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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with

Lynda Zimmer Straw
Little Rock, Arkansas
4 July 2005

Interviewer: Brenda Tirey

Brenda Tirey: [This is] Brenda Tirey. It is July 4, 2005. I'm in the living room of my home in Little Rock, Arkansas, preparing to interview Lynda Zimmer Straw for the [Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History's] *Arkansas Democrat* oral history project. Lynda, you have signed a release for the University of Arkansas. Is that correct?

Lynda Straw: Yes, it is.

BT: Just tell me about yourself first. Where were you born?

LS: I was born and grew up in Tucson, Arizona. I went all through school and to the University of Arizona.

BT: And where is that, all in Tucson?

LS: All in Tucson.

BT: What did your mother and father do in Tucson?

LS: My father was an engineer, and my mother was the manager of an insurance company.

BT: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

LS: I have one younger sister named Viki.

BT: How did you decide that newspaper journalism was the career for you?

LS: Oh, I wanted to be a journalist ever since I was in fifth grade. I helped put out one of those purple print mimeographed newspapers in fifth grade. I just decided that was the most wonderful thing: to ask people questions and be nosy and write down their answers.

BT: This was part of a school project? You were in elementary school when you were doing that?

LS: Yes.

BT: Did you take journalism courses later in public school and in college?

LS: Yes. I just always knew what I wanted to do, so in high school I was on the newspaper staff and the yearbook staff. I became the yearbook editor and went to Northwestern University Journalism School Chicago one summer, just because I knew [that] I wanted to do it. I got lots of scholarships and opportunities to continue with it.

BT: You got a bachelor's degree in journalism. Is that correct?

LS: Yes, from the University of Arizona in Tucson, in 1968.

BT: What did you do after you got your degree?

BT: Well, [during] my senior year in college I worked at the local morning newspaper, the *Arizona Daily Star*, full-time. I also had been on the school newspaper as a paid editor. I did a newsletter for a rural electric cooperative, so I did a lot of journalism things like that while I was still in school. My first job out of school was with the Associated Press [AP] Bureau in Phoenix, Arizona.

BT: And what did you do for them?

LS: I was the broadcast editor. I would write up the news in short sentences for radio

stations. They called it “rip and read.” The radio station announcers would just rip it off the wire and read it right onto the air. That’s where I met my future husband, Robert Zimmer. He was doing the same thing. He had the job on the night schedule that I had on the day schedule.

BT: How long did you work there?

LS: I was there about a year. By then, I was engaged to Robert. They needed someone down at the Tucson bureau of the AP, so I went to work there for about six months while he was at [U.S.] Air Force basic training. I moved back home with my folks and worked at the Tucson AP bureau at a time when there was a lot of Mafia in Tucson, and things were getting blown up. It was quite an exciting time to be working in journalism.

BT: What were you doing at the Tucson bureau?

LS: Here, again, with the AP we mostly just rewrote newspaper copy, and didn’t get out to cover a lot.

BT: So you were a rewrite person?

LS: That’s pretty much how the AP operated back then.

BT: Did you have to call people and get additional information, or [did] you just rewrite and send it out?

LS: Yes, frequently, and the New York office would always call with more questions about the Mafia things.

BT: Was that the only job you held before you came to Little Rock? When did you get married? When did you marry Robert?

LS: Well, Robert and I got married in September of 1969, and that's when he got his first assignment with the air force. He was a military journalist, and his assignment was Little Rock Air Force Base. So we moved to Jacksonville, Arkansas, right after Christmas of 1969.

BT: Jacksonville, Arkansas, is near where Little Rock Air Force Base is located.

LS: Right.

BT: Did you start looking for work right away?

LS: Yes. We were on a very limited income. He was enlisted in the military, and we just barely had enough to rent a place. I went downtown to try to get a job with the AP, where I had worked previously, but they didn't have any openings, so I just walked right next door to the *Arkansas Democrat* building.

BT: This was in downtown Little Rock?

LS: Yes. January 1970.

BT: Did you have an interview scheduled or anything, or did you just walk in cold off the street?

LS: I can't remember if I called first. John Robert Starr was the AP bureau director at that point in time. And, as bureau chief, he might have told me to go next door, or he might have told me to try both newspapers. I just remember the *Democrat* being right next door, and the quickest and easiest. I [laughs] was very anxious for a job. I remember going there the same day.

BT: Did you know anything about the Little Rock newspapers before you had come here? Had you formed any ideas about them before you came into that job?

LS: No. I had no idea about them.

BT: What happened when you came next door to the *Democrat*?

LS: Gene Foreman was the managing editor. Ralph Patrick was the city editor. They were the two who interviewed me. I just remember them smiling a lot and being impressed with the previous experience I had, and I was hired right away. My first day was January 26.

BT: What were you hired to do? What was the *Democrat* like then, and what were you hired to do?

LS: They hired me to learn about city hall. Bob Ferguson, who was covering both Little Rock and North Little Rock city halls at the time, was my teacher. The *Democrat* was in this old decrepit former YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association] building. We had desks out on where the basketball court used to be, and there were old tiles on the floor and all these old wooden desks. Five or six years later they sold off all the wooden desks, and I bought a bunch of them, but then I thought they looked pretty antequy. The women's restroom frequently didn't even have a light bulb in it that worked. It was just a very rustic newsroom, something like you'd see in the movies of the 1930s.

BT: Did you work in that newsroom, or did you go work in the city halls?

LS: We spent most of our time in those days in little offices in the buildings we covered. Bob Ferguson would take me over to city hall. But the first rule every day was we'd go eat breakfast at Walgreens drugstore. George Douthit, the state capitol reporter, told me that was what to do. It was just down the street on the

corner. George Douthit, who had been there for years, and Bob Sallee, who was on the police beat, and Bob Ferguson—those are the three guys I remember most who would go. They'd say, "The first thing we always do, Lynda, is go down and eat breakfast at Walgreens." I thought it was very strange, since we were an evening newspaper, that we didn't just kind of hustle up and get the news in the morning, but . . .

BT: Since the *Democrat* was an evening newspaper, what was your deadline?

LS: I can't even remember. We ate breakfast, then we came back. Most people would rewrite things that had already been in the [*Arkansas*] *Gazette*. It was kind of a let-down for me. I thought, "Boy, this is just not real journalism."

BT: Did you bring in things from the day before that you had done at city hall? You said you were in little offices in the city hall, but did you actually cover things in the city hall and do your own stories, too?

LS: Seems to me we had typewriters in our offices there, and I wasn't at Little Rock City Hall for very long. They decided after just a few weeks to leave Bob Ferguson at Little Rock City Hall, and let me cover North Little Rock exclusively. So I went over to a little office in North Little Rock. They had an office for the *Gazette* and the *Democrat*, and typewriters there. I'd do most of my work right at city hall.

BT: Would you call it in? How did you get it to the *Democrat*, just carry—hand-deliver it?

LS: Sometimes I'd stand out on the street if we were right on deadline. I remember

standing at the pay telephone on the corner, so the *Gazette* reporter would not hear me, and calling in a lot of stories to meet deadline. Other things, like city council meetings at night, of course, the *Gazette* would have the story first. I would just go in the next morning and write up my version of it for the evening newspaper.

BT: I assume you didn't get to eat breakfast at Walgreens after you started working full-time in the city hall itself. Did that stop?

LS: Oh, I believe it was when Bob McCord came in as editor. Somebody finally put out a very stern memo that we were supposed to write some news stories before going to Walgreens. And I thought, "Well, this is more like it. This is more like working for a *real* newspaper."

BT: When you went to North Little Rock City Hall, what kinds of things were going on there?

LS: Well, of course, early on I met the infamous [William F.] "Casey" Laman, who was mayor at the time. I guess he thought I would just be like another daughter of his. He was just so sweet at first, and he wanted to take me on a tour of the city. He took me all over and showed me this and showed me that. Even early on, he was very interested in creating parks. I was pretty naive, and I'd say, "Well, how do you get permission to do this or that?" And several times that day, he'd say, "Well, I'm just the head nigger here! I can do whatever I *want!*" And [I], being a non-southern girl, went right back to the office and quoted him as saying he was "the head nigger" in North Little Rock. So, from then on, he didn't like me—he

didn't trust me. He never expected me to write that.

BT: What did he tell you after that? Did he get a reaction to it? Was there public reaction to his saying that, that you're aware of—anyone publicly criticizing him?

LS: I just started right in doing kind of investigative things. I had a very good source early on who told me to check out things in the financial records. I found out, for example, that they were buying furnishings for city hall out of Casey's family furniture shop across the street without any bids. After I did a few stories like that, Casey just forbade me to talk to any of the department heads. And he forbade any of them to talk to me.

BT: So how did you do your job, then?

LS: Oh, I found out things. People who felt sorry for me told me things on the outside, and I still could check financial records. I still found plenty of stories because there were plenty of characters in North Little Rock.

BT: Did Casey ever get more kindly toward you again, or did his hostility just continue throughout the time you were there?

LS: No, it just got worse and worse. I was able to break the story when—they were trying to rebuild a lot of things in North Little Rock with federal money. HUD [Housing and Urban Development] got wind of some of his deals, and cut North Little Rock out of all the funding for that. I broke that story. One of Casey's best friends, John Blodgett, was on the planning commission, I believe. One time Casey and John went off to a convention of some sort for "city business," but there was word that they had spent a lot of city money doing other things. I

learned a very important lesson in journalism that time. I called up John Blodgett and said, “Well, what did you do while you were at that meeting?” And he said, “Well, you know, we went to the meeting one day, but after that, boy, we just played golf. We went out to swimming pools. We had a condo on the beach.” He just told me everything they did, and the city money they spent. So that was another rough time with Casey, who was really upset and didn’t want all that in the newspaper, of course.

BT: How did you get along with John Blodgett after that? Did he regret telling that to you?

LS: Well, I don’t believe he ever spoke to me after that. It was amazing. These officials just didn’t expect their comments to be in the newspaper.

BT: When a reporter would ask them questions, what do you think they were used to? Do you think Casey expected you to just say what he wanted you to say? Did he ever outline that for you?

LS: Yes, he just apparently thought I would toe the line and present him in a good light. And when he finally decided not to run for reelection, I remember he scheduled a very private announcement of it about an hour before the city council meeting. He invited John Woodruff, my competition at the *Arkansas Gazette*. So, of course, he got the story first that Casey was not going to go for reelection. Casey had set that all up so I wouldn’t get the scoop.

BT: Since you were still an afternoon paper, was there any way you would have gotten the scoop? Even if he had announced it at the city council meeting, you wouldn’t

have gotten it, either.

LS: Well, that's true. That's true. But he was always trying to do things on the *Gazette* time after *Democrat* deadlines, so I would have to come in late on it. There were a lot of other characters in those days at North Little Rock, though. There was an alderman named John O. May, who was quite well known. I remember one of these stories, calling it in from the telephone booth on the corner. There was some problem with John May and the airport manager. They were going to fire the airport manager. I got there and found out they were having a hearing on this, and they hadn't invited the press. I just guessed off the top of my head what was going on, and I said to the airport manager, "Well, was there a *gun* involved?" And he looked very startled. He said, "Well, yes, as a matter of fact, there was. I guess I threatened him with a gun," meaning John May. I can't remember the airport manager's name. So that's when I ran right out and called in the story from the corner phone booth.

BT: The airport manager was fired by John O. May, or by Casey, or by someone else?

LS: Probably the whole city council or the airport commission. Then John O. May was also indicted for, of all things, performing illegal abortions in his garage. There was a trial I covered on that. His alibi for the particular case they were trying was that on that particular night, he was off staying at a trailer with his girlfriend, who was named Dixie. The way the headline came out, it intimated that they had been sleeping together in this trailer, and he just had a fit about that. He said that they weren't really sleeping together, they were in separate rooms in

that trailer, but it was still his alibi. I believed he sued the *Democrat* over that, and, much to my chagrin, I think they gave him some money for besmirching his reputation. Mind you, he was already married at this time, and he was being tried for doing illegal abortions, but he sure didn't want it intimated in the newspaper that he might have been sleeping with his girlfriend.

BT: Tell me what North Little Rock looked like then.

LS: It was kind of a sleepy little town. It was definitely an underdog to Little Rock. There was just a lot of political wheeling and dealing, payoffs on deals to get things built, and it was kind of like the Wild West of Arkansas.

BT: And Casey was the boss. Is what Casey wanted usually what happened in North Little Rock?

LS: Yes. And he was a good leader because of all his work on the parks and the park district centers, which is what North Little Rock became known for. But he went about a lot of development in the town in kind of a closed, backroom way.

BT: How long did you work at [covering] the North Little Rock City Hall?

LS: I was there for about three years. During that time, we had these desks pushed together at the *Democrat* whenever we were in the office. My seat mates were Brenda Tirey, who became one of my best-ever friends—she sat right across from me—and Martin Kirby. And back in those days, we all shared one telephone.

BT: Yes.

LS: Brenda and I were usually angry because Martin was on the telephone all the time, but that's how we all met each other and stayed friends over the years. I

would go in the office sometimes to type, and it was very difficult to get a handle on a telephone. Oh, I wanted to tell you about one other North Little Rock character. There was a policeman named Monte Montgomery who complicated my life once. He had been accused of crawling in a neighbor's window and raping the neighbor's daughter. Her father came home early and apparently took a gun and shot at whoever the rapist was. Monte Montgomery claimed it wasn't him, but the story was later that he went to a veterinarian and had the bullet taken out of his backside and replaced with a different caliber bullet so that he could claim that he was wounded when he was hunting. That was another case that kind of led me from the North Little Rock City Hall beat to the courthouse. Because there were so many illegal things going on, I was at the courthouse covering North Little Rock people a lot.

BT: Did anything ever happen to Monte Montgomery? What was the resolution of that? Do you recall?

LS: I don't recall, but he was another person who was trying to sue me and the *Democrat* for defamation of character or—some lawsuit that he was upset about. I was late leaving on a trip back to my home state because of all that. It got very complicated. By then, it was 1973. Dianne Gage, one of our other reporters, was leaving to go to the *Arkansas Gazette*, so that's when they transferred me to the courthouse.

[Tape Stopped]

BT: As I recall, at the *Democrat* then, some of the editors decided that for everyone to

change beats ever so often was a good idea—that we ought to not stay too long in one job or we'd get burned out on sources, or too close to sources. Something like that. Do you recall that?

LS: I just remember they needed somebody to go to the courthouse because Dianne was leaving. She used to handle federal and county courthouse [coverage], and the *Gazette* hired her, so the *Democrat* needed someone else to go over there. I had already covered several trials because of [all the things going on at] North Little Rock, so I was sent to the courthouse. It was a difficult, competitive situation because she and George Bentley were both working over there for the *Gazette*, and he had a great deal of experience in the courthouse field. And there I was, competing against both of them.

BT: What was that like? What was the *Democrat* like, other than being an afternoon paper, which gave the *Gazette* a competitive edge on any of the afternoon and evening stories? The *Democrat* deadlines were when? Around noon or something? Was that when you had to have your stories done?

LS: It seems to me that maybe the final deadline was 1:00 at the latest. I was very competitive, and I did get some scoops. I think a lot of the *Gazette* people then, because their newspaper was better thought of, and they had more reporters—maybe got just a little lazy at the job. I just tried harder to find out things.

BT: Can you recall any of your other scoops in North Little Rock?

LS: Not offhand.

BT: At the courthouse, what was that like? Other than having two reporters, one of

them with a long experience there—were you covering government and trials and judicial and legislative matters?

LS: Yes, there was the quorum court.

BT: What was the quorum court?

LS: That was the county government legislative body. For years they had talked about changing that, but the county judge, who was Frank Mackey at the time, would convene this quorum court. There were hundreds of people on the court voting on trivial things. On a daily basis I would have to go to Judge Mackey's office and ask what was going on, cover the quorum court, cover the circuit courts, which [had] both criminal and civil divisions. Then we had the chancery courts, which we didn't cover so much. They handled mostly divorces and adoptions—that sort of thing. But then the federal courthouse was a different building, so you'd have to keep tabs on that, too.

BT: That was considered part of your beat, as well as the county courthouse?

LS: At first it was, and it was difficult to cover everything because if there was a well-known trial you couldn't get to other things.

BT: Did the *Gazette* have another reporter at the federal courthouse?

LS: Jerol Garrison was there.

BT: Another longtime *Gazette* reporter.

LS: Another longtime reporter. So, come to think of it, I was competing against *three* *Gazette* reporters in two buildings. But I believe I spent most of the time at the county courthouse because there were a lot of interesting trials there. If you

covered a trial for two or three days, it was difficult to keep up with the other divisions or the other building.

BT: Did you have to work a lot of overtime when you were at the *Democrat*?

LS: Yes, and they didn't really want to pay overtime. At one point, it came down to only working three to four days a week—very long days—to cover things. And they'd want you to take a day off, rather than pay overtime.

BT: Did you ever get paid at all for overtime?

LS: I don't believe so.

BT: It was all comp time.

LS: Right.

BT: That must have been kind of wearing.

LS: Well, we were young and enthusiastic about doing it. At least I was. It didn't bother me. I didn't have any children. I'd always be working until 9:00 Friday night on my Sunday story. We just weren't clock watchers.

BT: And Sunday stories—you were expected to do daily things and then special stories for Sunday's edition?

LS: Yes. Sunday was always something longer and more investigative.

BT: Do you recall any stories at the courthouse that you particularly had a scoop on or did very well on?

LS: Yes. Well, one of the most fun stories was when they started a pornographic, or X-rated, movie theater in North Little Rock. Casey was really making a show against it. He built a chain-link fence right in the middle of the sidewalk about six

inches from the front door of the place so that it would be difficult for people to get into it.

BT: Six inches?

LS: Yes, just right in the sidewalk so people couldn't get into the place. Then, Judge [William J.] Kirby in circuit court had a hearing on whether some of these films were really pornographic or not. He was an older judge who fell asleep during most hearings, but when he did the porno trial, he required that they take down the American flag because he didn't want the flag in his courtroom when these movies were being shown. As soon as the lights would go out, every secretary and every clerk in the whole courthouse would leave their desks and go running to the courtroom to watch these movies.

BT: What was the outcome of that trial? Do you recall? The place is no longer in North Little Rock. Did it have to close or just go out of business?

LS: I don't recall what happened to the place, but it certainly was made difficult for them to do business.

BT: And it certainly caused a stir at the courthouse, it sounds like.

LS: Yes, it was fun.

BT: Was that your last assignment at the *Arkansas Democrat*, covering the courthouse? Did you do other things as well?

LS: Well, no. Here, again, since we weren't paid overtime, and we were paid not very well, one of the things that happened at around that time, in the mid-1970s, was that some of us reporters decided to form a union. I remember working on it a lot

with Dan Farley, and we hired Phil Kaplan as the lawyer. We were trying to affiliate with the printers union at the newspapers.

BT: The International Typographical Union.

LS: Right. We were particularly concerned about an older woman at the newspaper named Bobbie Forster, who had [been] business editor for a long time. We found out that she was making less money than a lot of us young reporters. There were no pensions or anything like that at the *Democrat*. So we started this union movement. Bobbie Forster ended up being on the management's side, even though her pay was very low. Some of us who were leading the union movement immediately got raises. They were trying to discourage us from continuing with this union movement.

BT: Were you one of them [who received a raise]?

LS: Yes. I remember Ralph Patrick pushing something across the desk, and it was a \$12 raise.

BT: A week?

LS: I can't remember. It probably was a week [Laughs] back then. But I remember both Dan and I getting raises in hopes we'd stop this union.

BT: What was Dan Farley's job at the newspaper?

LS: I'm not sure.

BT: Was he a reporter?

LS: Yes, he was a reporter, but I'm not sure what he covered. Do you think it was education?

BT: I don't recall, either. What were salaries like at the *Democrat*? Did you feel like they were just pitifully low? Did you have any idea? Were people ever allowed to discuss salaries at the *Democrat*?

LS: I just remember they were low, but I cannot tell you what they were. I just can't recall. By then, my husband gotten out of the air force, and he had gone back to work for AP next door. And without any children—I mean, we weren't really hurting with two salaries and no children, but I cannot recall what the actual salary was.

BT: It seemed the Associated Press reporters did make quite a bit more.

LS: Yes, he made more. It seems to me back then it was something like \$300 a week, and we were making quite a bit less at the *Democrat*.

BT: What was the outcome of the union effort?

LS: It was voted down.

BT: Did you continue to work at the courthouse?

LS: I can't remember the timing of this.

[Tape Stopped]

LS: Well, talking about scoops at the courthouse, I remember one story. Roger Mears was head of the election commission. Georgia Sells was working for him, and she was a social friend of mine. Roger was running for county judge, and he got all of his employees on the election commission one time to spend their lunch hour outdoors at the courthouse handing out political material for him. So I wrote a story about that because as public employees they weren't supposed to be doing

that. Georgia told me years later that Roger came up to her and said, “Why did that get in the paper? I thought Lynda Zimmer was a *friend* of yours!”

BT: And Roger Mears was elected county judge.

LS: Yes, he eventually was elected.

BT: Anything else about the courthouse? Was the courthouse also a place where they had a press room where the reporters actually worked in a room in the courthouse and did a lot of their work there?

SL: Yes, I worked right up in a turret. All three of us had desks up there—Dianne Gage and George Bentley. It was a turret with that old bent glass. I would make phone calls there if they weren’t in the room, but I would more frequently go back to the newspaper to write my stories if I had anything exclusive. One of the more interesting stories I worked on was about Susan McMillan, a woman who was accused of killing several husbands with arsenic poisoning. Her only case that came to trial was dismissed because Sandy McMath, one of the prosecuting attorneys, sent off all of the material from one of her husband’s graves for an arsenic test. They messed up the test somehow, and there was nothing left to test, so they had no proof of arsenic. The whole case was dismissed.

BT: Sandy McMath—was he a deputy prosecuting attorney?

LS: Yes. He was working with Jim Guy Tucker. So I got an exclusive interview with Susan McMillan, who invited me to her home. By then, she had remarried again, and I realized I was sitting at her kitchen table drinking coffee and eating ice cream, two of the things she was accused of putting the arsenic poisoning in.

That was a memorable thing.

BT: Okay. Did Susan McMillan think she'd been wrongly accused, that she was just defending herself?

LS: Oh, yes. She thought she was wrongly accused. I know some nuns in town housed her and her son for a while. She was a very attractive woman. She looked like Elizabeth Taylor, but she was accused of killing several husbands. Speaking of killing spouses, another courthouse investigation I did was very interesting. The circuit judges hired a public defender by the name of John Achor. Achor was hired from Florida to be the public defender, and no one at the Pulaski County Courthouse checked out his background. We got a tip from a newspaper reporter in Florida that he had quite a colorful background, so I spent a great deal of time researching records and on the telephone. I broke a major story that down in Florida he had been accused of killing one of his wives, who supposedly choked on a piece of cheese when they were out on a rural road. He reportedly had Mafia ties, and one of his wives was seen wearing stolen jewelry. I turned up quite a bit of information about John Achor. There were many, many meetings at the courthouse, but the judges who had hired him never did penalize him or fire him.

[Tape Stopped]

BT: Is there anything else from your courthouse years that you especially remember that was going on in that time?

LS: Well, I was pulled off the courthouse beat to do some work with national politics.

It is probably the most important thing I ever did in journalism. I was assigned to

cover [Senator] Bill [J. William] Fulbright, and Gary Rice was assigned to cover Dale Bumpers when they went up against each other to run for the U.S. Senate.

BT: And this was in 1974?

LS: Yes. Fulbright had been in there so many years, and was so respected. He was considered just a shoo-in for the office. Jerry McConnell was our managing editor by then, and he had a different idea for covering the campaign. Previously, we reporters would follow the candidates around—report on their stump speeches, which were the same everywhere. Jerry McConnell just proposed that we stay at home [and] do a lot of investigation into their fund-raising practices. This is when Dale Bumpers wanted to appeal to the common man and announced that he would accept only very small contributions from individuals, while Fulbright was collecting large amounts from political action groups out of state. So we reported how the finances differed.

BT: Did you cover both of them?

LS: No. I covered strictly Fulbright, and Gary covered Bumpers. Our stories would run side by side on who was raising money where on a day-to-day basis. We just did a lot of behind-the-scenes investigating on the fund-raising. Fulbright was also using some campaign literature, I believe, that was not printed by union employees. There were also allegations from many people out in rural areas that they were paid to get voters to the polls in the past to vote for him. And, ultimately, Senator Fulbright was defeated.

BT: He had been a very respected senator up to that point.

LS: Oh, yes—very well-known nationally and internationally, also. I remember the night he conceded defeat, he really blamed the *Arkansas Democrat* for defeating him and not covering the real issues of the campaign—meaning the speeches. I also did quite a bit of coverage of Wilbur Mills, who was Speaker of the House, and a very powerful national political figure who decided to run for president at one point.

BT: He was chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, right?

LS: Oh, that's right. It was the House Ways and Means Committee. It was not Speaker of the House. This was around the time he was drinking too much, and was involved with Fanne Foxe, the Argentine firecracker.

BT: Wasn't she was a strip-tease dancer?

LS: Yes. Yes. It was quite a scandal, but he was just drinking so much that he wasn't sure what he was doing. There was a story about her jumping out of his limousine one night into the river there . . .

BT: The Washington Tidal Basin.

LS: Right. The Tidal Basin in Washington, DC. I asked him about his affairs at one big news conference back in Little Rock, and even the other reporters were shocked that I had brought it up. Back in those days it was an unwritten law that you didn't ask the politicians about their sexual escapades, but I was not shy, and I asked about that.

BT: Do you recall what he said? Did he respond?

LS: Oh, he came back with some sort of smart reply. I'll have to look up that story.

Something about he didn't know—he kind of turned it around about whether his wife was having an affair or not. He was trying to make a joke out of it.

BT: Then you were taken off the courthouse beat just to do special projects and things like that for the rest of your time at the *Democrat*?

LS: Right. Well, I eventually went back to the courthouse. I quit in 1976, and the reason was the *Democrat* was doing so badly. We had so few reporters, our circulation was going down, and they asked me if I could just not cover trials, and call the attorneys at night and ask what was said in court in order to do stories.

BT: You mean, stories like your investigative stories?

LS: Stories just about trials going on, rather than cover them. Here, again, I was one person against three, and if I would cover a trial, then I'd have to take off Monday or Friday. Well, they wanted me to work every day, but just kind of do a half-wit job of it by calling attorneys at night. I just couldn't do that. It was too much of a compromise of reporting integrity. So I quit in 1976.

BT: What did you do then?

LS: I stayed home for a year. After that, my husband was transferred from Associated Press Little Rock Bureau to open a bureau in Champaign, Illinois. So, in 1977, we moved up to Champaign, Illinois.

BT: Do you remember if you left the *Democrat* in 1976 in the spring or summer?

LS: I believe it was in the spring or early summer, because I had a full year at home before we moved.

BT: Did you miss journalism? Did you miss the routine of daily reporting?

LS: I did. When we got up to Champaign, there were two newspapers. Robert was the first AP person who had ever worked there. He had an office in both newspapers, and he'd be at one in the morning and one in the afternoon. He asked me not to work in journalism because they all kind of thought he was a spy taking information from both newspapers. It would have been very awkward if I had worked for one. The morning newspaper, the *Courier Urbana*, in Urbana, eventually folded. By then, I had gotten busy as a volunteer working with foreign exchange students. And I worked at a travel agency. I did not go back to journalism until Robert died very unexpectedly in 1992 of a heart attack. In 1993, I needed to support myself, so I went to work for *The News-Gazette*, the surviving newspaper in Champaign, Illinois, where I still work. I've been there eleven years now.

BT: What do you do for the Champaign *News Gazette*?

LS: I'm on the features staff. I do three columns a week: a consumer column, a food column, and the restaurant review column. I do the religion page, and I do many human-interest news stories. No more politics or meetings. It's kind of fun.

BT: Do you still come back to Little Rock and keep up with old friends at the *Democrat*?

LS: Yes, I just have many fond memories of Arkansas. I try to get back here at least once every two years. I consider Brenda Tirey my best friend, and, ironically, Dianne Gage, whom I replaced at the courthouse. She and John Woodruff, who was my competition in North Little Rock, married each other. My husband

Robert Zimmer and I had their wedding reception at our house. We all became very close friends, and I come back to see them all.

BT: What was going on in the state when you were at the *Democrat* from 1970 to 1976? You said that in North Little Rock, Casey Laman, the mayor, was the long-time boss. Those were his last years that you covered.

LS: Right. It was just wild politics. I mean, even at the courthouse. I remember one of the candidates for prosecuting attorney, that I thought a lot of, ended up being arrested in Mexico with his wife for having marijuana under the back seat of their car. There was something crazy happening at least twice a week that you just never would expect. You know, like the city alderman doing abortions. There was just always something going on. It was just a very exciting time, and I was young and wanting to dig up the dirt on people and get it into the newspaper.

BT: You said you felt at a disadvantage sometimes because the *Democrat* had fewer people, and it was a smaller-circulation newspaper than the *Arkansas Gazette*, which was the morning newspaper at that time. But you always felt competitive, as you said. That did not discourage you at all.

LS: It just gave us an edge, I think, to try harder to get more original stories in the paper. You just felt like you had really accomplished something whenever you'd scoop the *Gazette*. It was just a really exciting, fun time in my life.

BT: Who were the people you remember working with closely? What kind of newspaper was the *Democrat*? How would you characterize it in the way it looked—the kind of image it projected in the community?

LS: It just reminded me a lot of the movies—*The Front Page*—made in the 1930s. We typed up our stories on old typewriters, and old newsprint paper. This was before computers came in. We had a clerk named Mabel Berry. If you were calling in a story on deadline, she would type it with you dictating over the phone. Bob Sallee, our police reporter, later went into political reporting and editorials. He always could explain to me the various political ins and outs of things. He could always see the big picture on why a certain group of politicians would be doing something to get ahead. It was just a great camaraderie and competitive spirit, where we were all out to get the best stories.

BT: And there always seemed to be a lot of stories out there to get.

LS: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. On the North Little Rock beat there were lots of wheeling and dealing politicians—and on the national scene, too—from Arkansas.

BT: Is there anything else you'd like to say about your memories of working in Little Rock for the *Arkansas Democrat*?

LS: It was just a wonderful education.

[End of Interview]

[Transcribed by Cheri Pearce]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]