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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with

Mr. Estel Jeffrey
Arkansas Democrat-Gazette Building
Little Rock, Arkansas
31 July 2006

Interviewer: Jerry McConnell

[00:00:00.00] Jerry McConnell: This is Jerry McConnell. I'm sitting here in an office with Estel Jeffrey at the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*. This is July 31, 2006, and we're getting ready to do an oral history interview on the history of the *Arkansas Democrat* and the [*Arkansas*] *Democrat-Gazette* [for the Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville]. The first thing I need to do, Estel, is to ask you when and where you were born.

Estel Jeffrey: I was born in Salem, Arkansas, in Fulton County on January 28, 1944.

JM: Okay. What were your parents' names?

EJ: Estel Jeffrey and Kathleen Melton.

JM: M-E-L-T-O-N?

EJ: Yes.

JM: And is that with a K—Kathleen?

EJ: Kathleen with a K.

JM: K-A-T-H-L-E-E-N.

EJ: -L-E-E-N. Right.

JM: Okay. All right. Where did you go to school?

EJ: I went through the twelfth grade at Searcy High School, and I went two years to Arkansas State [University, Jonesboro].

JM: Okay. All right. Kind of give me your progression from there—your work history.

EJ: Well, I grew [up] in the newspaper back shop, practically—throwing papers and working in the back shop—from the about the time I was nine through high school. When I wasn't out for sports, I would work part-time. Then I got away from it. I took some journalism classes in college, and I spent a year after I quit school here in Little Rock working for an industry. Then I decided that I wanted to get back into business. I ended up at the Conway newspaper, the *Log Cabin Democrat*, in 1966. I stayed there through 1982, and I got out for a couple of years. I had reached my goals, and I was kind of struggling to continue at the paper, so I got out for a couple of years and was a national sales manager for a manufacturer. I did that until my daughter could graduate from high school. Then I was planning on getting back in the business; I had some job offers from some newspapers in other states that I felt—Paul Smith, who was the general manager here at the time—he would know about them because he was in the organization called Midwest with these papers. So I called him to get some background on which ones he thought I ought to pursue; he ended up getting me down here, and

the rest is history.

JM: Yes.

EJ: I came to work here on October 15, 1984.

JM: October 15, 1984?

EJ: Yes.

JM: Okay. What did you do at the *Log Cabin Democrat*?

EJ: I was the advertising manager. I was over all the advertising and the advertising production. I also helped really push them into [producing] a Sunday morning [issue]. I did most of the work for circulation, setting up the motor routes. I was kind of almost an assistant to the publisher, at times.

JM: And the publisher then was Frank . . .

EJ: Frank E. Robins, III.

JM: Frank E. Robins, III. Okay.

EJ: Great guy.

JM: Yes. Was John Ward there then?

EJ: John came after I was there. John and I are good friends.

JM: Yes. What position did you take at the *Democrat* when you came to the *Democrat*?

EJ: Promotions director.

JM: Promotions director?

EJ: Right.

JM: Tell me what that position did.

EJ: Well, at the time—of course, Paul and I had known each other from 1968 or 1969.

We had met both coming up the ladder, I guess. I think Paul felt that I had the—

even though I had been in sales a lot, I was also fairly creative, and I knew the newspaper business. So, basically, my job was to—he had just started this department about a year prior, and he wasn't happy with where it was going. So my job was to help the *Democrat* with not only image, but to combat anything the *Gazette* was doing at the time. I'd match them step for step and contest any step they might make. So I was in charge of doing all the TV [television] commercials, the radio commercials, the billboards, all the newspaper ads—anything that required promoting the *Democrat*. Also, I had to do reader contests to get reader involvement—pull readers away. I supported circulation in their marketing efforts at the time, editorial also, and advertising. My job was to support them. For the first couple of months, I was a one-man department. Then I hired an artist in about December and then a writer in the spring of the next year because we started a real estate section that I was responsible for the editorial content. So that was kind of my job for a number of years.

JM: Okay. So you, in effect, had your own in-house ad agency?

EJ: Right. Correct.

JM: You produced ads here that other people might have been farming out to an advertising firm, but you were producing them in-house here at the *Democrat*.

EJ: Right. They had one gentleman helping them with their advertising when I came here, a gentleman by the name of Dick Lankford. He had a company called Dick Lankford, Ink. I-N-K. I kept Dick for a couple of years. We really didn't need him because I had enough background to know what to do, so we took care of everything in-house because we could do it faster. We could turn quicker, and in a lot of cases that made a big difference.

JM: When you said you had Dick Lankford—but he had his own firm, is that correct?

EJ: He had his own firm. Right.

JM: Okay. All right. I knew Dick, and I think he's deceased now. Is that correct?

EJ: He is. He is.

JM: Okay. But at any rate, what was the situation as far as the competition between the two papers when you came here? Do you remember how it stood?

EJ: Yes. I came here in October, and they [the *Arkansas Gazette*] sued us in December. [Laughs] It was kind of like, "Uh-oh." [Laughs] It had gotten to the—you know, I was in Conway watching this for a long time.

JM: Yes.

EJ: Paul was a personal friend of mine, and I had known Walter [Hussman, Jr.] for a long time, but I also had friends at the *Gazette*. And I knew distinctly the difference between the two. It was pretty obvious to anybody.

JM: Yes.

EJ: But I noticed even after I got down here that the *Democrat* was beginning to gain some momentum at that time.

JM: Yes.

EJ: It wasn't anything to write home about, but they had been through some really, really, really tough times.

JM: Yes.

EJ: I noticed that the momentum was changing ever so slightly, and I think Mr. Hugh Patterson must have thought the same thing because all of a sudden the lawsuit was slapped on us. It didn't make sense to anybody who had common sense because we were the minority paper, and we were getting sued for anti-trust.

JM: Yes.

EJ: So it got really chaotic because we never ceased doing the job we were supposed to do, but we also had added on us—me, not to the extent of the others—going through all their papers—half a day, almost, every day and getting all of our papers in order. You know, the lawyers took over, almost, and yet you still had to function as a newspaper.

JM: Yes.

EJ: So it got to be quite a challenge.

JM: I bet.

[00:08:08.01] JM: Okay, Estel, from that point can you recount for me just some of the situations that you found yourself in and some of the ad campaigns that you got involved in—what you were advertising or what you were doing to counter the *Gazette*? Just fill me in on any of that.

EJ: Well, when it [the *Gazette*] was still privately owned [by the Patterson family], I think the main thing that we pushed that I can remember is that we were growing. Our theme was more. Everything was more, more, more. More pages, more news. We tried to get the perception out there, and we weren't kidding. We did publish more pages every day. We did publish more news. We did publish more advertising. We did publish more classified advertising. So the main thing was to get people to start thinking, "Well, wait a minute. The *Democrat*—there must be something there if they can make this claim, because the *Gazette* is not disputing it," and they never did because, quite honestly, it was true. So that was one of the themes I think we carried through year in and year out during the newspaper war, when it was privately owned. Also, we constantly were running—we'd get the

ABC [Audit Bureau of Circulations] reports, and we were always growing faster than they were growing. We were showing how their circulation on a graph was going parallel and ours was coming straight up at them.

JM: Yes.

EJ: And even though it took a while to pass them, people every six months were [saying], "Whoa, look at that! They're closing the gap." So we were trying to plant seeds that we were a good newspaper. We never said we were a great newspaper, but we were a good newspaper, and "You should look and see why. You should take us and see why." We ran a lot of TV ads to that effect. Also, when we'd win awards, we'd make a big deal out of that because it was important. Everybody thought of the *Gazette* as an award-winning newspaper, and we were trying to get people to change their perception, also.

JM: Yes.

EJ: So everything we did was on the—we were trying to get people to understand we were larger, and we were growing, and we were becoming a very good newspaper. And everything we did was based on fact. We didn't say anything we couldn't back up.[00:10:39.15]

JM: Okay. Do you remember any of the specific ads that you put together that sort of dealt with those issues?

EJ: Well, I can remember doing a lot of the ads. For example, when we'd show the charts—the graphs of the circulation growth.

JM: Yes.

EJ: We would really hammer that home. We would always make a big deal when we hit a million classified lines or a million classified ads—and that would usually be

around October or November of every year—because they could not match it.

JM: Yes.

EJ: And, again, it was that more thing. We just kept coming after them with that.

JM: Yes.

EJ: We also—and this is something that just now dawned on me—we promoted certain people heavily because we had to get people to start thinking of us in terms of our personnel.

JM: Yes.

EJ: We promoted Wally Hall and Randy Moss, who was a handicapper from Oaklawn [horseracing track in Hot Springs].

JM: Oaklawn Park.

EJ: We made him a star, so to speak. [Laughter] And he's doing very well today.

JM: He was hired from the *Gazette*.

EJ: Yes, he was, and he's now the head horseracing analyst for ESPN.

JM: Yes.

EJ: And, of course, John Robert Starr. You had to promote him.

JM: Yes.

EJ: And whoever at the time would be our outdoor editor—we pushed them pretty heavily. So there were selected people that we really tried to push hard because when we would do market studies, which we did about every three or four years, we'd always find out who were the top ten columnists. And Starr and Hall were always up there—one and two or one and three or whatever. That was important because the other two would be—oh, gosh—the two—well, Orville [Henry] would be in the mix from the *Gazette*.

JM: Charlie Allbright.

EJ: Charlie Allbright and . . .

JM: Richard [Allin].

EJ: Richard [Allin].

JM: Yes.

EJ: So those five would always be right in there together.

JM: Yes.

EJ: But when you started seeing Starr and Hall up there with them, people—I think their perceptions started to change a little bit. Of course, we portrayed them in a certain way.

JM: Yes.

EJ: Wally—he was always portrayed as telling it like it is. We tried to paint Orville as, basically, Frank Broyles's [athletic director of the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville] puppet.

JM: Yes.

EJ: So Wally's goal was to do it that way. And, of course, John Robert didn't need any coaxing to do what he did. [Laughter] People enjoyed him; there's no question about that. So we used that to our advantage. We did a lot of TV commercials with them and a lot of print ads with them.

JM: Whose idea was it to sort of portray Orville as being in the pocket of Broyles? Do you remember that?

EJ: You know, that was already—it's really interesting because even before I came here, that was the perception around Arkansas.

JM: Yes.

EJ: So it was an easy thing to pick up.

JM: Yes.

EJ: I don't know who here did it because it was already kind of going. There was a sportswriter who was here who went to Denver [Colorado].

JM: Fred Morrow.

EJ: Fred Morrow. Fred had already [laughter] started beating him up pretty good.

JM: Yes. [Laughs]

EJ: Almost to the point of getting overboard with it. No, Jerry, I think it was already a natural thing to latch onto. And I personally liked Orville. His son Clay and I worked at the *Log Cabin*.

JM: Clay. Yes.

EJ: But it was war, you know? Somebody had to survive.

JM: Yes, I understand. So how did you portray Orville when he came to work at the *Democrat*? [Laughter]

EJ: Well, you know, we never really went after Orville in the ads.

JM: Yes.

EJ: It was a perception thing—that Wally's going to tell you the real story.

JM: Oh, yes.

EJ: And it was easy what . . .

JM: You could infer what . . .

EJ: You could infer.

JM: Okay.

EJ: But Orville was easy to work with because he had met me a couple of times, and when he put it together that I was with Clay up here, he would do anything we

asked.

JM: Yes.

EJ: Which was nice.

JM: Yes.

EJ: And he gave us anything—you know, if I needed him to do something, he'd do it.

[00:15:01.18] JM: Okay. Were you involved in any of the advertising on the free classified campaign or had that . . . ?

EJ: Yes, a lot of it.

JM: Yes. Okay.

EJ: We did a lot of that because that was such a strength, and it was ours. We owned that franchise.

JM: Yes.

EJ: We did some really good commercials, and we really went straight at the *Gazette* when they started trying to do it with it.

JM: Do you remember any of those commercials—what they said?

EJ: Yes. We were talking about them Thursday, as a matter of fact, at a luncheon they gave for me and my wife. We had heard—well, they did one one time—they came out with “three lines, three days . . .”

JM: “Three dollars.”

EJ: “. . . three dollars.”

JM: Yes.

EJ: And we hammered them on that. “Who needs three, three, three when you can have free, free, free?”

JM: Yes.

EJ: Then we heard that they had made a huge buy on television locally. I did some phone calling and found out they had, indeed, and we knew when it was going to break. But the rumor that we had heard was that it was going to be free classifieds. So I booked a studio in Dallas, and we flew an actor in from St. Louis [Missouri] that we had used before and one from Houston [Texas]. We did it on the quiet, and we had one breaking the news that we heard they were going—there were two guys in Bard's Restaurant that used be up in the Heights. [Reference to Pulaski Heights, an area of Little Rock] We had a set that looked just like Bard's. These guys talked about—Well, they heard they were going to break it, and the word was, "Well, they copied the *Democrat* in everything else, but didn't they sue them for doing that one time?" Which they had. So it was really setting them up.

JM: Yes.

EJ: Then the second—they did go with a—and our second commercial we did was about the fact that "They're copying us again, and who would've thought it? What next, Orville Henry T-shirts?" and so forth. So that was one really strong campaign we went after.

JM: Yes.

EJ: The others we did were always touting the fact that we ran over twice as many classifieds—over a million line ads a year—over a million ads a year. We'd show the comparison of how many they ran and how many we ran. Classifieds, I think, was one of the keys in this newspaper war. There are many, many keys.[00:17:19.29]

JM: Yes.

EJ: But if you go back to when the war started changing, from an outsider—I was still at the *Log Cabin Democrat*.

JM: Yes.

EJ: We all thought that was a turning point.

JM: Yes.

EJ: That's when things started to kind of slowly start turning.

JM: Yes. Now, when the *Gazette* went to free classifieds, it's my recollection—and I'm not sure about this one—had Gannett already bought the paper? Was Gannett in charge when they finally went to free [classifieds]? I know they went to “three, three, three” when Patterson was there.

EJ: Yes.

JM: But I was wondering about when they started the free classifieds.

EJ: You know, the line gets blurry in there.

JM: Yes. Okay.

EJ: The *Gazette* sold in late 1986.

JM: Late 1986. Somewhere in there.

EJ: I believe—you know, I can't remember.

JM: Okay. That's one that—I've got to interview Paul again at some point in time. He'll probably know.

EJ: He'll know.

JM: He'll know.

EJ: He'll know.

[00:18:15.12] JM: Yes. Okay. Any other campaigns? What were the other things that you were hammering them on or that you were illustrating? Let me [know]

this—your growing circulation and everything—where did you put that? Billboards, newspapers, or did you have that on TV?

EJ: On the circulation?

JM: Yes.

EJ: TV and newspaper. We've had billboards. You know, "Arkansas's fastest-growing newspaper." At one time, we were America's fastest-growing newspaper, percentage-wise. We played that up.

JM: Yes.

EJ: It was always—anything we could do to show us as being strong, we had to put out there because there was a perception that this was a blue-collar paper—even a red-neck paper, and [that] it wasn't well written. And to be honest, all those things were true. Even when I came here, it had a ways to go, but it amazed me how the leaps and bounds that we made—and we're a much better paper today than we were then, of course.

JM: Yes.

EJ: But we had limited resources.

JM: Yes.

EJ: I remember walking in here and the office furniture was just horrible. But Walter and Paul chose to put the money where it counted, and it paid off. But every time we could hang our hat on something, we would build a campaign around it because you only get one chance.

JM: Yes.

EJ: And we took advantage of every one of them. The *Gazette*—I think the theory here is that if they ever woke up over there, we could've been in some trouble.

JM: Yes.

EJ: But they didn't wake up. And even Gannett surprised us by not—they did things that we were just scratching our heads thinking, "What in the world is going on here?" We didn't expect—we expected more, I think, than what they gave us.

JM: Yes.

EJ: They gave us plenty, but we managed to always be ahead of them one step.

JM: You expected more aggressive behavior out of Gannett or a different kind of behavior?

EJ: Well, I'll tell you what I think happened, and this is personal opinion right here. Now, to say we weren't scared to death when Gannett bought the *Gazette* would be the understatement of the year. America's largest newspaper chain coming here—I mean, they could just pile the money on until we suffocated.

JM: Yes.

EJ: But they—we've joked about this—they did more to kill themselves than we ever did. They shot themselves in the foot every day. But they didn't quite get it. Now, they came in here boasting that they [would] put us out of business in a year and a half, max[imum]. They were tough. They were street tough. They knew how to compete. Well, if you started digging into their history, they didn't know how to compete. The two times they competed they got sued and had to give the newspaper back. One was in Connecticut—the other was in Santa Fe, New Mexico.[00:21:14.18]

JM: [Laughs]

EJ: They've never competed hardly in their life, and that was the difference. We knew how to compete, and they didn't.

JM: They had not been in very many competitive situations.

EJ: No. Not.

JM: And I guess maybe Hartford [Connecticut] involved the *Hartford* [*Courrant?*] and I forget what the other paper was there.

EJ: Yes.

JM: No, that's true. I don't think they had been in a whole lot of competitive situations.

EJ: No. And this competition here—I know that during the time I was here, you had the two Dallas papers, the two Houston papers, and some more markets. I think this is probably as bloody a market as far as a newspaper war as any of those were.

JM: Yes.

EJ: Not that [those wars] weren't tough, but this—we're smaller and we're two or three blocks away. You couldn't get any more competitive than that. [Laughs]

JM: No. And another thing, though, is that there was probably more difference in the two newspapers here than there had been there. I'm not sure of this. But I would tend to think that maybe the *Houston Post and Chronicle* and the *Dallas Morning News* and—what was the afternoon paper—the . . .?

EJ: *Herald*.

JM: Yes. *Herald*. *The Dallas Times Herald*.

EJ: *Times Herald*. Yes.

JM: That they were maybe closer in competition and closer in size and . . .

EJ: Yes.

JM: . . . and circulation and revenue than the *Gazette* and *Democrat* started out.

EJ: Right. Right.

JM: Okay. So when—Gannett bought out the *Democrat* in late 1986, so it was...

EJ: The *Gazette*.

JM: I mean, bought out the *Gazette*—it was scary times then here.

EJ: Oh, I think you could hear a big gasp of breath [laughs], you know, like "Oh, my!" Because we didn't know what to expect. We just knew they were huge and they had money and, you know, that could spell trouble. I don't care what business you're in.

[00:23:07.19] JM: What were some of the—any other key developments you can think of that you sort of hung your hat on, as far as advertising campaigns, that were going on with the newspaper? Of course, you've mentioned Wally and John Robert and the growth and everything. How much of a factor was "High Profile"?

EJ: It was a huge factor, and you know what? Privately, I thought that this was not going to be something that was going to do us a lot of good, that it was just going to be for a few people. But the theory was, it's going to pull in the people—the “decision-makers.” The few people who are going to see this—I mean, at the time we were just strictly in areas of Pulaski County, not even—I believe I'm correct—not even all of Pulaski County got it at first.

JM: In fact, they were mainly just in west Little Rock to start with.

EJ: Yes. Exactly. And I found that a little hard to take at first. I grew up very middle class.

JM: Yes.

EJ: And that kind of didn't set with me, but as time went on I started to realize that

they're right. The decision-makers love this thing, and it puts us—anything you can do to get ahead of them, then it works. There was the old theory that Paul and Walter had, and we had a consultant named Steve Starr, who's passed away now. He taught at Harvard [University] and, I believe, MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] at one time. His theory was: “you can never be as good as your competition, you have to be better.” “You never let them take a step without contesting it,” and that's the theory we worked on. It was kind of interesting that they didn't try to match "High Profile." Either they thought that it wasn't going to make a difference, or I can't believe they would have conceded it to us. I don't know what their thought process was, but they never came at us with it. And we had the perfect woman for it: Phyllis Brandon. If you had to sit down and write the scenario for the person you wanted, she would've been the person.

JM: She knew everybody in town.

EJ: Everybody.

JM: Yes.

EJ: And had entre into any party or any gathering.[00:25:24.04]

JM: Any other things you can think of—advertising campaigns that you thought played a critical role or just an important role in the war?

EJ: Well, I think all of them were important.

JM: Yes.

EJ: It was one of those things—I can't think of any particular thing. I know there were things that maybe spiked higher than others, but everything we did was so important that—we wanted it to work because we didn't feel we had many chances to mess up.

JM: Yes.

EJ: You know, everything was just right there and had to be right on the money.

[00:26:09.09] JM: But the *Gazette* didn't respond to anything the *Democrat* was doing, in particular, not even in the advertising campaigns, for a while, did they?

EJ: No. The *Gazette*—you know, this is something that, again, we said, "We hope they don't wake up."

JM: Yes.

EJ: Paul Smith told me that one day when I was still at the *Log Cabin*. He said, "Boy, I hope that big old' dog doesn't wake up over at Third and Louisiana because we're in trouble." But I think that was everybody's feelings here—we would do something—sometimes we'd get a response. But, Jerry, I really felt like they felt it would be beneath them to respond to us because I think they felt if they responded to us, then people would see that as a sign of weakness.

JM: Yes.

EJ: Even when Gannett was here, it was amazing. We were kind of like guerilla fighters. We would do something and move quick. And the Gannett people would have a meeting—they would go on for a week trying to decide how best to answer us. By that time, we had already gone to something else. And when they tried to answer whatever we did, we had a new set of problems for them.

JM: Yes.

EJ: So I think that's the big difference.

JM: Yes. Who was responsible for that—for the quick decision-making here?

EJ: Paul Smith and Walter Hussman.

JM: Yes.

EJ: No question.

JM: Yes.

EJ: I've seen decisions made that involved a lot of money. It would be a gamble of the money. There was no certainty at all. The decision would be made in less than thirty minutes, and we'd all be in there. Everybody would basically give their opinion, but there was no wasted time.[00:27:47.17]

JM: Okay. As to when you were growing up—say, in Searcy and then later on when you got to the *Log Cabin*, or at least when you first got there—what was your impression of the two newspapers at that time?

EJ: You know, that's interesting, because I've really thought about this. It was really interesting. My thought process was—before Walter bought the paper, the *Democrat* did not play a big part in my life. I read the sports section, and I read the sports section of the *Gazette*.

JM: Yes.

[00:28:23.14] EJ: But here's an interesting thing. There was a perception amongst the newspaper people in Arkansas—and back then, most daily papers and weekly papers were owned by families.

JM: Yes.

EJ: They did not like the *Democrat* after Walter bought it, and it became apparent why. They were fearful, because Walter was changing the landscape.

JM: Yes.

EJ: He was changing the way you publish a paper, the way you market a paper, and they didn't like it. I grew up in two privately owned newspapers, and it was like they had entitlement.

JM: Yes.

EJ: It's like money wasn't that important to them—some, it was—but to most, it was the fact, "I own a newspaper, and I am gentry." I don't mean to go overboard with it, but I'm telling you, it was there.

JM: Yes.

EJ: Walter and Paul, back in the early stages, started doing things because they had to survive. They threw the "newspapers don't do it" philosophy out the window, and started saying, "We're going to survive as a business. We've got to look at it like that."

JM: Yes.

EJ: So the perception was—I'll tell you, the vote was heavily *Gazette*, because the *Gazette* represented everything they wanted to have in their newspaper—the stated gentry running it, and the mandate from the people, so to speak.

JM: Yes.

EJ: And this over here represented huge change—if he won, it would never be the same again. And I think it scared the living daylights out of them.[00:29:57.13]

JM: These are some of the newspapers—the dailies that you're talking about?

EJ: Yes. I know it bothered Frank Robins. It bothered Bonner McCollum over at Forrest City, Fred Wolfkuhler up in Paragould . . .

JM: Paragould. Yes.

EJ: . . . the Troutts. I mean, they just—they did not like what Walter was doing down here because newspapers did things the same way for 100 or 150 years, and nobody rocked the boat.

JM: They probably weren't really excited about giving away free classifieds. [Laughs]

EJ: Oh, absolutely not! No.

JM: I can imagine.

EJ: That scared everybody to death.

JM: Yes.

EJ: That, and just how they got aggressive.

JM: Okay.

EJ: And that scared them, because they were sitting in towns that they never had competition, and this brought to life—"They have it, and if they do, things are going to change."

JM: What was your impression of the quality of the two newspapers over that period of time?

EJ: Well, it's really interesting because when Walter came in, he started sprucing up the *Democrat*.

JM: Yes.

EJ: As far as color, and I think—I liked it. The *Gazette* was known as "The Old Gray Lady," and that was fine. I liked that, too.

JM: Yes.

EJ: The *Gazette* was very well laid out every day. You knew exactly where things were going to be. The *Gazette* was no surprises, and that's what people really do want in their newspaper: no surprises.

JM: Yes.

EJ: I think for a long time—I know when I first came here, I noticed they still had column rules, and they were offset. I went to Paul. I said, "If I'm going to promote this paper, let's get those column rules out of here." And one of the very

first things I got done was they pulled those out, because that went back to the early—well, early 1970s and late 1960s.

JM: Yes

EJ: And they were still doing it here because they had always done it that way.

JM: Yes.

EJ: But the perception would've been—the *Gazette* was the Cadillac.

JM: Yes.

EJ: And I guess the *Democrat* would be looked at as not the Model T [Ford], but something akin to it.

JM: Yes.

EJ: And trying to bring it back out of the grave at that time, I think.

JM: And in those early years, at least—it would've come as a great shock to anybody to ever suggest that the *Democrat* would win the war over the *Gazette*.

EJ: Oh, no way!

JM: [Laughs]

EJ: You know, people just—I almost believe there were probably bets as to when they were going to bury the *Democrat*.

JM: Yes.

EJ: And, again, I think when they just refused to go away and their free classifieds started working that's when perception started slowly changing.[00:32:37.25]

JM: When were you aware after Gannett came in that things weren't quite going Gannett's way, as you had feared they would or as they had anticipated they would?

EJ: I think there were a number of things. One, they kept changing people over there.

JM: Yes.

EJ: They would try this person. If he couldn't do it, they'd bring in another. I remember we were at a banquet for Nolan Richardson [who at the time was head men's basketball coach at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville]. We helped bring him in and buried the hatchet between him and Wally. It lasted about a week.

JM: The burying lasted [about a week]. [Laughs]

EJ: Yes. [Laughs] There was a table behind us—we were at what is the Doubletree [Hotel] now—there was a table behind us of young business execs [executives]. As a matter of fact, I think—yes, a couple of them were from Stephens, because I recognized them—and the whole conversation was about—they had just brought in Moon. Craig Moon. And he was the second or third person they'd brought in. And these guys were saying, "They're not going to make it over there. They don't let anybody stay long enough to get their laundry done." That started—we felt it here. We felt like, "Boy, if they keep doing that they're never going to figure out how to battle us in Arkansas." And, you know, the first thing they did when they came in—on their newspaper tubes and on their ads, they dropped Arkansas and had "The *Gazette*." And that's when we put "Arkansas's newspaper" under our logo for a long time. They left the mantle to us. I mean, they had that mantle, and they vacated, and we jumped all over it.

JM: Yes.

EJ: So they did things like that. They had young people who were over there. They were running off a lot of the old vets [veterans]. They did not have the institutional knowledge that they had before. And I'm sure they were bright, young reporters. They were spelling the names of towns wrong because they didn't know

any different, and the problem is the copy editors didn't know any different. They were all being brought in. Not that we felt like this was going to help us win the war, but it started—they were making—more and more of these things were becoming evident to the reader out there. But I think the one time that people were beginning to have doubts about Gannett—they had an editor named Walter Lundy. Walter Lundy ran a story—it was a series—on gays in Little Rock. I'm not saying it wasn't a good series—probably, it was very well written. I read quite a bit of it. But it was all over the front page. It had these two guys embracing on the front page, and what was hysterical is inside—well, one day, [there was a] photo of this couple with this child. One of the women worked here, and they didn't even know it. They ran it. But they said their phone system almost melted down over there.

JM: Yes.

EJ: And that hurt them. I mean, it hurt them.[00:35:38.25]

JM: What do you know about the Dillard's [department store] situation? What do you know about why Dillard's pulled out of the *Gazette* and when they had come to the *Democrat*? That's two different questions. [00:35:59.28]What do you know about why Dillard's pulled out of the *Gazette*?

EJ: Well, they found out—just like with us, they were told that nobody would ever have a lower rate. Now, that doesn't mean that no one can not have their rate. If they were willing to spend the same amount of money as Dillard's, they could have the same rate.

JM: Yes.

EJ: And that's what—you know, we had a contract with Dillard's for this much an

inch, and we told them, "No one will ever go below you." But it was very well known that someone could have that rate if they were willing to spend the same amount of money. The *Gazette* told them the same thing. Then they found out—and were shown proof—that there were people spending not even a thousandth of what Dillard's was spending that had gotten a lower rate.

JM: Oh.

EJ: When Mr. Bill Dillard—the old Bill Dillard—found out, he was incensed. Now, the word I always heard—that he did not like Hugh Patterson to start with, so this just kind of cinched it. I know when they brought in Craig Moon to be general manager, his job was to go resolve that, and he couldn't get it resolved. As a matter of fact, they said that some people from Dillard's told our people that he told them, "Well, my family will spend about \$15,000 a year on clothes. I sure would hate for you to lose that by not advertising with us." And we were thinking, "Boy, that really shook them up." [Laughs]

JM: Yes.

EJ: But that hurt them.

JM: Somebody told me that at that point Mr. Dillard said, "This meeting is over with." [Laughs]

EJ: "We'll call you. Don't call us, we'll call you."

JM: [Laughs] Yes.

EJ: And I think [those] were the parting words. That hurt the *Gazette* big time. Losing the revenue hurt them, but more than that, losing Dillard's hurt them.

JM: Yes.

EJ: Perception-wise, that was a tremendous blow.[00:37:52.06]

JM: Yes.

EJ: And I think it also sent a ripple effect. It had to have affected a lot of employees because you don't lose an account like that and not start thinking that things are going to happen. I hired some employees from there prior to us buying the assets [of the *Gazette*], and they said that the feeling over there is we would never win the war here because Gannett had all the money in the world. There was no way they were going to lose.

JM: Yes.

EJ: They might've been a little fearful before they sold because they lost the lawsuit, and things were really tense after that. But they thought, "When Gannett bought it, we've been saved."

JM: Yes.

EJ: Then they started getting a suspicion that wasn't going to save them.

JM: Yes. Did you do any kind of advertising to capitalize on the fact that Dillard's had dropped the *Gazette*?

EJ: No. I didn't. I don't think we did.

JM: Yes.

EJ: That wouldn't be something you'd do because I don't think Dillard's would like that, particularly.

JM: Yes. Okay.

EJ: It became pretty evident.

JM: Did you do any kind of advertising that you remember to capitalize on the fact that the *Gazette* lost the lawsuit?

EJ: No, not really. There was so much on the front pages that advertising would've

just been redundant. And that's not something that—we might've done something, but I don't think so, because I think that would've made us look like braggarts. I don't believe we did that. I don't.

JM: Okay. This will go back earlier—as a kid growing up around Salem and Searcy, which newspaper did you read then?

EJ: It's interesting. My grandparents took the paper, and they took both. They took the morning and the evening paper, so I grew up around both papers. Of course, when I was nine years old I had a route for the Citizen . . .

JM: In Searcy?

EJ: Yes. And I wasn't a typical kid . . .

JM: Yes.

EJ: . . . because my uncle worked at the Searcy paper, and my grandparents took three papers, and I lived right next door to them. So I was around newspapers all my life. It wasn't something that I felt—even in high school and college, the *Gazette* and the *Democrat* just had a place with me. It didn't matter. When I went to work as an adult is when I started—I think I was influenced by people who—like at the *Log Cabin Democrat*—had a place in their heart for the old *Democrat* because they didn't want to see it die off.

JM: Yes.

EJ: They remembered Mr. [K. August] Engel.

JM: Yes.

EJ: And they thought a lot of him and, of course, Mr. [J. N.] Heiskell and that crew. So there was always this reverence for both of them.

JM: Yes.

EJ: And then, again, when Walter bought it, everybody had a "let's wait and see" attitude. Then when Walter and Paul started shaking things up down here with an aggressive plan—and that was after the free want ads started. Prior to that, I don't think there was any attitude about it at all. But after that it started bothering people. I say that because, Jerry, I'd be at APA [Arkansas Press Association] meetings, and I'd hear them talking. They really—their world was being shook up, and they weren't ready for that.

JM: After Gannett sold the *Gazette's* assets to Walter, how did your advertising promotions and everything—what proceeded from there?

EJ: Okay. I think the first thing we felt we had to do is to get people to accept the fact that there was one paper, and they were getting the best of both. That was our central theme in advertising—"the best of both," because we knew that *Gazette* readers were not going to accept us with open arms in the beginning. It was a shock to them, even though there had been rumors flying. We overrate how much we are thought of as newspaper people, but we're only important if we're there on delivery time. But, still, we felt we had to get our case across that, you know, "You need to keep taking us because now you're getting the best of both newspapers. We're integrating and we're bringing people over." And that went on for a number of months. We were heavy TV advertisers up to that point, and so was the *Gazette*. That ceased because we no longer needed to be. I think the best line I ever heard was—Paul Smith said, "Yes, we spent a lot on TV because we want to talk to the *Gazette* reader. If the *Gazette* would let us advertise with them, we'd never use TV." [Laughs] When that happened—and it was really interesting—the second we cut off TV and radio [advertising], the [laughs] TV and radio

people went from being really nice to us to just absolutely vicious toward us.

[Laughs] They started attacking us, trying to take business away. But mainly we changed directions on calming down the rhetoric and started acting like a really solid, good newspaper. I hate to say that because it sounds like we were starting to become what the *Gazette* was, and that wasn't the case at all. We were still going to be aggressive, but we were not going to do it—there wasn't a need to have to do it the way we'd done it before because we no longer had to be screaming from the rooftops, "We're bigger. We have more, more, more, and more."

JM: Yes.

EJ: That wasn't necessary anymore. We had to start selling the fact that we were a very good newspaper. And today—it has carried through even today. When we win awards, I know before the ink is dry, I'm already doing house ads promoting the fact that we won this award, we won that award, because we want to people to think, "Well, hey, I'm taking a good newspaper." And I think they are right now. But that's where I think our attitude changed from having to scream at people, so to speak, that "We're good. We're bigger. We're better." The fact is you've got one of the better papers in this part of the United States. And we've proven it by being voted the best two out of five years in the Dallas Press Club—the Katy Awards.

JM: Yes.

EJ: We've won some really high-powered awards, and that's been our focus. And also our focus on household penetration—you know, we led the nation three years, I believe, in our metro market as far as household penetration.

JM: Yes.

EJ: That's basically to the advertiser, though.

JM: That's pretty significant, also.

EJ: It is.

JM: Yes.

EJ: Very much so.

JM: I just asked Paul this—what was their thinking in having an in-house agency promoting, particularly doing the TV ads and everything?

EJ: Well, one is we felt like—of course, I was brought in to do it.

JM: Yes.

EJ: And I think it was fortunate for Paul [laughs] and fortunate for me, and I hope fortunate for Paul and Walter—we could move faster . . .

JM: Okay.

EJ: . . . because we didn't have to explain why we wanted to do this. We all were newspaper people.

JM: Yes.

EJ: We had all been around newspapers since we were very young, so we could even do shorthand. We didn't have to say a lot of words.

JM: Yes.

EJ: Sometimes Paul and I would be writing the commercial on the way to the studio, because he would be there quite often—not all the time, but quite often. With an ad agency, no matter how good they were, they would want to do things a certain way to make—you know, they wanted to be proud of their commercial . . .

JM: Yes.

EJ: . . . and the message would get lost. And the *Gazette*—if you go back and look at

a lot of their commercials, the message almost got lost with all the glitz and the glamour and the smoke and the mirrors. Our theory was, "We have a message. We want to say it as clearly and as succinctly as we can." We might have things going on in the commercial that added a little bit to it visually, but not a lot because we never wanted to lose sight that we wanted you to understand what we were trying to tell you.

JM: Yes.

EJ: With an ad agency, well . . .

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

EJ: . . . come up with an idea, let's say, hypothetically, on Monday I could call Dallas to the talent agency and have our guy up here Tuesday morning. Wednesday I'm going to the TV studios with a finished commercial. That was really important. Speed was of essence because, again, we didn't have the luxury of waiting. If we had something to say, it was important enough to get it out there, and get it out there fast. And we could do that because we didn't have to educate someone on—not the whole commercial, but maybe enough points that it just kind of kept you bogged down. Expense was another thing. To be honest with you, we didn't have a lot of money to get an agency involved—and I'm going to be hypothetical again, but if I could do a commercial for \$10,000—if I had an agency involved, it's going to be more like \$20,000 to \$25,000.

JM: Oh, okay.

EJ: So, you know, it just didn't make economic sense, and it didn't make sense from the standpoint of expediency and knowledge of the product.

JM: You're having to pay them a fee for doing the commercial.

EJ: For doing their job, almost. [Laughs]

JM: Yes. Yes.

EJ: We'd have to hold their hand through a lot of it.

JM: Yes.

EJ: I mean, there's some pretty sharp people out there in the agency business, but, still, we could do it better than they could and faster. They may look glitzier, but we weren't willing to pay for that.

JM: Yes. Okay. Why did you go to Dallas to do some of your commercials?

EJ: Well, the two I told you about.

JM: Secrecy?

EJ: Secrecy.

JM: Okay.

EJ: Because, you know, they were trying to keep secret about breaking with their free want ads, and we did not want them to have any inkling that we were going to do that or contest them.

JM: Yes.

EJ: And I'm sure it caught them off guard . . .

JM: Yes.

EJ: . . . because there was no way they were going to know about it.

JM: Okay. And I assume that since he was so intimately involved, that some of these ideas for the direction of the ads would come from Paul Smith.

EJ: Yes, a lot of them.

JM: Yes.

EJ: A lot of them. Absolutely.

JM: Yes, because Paul was intimately involved in advertising and a lot of other things, too. [00:50:12.07] How big a factor do you think it was in the outcome of the war—the *Gazette* losing that lawsuit?

EJ: You know, it's interesting. I think when they lost the lawsuit it showed a lot of people they were not invincible. Of course, it's our understanding that Mr. Patterson was advised over and over and over, "Don't do this," but he was determined—I think he became so focused on destroying Walter more than anything, that he wouldn't listen to reason. But I think he realized when he lost it, he had lost.

JM: Yes.

EJ: And he was afraid that Walter was going to pass him, and all evidence showed that the way our circulation was going—we had already passed him on Sunday . . .

JM: Yes.

EJ: . . . and we were catching him on daily, and that would've been the tough thing. And I think he felt at that time he had to get—you know, sell the paper. But I think it—I don't know how much circulation they would've lost over that or they did lose over it, but I think, perception wise, it showed—let's just go with the advertiser side. The advertiser looked up and said, "Things are changing, and I'm not going to be bullied or intimidated or whatever by the *Gazette* anymore because they don't have the power." The thing is, quite honestly—and it's a well-known fact—they pretty much had the advertiser over a barrel. The advertiser sometimes couldn't get an ad in if they were one minute late because the *Gazette* had that kind of power. And all of a sudden they started losing that grip. I think

Hugh Patterson just said, "I don't need to fight this anymore. I don't want to fight this."

JM: I've been told that I guess in their advertising department that they just sort of wrote the rules the way they wanted them, and they just didn't bow down to anybody.

EJ: No.

JM: They just said, "No, you've got to do it our way."

EJ: "Our way or forget it." And they were very—I guess I've been dancing around this word—they were arrogant.

JM: Yes.

EJ: They were really arrogant.

JM: Are you particularly talking about advertising now?

EJ: Advertising, yes—well, at the whole paper.

JM: Oh, okay.

EJ: The *Gazette*. Yes, the whole paper, but their advertising people especially.

JM: Okay.

EJ: But not especially—I mean, a lot of their newsroom was that way. But it was instilled over there, that "We're the best. Nobody can touch us." We would go to a—let's say—and I can think of one in particular—the Arkansas Furniture Association. That's not the correct name, but it's a furniture organization. We'd go to a lot of things like that where no matter what happened, we were there in force. I would go to these. Our advertising staff and I would go with them because we were not going to let them take one step without us. But when we would be there, they would say very arrogant things where we could hear them. They'd want us

to hear them. So, you know, we just would grin about it because we were focused on what we had to do.

JM: Yes.

EJ: I think they spent too much time trying to intimidate us—maybe that was part of it—but they lost focus on what their job was.[00:53:44.17]

JM: Yes. If the *Gazette*—and part of this would've been before you ever came to the paper, and I've heard this thesis from elsewhere—if the *Gazette* had responded more quickly to the challenge from the *Democrat*, would they either still be in business or possibly even won the war themselves?

EJ: I think where the *Gazette* should've—they could've put the *Democrat* away before Walter bought it, but they—again, it's like sometimes it's better to have your competition right where you want them . . .

JM: Yes.

EJ: . . . [where?] no one else can come in. You've got on there, and you know how—you're not going to be hurt by them. But I think if they had jumped on Walter right at the beginning—I mean, poured it on—but they would've had to have brought a whole crew in that was aggressive, and that's what they didn't have. It's hard to be aggressive if you've never had to be. If you work in any newspaper for any period of time and you've never had to be aggressive, you can't turn it on all of a sudden. It won't work.

JM: Yes.

EJ: And that's what got them in trouble. I mean, from the top on town—they could sit over there and talk about, "Well, they can't touch us. We're the *Gazette*," et cetera, et cetera, and you still—and you let Walter grow up over here, you're going to

lose it.

JM: Yes.

EJ: I mean, the chances are you're going to lose it. I think the *Gazette*—if they had had somebody aggressive managing it—I mean, if Hugh had brought in a general manager who would shape it up and bring in some really fire-eating guys and women, they would've put Walter out because Walter had to overcome a lot of difficulties here before he ever even really got the paper going.

JM: I think, also, that maybe even when he had some people over there who wanted to do things different, Hugh kept vetoing them . . .

EJ: Oh, yes.

JM: . . . that they wanted to be more aggressive and respond, and in some cases he kept vetoing them.

EJ: As I understand it, it was very frustrating over there.

JM: Yes. Okay. Is there anything that you can think of that we haven't covered? Is there anything that you want to add that you particularly remember about . . .?

EJ: No. No, not really. I tell you, I was almost at times like an outsider because I had to listen to everybody and because sometimes I had to bring it all down and do advertising for different departments.

JM: Yes.

EJ: But it's been a—I say this in all honesty—I've been very privileged to have lived through it, and I mean that literally. [Laughs]

JM: Yes.

EJ: I mean, there were days I guess we wondered if the doors were going to open.

JM: Yes.

EJ: But this has been an experience that very few people get to experience in our business.

JM: Yes. An unusual war and an unusual outcome.

EJ: Exactly.

JM: Yes.

EJ: I don't think anybody would've been unwise not to put money on us, and that says a lot for Walter Hussman.

JM: Yes.

EJ: It really does—and Paul Smith, two men that I admire greatly.

JM: Okay. I appreciate it. As I understand, you're retiring today.

EJ: Today.

JM: Okay. And this is the afternoon on July the thirty-first, your last day at the *Democrat-Gazette*.

EJ: Exactly. It's almost like a debriefing, Jerry. [Laughter]

JM: Yes, and I appreciate you taking the time to do this.

EJ: Well, thank you.

JM: And I can just say welcome to the club.

EJ: [Laughs]

JM: It's been a lot of fun being retired, but now I'm not completely retired anymore, but I'm enjoying what I'm doing. It's sort of like fun.

EJ: Yes.

JM: But, at any rate, I do appreciate your cooperation.

EJ: Thank you. Thank you.

JM: Okay. [00:57:37.10]

[End of Interview]

[Transcribed by Cheri Pearce]