

*Gazette* Project

Interview with

Robert Douglas,  
Fayetteville, Arkansas,  
14 February 1997

Interviewer: Roy Reed

[This is the second session of the interview. This continues Tape Two, Side One.]

BD: It's what you asked about from me. I still think it's better than for me to just . . .

RR: This is the second time around, February the 14<sup>th</sup>. Did you have anything in particular on your mind that you wanted to talk about before we got . . .

BD: No, something might occur to me.

RR: Okay. What I would like to do is ask you about some particular people and your memories of them, and let's just start from the top with J.N. Heiskell. You worked with J.N. Heiskell for a long time. What kind of a guy was he?

BD: Well, he was an admirable old man, certainly, and was extremely proud of his paper. He never called it, "my newspaper." I never once — I doubt if he ever did. When he was talking to anybody, he called it the *Gazette*, just like, you know, it was just a separate entity, which it pretty much was. He would allow you to put out a good newspaper, without real interference. If he had any criticism, it would be on a post-mortem basis.

RR: Very much aware of history, wasn't the old man?

BD: Very much so.

RR: This was the oldest newspaper west of the Mississippi.

BD: Right, yes. It was founded in 1819. During the Central High segregation crisis, the Legislature, as you will remember, was out to punish the *Gazette* and anybody else who thought maybe that the pursuit of law and order was desirable. Well, somebody introduced a bill to prohibit the *Gazette* from using its logo. It's the

thing with the eagle in the name plate.

RR: Yes.

BD: Which was the same as the Arkansas seal. Well, of course, Mr. Heiskell pointed out that the *Gazette* had it first, and we had no objection to the state continuing to use it. [Laughter]

RR: He was not that far removed from Woodruff. I guess, he, you know, now Woodruff is a distant historical figure.

BD: Yes. I think he was. Of course, he [Heiskell] was born after the Civil War, but not many years after. His father was a Confederate colonel. It always struck me for some reason – it really interested me to realize that he was nine years old at the battle of the Little Bighorn, where [laughs] Custer met his fate.

RR: What about the old man's work habits? We talked a little about that the other day. We all knew about his messy desk, piled high with papers, but what about his work habits?

BD: I don't know. I never knew what he was doing in there. He was reading newspapers and, toward the last, reading them with a magnifying glass, when he got so much older and his eyesight started going. He would concentrate on the editorial page. We rarely saw him in the newsroom after he moved from that cage that he was in when I first came to the *Gazette* in the corner of the newsroom. But if he had a criticism, he would come out and sometimes he would have a suggestion. He rarely second-guessed, but when he did, he was usually right.

RR: You remember any example of it?

BD: Well, yes, I remember that some professor at the university discovered the brown recluse spider, and I ran a story, but I ran it inside and he thought it should have been on page one. Well, he was right. It was a very important discovery, these little brown spiders that kill people.

RR: You mean a guy at this university here in town?

BD: Yes.

RR: That, the brown recluse is his? They weren't known before that?

BD: They weren't known before that.

RR: I thought you were going to say that the old man objected to overplaying the story because it is kind of repulsive.

BD: No, no. I never had that problem with him at all. He had his taboos, and one of them was running a picture of snakes, which I violated a couple of times, or at least once. And I never heard anything from him. I knew it was something I could justify. A little animal sideshow had broken down in Little Rock, and a lot of the animals escaped. And there was a snake truck that had broken — a snake truck had broken down, that's right. [Laughs] And there was a picture of one of the snake trainers trying to corral a snake, a great big snake, I guess a boa — I don't know. She had it by the neck. No, she didn't have it by the neck. She had it about the middle with her hand, and it was biting her on the butt. So I ran that on page one. [Laughter] He had another one [taboo] about running dead bodies, and I violated that a couple of times because — I never ran a gory picture, but sometimes it was absolutely essential to the picture that the body be visible. If you exercised what you thought was good news judgment, you . . .

RR: Did he have a lot of taboos like that?

BD: Not very many. He was always conscious of the fact that the *Gazette* was a breakfast table newspaper, and he didn't think that people ought to be upset by what they would see in the paper — as far as pictures were concerned — while they were having breakfast.

RR: I seemed to remember he had some eccentricities about word use. I can't recall any to mind right now. Well, "evacuation," wasn't that one of his?

BD: Well, no. That was one he was very serious about, but he was right, of course. That wasn't an eccentricity it was just a . . . Evacuate is a word that is used

erroneously quite often. You evacuate an area. You don't evacuate people.

RR: Okay.

BD: You know. The Associated Press was always evacuating people. That sort of thing we had to be on the lookout for. We knew that he would . . .

RR: There was some peculiarity — I didn't know this peculiarity — about the spelling of the word "drought."

BD: Yes.

RR: As I recall.

BD: We spelled it D-R-O-U-T-H, which was acceptable, but I guess it no longer is. I don't know, but really it was a Southernism, so we spelled it that way for a long time.

RR: I was still spelling it that way all though my career at *The New York Times* and never learned until I got back to Fayetteville that G-H-T was the preferred spelling. [Laughter]

BD: When I first went to work there, you didn't refer to the Civil War. You called it the War Between the States.

RR: Is that right?

BD: Yes.

RR: What about his personal habits? Do you know anything about them?

BD: I think he followed a pretty straight regimen. He used to take a nap every day at the Little Rock Club.

RR: You told me about the little rooms at the back.

BD: The little nap rooms.

RR: Do you remember when the old man quit driving a car?

BD: I don't remember what year, but, yes, he was in his nineties.

RR: Do you recollect his reason for it?

BD: I don't know. He probably should have quit a little earlier than he did. [Laughs]

He used to — when he lived on Louisiana Street — and he lived there for years and years —

RR: Yes.

BD: . . . he didn't pay any attention to stop signs. He came to work and went back without stopping. [Laughs] Of course, there weren't many stop signs.

RR: What about after they made it one way?

BD: He had moved by then.

RR: Okay. Well, the story I had heard about his driving was that he came in one day to announce that he had quit driving, not because of his age, but because he had begun to notice that there were so many damned fools on the road that he didn't . . .

BD: I don't remember that.

RR: He felt unsafe to be out among them.

BD: It certainly could have happened. I don't remember it. You would expect him on certain days. He always came out in the newsroom on the day of the Kentucky Derby. We had a television in the corner, and we always watched the Kentucky Derby, and he told the same story every year. He told us about being at the Kentucky Derby and sitting next to the — I believe it was either the state treasurer, or the city treasurer of Louisville — but he sat next to him during Derby Day, and the guy went on to kill himself. I guess he probably had lost a lot of money. We heard that story every year and always sort of looked forward to it. [Laughter]

RR: Was he a horse racing fan?

BD: No, not really.

RR: He didn't go over to Oaklawn and play the horses?

BD: As far as I know, he never went. He could have, but I don't know.

RR: Do we know what he did for fun?

BD: He liked to talk. I don't know. I never partied with him except once at a little wedding in Virginia when his grandnephew got married.

RR: How would you describe his voice? His accent?

BD: A little tremulous and slightly high pitched, but I don't think it had anything to do with age.

RR: Did he have a noticeable Southern accent?

BD: Not so much. He was a Tennessean. From east Tennessee.

[Tape Stopped]

RR: Now, we were talking about Mr. Heiskell's accent. Neither one of us remembers him having any particular accent.

BD: No, I don't.

RR: You wouldn't think it was like a Georgia accent.

BD: No.

RR: And not that harsh Texas drawl, like Lyndon Johnson.

BD: Of course, the Heiskells were an old German family, but I never saw any particular German characteristics in Mr. Heiskell or, certainly, no accent, I'm sure. Well, they'd lived in this country . . .

RR: What was his — he was kin to Andrew Heiskell, who was head of *Life Magazine* back in those days. Do you remember what the . . .

BD: They were cousins, and I don't know how close.

RR: And there was a connection there with *The New York Times*. As I recall, Andrew Heiskell was married to Marion Sulzberger Heiskell. I believe I got that right.

BD: I don't know.

RR: I always wondered if that had anything to do with his kind of exaggerated regard for *The New York Times*.

BD: I don't think so. I think he just respected it as a newspaper, but he didn't like their makeup, and he and I agreed on one thing, which was that the *New York Herald-*

*Tribune* had the best newspaper makeup of any paper in the country. [Laughs] Even more than he liked the *Gazette*'s. His own newspaper career — I think he started in Knoxville, and then he worked for, I believe, the AP in Memphis. He may have worked in Louisville, but I am not sure of that. Anyhow, he had an avid interest in anything that happened in Memphis, so we had to be alert for any story out of Memphis. I remember I missed a few. I heard about it, and one of them certainly should have run, although it didn't.

RR: This matter of makeup. The old man must have seen the paper change several different times in its appearance while he owned it.

BD: Yes, yes, he did. He was a progressive. He wasn't a stick in the mud at all about newspaper tradition of that sort. I mean, he was all for improving the makeup. He originated the "In the News" column on page one, which became a *Gazette* trademark, and he didn't want that changed.

RR: Was that before the war that he started that?

BD: Yes. I don't know when, but it was a longstanding feature and a very popular one that the poll surveys always showed was very well read, something like the second most-read thing in the paper.

RR: Apparently still is, as the *Democrat* . . .

BD: Oh, that's what they say, yes. Of course, when Gannett took over the paper, the first thing this idiot Walter Lundy wanted to do was get rid of the "In the News." He didn't know what it was. He was up here [Fayetteville]. He said, "I don't even know what it is." I said, "It doesn't matter. You'd better not touch it." Well, he did. It went out one day, and the switchboard was jammed. [Laughter] And he — then the publisher, Bill Malone, crawled all over him about it.

RR: Good. Let's move on down a little bit and talk a little about Hugh Patterson. You worked with Hugh for the same number of years as you did the old man, a lot of ups and downs. What kind of a guy was Hugh?

BD: Hugh was a little unpredictable. For the most part, he was a very fair-minded man and listened to reason. He didn't have a newspaper background. He learned from scratch, and he never learned quite enough. But Harry Ashmore had a great deal to do with Hugh's newspaper education. Harry was very persuasive, as you know, and he taught him a lot. Otherwise, I think he might have been impossible.

RR: Is that story about Mr. Heiskell telling his publisher to stop skimping on newsroom supplies, was that Hugh who had cut back on [the supplies]?

BD: He had the business office. I guess it was Hugh, Jim Williamson, somebody. Mr. Heiskell didn't want anyone from the business office messing around with the second floor. You always had support there if the business office tried to interfere in any way, wanted a special favor for an advertiser or something. You knew that you didn't have to go to him, they knew that you would. He had a strange relationship with Hugh, who liked to party, liked to drink, as most of us did. Mr. Heiskell was a prohibitionist except he would allow some sherry at the country club. [Laughter] But he would put him in his place every once in awhile, remind him that his job was to take in the money, sell the paper, but not to put it out. Hugh didn't have anything to do with putting it out.

RR: Would Hugh generally observe the line between the newsroom and the business side?

BD: Yes, he did. He did for the most part. Up to the very last. Up until the time that Carrick Patterson came along. Not that he didn't . . .

[End of Tape Two, Side One]

[Beginning of Tape Two, Side Two]

RR: . . . interfering in the newsroom, were there times when he supported the newsroom, when his support was important?

BD: Yes, of course, most notably during the segregation crisis of 1957.

RR: Yes.

BD: Yes, he supported me. Sometimes he didn't particularly want to, but he usually did. Dillard's, say, would complain about a news story about what they were doing, and somebody from Dillard's would call him. He would call me, and once I said, "Hugh, just back me up on this," he said, "OK."

RR: He did?

BD: And he did.

RR: Do you remember one day you and I marched down to Hugh's office to complain about something or other?

BD: I don't remember going down to his office with you. We cornered him in the newsroom when he was passing through, assailed him about—I don't remember what it was—it had to do with a Pat Owens story about a couple [whom] he thought were very nice people—and they may have been, but they were—darn, I don't know. I don't remember the details.

RR: It wasn't the king of the world story?

BD: It wasn't the kind of the world story. No, he didn't bother you about those. This was a couple. I believe they were working for Reynolds, pretty high up.

RR: I . . .

BD: I think the guy may have been a chemist, and the woman had an impressive background. I don't know whether it was segregationists. I don't think so. I think they were right-wingers though, pronounced, right-wingers. And that came out in the story, and they complained. They thought they had been treated unfairly. High didn't change, or order anything changed in the story. But he did, I think, reprimand us. And we jumped him about that.

RR: That might have been it, but I distinctly remember that you and I went together one afternoon down to his office on the first floor.

BD: We may have. I may have. I went down there a lot of times.

RR: And sat down and shut the door and complained bitterly about some policy of the

papers. It was a wonder he hadn't fired us both.

BD: I'm sure that happened.

RR: We were clearly overstepping our bounds. [Laughs]

BD: Oh, yes, that was certainly . . .

RR: Especially me, you at least had the rank of news editor at that time.

BD: Well, that didn't mean anything.

RR: But he listened very patiently. [Laughs]

BD: He would do that. That was one of his better qualities, I think, and a commendable one, certainly. I could have been fired I don't know how many times just for mouthing off.

RR: Yes. What about Ashmore a little bit? You knew him for a long time, too. What kind of a guy was he, just all the way around?

BD: He was a great newspaper man and [?] a lot of fun to be around. A great talker, had some great stories, and a darn good newspaper man. What he did for the *Gazette* can't be overstated. He had a difficult, big, bold sort of mold in his head on what kind of newspaper it could become. Oh, it had always been a solid newspaper and solid technically. Harry supported the newsroom. He was a champion of the newsroom.

RR: I remember he used to come out into the newsroom and just kind of stand around and talk.

BD: Yes, he did a lot of that.

RR: And as a young reporter I appreciated that. It was the way . . .

BD: Yes, I did, too.

RR: He was part of this operation.

BD: Yes, he was. He was vitally interested in what was going on, what was the news of the day. The only time I can remember Harry being upset about anything and saying so, the few times he was he was right. In 1957, I remember a straight news

story — I think a round-up on the legislature, and it had one sentence about Faubus. It said, well, several sentences about Faubus, but this particular sentence said, “Following the Governor’s own peculiar liking. . . .” Well, that was not objective and he was really very upset about that. He was the most objective man I guess I ever knew.

RR: I wish I had known that and had bounced it off Orval Faubus before he died. Faubus might not have believed me — because he always figured Ashmore was his sworn enemy, that he went out there in the newsroom and directed the reporters to write biased copy against him.

BD: Yes, that is what a number of our readers, of course, thought. [They] bought, Faubus. They believed Faubus. It was total nonsense. There was never anything like that.

RR: The closest thing that I ever encountered to anything like that, I remember once or twice seeing Harry write editorials in the newsroom.

BD: Yes.

RR: Of course, we all knew what he was doing, but it didn’t influence our reporting. In fact, I thought it was kind of fun watching those guys sit over there and just bat out an editorial.

BD: He would do that to be right on top of the news, to make sure his editorial was relevant, but, no, the editorial stand of the *Gazette* had nothing to do with the newsroom.

RR: Wasn’t he a very fast writer?

BD: Oh, very fast. I doubt if he ever made a typo or ever paused. He just sat down and wrote like he talked, wrote beautiful editorials, he talked beautiful editorials.

RR: Yes, he speaks in complete sentences.

BD: Yes. His syntax is perfect.

RR: Or used to — I noticed the last few years sometimes his sentences get a little

jumbled up. Did you tell me that story about him being out at the Little Rock Club one day during the Central High Crisis and drinking two or three martinis? Oh, this was the same day — didn't he have them put on the tab of some known segregationist who was a member of the club?

BD: I remember something about that. No, that was not what happened. That's not the story I remember.

RR: Okay.

BD: Herbert Douglas, the bartender, the black bartender . . .

RR: That's, that's right.

BD: A legendary figure, extremely intelligent man. He would put Harry's drinks on the tab of some arch segregationist. [Laughs]

RR: Doing his bit for the cause.

BD: Yes.

RR: Well, the other story that I heard, that I thought you might have told, also involves Herbert Douglas and Ashmore, who, having been in there with two or three visiting newsmen, had already had two or three martinis under his belt. As they were leaving, Harry tells the others to go on and he stops at the bar and tells Herbert Douglas to make him another martini. And while the man is mixing the martini, Harry said, "You better make it a double. I have to go back and write an editorial."

BD: That is certainly plausible. I can believe that. [Laughs] It didn't affect him at all. He could drink an awful lot and not show it at all.

RR: Unbelievable man.

BD: It didn't make him more garrulous. He was already that. [Laughter]

RR: He was funny.

BD: Yes.

RR: Did he tell jokes?

BD: He told a lot of jokes.

RR: He was good at it. Some of them kind of dirty.

BD: Slightly. In today's society they would be not just PG, but probably G, for a movie, following the movie ratings.

RR: Yes.

RR: Tell me about A.R. Nelson a little more. We mentioned him briefly the other day, but as to what sort of person he was . . .

BD: He taught me to be an editor. I've never known anybody better with copy, and he had pretty good judgment, too, good judgment. Nelson taught more copy editors, made good editors out of copy editors, as much as any man that ever lived. Everybody who left that copy desk went on to something fairly important when Nelson was news editor.

RR: I know that one of them ended up at the *New York Daily News*. One of his . . .

BD: Yes. Earl King.

RR: Earl King.

BD: . . . who was their champion headline writer.

RR: Yes. In . . .

BD: Actually, Earl was on the — not on the desk when Nelson was news editor.

RR: He came later?

BD: Yes. Ray Stevens. Of course, I mentioned him before. Jim McDaniel, becoming managing editor of the *Commercial Appeal* in Memphis. That was an excellent copy desk that I worked with. I was a junior member of the copy desk, and I learned an awful lot.

RR: Wasn't Nelson kind of a private sort of fellow?

BD: Yes, he was. Actually, he was a little shy. He would never admit to being [that way], but he wasn't always comfortable around everybody. But if you were talking newspapers or just talking to a bunch of us . . .

RR: I couldn't imagine Nelson being out at the country club or having lunch with some politician.

BD: He never did that. He was at the country club with Hugh some, and I don't think he was ever comfortable at the country club. I know I wasn't either.

RR: Talk about Shelton a little bit more.

BD: Bill came to the *Gazette* — I think I mentioned this before — around August [unintelligible] after he had got of the Columbia graduate school of journalism. He wanted to come work at the *Gazette*, but the strike was on, so he got a job with AP&L and sort of waited until the strike — it hadn't ended, but it was over for all practical purposes. The guild knew it had lost. So he went to work on the copy desk. And Nelson, who made him city editor when Sam Harris made a mistake — saying, well, he didn't like the Capitol coverage, so he'd go do it himself -- they took him up on it. And Shelton — you know, you wouldn't know this sort of thing about Shelton — he tells me he was terrified when he came to the *Gazette*.

RR: No, I never would have guessed. He always seemed so certain.

BD: Yes.

RR: I remember him as being a terrific person to work for.

BD: Oh, he was a great city editor.

RR: And he'd take time to help young reporters, and at the end of the day he would come around and say, "I just wanted to make a suggestion or two about your writing. A little bit more to this angle of the story." He was very helpful.

BD: Yes.

RR: But with not much — you wouldn't think of Shelton as being especially friendly.

BD: No, you wouldn't. Actually, I think he frightened people who came up trying to get something in the paper or came to see him on business. He wasn't aware of that at all.

RR: What was that story about that seg woman who came up?

BD: Margaret Morrison. Great big woman, she came up and slapped him — just in protest of what the *Gazette* was doing, putting out the news. [Laughter] And she slapped him twice. And he told her, “Get out.” He didn’t flinch.

RR: I remember Shelton when we came to a parting of the ways. I know I have told you this. I’d come back from Harvard being an Neiman Fellow, pretty full of myself. And he knew it, and he was going to bring me down to earth a little bit. He sent me off to Blytheville, or somewhere in up in Mississippi County. He wanted me to do a story about, I don’t know, the Farm Bureau convention, I don’t know, some kind of routine story. I ended up spending two or three days up there doing not just that, but the story I wanted to do, about the politics of Mississippi County. I came back and dusted off his assignment in about six graphs and wrote my story at a length of about two thousand words. [Laughs] And he ran them both, just as I had written them. We had this custom going out to coffee at Miller’s about the same time every afternoon. The day those stories ran, or the day after, he said, “I just wanted to tell you what I think about that,” and he did. [Laughter] God, I felt about six inches high.

BD: Oh, yes.

RR: Of course, he was exactly right. You don’t treat your editor that way.

BD: No, he was right.

RR: But he listened and he never raised his voice. This discussion went on for the better part of an hour, very tense. We were both mad and hurt — or I was — but he never raised his voice.

BD: He never raised his voice. I never heard him raise his voice. Bill wouldn’t have resented you being a Neiman Fellow.

RR: No, that wasn’t it.

BD: I think Nelson would have. Nelson had a sort of an anti-intellectual streak, and Nelson was a very smart man himself. But he didn’t much like Phi Beta Kappas

or people who went to Harvard.

RR: Yes. Let's see, who else was — talk about some of the reporters a little bit. Ray Moseley comes to mind. He was there, how long, three or four years?

BD: Three or four years and was a super reporter. Very good, very fast, wrote very clean, good copy.

RR: Did he come up from Texas?

BD: He came from Texas. I think he was from Marshall.

RR: Covered most of the Central High story.

BD: Covered a whole lot of it, yes.

RR: He and Jerry [Donald or Dhonau?].

BD: He could handle just any assignment and do it real well.

RR: You remember a series he did on the public quarrel between AP&L and Arkansas Louisiana Gas Company and Whit Stephens?

BD: Yes, I do. I do remember that.

RR: I had occasion to read that series over again when I was working on the Faubus book, and, boy, was it good reporting.

BD: Yes.

RR: Made you wonder how he got some of the material. It was all there. He could handle figures, you know, high financing, and made it understandable.

BD: Well, yes, he could do math. I agree. He came by my desk once when I was telegraph editor. He was working out some kind of algebraic equation, and he had a little problem with it. And he came by my desk and showed me the sheet of paper. It had an x on it and I struck at it. [Laughter] "What the hell do you mean x?!"

RR: His personal life was always a mess.

BD: Well, sort of. Not a bad mess, but he had sort of unfortunate little things happen to him. His love life was always in some disarray.

RR: He was kind of physically uncoordinated.

BD: Yes, but a very muscular guy, really. Yes, he was always circling over a desk or something. One of my favorite memories probably wouldn't be funny to very many people. When Ray came to work one day, he had on a fresh white shirt, nice tie, and went back to the coffee machine — it was back in the composing room — so he went back and got himself a cup of coffee and one for somebody else, and he was coming out of the composing room with two cups of coffee, one in each hand, and he kicked the door open because he didn't have a free hand. Well, then he tripped a little, stumbled kind of, he caught his balance, so he was just frozen there with this door swinging back toward him. [Laughter] I will never forget the expression on his face. I still laugh about that. It was a helpless expression. [Laughter] "I am going to have hot coffee spilled all over me and there is nothing I can do about it." And, of course, the door did hit him, spilled the coffee all over his fresh white shirt.

RR: He was part of that bunch of young bachelors in the newsroom.

BD: Yes, they were called the "Jolly Boys."

RR: They liked to party a bit.

BD: They succeeded my bunch of young bachelors, who were no longer young or bachelors. We called ourselves the "Drones," with our house that we shared the "Drone's Nest." Ray's group, which included Jerry Jones, Gene Foreman, and Jim Borden, they were called the "Jolly Boys."

RR: What was that story about him and Mary Powell at a party?

BD: I'm not sure we can tell that. [Laughter]

RR: Okay. I think it's all right. It's not anything . . .

BD: I don't remember it.

RR: Well, okay, never mind. [Laughter] Skip forward a few years to — Now, there is somebody else I want to ask you about first who was a reporter. Tell me about

young Wes Pruden.

BD: Well, young Wes Pruden wasn't there too long. He was very young, I think just out of high school, when he was going to UALR. Started as copy boy and then sort of worked up to a job on the state desk. He got to cover [some events], I think once in awhile, or write some stories. He was a fantastic writer. He didn't stick to the facts. [Laughs] He was a darn good writer, about good as anybody I've ever known, you know, a prodigy.

RR: That thing about the facts, how many newspaper men and women are dishonest?

BD: Very, very few. You mean, that will make up stuff?

RR: Yes, yes.

BD: Hell, I don't know. I'm not sure I knew another one.

RR: I mean this is something we've been accused of down through the ages.

BD: Yes.

RR: Being dishonest. Part of that may be because we all know that reporters sometimes use deceitful methods to get a story. There are – Sonny Rawls told one of our classes that he would lie, cheat, or steal to get a story. Aide from the hyperbole.

BD: Not every reporter did that.

RR: No.

BD: But he wrote a factual story.

RR: Oh, yes, but being deceitful in getting the story is not the same as writing it dishonestly, and I'm not sure if . . .

BD: Not at all. I can only remember two incidents. One involved boy Wes, and it was not a big thing really. He was covering the Southern Baptist Convention, Arkansas Southern Baptist Convention in Hot Springs, and he wrote a very readable story about it, but his lead was that the Baptists and the Hot Springs gamblers had agreed to a truce. The Baptists wouldn't say anything about their

gambling, and they would let the Baptists alone. I don't know what gamblers would have done to the Baptists, anyway, [laughter] but he wound up the story by saying that, you know, the Baptists were closing their eyes to gambling, quoting some — Wes was great at quoting unnamed people — he quoted some Baptist delegate as saying, “Well, I haven't seen any gambling around here.” And this was his capper on the story, the last line, that they stood no more than ten feet from a pair of dice. Well, I didn't believe that. I didn't have anything to do with the story, I was telegraph editor, but I challenged him on it. I said, “Wes, you sure of this?” He said, “Well, yes.” He said, “He was in the Boys Club, and it was a monopoly game.” [Laughter]

RR: Okay, yes, yes.

BD: And the only other one I remember was Jack Baker.

RR: Yes, I knew him.

BD: Jack was — I thought he was another good writer — but he would have false situations. He would have an interview with, say, J. William Fulbright at the country club, but Fulbright was not at the country club — petty things, for no apparent purpose that I could tell. But the worst thing he did was covering a Fulbright speech and, for some reason, Jack was insistent that the — do you remember the Tonkin Gulf incident?

RR: Yes.

BD: — that the American ships were within Vietnamese waters when this incident, which turned out to be phony incident really, was supposed to have occurred. So he covered Fulbright's speech and had Fulbright saying that. And none of the other reporters had that, of course. I don't remember whether I was news editor. I may have been, but, of course, I didn't notice it until the next day. But I remember asking Jack about it, and he said, well, he was changing -- I said, “You got this on tape?” No, he was changing his tape when Fulbright said this. Well,

Fulbright never said it, and then he finally wound up saying it was a “constructed” quote. Now I don’t know what that means to this day, but Jack left.

RR: Well, yes. Talk about Ernie Dumas.

BD: Ernie was a gifted reporter, who, you know, wrote well. Ernie didn’t write features, anything like that. He was just an excellent reporter. Always got things right and got the real guts of the story, no matter how complicated the subject. And he was fast, too. I’ve never known a better reporter. He used to — he’d be covering the Capitol. He became, easily, *the* authority on state government in Arkansas. He knows more about it than anyone else.

RR: Yes. Even now. Valachovic, Ernest Valachovic, you remember him?

BD: Oh, yes. Ernie was a damn good reporter. He wasn’t especially a good writer. He was a little careless, not with facts, but he might get things wrong. He didn’t pay a whole of attention to that sometimes. — Not that he did it over and over — I just remember one. He had referred to Phil Stratton — you remember, Phil, of course, was Jim Johnson’s aide — as “Philip G. Stratton.” Well, I knew he wasn’t Philip G. Stratton. He was J. Phil Stratton. Well, I don’t know where Ernie got that. Every once in a while, you had to watch those things with Ernie, but he really got the news and was very good at ferreting it out. He had all the necessary brass. Ernie would go in and take things out. Well, you were out there with Ernie, weren’t you?

RR: Yes, yes. Yes, I came . . .

BD: Take things off the desks at the Capitol, read them. [Laughter]

RR: I’ve heard people just get indignant. They would come in — they’d leave the office for a minute, which is a mistake with Ernie, and come back and find him rifling through their papers on their desks. [Laughter]

BD: Oh, he’d do it.

RR: And he would stand in front of the desk, just brazenly stand there and read

everything upside down. He had that gift to read upside down.

BD: Yes, and if he couldn't do that, he'd pick it up.

RR: Even Faubus liked Ernie.

BD: Everybody liked Ernie.

RR: Yes.

BD: Kelly Bryant. Ernie Valachovic, did not like Kelly Bryant, who was Secretary of State [unintelligible]. But Kelly really thought the world of Ernie. Would tell him practically anything. I remember Kelly came back from some function in Louisiana, for their lieutenant governor and then decided that he would have a dinner in his own honor. [Laughter] Well, Ernie wrote a very good, good story on it, and I put it on page one. But Kelly Bryant thought Ernie Dumas did it.

RR: No. [Laughter] You mentioned Phil Stratton a while ago. Did he work at the *Gazette*?

BD: No. Phil didn't. He wanted to. That is sort of a tragic story really. Charlie Allbright told me about this. Phil had applied and he didn't get the job. And Bill Shelton and Phil were good friends up until, you know, 1957, or maybe a little before 1957, when Phil took over Jim Johnson. So Bill wrote him a letter explaining why. Well, Phil, unfortunately, had a humpback. He had a hump on his back.

RR: Yes.

BD: Bill wrote him. I didn't see Bill's letter. Allbright saw it. Phil was working in a civilian capacity at Camp Chaffee, while Charlie was in the army there. Shelton wrote Phil a letter saying, "It is your appearance," which really tore Phil up. Well, Shelton wouldn't think — Shelton was being honest, you know.

RR: Yes.

BD: It really tore him up, and he hated the *Gazette* from that day on, I think.

RR: What kind of a guy is Allbright? You've known him a lot longer than I have.

BD: Well, he was a cousin. I don't know how close we were. I think my grandmother and his aunt were sisters. Yes, that's the way it was. We didn't know that until he came to the *Gazette* from the *Democrat*. Charlie's got a touch that is distinct, if not unique. One of the best, most consistent humor columnists to ever come along. And he was a good reporter. He wrote feature stories, very good. He had one — I don't remember — he could cover a Shriner's convention and write a kind of funny story about it, a light story about it. It was good reading. And he was writing about their schedule, and he wrote, "A breakfast will be eaten Thursday morning." [Laughter] Well, nobody else would write that, they'd say, "A breakfast is scheduled," or "The Shriner's will sponsor a breakfast," or something like that.

RR: I relieved him on the North Little Rock beat. When they decided to make him a columnist, the "Our Town" columnist, he turned over the North Little Rock beat to me when I came to work there. And he was happiest man in the newsroom. [Laughter] Finally got off Dogtown.

BD: I guess Nelson made him a columnist. Of course, he was darn good. I don't remember how that worked. I think he was the second "Our Town" columnist. Carroll McGaughey was the first and [Allbright] the best. He made it his column, and he was a very good writer, so [when others] took [it] over, [they] couldn't quite match up because it already had his stamp on it. Buddy Portis -- there is no better writer in the world than Buddy Portis-- by his own admission he said, "I can't do it. I can't make it this come out right."

RR: Yes, and I think that's right. Buddy's tone was different.

BD: It was different. That's it.

RR: You need that. I wouldn't describe Charlie's tone as kind and forgiving . . .

BD: Gentle, self-effacing — Charlie never uses "I." He uses "we," in the old newspaper style that has certainly gone by the board now. And its effect — that,

again, takes the ego out of the column.

RR: Mike Trimble took a spell writing that column, didn't he?

BD: Mike wrote "Arkansas Traveler."

RR: "Arkansas Traveler," that's right.

BD: Bob Lancaster wrote "Arkansas Traveler." Actually, Charlie left and went to work for an ad agency, made more money and was absolutely miserable. Then he hooked up with Winthrop Rockefeller. After I became managing editor, the first thing I wanted to do was bring Charlie back. Well, Winthrop Rockefeller was ill with cancer then, and Charlie insisted on waiting until he was gone before he would come back. Well, Richard Allin by then had taken over the "Our Town" column. The "Arkansas Traveler" column had not been written in quite a while, so I gave Charlie that one.

RR: I guess since Ernie Deane.

BD: Yes.

RR: Or maybe Mike had claimed that.

RR: No, no. Yes, Mike had it, Bob Lancaster had it, and they are both great writers, but they [unintelligible]. I don't know if he . . .

RR: My take on that particular column, the "Arkansas Traveler," is that the two successful columnists have been Allbright and Deane, for entirely different reasons.

BD: That's mine. Yes, I feel the same way. Ernie — They started that column, and Ernie had been an editorial writer. Well, he took Ashmore's place and that didn't work. He didn't work out with Mr. Heiskell. Editorial writing is not his [Deane's] forte. And Ashmore decided he'd come back, but Mr. Heiskell was really concerned about having Ernie as the chief editorial writer. In fact, he asked Jerry Neil and Charlie Davis to dinner at his house once and asked them to bear with it, so that worked out fine.

RR: What was that? I didn't catch that.

BD: Well, he was having trouble with Ernie as a whole.

RR: Oh, okay.

BD: Ernie might have used terms like liquor, L-I-C-K-E-R, you know — not misspelling it, but . . .

RR: Yes, there, again, a matter of tone.

BD: A matter of tone, yes. Ernie had a distinct tone of his own. It wasn't suited for editorial writing.

RR: It sure worked in the "Arkansas Traveler."

BD: Worked fine in the "Arkansas Traveler." Of course, this was during the segregation crisis, and we were being boycotted and lost an awful lot of circulation. And Ashmore created the "Arkansas Traveler" column. He [Deane] was supposed to make people feel good, make friends, which Ernie can do, Lord knows, and did. And that's — it's a little unfair, but once had they had, you know, they had this collection of "Arkansas Traveler" columns. And Ernie did not write a funny column. He wasn't supposed to. It was a light column, but it wasn't supposed to be a humor column. All the other "Arkansas Traveler" writers were humor columnists. So, you know, Ernie comes out as being a little dull when compared to them in this collection. And I thought it was unfair.

RR: I do. You know, I have just been sitting here thinking about all the terrific writers who have come off that newspaper, worked there. I don't know how far back, maybe forever, certainly in my memory.

BD: Oh, yes, well . . .

RR: You can talk about Lancaster, Trimble and Allbright, Portis, you know. Whitworth.

BD: Yes, world class.

RR: Bill Whitworth was one of the best writers of his time.

BD: Excellent writer and editor of the *Atlantic*, of course.

RR: Just as an aside, I have to say I think Bill Whitworth may right now be the most influential journalist in this country.

BD: May be.

RR: That magazine he's putting out is — solid. He's got everything in it. Every month it's worth reading.

BD: He was the most mature young man I have ever met, ever knew.

RR: A little scary, he was so good.

BD: Well, the writers of legend before 1948, before I came to work there, people I never knew, were James Street, the novelist . . .

RR: Oh, yes.

BD: Worked at the *Gazette*. So did Morgan Bailey, the great radio announcer.

RR: I never knew that.

BD: So did, well, Inky Blackman, the legendary *New York Herald Tribune*.

RR: Yes. What was his real name?

BD: M.C.

RR: Yes.

BD: You know *The Times* used initials. This wasn't the the *Times*, it was the *Herald Tribune*. Yes, a lot of newspapers used initials.

RR: Everybody called him Inky.

BD: Inky. I heard a lot of stories about Inky.

RR: I just realized a bunch of *Gazette* people ended up working at the *Trib*.

BD: Yes.

RR: Both, both . . .

BD: Bob Poteet was the first post-war *Gazette* staff member who went to the *Herald Tribune*.

RR: Yes.

BD: Bob was a terrific writer.

RR: Then Portis, Whitworth, Crowe — or did Crowe work there?

BD: Yes, Crowe worked there for a while.

RR: Yes. He worked at the *Times* copy desk and couldn't get along with David Halberstam and some others.

BD: Yes.

RR: And left.

BD: He went — I can't remember. Did he — he went to *The Times* first and then the *Herald Tribune* and from there to the *New Yorker*.

RR: Same as Whitworth.

BD: Yes. I had an offer from the *Herald Trib*. I guess Poteet had recommended me or something. To be an assistant city editor.

RR: Yes.

BD: Couldn't go, didn't want to, but I couldn't have anyhow. Family obligations.

RR: Well, Dumas, I don't know how many offers Dumas had. I know the *Baltimore Sun* tried to hire him.

BD: Yes.

RR: He probably could have gone to work at *The Times*, *The New York Times*.

BD: Most of the people on the *Gazette* staff, at most any given time, could have gone to work just about anywhere they wanted to.

RR: Which is really a valuable thing.

BD: And go straight from the *Gazette* to *The Times*, which, you know, was a rarity back then.

RR: Yes.

BD: You were supposed to go to work for another big paper [first]. Of course, you were certainly a prime example. There has never been a better reporter than you or a better newspaper writer.

RR: I've diminished in my own estimate of my work in the last few years.

BD: Well, I disagree entirely.

RR: But luck had a lot to do with that, too, you know, [Paul?] being down there and getting trained in and all that.

BD: Well, yes, when all the reporters came in during the 1957 crisis and worked out of the *Gazette* newsroom. I had a feeler from the *New York Post*, Another one, I think it was in Philadelphia. I don't know.

RR: Probably both.

BD: Sometimes, you know, they weren't necessary formal offers, but I am sure everybody in the newsroom, just about everybody in the newsroom, had an offer or a feeler from the big papers in the East.

RR: Well, certainly, time had shown the *Gazette* up to good advantage.

BD: Oh, yes, it sure did, but we had the staff. We had a staff of good writers, good reporters, and I think that surprised them. Pat Owens — oh, Lord knows, was great . . .

RR: Patrick J. Owens. One of a kind. I never will forget him. Well, I am tired of telling that story of the king of the world. Whitworth — you know, one of the great pieces of reporting that Whitworth did after he went to the *New Yorker* was about that same guy who came to work . . .

BD: And for *The New Yorker*. And Bill Shelton, you know, if Bill had one flaw, [it was that] sometimes subtlety escaped him. [Laughter] He was so factual minded.

RR: Yes, yes. Poor old Pat was crushed. Shelton knocked that story down, I guess from a column and a half to six graphs. [Laughs] And you had to tell him Shelton was on to him, he knew he wasn't king of the world. [Laughs] Owens had that same gift for turning ordinary stuff into good copy. I still remember a paragraph that he wrote from the police station one night — he got sent down there filling in for Joe Wirges. I can't begin to quote it. I just remember sitting

there — I was working the late desk when it came in. And I remember sitting there, laughing out loud over this ordinary little incident that he had turned into this hilarious account.

BD: When I was news editor, I just to steal stuff, sometimes take from Shelton's desk, stuff that I didn't think he was going to use, and I got one story out of the wastebasket — Usually they were Owens stories — and put them on page one.

RR: Yes.

BD: He wrote one about hunkering. Do you remember that one?

RR: Yes.

BD: There was a hunkering fad, guys sitting on their haunches and talking like they used to do in country towns. But some of the boys, I think they were fraternity boys, started a hunkering craze at the university, and Owens wrote about it and had some pictures.

RR: And then it spread all over the state.

BD: Spread all over the state. *Life* magazine ran a four-page spread on it. [Laughs] Well, I swiped that one. I think I got that one out of the wastebasket and put it on page one. There was another one Owens did — I remember stealing it and putting it on page one — about an interview with a fat boy in a side show.

RR: Yes.

BD: It was Owens who took a great picture of himself with the fat boy. [Laughter] Fat Boy certainly had the edge on him, but Owens was not small. It was a moving story about the guy, the fat boy. "He loved show business, but he missed his brother."

RR: I remember that one. Owens left us and went to Pine Bluff, was it?

BD: Yes as editor.

RR: And I still quote from memory one thing that he did down there. He and his then wife, Ruth, had a house full of cats. They'd started out with one female, and she

had had a litter of cats, and he was desperate to get rid of them – Pat was. And he went into work one day and put a notice on the bulletin board. It said, “Notice of cat drowning. There will be a cat drowning at 2 p.m. on Sunday at the Arkansas River bridge.” [Laughs] And he said that before the afternoon was out, he had given away every one of those kittens. [Laughter] All the women on the staff begged him not to drown those kittens.

BD: Pat broke a lot of stories. I remember Gerald L.K. Smith was trying to tiptoe, kind of sneak into Eureka Springs. He didn’t want it known that he was the great anti-Semite. Well, the state desk, our state desk was a little lackadaisical about it. Nelson didn’t want that story at all. So I got it from Owens and put it on page one. And the headline called him “Noted Anti-Semite.” Nelson didn’t like that at all. He thought that was being editorial.

RR: Smith himself would have agreed with it.

BD: Sure he would have.

RR: Especially the noted part. Well, he was a great con artist. I interviewed the old man once. When I left his house, he handed me a reprint of a piece that H.L. Mencken had done on him thirty, forty, fifty years before. [Mencken] called him the “Greatest boob thumper of them all.” [Laughter] And he had this thing reprinted by the hundreds and thousands maybe. [Laughter]

BD: I don’t know whether even to believe — I don’t know whether he was an anti-Semite or not.

[End of Tape Two, Side Two]