all, I guess we should talk about Gannett’s influence there.

JD: Right. That was certainly key.

JR: What was that like—the transition from the Patterson’s ownership to Gannett?

JD: Right. Early in the newspaper war, the *Democrat* began what the *Gazette* perceived as unfair competitive pricing and marketing concepts. Because that was

going on, the Pattersons and the people at the *Gazette* thought that there needed to be a lawsuit filed to try to reign in the *Democrat's* practices there. Such a lawsuit was filed, and, unfortunately for people at the *Gazette*, the jury—I believe it was a federal court jury—decided that—in about 1986, I believe—that there were no unfair pricing efforts being made at the *Democrat* [and] that all was fair in love and war there. As a result, the Pattersons began shopping around for someone else who had deeper pockets than they, who may be able to operate the *Gazette* well at a profit, and certainly meet the competition that the *Democrat* was putting up.

JR: Okay. So that became Gannett, which, I guess, was the largest newspaper chain in the country at the time.

JD: Right. Right. The *Gazette* staff had always been like extended family. Gannett began to change all that.

JR: When such a chain takes over a family owned newspaper, one can anticipate some pretty big changes. What did you experience?

JD: Well, there were some definite changes there. The Gannett people, I think, made a real effort at the beginning to keep the *Gazette* an Arkansas newspaper and to avoid any appearance of change there. Bill Malone was brought in—an Arkansan experienced in Arkansas journalism—as the editor for a while. He had certain ideas about how things were to be done. Also, there were a series of other Gannett people brought in—Walker Lundy, John Hanchette, [and] a few others who had very definite ideas about changes that they saw needed to be made at the *Gazette*. There is always resistance to any change. Most of the older hands at the *Gazette* were reluctant to see certain changes made. I remember there was one—

when the *Gazette* went to color—that sort of thing—not everyone appreciated that change, but most people went along with it. There was another story that ran in the *Gazette* on page one, I believe, about UALR cheerleaders going to very revealing Spandex uniforms. That riled not only a lot of readers, but also people within the *Gazette* who thought that was kind of a breach of what they had been told the *Gazette* was all about. So there was some resistance to the Gannett people who came in. They tried to mix in enough former *Gazette* people and to have kind of a consensus on the directions they needed to go, but I think, to some extent, people perceived that the *Arkansas Gazette* was losing its “Arkansas roots” and was becoming Gannett’s *Gazette*. Run not by hometown people, but by folks who were at least perceived as outsiders. People who had written professionally for twenty years were subjected to “writing coaches.”

JR: Describe the days leading up to the end of the newspaper war when, finally, the *Democrat* did buy the assets to the *Gazette*. What was it like to be working in the newsroom under those conditions?

JD: Well, it was very difficult to figure out what was rumor, speculation, and just wild paranoia, and what was actually legitimate concern on the part of *Gazette* employees as to where the *Gazette* was headed. The last couple of months leading up to October 1991—I remember people who had printed up religious tracts saying that we all needed to pray for the *Gazette* and get divine intervention on our side [and] that sort of thing. There were also a lot of little group meetings going on, I think—trying to figure out where we were headed and what was going on. There were rumors going around that Gannett was going to pump more money in [or] that they were going to pull out completely. Nobody really knew, I think,

outside the ivory tower. All we knew was that we had folks like Craig Moon, who at least seemed to be distant from the other folks heading up the *Gazette* that were trying to keep the *Gazette* on a steady course. Among the people who tried really hard in those last few days was Bill Rutherford, who I think was a candidate for sainthood among most of the *Gazette* stalwarts. He jumped into the very difficult [and] very untenable editor seat in those last few months, and really tried to pull the newspaper out of what most of us thought was a tailspin. Much to his credit, he almost pulled it off. There were people at the end who thought that the *Gazette* was certainly worth saving, and that Little Rock needed to continue as a two-newspaper town. Those people, like Scott Van Laningham, tried awfully hard to find some way to salvage the *Gazette*, but ultimately the axe fell in October of 1991. Many people at the *Gazette* resented the fact that the newspaper was closed down almost in mid-stride. I was writing a story about events up at Cabot at the time when the computer system simply switched off. After much fracas, we were all just told to go home and check back later. There would be a general announcement that afternoon. Most of us realized by that point, I think, that the death knell had sounded.

JR: After going through that abrupt ending to the newspaper war, a lot of writers, such as yourself, did other kinds of jobs for a while. You did a stint in public relations?

JD: Yes, I did.

JR: Eventually, though, you found yourself back at the *Democrat-Gazette*. How did that happen?

JD: Well, I worked six months with an old friend of mine, Bob Sells, who had been

spokesman for Southwestern Bell Phone Company for a long time. He and I were good friends. I hope we are still good friends. He was trying to get a public relations firm started up with his daughter Stacy Pittman. He asked my help in doing some writing for them and some account representative work. I was glad to do that. Clearly, I wasn't cut out for that kind of work. After six months, he and I, I think, had a gentlemen's agreement that I would go find other employment. I began freelancing some. Among my freelance efforts, I was doing some travel writing for magazines at the time. I submitted a travel piece I had done to the *Democrat's* travel editor who, at the time, I believe, was Griffin Smith, Jr. Very shortly after I submitted that, to the astonishment of many, Griffin was elevated by Walter E. Hussman, Jr. to the level of editor—executive editor—at the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, the hybrid of the two [papers]. I had a nice letter back from Griffin in response to the travel pieces I sent him saying, in essence, that they were overloaded with travel pieces—even good ones—but that he would be interested in my returning to what formerly had been my employer at the *Democrat* in some capacity as a writer. So I went in and discussed that with Griffin [and] with the new managing editor, Bob Lutgen, who had come over, I believe, from Fort Smith. Later Lutgen became WEHCO's Chattanooga editor. They seemed very keen. They were aware of the work I had done at the *Gazette*. To some extent, they were aware that I had been a *Democrat* employee for seven years. Walter Hussman sometimes praised the editorial writing I had done for him in the past. He was amenable to my return. At the time, there was a lot of confusion out there in the Little Rock news market because people seemed to fall into several categories. There were former *Gazette* employees who would not consider working for



the hyphenated hybrid *Democrat-Gazette*. There were a lot of them who wanted to work there, but who were not going to be given the chance for any number of reasons. There were some, like Orville Henry, who had already gone from the *Gazette* to the *Democrat* before the newspaper war ended. There was another category that included people like Charles Allbright—an excellent columnist—and Richard Allin the “Our Town” columnist, who had been hired by the *Democrat-Gazette* directly from their experience with the *Gazette*. Then there were half a dozen more of us, I guess, who were kind of somewhere in the interim. We had been in other employment, but really wanted to get back in the newsroom. I was among those, certainly. They included other good *Gazette* people like Irene Was-sell, who had become the *Democrat-Gazette* food editor. Karen Knutson, later Karen Martin, who became style editor for the *Democrat-Gazette* later. People like Leroy Donald, the very excellent business writer [and] veteran journalist from the *Gazette*, who wound up in the business section at the *Democrat-Gazette*. Jerry Jones, who had been a deputy city editor to Bill Shelton and was a personal friend of mine—Jerry and I wound up with desks back to back, so we felt we were really back home in some ways. I found myself at the *Democrat-Gazette* wondering what kind of response I would get from John Robert Starr, because, certainly, I’d gone out the *Democrat’s* door not under the best circumstances with him. I knew him capable of being very vindictive upon occasion with other journalists. When I saw Bob stride into the newsroom that day and draw Bob Lutgen aside to talk to him, I thought, “Well, there goes any prospect that I’ll ever have for working here.” What Starr was concerned about was that they were hiring me as a feature writer. As I understood it later from Bob Lutgen and Griffin Smith,

Starr was saying, “Don’t you dare hire Jerry Dean as a feature writer, because he does a lot better at hard news. So put him on that news desk and give him something to do.” Of course, I was pleased [and] very gratified that someone that I had not always seen eye-to-eye with would be willing to bury the hatchet and accept me back on the news staff. Starr retired very shortly thereafter, but he certainly could have put the quietus to my return if he had a mind to.

JR: [00:48:08.27] What was the atmosphere like in the *Democrat-Gazette* newsroom compared with how you remembered it in the earlier years you had described?

JD: I guess it was a synthesis of the two old newsrooms I had worked in. The first *Democrat* had been something akin to chaos in many ways. The *Gazette* that I went to in 1979 had almost been too businesslike for a newsroom. It was quiet for the most part. There was nobody throwing typewriters on the floor. There was nobody punching anybody else out. So I went from one extreme to the other there. When I returned to the *Democrat-Gazette*, it was a very strange experience for me and a lot of other people. It was the same second-floor newsroom that I was going back to [and] the same computer system was still there, amid remodeled offices, but they were all different people, with the exception of a few who had survived. Meredith Oakley was still there—Meredith Martin I’d known her as earlier. Rhonda Owen was still there as an editor. Jack Hill, whom I interned with, was still there. There were several people—Wally Hall—John Robert had elevated him to sports editor from just sportswriter in my absence. So there was a group of people I was familiar with from my old *Democrat* days, but very shortly after my return—since Hussman had purchased all of the *Gazette*’s assets including all of its furniture and its computer system, he’d built and remodeled a new

newsroom upstairs in what had been the composing room. All those former *Gazette* assets were brought over there. So all the old furniture, all the old desks, all the computers I'd worked on before at the *Gazette*, followed me back across Main Street to the *Democrat-Gazette*. The newsroom there was something akin to a journalist's nirvana, because the remodeled newsroom had been an old dirty composing room with Linotype grease on the floor and what have you. They had transformed that into a beautifully carpeted room with skylights, high ceilings—just a beautiful paradise for journalist to work in. The supreme irony came the day that I found, among the *Gazette*'s furniture that had been brought across the street, one of the same broken chairs that I had at the *Gazette* earlier that still had my name on the bottom of it. You know, I thought that chair would have been one of the first to go, but it followed me over there, too. Just as a little bit of nostalgia, I sat in that chair for quite a while after I arrived there. It was kind of my transition back to the old *Democrat* building where my career started.

[00:51:04.04]

JR: So you stayed at the *Gazette*—I mean the *Democrat*—this was now the third time [that] you'd really been there.

JD: Right.

JR: How long [did you stay] the third time before you left for newspapering in Knoxville [Tennessee]?

JD: Right. I stayed there about three years. [I] came in May of 1992 and left in May of 1995. [I] worked with a great bunch of people. There were some other former *Gazette* people that followed me across the street there, too—including Mike Trimble, who had become a personal friend of mine. Mike was a very gifted

writer. I think he eventually left to go to Denton, Texas, with a new wife and pursue other possibilities out there. Trimble and I had been friendly rivals way back when I was covering federal courts at the *Democrat*. So some of those old familiar faces came back, and it was reassuring to see them among all the new ones that—the people that I was meeting there.

JR: Are there any closing thoughts you would like to share about your experiences with newspaper journalism overall in Arkansas, or anything that this interview has brought to mind for you?

JD: Well, Jeanne, I certainly don't have a key or a lock on newspaper history in Little Rock, and I don't pretend to. I guess, if I bring anything to the discussion, it might be that there were very few people—I can't think of any others—that had worked at the old *Democrat* and made the transition to the *Gazette* and then popped back up again to the surface of the *Democrat-Gazette*. So I guess for whatever that is worth, I have some perspective on all three of those. I just have to say that in thirty-five years of journalism, I've never made better friends or had better working situations than I did at those three. All three of them in their own way were great experiences that I will always treasure. In 1995, I had a second marriage and a couple of kids that were coming along—new babies—daughters this time instead of sons. My wife and I began looking for a good place where she could make more money, I would have a job opportunity, and the girls might receive a good education. We happened upon Knoxville, Tennessee. She was offered a job with the National Public Radio affiliate there making quite a bit more money than she had in Little Rock. I was able to talk with three editors at the *Knoxville News Sentinel*—a Scripps-Howard news chain newspaper—who had

seen what I had done in Little Rock and were interested in hiring me to write politics and cover the Tennessee Valley Authority. We found what we thought were some excellent schools for our daughters to attend, with the possibility that the University of Tennessee would also be on the doorstep. All of those things lured me away from my hometown. Sometimes I have regretted it, [but] most of the time I've thought it was a really good move. We enjoy east Tennessee. The supreme irony is that John Netherland Heiskell, back in the early 1900s, was a UT [University of Tennessee] graduate, [and] still has a street named for him in downtown Knoxville. So whenever I feel nostalgic about times at the *Gazette* or *Democrat* I can always drive by Heiskell Avenue and kind of relive some of these old times.

JR: You have been listening to professional journalist Jerry Dean. I'm Jeanne Rollberg.

[End of Interview] [00:54:35.17]

[Transcribed by Lindley Shedd and Geoffery Stark]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]