

The David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History
University of Arkansas
365 N. McIlroy Ave.
Fayetteville, AR 72701
(479) 575-6829

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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with

Robert Ike Thomas
17 July 2006
Little Rock, Arkansas

Interviewer: Arlin Fields

Robert Ike Thomas: Okay.

Arlin Fields: And there's a little forward here, obviously, that's verbatim. This interview is part of the [David and Barbara Pryor] Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History project on the *Arkansas Democrat*. They will transcribe this interview and make it available for those interested in Arkansas history. They will give you the opportunity to review the transcript, at which point you will sign a release. And all you need to do now is tell me your name and indicate that you're willing to give the center permission to use this tape and make the transcript available to others.

RIT: Okay, I am Robert Ike Thomas, and I give permission for this interview to be used for any purpose.

AF: Great. I'll tell you—well, just for a little personal background, tell us where you

were born and where you grew up.

RIT: I was born in Hot Springs, Arkansas, in 1949. My father was in the army and he was actually stationed in Hot Springs. It had a large military hospital there that later became a VA [U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs] hospital. And so I grew up all over the country. And then my father retired from the army. He moved to North Little Rock. That was around 1961. So I went to high school in North Little Rock, and I was a photographer there for the school newspaper and annual. And then went to the University of Missouri, Columbia, to study journalism. And I particularly concentrated in photojournalism. Earlier on I had done a few odd photo jobs for the *North Little Rock Times*. And that was when—I think Ralph Patrick was there. And Robert McCord. And then, I guess, in the summer of 1970, I interned as a photographer and reporter at the *Arkansas Democrat*. And after I graduated from the University of Missouri in 1971, I started work at the *Arkansas Democrat*.

AF: All right.

RIT: When I started, I was mostly a reporter that's with photography, so they would send me around to places, and I would do pictures and story. The only beat I ever had is Jacksonville city government. But otherwise it was general assignment.

AF: So when did you first develop an interest in photography?

RIT: Well, my father had an interest in that. And he got darkroom equipment and—and did some of that. It was in the bathroom at our house. So I started probably around 1959, was when I first started taking pictures seriously and developing. So I was somewhere about ten years old.

AF: And you developed an interest in journalism before it—apparently?

RIT: Yes, yes. I thought that would be fun and it turned out to be. It was a lot of fun being a photographer for the newspaper.

AF: Who actually hired you at the *Democrat*?

RIT: Ralph Patrick hired me. And I think Robert McCord was involved in the decision, since he was the managing editor at that time. Ralph Patrick was the city editor.

AF: And then just—as I say, we’ll come back and revisit the details—but you were there quite a long time, Robert.

RIT: I was there for ten years. I left in June 1981.

AF: Okay. What were the major progressions of your career at the *Democrat*, from the time you started to the time you left, just sort of the nuts and bolts, and then we’ll go back and revisit some of your impressions.

RIT: Well when I first started, I did reporting as well as photography, but after about a year and a half I switched over to photography exclusively. And I think that was mainly because I wasn’t that good as a reporter. [Laughs] At that time, the photo staff had Owen Gunter, who was the chief photographer, then Glen Moon and Steve Keese. Later, Steve left and went over to the *Arkansas Gazette*. For quite a while we just had three photographers. When the newspaper was sold to the Hussmans, they decided to compete seriously with the *Gazette*, and because the *Gazette* had six photographers, soon we had six photographers, also. So we really ramped up and scoured the city for pictures to be coverage.

AF: And so you worked through the “great newspaper war” as it’s called.

RIT: Yes. Much of it, but I wasn't there at the end. I left the paper before the *Gazette* threw in the towel.

AF: Mhmm. What—when did you leave and what prompted you to leave?

RIT: Well, I developed an interest in computers, just because they have that gadget aspect like photography. And I took some courses out at UALR [the University of Arkansas at Little Rock] to learn about it. And I even bought a computer kit and built it. It was an Altair 8800, one of the first personal computers that anybody could actually have. It had probably 2,000 solder joints that it—you had to put it together yourself. And I just tripped through that, and ultimately I decided that newspaper photography was really more of a young man's game, and it was starting to get—to be the same thing over and over. But I did enjoy it a lot, and it was a lot of fun while I did it. I did it for ten years.

AF: Do you still take photographs?

RIT: Yes, I take pictures, mainly of my grandchildren. I've probably taken 10,000 pictures of them and printed out at least a thousand of those. Naturally it's digital now.

AF: Mhmm. Well, you sort of—it seems got into the right thing at the right time and had some foresight getting into your career in information technology. Is that—you think that's true?

RIT: Well, it's a fun thing and it's problem solving. It's like solving puzzles. It's creative, which is much like being a photographer. Creating things out of nothing, so I think it's similar in a way.

AF: At this point, do you work on systems? Do you write code? What do you

actually do?

RIT: Well, I'm a programmer analyst. Which means to decide what needs to be done for the business purpose, and then write the programs. I'm actually the project leader for the warehousing systems, so there are four other programmers that work with me. And together we take—we'll write and take care of those systems. I work at Dillard's now, and have for the last, almost twenty-five years. Much of Dillard's' computer code is custom written. We don't purchase packaging—packages very much. So it's all custom written and maintained. So a lot of it is debugging and responding to changing the requirements.

AF: But you see some parallels between that and photography? Explain that a little bit.

RIT: Well, I see that the parallel is creativity. In photography or writing a story, you have to come up with the story. The thing you want to express. And it's not like doing ordinary paperwork. It's making up things out of thin air or capturing things when it comes to pictures. And so I think it's pretty similar. I don't know a lot of photographers who have gone into it. But a lot of photographers do get seduced by the technical aspect.

AF: Mhmm.

RIT: And a lot of photographers get into photo editing—playing with the computers to enhance pictures.

AF: Photoshop.

RIT: And go on to the computer side.

AF: Mhmm. Is there more you want to say about that?

RIT: No.

AF: Tell us a little about your impression of the *Democrat* when you started there. What kind of place it was to work. What kind of people you were working with. How you felt about it.

RIT: Well, I always thought it was an odd place. The summer that I interned there, I think that was the first summer that they had installed air conditioners. And I had actually visited only maybe a year before. This would have been about 1969. And that's when I learned the reason for paperweights, because they had huge fans everywhere and paperweights holding all the papers down. And the fans, of course, made this loud buzzing noise. So it was probably a little behind the times. I don't know if I should go into the ownership or the politics. It might be a little insulting for the previous owners. But long ago, the newspaper was associated with Channel 11, KTHV[-TV]. And by that time, the connection was pretty tenuous, but the newspaper was owned by a family trust. And there just wasn't enough money and investment to keep it going. And I think that's why ultimately they broke the trust and sold to Walter Hussman. And Mr. Hussman ran the newspaper without too many changes for a few years. But I think he was just formulating his plans for the newspaper war. And I'm guessing that he realized that the town wasn't big enough for new—two newspapers. And he wanted to be the newspaper. Plus, competitively, he had newspapers all around the state. The *Arkansas Democrat* [*Arkansas Gazette*] competed with them because it was distributed statewide, whereas I don't think the *Democrat* was. So strategically, it made sense to what Mr. Hussman did.

AF: And were you there for the transition from the p.m. to the a.m.?

RIT: Yes. Yes, and it was quite a secret, because they didn't tell the people who worked there until very late, very late on. And it changed the way we did things. When it was the p.m. newspaper, hardly anything happened until—well, actually, it was weird, because our first deadlines—our first serious deadlines—were around 11:30—at 11:30 a.m. So there was very much we couldn't get in. There was a later deadline around 1:30 in the afternoon, but this was only the newspaper that was distributed in the downtown area. So we really had several distinct editions. And it was just, I don't know, a nightmare. The—it made no sense to have an afternoon newspaper where most people made a living would have time to read it in the afternoon, plus fighting the traffic to try to get it out, it was something of a mystery while you're working at an afternoon newspaper at that late date. They did have people hawking the newspapers on the streets around lunchtime. That's why our deadline was 11:30 lunchtime newspapers. So after 2 o'clock, generally everything ground to a halt. We would still cover news, but there weren't people there. When it went to the morning paper, everything started about 9:00 a.m. and then went on until maybe 10:00 p.m. at night.

AF: Mhmm.

RIT: So it was quite a big difference.

AF: Tell us a little about the people who were there in the photography department and in the news department when you started. If Ralph Patrick hired you, [then-editor] Gene Foreman was already in place.

RIT: Yes. He was there.

AF: So tell us a little about the people you came in and worked with on the photography department and on the news side.

RIT: Well, it was so long ago. I hardly remember it all. We had quite a lot of interesting people there. Everyone—most everyone—took their jobs very seriously. We would have people come in straight out of college. We were somewhat annoyed at working with—they got the job done every morning but they didn't think it was a real newspaper. But it was. It was a real newspaper. Pay might not have been too hot. We may have been having our pants beat off by the *Arkansas Gazette*. And I didn't even believe the *Arkansas Gazette* deserved it, because at the time we were an afternoon newspaper, if you read both newspapers, you would see that the stories were very different. And when I was doing reporting, even with the *Arkansas Gazette* story before my very eyes, I would write a different story because *they were wrong*. *They got things wrong*. And that's the reason that I lost any respect for the *Arkansas Gazette*, because I thought, "Don't their editors read our news stories? Don't they realize that we're writing our stories *after* their stories, and we are contradicting them?" Doesn't it bother them? But apparently not.

AF: Hmm. So what were the major changes you would say you saw at the newspaper in the ten years you were there? I'm sure you saw a tremendous amount of changes and it's a difficult question, but what do you characterize is the most significant change?

RIT: Well, when the newspaper war started in earnest, the physical size of the paper got much bigger. So there was much more of a news hole, so that we could have

many more stories—longer stories, picture stories. It was much better during that era. We could cover things—we had more personnel, and the *Democrat* tried to match physically the size of the *Gazette* to beat them. So it was a—it was something of a golden age during the newspaper war. And of course, you liked trying to beat the competition.

AF: So I gather from your comments you had no great love for the *Gazette*. So did you enter into the competition with a relish? Was it something that you took personal part in?

RIT: Well, I didn't want to destroy them. But I realized that that was the goal. And so I tried to beat them on a picture-by-picture basis, at least. And later on, when Owen Gunter died, I became the chief photographer and we tried to, you know, have more activity in the photography. Have more people out. And I would try to campaign with reporters to be sure to remember they needed a picture to make their stories look more important.

AF: Did the way pictures were handled by the newspaper change?

RIT: Since we had more space, we did run more pictures. But substantially, I would say no. We could get better coverage since we had more people. Because we were going out to take a picture then had to come back and develop and process and print it, really only half of a photographer's day could be out taking pictures. The other half was back in the darkroom.

AF: Mhmm.

RIT: So having more people meant we could have more—effectively three people taking pictures all the time instead of one or two.

AF: How were relations between the photography department and news department? Was it harmonious? Was there ever conflict? What happened then?

RIT: Well, I think it was—it was very harmonious. And most reporters liked having a photographer go along and get some pictures. Because, you know, they did punch up the story. And, you know, when you send two people to interview somebody instead of one, it's just, you know, you have them outnumbered. So they like that. And I think it was very harmonious.

AF: How did you feel about just the day-to-day [] of a photographer, being in the midst of politics, being in the midst of cataclysmic events, being in the middle of things that were going on? How did you feel about that?

RIT: Well, it was—it was fun to watch things happening. And as a photographer, I could listen to the interviews going on, and a reporter had to ask questions and write things down and I don't think anyone ever complained, but you know, I'd listen to the interviews and every now and then I'd throw in a question myself. If somebody was—say a news source was evading a question, I might come back to that. And, you know, I felt a little bad about doing that but nobody complained, so I guess it was okay.

AF: You said you were there when Gene Foreman came in, so you were there when he left and [Jerry] McConnell came [as managing editor].

RIT: Yes.

AF: What did that mean for the newspaper and for your job?

RIT: I didn't really notice a big difference. Gene Foreman was probably more of an *Arkansas Gazette* type of guy. In that he practiced more of a dignified journalism.

Whereas Jerry McConnell, I think, wanted to score points against people. Not slanting it, but dig in and get the picture, get the story, get the—get what was behind the fluff. So I think it wasn't a major difference but he just seemed to be that kind of guy, you know. "You don't have to be so gentle and polite." And that was something of the style the pictures I took. I liked to use a wide-angle lens, so in taking a picture, I would lean in very close to get the picture and it would invade somebody's space. So you'd get these pictures of people looking at you with sort of disgust, fear, anger. And, you know, it made interesting pictures. The pictures in the newspaper are not something you would want to hang on your wall, you know. It needed to be edgy and funny and frightening.

AF: Mhmm.

RIT: And I used to tickle the little old ladies or would take pictures of club officers and take a picture by looking past the camera with my other eye and making faces at them, and they would get this sort of weird, bemused look.

AF: [Laughs]

RIT: Probably not anything they'd want to hang on their wall. You know, people turning the page are going to stop and look at the picture.

AF: What were some of your memorable assignments or photographs?

RIT: Hmm. Well, there was one—sort of—it was a sad thing because some prisoners had escaped and killed a state trooper. This was near Clarendon, Arkansas. And [reporter] Bill Husted and I went out to try to cover this story. And as we approached it, we came up on this two-lane Arkansas road and slammed on the brakes because there were police cars and police officers crouched behind,

pointing guns down at the guy. So we stopped and backed up and tried to get out of the line of fire. And of course that freaked the police out, so they started pointing their weapons at us. And we just raised our hands. Turned out they were just a road block. And they took—“Oh, yeah, you can drive on through.”

AF: [Laughs]

RIT: So we did. And we—remember this was east Arkansas, out where it was just flat and very few trees. The police finally cornered at least one of the escaped prisoners. And I got a picture of them hauling him away in the back of a pickup truck. And then, you know, a couple of cops with shotguns sitting on each side of him, looking very pleased that they caught him. That was probably the biggest story I covered. There were others, like the Vietnamese at Fort Smith. But it was a big story, but it was covering an event []. It was like a big difference between spot news, breaking news and things you know about. So while the Vietnamese—the story—it was very big, it was not nearly as thrilling or nerve-racking.

AF: So I gather you had a preference for covering breaking news.

RIT: Yes, there wasn't a whole lot of that going . . .

AF: [Laughs]

RIT: . . . so it was a treat to be able to cover something like that.

AF: Were there any major storms or things like that you covered?

RIT: Well, we did cover a lot of tornadoes. There was a tornado that hit Jonesboro that was very terrible and we covered that. But the most haunting thing of that nature that I covered was the first fatal tornado [of the year?], one year. It hit out in east

Arkansas, and I drove out there about midnight. Got in the area about 2:00 a.m. and I couldn't find the house that had been hit. So I got on the CB radio and actually people were up at that time and directing to it. And the reason I couldn't find the house was—it was just gone. There was just the slab and off, way off in a field, was the wreckage. So I just set up a camera on a tripod. Took a picture waiting for the lightning to strike, to line it up. And it made a very grim picture.

AF: Hmm. Politically, what was going on during the time you were at the *Democrat*? I'm sure you saw a lot going on there. What were the trends or events that you remember?

RIT: I don't know. I covered Bill Clinton just a little bit. And then—maybe at [the University of] Arkansas. But he was a trip, you know? He had that long hair and that take-you-in personality. And he's—he was great. Youngest governor in the country, maybe the youngest governor ever.

AF: Mhmm.

RIT: So that was pretty exciting. After that, well, I just didn't see much in the way of politics, I guess.

AF: What about the social causes or social movement that was going on? Does anything stick in your mind about that that you were exposed to?

RIT: Well, one thing that puzzled me was the sort of a genteel rioting of the Iranians. There were quite a few Iranian students in Little Rock. Just because at that time the shah of Iran—if you wanted to go to college, I guess the country would send you wherever you wanted. And there were probably thousands of Iranian college students in Arkansas. And they were rioting, or demonstrating, against the shah.

And, of course, when the shah fell [in 1979] their money was shut off. They couldn't go to school anymore.

AF: Mhmm. [Laughs]

RIT: And I hope they're happy with how the lives of their country turned out, now that the shah is gone.

AF: [Laughs] Kind of ironic, ain't it?

RIT: I just remember at the time, I thought, "Why are they demonstrating and rioting?" I say rioting, but you know, it was very—very gentle rioting.

AF: Mhmm.

RIT: More than a demonstration. [Cell phone rings]

AF: That's my phone.

[Tape pauses]

AF: Let's backtrack and talk a little bit about the physical plant at the *Democrat*.

What are your memories of the physical structure and the—just the ambience of the place.

RIT: Well, it was pretty grim and Spartan when I first started there. They did have air-conditioning. But later on, they added extra linoleum to the bare concrete floor and they put in a suspended, you know, egg-crate type ceiling to cover just the bare pipes and everything. The building had originally been a YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association]. So I have no idea what was on that floor, but there were floor drains. And one of the things I would do was whenever I smelled a foul odor, I would renew the water in the floor drains, so the water trap would stop letting the sewer gases come in.

AF: [Laughs]

RIT: But it was pretty nice. By and by, they installed what they described as “riot-proof windows.” And these were sort of smoky gray, plastic windows. I guess Mr. Hussman thought that there might be a situation where the newspaper might offend some people, and so they put in these windows. Now the windows replaced actual openable windows. So whenever you had air-conditioning going out, and it didn’t happen very often but it did happen, it was tough. But I discovered that they hadn’t replaced the windows on the alley side because they were, you know, steel-reinforced glass. And with a hammer and a chisel, I managed to open those windows one day when the air-conditioning was out.

AF: [Laughs]

RIT: The darkroom facilities were pretty good. We had a darkroom with a light trap so you could walk in and out without opening the door and ruining somebody’s stuff. And by and by, they gave us a closet, which we called our auxiliary darkroom. It was big enough to put an enlarger in there. But mainly we used it for developing film. And we also put a new coffee machine in there. I remember I had a coffee cooperative where—I don’t know if you were there in that era . . .

AF: I don’t think so.

RIT: Before that everyone would go upstairs and get coffee at 25 cents a cup from the composers. But we all thought that was too much, so we started a coffee cooperative, and I actually calculated the costs of it and would bill that to the members. And our coffee ran about 10 to 11 cents for a mug of coffee. And that was one of the first things I used my home computer for. I wrote a program to

keep track of the coffee, so if anybody had a cup of coffee they put a check mark by their name. If they had made a pot they would put an “X” and that was good for one free cup of coffee. Some of the people who made coffee got a break on the profit.

[Tape break]

AF: I remember you always had a strong interest in technology. At that time, handheld calculators in the early days were going through a lot of innovation. And you seemed to have a fascination for those and bought more than one of them, as I recall.

RIT: Yes, I did. And played around with math. That was probably another thing that led me into the computers. I can’t recall when it was particularly work related, though.

AF: Right.

RIT: It was just something I did.

AF: And I’ll bet you paid as much—I recall for what we had to spend back then, you were paying some handsome prices for some of those things. And the prices would drop, like computers these days, the prices on those things have dropped rapidly after they were introduced.

RIT: Well, they didn’t drop all that fast at that time. It was only after the Chinese manufacturers got into it that the prices started plunging. But, you know, I do remember one of the calculators I got was \$150, and the equivalent these days would cost about \$15. But back then it took a while—it took a while for stuff to drop in price. I remember the first computer kit I built, it was \$500 for the basic

kit. And after that it would do nothing except make the red lights flash on the face. You had to buy every other little thing to make it useful. So I probably spent \$3,000 on that computer in 1975 dollars. And, you know, for \$3,000 [today], you'd get a home computer that's about literally a thousand times more memory, more storage, even more pixels on the screen.

AF: Did you have to write your own software for those things, or what did you do for the software?

RIT: Yeah, pretty much. Back in those days the hobbyist magazines, they would publish, you know, programs that you'd type in. And I did that—and I think some programs myself. Just things that I wanted to do.

AF: When did it begin to dawn on you that, “Hey, I may want to make a change in careers?”

RIT: It was probably—I had already started taking a few courses out at UALR, but it was probably around 1978 that I thought I couldn't continue as a career in photography. On all of my vacations, I would travel around—visit other newspapers. And I remember at the [*St. Louis*] *Post-Dispatch*, they were very friendly and showed me around, told me stories and stuff that—it had been nine years since the last photographer had been hired. Once somebody got on there, I mean it was—never left. And another newspaper I visited is the *Milwaukee—Milwaukee Sentinel*. No, the *Courier-Journal*. Really, I think the same one as the other paper. And it was one of the famous photojournalism newspapers and the chief [photographer] there said, “I would really have to get a job at some other Wisconsin newspaper [for] a few years to learn the area.” Because, you know,

they didn't want any green people on their staff. So I just thought, "There's just not much of a future really."

AF: So it really wouldn't apply, what you or what I think would be proper credit for the professional times that we're in. I mean, where we've been.

RIT: Not there. I think the *Post-Dispatch*, there they would have. But one of the downsides at the *Post-Dispatch*—they said they averaged maybe two pictures a day per photographer. Two assignments. And that's all they could do because it was such a sprawling city. There was so much driving involved. And also it didn't sound that appealing. In Little Rock, at least I could do my thing, do a lot of pictures, get around, get published. But these other places, who knows?

AF: Mhmm. So at this point in your career are you glad you made that change?

RIT: Yes. I'm glad. It's a very dignified, quiet way to make a living. It's inside work. I do this roaming around the city, looking for "wild art," as you call it, just looking for things to take pictures of.

AF: Explain that a little more: wild art. What is that?

RIT: Well, when we didn't have an assignment or we weren't busy developing things, we were just driving around and try to see people doing stuff. We'd stop and take pictures of work crews paving the road—try to get a—an interesting picture, or, you know, kids blowing bubbles at the—out of a hoop. Just whatever we could find. And we did find a lot of charming little pictures. And sometimes we would take pictures and people would call the newspaper and complain that we were bothering them before we even got back there. So it was a weird thing.

AF: So how do people generally react to newspaper photographers in your

experience? Or is there a common denominator?

RIT: Mostly they reacted pretty favorably. I would try to identify myself. I would always say I was from the *Arkansas Democrat* newspaper just in case they didn't quite understand what I was up to. And mostly people are, you know, are cooperative. Some people let you take your picture but then would refuse to give a name, so you couldn't use the picture, which [made their point?]. These days, sometimes the—I see the newspaper will use a picture with nobody's name. That's just because personal privacy has become so important now that I've been seeing more people who don't want their names in the paper.

AF: When you think back on those years, Robert Ike, who are the personalities that stand out in your mind, for one reason or another?

RIT: Well, Ralph Patrick, certainly. He was very crusty, and you know, and helpful. And [Editor] Robert McCord, who's—who was like the “grand old man of journalism.” And he was—you know, he was forced out of the *Arkansas Democrat*. John Robert Starr came in. Starr was probably the most interesting character. And he didn't bother me too much, probably because we were doing the job and not getting in a lot of trouble. But he was definitely a “type A” personality []. If you weren't working as hard or thinking as hard or taking it as seriously as him, you'd get on his bad side pretty fast. There was a—there was an odd dust-up about overtime pay. And it mystified me because there were so many reporters and copy editors who complained and put in for overtime as a “labor violation.” And puzzling, because in the photography department, we worked overtime, we turned in overtime, we got paid our overtime and nobody

said boo to us. So I don't know what was happening on the other side. But after that, Starr made a speech, which I wondered whether he would get in trouble with the government for that—but he said that he found that some of the people who were doing a good job in eighty hou—in forty hours a week were actually taking *longer*, and he would take that into consideration [laughs] in the future when he decided what their pay raises would be. So, I don't know, that was interesting that he gave that speech in the newsroom.

AF: What—how did the people working under John Robert Starr generally react to him?

RIT: Oh, me. Well, he wasn't totally hands on, but he was the managing editor so he tried to set the style. But I don't think he generally dealt with all of the people on a day-to-day basis, so that's to say he wouldn't have much to say to me, and I wouldn't have much to say to him. So—he did make us start using bulk film instead of purchasing preloaded rolls, which annoyed all the photographers, 'cause that was another thing to do in the darkroom instead of taking pictures.

AF: Mhmm.

RIT: But it probably saved a lot of money. Also, we lost a few pictures because of it. If you load your own film, the last shot or two, the light struck. So then if you took one more picture, you wouldn't get the picture.

AF: [Laughs]

RIT: But that was the price you paid.

AF: Maybe just a bit on that subject, what about—actually, I know there'd been a tremendous amount of technological advances that have occurred in photography

in the time since you left the *Democrat*. Did you see much evolution of technology in the time you were there?

RIT: There was not a whole lot. There was one thing we added called the “autocon.” And that stands for automatic continuous—continuous tone. It was a way to make a half-tone of a picture, and it was using a computerized machine. It was a machine about the size of this table. And you’d put your picture on the belt and you’d drag it in, and it would scan it and size it and spit out on photographic paper the half-tone image. Which is, you know, different size dots to make the picture. And we’d then take it to a stabilization processor machine and would process it, and then there it would be. Up until that time, there was something that had been done up in the photo lab upstairs. You know, the compositors would take care of it. So that was something, and it made it a little faster to get the pictures done. Gave us a little later deadline but, you know, at the time I thought it was incredibly crude.

AF: So you were mak—explain that to me a little more. You were making your own plates?

RIT: Well, by that time we were doing photo composition. So what we would do is take a regular black-and-white picture, we would dial in the percentage increase or decrease in size, measure it for density, and then put it in. And it would come out with the ready-to-go. They would stick it next to the type and the headlines, all on the good paper. And then they would take that whole thing and make the printing plate, all at once. Takes [].

AF: I remember there used to be a huge camera and lots of equipment upstairs.

RIT: Right, they did that upstairs. And classically what you'd do—with photo composition was you would shoot the page, and there would be black squares on it. And then you'd do a half-tone negative and stick it in the hole.

AF: Mhmm.

RIT: And so that took a little bit of a step back with it. So that was the high-tech.

AF: You said it was crude. What do you mean by that?

RIT: Well, the quality wasn't quite as good as the old-fashioned way. It required a special paper that was sensitive to red laser light, and if photographic materials—well, that's a bad thing if you have something sensitive to red light. The thing would break down with a lot of adjustment. It was incredibly noisy. It was so noisy that one day I decided to move—it had a vacuum, you see, it had a vacuum to hold the picture on the belt. So I decided to do something about that, and so I punched a hole through the cinder block wall and relocated the vacuum part and ran the hose and the wire so the noise would be in some storage area. And that was a lot nicer after that.

AF: You seem to have a bit of the engineer in you, Robert Ike.

RIT: Yes, well, I'm not shy about trying things like that. [Laughs] The other thing I saw coming in was the—maybe we all—I don't know if you were there at this time, but we converted to IBM Selectric Typewriters, and a scanner would read Courier [typeface] [].

AF: I wasn't there for that.

RIT: And what this did was, it took away the meaningful compositors, or somebody who would type it in. The reporters would type on nice light paper or film, and

then we would take a device that would scan it in—it would scan. If it had trouble with a letter, it'd stop with a little red metal finger pointing at it, and the reporter would hit the keyboard and say [revise?] and it would take off from there. And so if you type something out and you saw some errors, you could mark out a word. And it would stop, and you could type it in at that point. But it ended up where the reporters had to feed their own story and get it scanned in. So, I don't know, it was shifting the work from one person to another.

AF: All right. How was the process working before that?

RIT: Well, before that, the reporters would type it out. They would paste the pages into “takes,” which would be, well, maybe two papers glued together as one take. And they would mark it up and do all the things, and it would go to a copy editor and they'd mark up their own changes. Then they would send it upstairs on a—sort of a belt thing that ran up and down between the two. The compositors would then type it directly into—at the beginning, they would type it into a Linotype machine. Later on they typed it into a computer terminal, which was attached to the Linotype machine. And that's how the copy is ?reset?.

AF: And so then they introduced scanners, which took down that step.

RIT: Right, right.

AF: Okay.

RIT: I suppose now they're just typing directly into a computer terminal []. But for a while, we had to type in, you know, it's—those balls on the IBM Selectrics would lose their plating, particularly on the Os. So for some reason we couldn't afford to buy replacement balls, and so you had to—every time it would stop, it would

stop on the O, and we'd say, "Oh. Oh. Oh. Oh."

AF: [Laughs] How was the—before the Selectrics were they manual typewriters?

RIT: Yes. They were some big old office typewriters.

AF: So how did the working staff embrace the transition to the IBM Selectrics?

RIT: Well, I think most people actually liked it better because you didn't have to pound so hard on the Selectrics [keyboards]. You know, it was electric and very fast. But the electric returns whacking against your hands and, you know, swell. We kept using the regular manual typewriter, because what we would do is type up our own captions and Scotch-taping the pictures in. Somebody else would type it in so we didn't have to do that.

AF: So there weren't any efforts to organize labor unions at the paper while you were there, were they?

RIT: Yeah, really, there was.

AF: There was?

RIT: There was one episode and the vote failed. And right after that a lot of people left—[what good?] was trying to organize the unions 'cause they [could leave?]-—if they're helping these guys, why should [we hang around]? It's hard to say how serious that was. I know there was a couple of meetings and people talked about this and that.

AF: Mmm.

RIT: At that time, it was to join the international typographer's union [International Typographical Union]. And I just felt like, you know, the typographers could see the writing on the wall. They were like []. But, you know, it made sense.

Later on, a few years after that, somebody suggested we should organize with the Teamsters. And, you know, it was appealing to some people who felt, you know, the Teamsters had a bad reputation but because of that bad reputation most of 'em—most of []. So . . .

AF: Were these attempts at organization vigorously opposed by management?

RIT: Not vigorously, but management did hand out things and give talks []. So they would say, "It's not going to do you any good. It's just going to cost us some money. You shouldn't do it. It's a bad idea." You know, that kind of thing.

AF: Do you feel that the—from what you know from observing, that the journalism business industry has changed significantly since you left?

RIT: Well, I think it has. Course, technology has made things a lot better. I've noticed that the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, the reproduction of pictures is far better. Course now it's offset. At that time, even when I was there at the very end, it was still Letterpress [printing technique]. A lot of the drudgery of editing has been cured. But I really fear for what's going to happen with newspapers because it's competing against the Internet. And everyone expects the Internet to be free, so—and a lot of people have "ad blocking" software. So I don't know. I don't know what's going to happen, and I'm afraid journalism is going to sort of fade back or fall back to more of a "report on the basic facts, repeated news releases." Not really getting the heart of journalism, the investigative journalism. And with the—pictures on the Web are small and compressed so they don't have as much quality as the picture you can see in the newspaper.

AF: Right.

RIT: They're not quite as easy to see and understand.

AF: So do you see the cultural relevance of the newspaper changing?

RIT: Well, I think it's changing. Maybe nothing they can do. I feel bad when I hear people say they don't read the newspaper. I still read the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*. I read it in paper, in here. I think it's a mistake for people not to read the newspaper.

AF: Sure.

RIT: I mean, those people, I think, they're going to get a big surprise one day when something happens, maybe on their street or their city, they'll say, "Why didn't somebody tell me?" Well, you know, it had been in the newspaper and nobody paid any attention. "Well, now the federal government can just tap on your phones. Sorry."

AF: One question I meant to ask about the newspaper war and I didn't was did you foresee the *Democrat* winning that conflict early on? How did you see that progressing?

RIT: I thought it would win. I thought it would, because Hussman had the motivation. He had the ideology. He had some of the hatred against the *Arkansas Gazette*. He had a solid business reason for winning the war, since he had a statewide network of newspapers. They were all competing against the *Gazette*. And I think, I mean, you know, this may surprise you, but I think the one thing probably that did in the *Gazette* was the free want ads.

AF: That seemed a small thing.

RIT: And also what some people may not have heard about is the *Gazette* gave some “all you can eat” ad agreements for some of the big advertisers and putting them out of the *Gazette*. So some of the big advertising, you’d buy two or three pages a day, and you might pay for one page [and] you’d get ten pages in the *Democrat*. And that was just sucking the money out of the *Gazette*. I think that was probably enough to tip it. I wish I could say that the news coverage and the three pages of funny papers and the great photography we were doing was what won the war. But, I think, it was really more of the economic reality.

AF: Explain what you mean by an “all you can eat” advertising agreement.

RIT: Well, they would have a contract with, say, a large department store and say, “How many pages do you want? Pay a flat rate, as many pages as you want, we’ll publish your ads.” Now, I’ve heard this. I’m not certain this is true. But I think it was things like that. And it may have been garbled from, you know, “Yeah, you’re paying \$10,000 a week to the *Gazette*. We’ll do the same thing for \$2,000 a week.” Maybe selling at less than the cost of actually publishing and putting it out there. There’s enough to suck the money right out of the other guy.

AF: Are those some things you—what I’m getting here is, what did you learn that surprised you during the course of your journalism career that you didn’t expect going in? Was it this—you mentioned this business edge to it that made a real difference. Were there any other surprises for you in your career?

RIT: Well, whenever I went out to take pictures, and even when I was interviewing somebody as a reporter, it always surprised me how people would tell us things that they shouldn’t. What—you’d get people talking, and they would tell you

things that—and I was just sitting there shocked. They were blabbing about these things. They were telling us these things.

AF: [Laughs] I know what you mean.

RIT: And, you know, as you're interviewing people, if you've interviewed more than one person, you've probably heard a lot of shocking things that—"Why is he telling me this?" And it was a lesson I learned a long time ago, not to get too enthusiastic and not to blather on too much.

AF: [Laughs]

RIT: And that was probably the biggest surprise.

AF: Mhmm. I know exactly what you're saying. Sometimes I would just shake my head and say, "Why are you saying this?" [Laughter] Looking back, would it be possible for you to say what you actually enjoyed most about your journalism career?

RIT: Well, I would get a thrill whenever I took a picture that I thought said a lot. Those pithy or poetic or trite, even. One of the things I liked to do was take a cliché and improve on it. Or give it a twist. So it was playing with the medium.

AF: Explain what you mean by that, take a cliché and play with it and give it a new twist.

RIT: Well, you know, say, a dog licking an ice cream cone. I'd take a lot of pictures and try to get one where maybe the kid was looking disgusted by it instead of happy. Turning something like that on its head.

AF: Would it be possible for you to say what perhaps you enjoyed least about your journalism career?

RIT: Well, it was not nearly as exciting or thrilling as I thought it would be. There was a lot of mundane, day-to-day stuff—a lot. Plans, new exhibits, talking heads, that kind of thing. And I would try to take meaningful “mug shots.” But I wouldn’t go so far as trying to make somebody look like an idiot. You know, I thought that was unfair. And so it may have been a little less enjoyable if all it was going to be is a head shot.

AF: Did you learn anything, or what did you take away from your years at the newspaper that now serve you at this point in your life?

RIT: Well, in any kind of newspaper job, you’re going to meet a lot of strangers. That makes it easier to deal with new people in new situations. So, you know, if somebody asks me if they thought they should be a reporter or photographer, I’d say, sure, for a while. It’d be good for you. I know that a lot of people at the *Arkansas Democrat* went on to many other careers. A lot in public relations or marketing. Advertising. But a lot became lawyers. Lot—a lot of reporters became lawyers.

AF: Mhmm.

RIT: So I think it’s a good first career and that communication skills are always important. So just that alone, being able to write clear sentences, has helped me a lot with where I am now.

AF: Were there any just oddball, colorful characters at the paper that stick in your mind?

RIT: Hmm. Well, you had a lot of interesting photographers and one of the most oddball was Michael McMullen, who—he was a bit of a kindred spirit because he

was—he liked to make the “antic pictures.” And he had long hair, so he looked kind of like maybe a “drug head.” By and by he was called to jury duty, and there was some minor crime, and he was on a jury that convicted. Well, unfortunately, you know, he didn’t realize this, but the prosecuting attorney just loved him because the defense attorneys ever after would not try to excuse him, thinking, “Hey, he’s our man.” And so because of that he got picked on a lot of juries. Waste a lot of time on juries. [Laughter]

AF: His appearance belied his character?

RIT: Yes, yes. He was pretty conservative, really.

AF: [Laughs]

RIT: But he didn’t look it.

AF: Is there any point or topic that you would like to touch on, Robert Ike, that we haven’t?

RIT: Well, I’ll tell you a funny story that a copy editor told me. He said, “Back when I first started, we did all the copyediting on paper. Reading paper all day.” He said, “I got home [and] I couldn’t stand reading a book or a magazine. I’d watch TV. And then one day they brought in the terminals, and it’s editing copy on a “tube” all day long. Now when I go home I can’t stand to watch TV, and I can’t stand to read, either. So I don’t do anything.” [Laughter] And thus what happens with the change in technology at the *Arkansas Democrat*.

AF: Is that it?

RIT: That’s it.

[End of Interview]

[Transcribed by Chris Branam]