

Gazette Project

Interview with

Anne Farris,
Chevy Chase, Maryland
22 June 2000
21 July 2000

Interviewer: Don Troop

Don Troop: Anne, if you'd like to go ahead and tell me about your first day. . .

Anne Farris: Right

DT: . . . at the *Arkansas Gazette*.

AF: Well, I moved to Little Rock originally with my late husband, who had a job there. I was a bit leery about going to Little Rock, because I had never lived in a city that small, although I was familiar with the South and had grown up in the South. My father is a journalist, so I'd always heard about what a great paper the *Arkansas Gazette* was, that it was called the Old Gray Lady of the South and the *New York Times* of the South. And I knew that it was also a city that had two competing, morning, daily newspapers, which was becoming rarer and rarer in the country. So I consented to move to Little Rock based mainly on my ability to be able work at the *Arkansas Gazette*. At the time, I was working for the *Kansas City Star* covering the Missouri Legislature. I had been working at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* for three years just prior to that. So I was confident that I'd be able to go to Little Rock and get a job. [Laughs] I didn't think about the possibility that I wouldn't, given my previous background. And let me digress here for just a

minute. It's part of the story. But I was also a stringer for *The New York Times* in Missouri. I had been a stringer for about two years, and I really wanted to retain my stringer position. But the way the stringer system works is that there's one in each state and no more than one. It's very territorial. I called my editor at *The New York Times* and said, "I'm living in Little Rock. Is there any possibility of me being a stringer there?" And he says, "Well, Ernest Dumas is the stringer for *The New York Times* there, and he's wonderful and he's been there, and he's an institution. He's a journalistic institution. He's an historic institution in Little Rock, and we're not ready to give him up, you know. He's our stringer." So I thought, "Well, I should at least call him and introduce myself and let him know I had been a stringer in Missouri." So I did, and he was the most gracious man. He said, "Well, I'm getting tired of being a stringer for *The New York Times*. They don't pay anything. It's a hassle, and they're always rude." Variety of reasons. I don't know if those were all his exact reasons, but he had a variety of reasons like that. He said, "You can have it." [Laughter] And he just threw me the bone, and I was indebted to him from that day that he just was so willing to relinquish that coveted position.

DT: And did you find that to be the norm of the type of people you deal with at the *Gazette*?

AF: Yes. Because I'll tell you what I found at the *Gazette*, which I found at no other newspaper I worked for. And I had worked at the *Greensboro Daily News*, the *Belleville News-Democrat*, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, and I had also worked for

two summers here in Washington D.C. for Newhouse News Service as a reporter for some of their twenty-eight papers, and then on their national desk, which was a news service that went all over the nation. What I found at the *Gazette* that I didn't find at those other places was this camaraderie among the reporters and very little competitiveness among *Gazette* peers. And when I was working at the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, I had a reporter in the newsroom right across from my desk steal a story from me. He heard me talking about on the phone. He started making a series of rapid calls and took it to the editor before I even got there. I couldn't believe it! You know, he just stole it right out from under me, and I never found anything like that at the *Gazette*. There was this bond among the reporters and the editors that I really have never experienced at any other newspaper. One of the great things about the *Gazette* was there were people there from all over the nation. I mean, it was a highly respected paper, and there was this competitive two-paper situation that people were looking for. And they came from everywhere. They came from New York. They came from Texas and California. They were young, they were bright, and they were real go-getters. I don't know why we had such a bond. Maybe because we were all sort of homeless and rootless in a way. That's not to say there weren't Arkansans there, too. There were a lot of Arkansans. But the *Arkansas Gazette* almost became our temporary home. It was just a great setting, and I've talked to a lot of people since then, and they've all reiterated the same experience, where they've never had a situation like this before in any other newsroom they've worked in.

DT: Or ever again?

AF: Yes. Or ever again. And sadly I think we're all, in some way, still looking for it.

But it's not to be found.

DT: Yes. Would this have anything to do with the competition with the *Democrat*?

AF: Very much did. Right.

DT: You were competing not amongst yourselves but with the competition.

AF: We were up against the competition. That made us sort of a unified force.

DT: Was there any camaraderie with *Democrat* reporters?

AF: There was some. Certainly, I didn't really know a lot of the people at the *Democrat*, but I know people at the *Gazette*, you know, had friends over at the *Democrat*. Some of them had worked at the *Democrat* before graduating to the *Gazette*. So it wasn't quite as vicious all the time as it sometimes is presented. And, again, going back to *The New York Times* stringer story: in 1988, I had my second child, and I took a six-month leave from *The New York Times* as their stringer. And told my editors I was having a baby, and I'd be back in six months. So six months later I called them up and, "Okay. I'm back." And they said, "Oh, we've got a new stringer," and I said, "What?" Much to my surprise, they said, "A reporter at the *Arkansas Democrat* has moved there from Washington D.C., and he is going to be the stringer." I raised holy hell. [Laughs] Not with the reporter, but with my editors at *The New York Times*, and I said, "No, no. You're not going to do this after being your stringer for four years." I heard later they weren't pleased with his work anyway, so within a month or two, I was back in

my stringer position.

DT: I see. I don't supposed you'd care to drop that name.

AF: Well — [laughter] But let me go back to talking about my first day at the *Gazette*.

I moved to Little Rock with a nine-month-old baby, and I was very rigid in my thinking that I would work part-time as a reporter. So I went to the *Arkansas Gazette* and I just walked in the door and asked to see whoever hired, and they sent me to see David Petty. I gave him my credentials. I had a master's degree. I had just worked for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, and I had covered Congress in Washington D.C. for Newhouse News Service. And that I wanted a part-time job as a reporter. Let me go back a minute. I remember walking in the newsroom the first day to get to his office, and they were having an editors' meeting in a room with a glass wall, which you could look into the room. The doors were closed. You couldn't hear anything. And it was all white males, and I was astounded. I just found that archaic and very old-fashioned. This was August 1985. And most of the newsroom was white males. There was one African-American woman on the state desk.

DT: On the state desk.

AF: And there was one other white woman, and a woman on the copy desk. But, you know, I was just taken aback. I was really surprised. Maybe I shouldn't have been, but the other papers I had worked for in larger cities were much more diverse.

DT: Yes. I can remember a few women: Laura Newman and Brenda Tirey and

AF: Right. And maybe it was just during that one time I walked in. A lot of the copy editors had not arrived for the evening.

DT: I see. Sure.

AF: It was my initial view of the newsroom. And, granted, out in the newsroom there weren't that many people because this is back when, you know, people really went out to get stories. You didn't make as many telephone calls. You didn't get things over the Internet. So I went into to see David Petty, and I told him I wanted a part-time job. He looked at me and said, "We don't do that." Meaning hiring part-time. He said, "We've never hired part-time, and we never will hire part-time." In a fairly diplomatic way, I told him he was crazy. I mean, here I was offering him an experienced reporter. How short-sighted of him to adhere to a policy just because that's the way it's always been done, and, after about an hour, I came out of there with a part-time job.

DT: Really?

AF: Yes. My ultimate threat was, "If you don't give me a part-time job, I'm walking across the street," meaning to the *Arkansas Democrat*, which wasn't literally across the street, but they knew what I meant. "I'm walking across the street to the other paper." And he stared at me and said, "Well, can you write business stories?" And I said, "I can write anything." So he put me on the business desk writing three days a week. And I worked under Leroy Donald and Bob Stover, and it was great. I mean, I don't really like covering business, but one thing that did impress me is Bob Stover had the foresight to realize that the entire world is

business, and that all news is in some way related to business.

DT: Right.

AF: Now you look at newspapers, and they have whole business sections. This was before there were such things as individual business sections, and before business took a big role in news coverage. So he saw that, and he was always pushing the rest of the management at the *Arkansas Gazette* to also have that vision. And he was pretty successful at it. Not always, though. A lot of times he just couldn't convince them how important business was in the world and the news. But I did that for about six months, and I was always hounding them to let me be a general assignment reporter. So they finally did move me over to the city desk to work as a general assignment reporter. And I worked three days a week on a part-time basis for the entire nine years that I lived there, except when there would be a special project. I'd go back to work full-time for six months or nine months. One time I went back for a year full-time. When [Bill] Clinton ran for governor, I went back full-time for that. It just depended on whether there was a story that dictated a need for me to be there full-time. So they were extremely accommodating, and, at that time, pretty progressive. People were doing job shares sometimes, but to let a reporter work for three days a week is hard, because you can't really cover a beat. And there was nobody else there to pick it up for me on the two days a week that I wasn't there. It wasn't job sharing.

DT: But your beat on the business desk was actually general business reporter?

AF: Right. And then my beat on the city desk was general assignment.

DT: Right.

AF: I felt like sometimes the part-time schedule did curtail my ability as a reporter, because I was just handed an assignment when I'd walk in the door that day and it have to be completed by day's end. But it was a trade-off, and I was willing to give that up for the luxury of spending two days a week with my kids. And that's why I did it.

DT: Right. I want to ask you about your kids. You said when you arrived in Little Rock in 1985, you had a nine-month-old . . .

AF: Daughter.

DT: Daughter. Her name is?

AF: Emily.

DT: Okay. And when did your son come along?

AF: My son was born in Little Rock in 1988.

DT: Okay, okay. And so you worked three days a week. What days? Do you remember?

AF: I don't remember. Isn't that sad?

DT: I remember they were always hungry for people on Sundays.

AF: No. It was never weekends. I mean, again, it was a complete luxury. I could always work until 7:00 or 8:00 at night, but no night shifts. It was Monday, Wednesday, Friday, or Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. They did dictate the days, because they did have special days, certain days, when they needed an extra warm body there.

DT: Yes.

AF: I had no problem if they dictated the day. I was already being given the luxury of the abbreviated schedule.

DT: Now, who did you answer to on the city desk at that time?

AF: Well, Max Brantley was my editor. And it is interesting speaking about the small number of minorities. Peggy Harris and I were really two of a few number of women reporters. And we sat right next to each other, and because of our names, Anne Farris and Peggy Harris, people were always confusing us. The guys in the newsroom just gave us grief to no end about one thing or another, but it was always good-hearted. No one was ever patronizing to us. They were always respectful of us. They treated us as equals, except when they would jab us about certain things that were just male/female differences sometimes. So we were really accepted into a very male-dominated climate there.

DT: Did you feel like you had to work any harder, or prove yourself, in any way, different than the men?

AF: No, except for the way I push myself normally. But, no, I didn't feel that pressure from my editors or the other reporters.

DT: Not even up at the top levels?

AF: Well, if it existed, it didn't trickle down within close enough range for me to feel it. I mean I heard stories about Craig Moon, after Gannett bought the *Gazette*, that he was a real womanizer, and he was always preying on women reporters and editors in the office. Maybe I should be offended, but I have absolutely no

personal knowledge of that. There was one reporter that Gannett sent down when Bill Clinton was running in 1990 for re-election for governor. Let me just clarify it was not John Hanchette. Anyway, the guy they sent was a real leech. [Laughs] He was always making sexual comments about the length of your skirt or nice legs. He was just a real sleaze.

DT: And he was the big city reporter? [Laughs]

AF: Yes, yes. I guess he thought, “Well, I can just sashay in and take advantage of these little country bumpkins down here.” [Laughs] I had to read him the riot act a couple of times. He was really obnoxious. When you work in a male-dominated work environment, you get used to that and you just blow it off. But, you know, it does get a little aggravating. [Laughs] But from the other male reporters at the *Gazette* over the years didn’t treat me any differently. Peggy and I were given the same caliber of assignments when we walked in the door that morning. I did come up with stories of my own, also, but this was the way it worked by the nature of my hours. I didn’t feel like they treated me any way different than they would a man in the same situation.

DT: Talk about some of the more important assignments that you covered during your years there.

AF: I ended up staying in Little Rock for nine years, and one thing I loved about that city was there were stories for the taking. It was a great place to work as a journalist. I don’t know if it’s the nature of people in Arkansas, but they do they so many interesting things. Whether it’s a crazed gunman walking into a mobile

home and shooting all sixteen of his relatives on Christmas Day to Clinton initiating some national proposal, there was always something there that makes great fodder for a story. I mean it was just endless. It was the most frustrating place because there was so many great stories, and you couldn't get to all of them. But one of the things I really liked about Little Rock, and one reason my husband went to work there, and that I ended up staying there, was the very progressive strain, or element, there. And there were some organizations that exemplify that: Heifer International, which is an international feeding program, is based there. ACORN [Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now], a national housing program, and Peace Links, founded by Betty Bumpers, an international peace organization. You had major corporations that were almost unheard of but had worldwide influence and significance. Wal-Mart. Tyson's. The Stephens.

DT: Rockefeller.

AF: Rockefeller. It was like a hidden secret. Nobody even knew where Little Rock, Arkansas was before Clinton. I'd come back home to Washington and my friends would say, "I'm so sorry." "What are you doing in Little Rock? Where the hell is Little Rock, Arkansas?" But what they just didn't understand was that it was a very progressive city. You know, it was a small core group of people who were doing that, but they were movers-and-shakers, whether it was on the philanthropic side, the government front with Clinton and a lot of national organizations, or on the business front. They were operating on a very large scale from this small entity. And I think a newspaper feeds it, and it feeds a newspaper—it's a

symbiotic relationship. It's crucial in a community that is going to be farsighted, tolerant and progressive to have a strong newspaper that educates the public. And I think an educated public expects a strong newspaper. Arkansas was just a perfect climate for that.

DT: And I think that was a very rare type of paper in the U.S. There are not many truly statewide newspapers.

AF: Right. Because I don't know of many states that have only one city. And that was one reason, too. You're right. But certainly that progressive element that you found in Little Rock was evident in its newspaper. Not that Fayetteville doesn't have a progressive, enlightened community, too. I don't mean to take anything away from other parts of the state, because all over Arkansas there are enlightened people.

DT: Right.

AF: But it helped feed the entire state, and I think it was reflected in a lot of the stories we did, which was your question. There was so much news there, and it was great being a stringer for *The New York Times*. I used to file something to them, either through a memo that would go into someone else's articles or my own articles, probably once a month. It seemed as if there was always something happening that took on some sort of national perspective. When I first got there, for a good number of years, I did just regular, general assignment stories, but the editors were always open and willing to my story ideas. For instance, somehow I found out about this law firm that was arranging adoptions, and they would house

the mothers, these teenage mothers, and once the baby was born they'd actually make the transfer to these families. And there was nothing illegal about it, but in the process of finding out about this, I learned that Arkansas had very lenient laws, much more so than anywhere else.

DT: Lenient laws as far . . .

AF: As far as the adoption procedures. It wasn't very highly regulated. So a lot of people came to Little Rock to buy babies. Basically, that's what they were doing, and a lot of mothers would cross over state lines into Arkansas so they could have their babies adopted. So instead of just writing a story on this one law firm that was facilitating this, I said, "Look, this is a regional phenomena," and my editors were like, "Great. Go for it." They never held me back. They always let me just go with an idea—which I loved. It was the ideal situation. Another example was after having worked in Washington and other states, I knew you could always get great stories about Arkansas in the context of the rest of the nation when the news was generated through maybe a federal agency. It might be about school rankings or teenage pregnancy, but you could always get Arkansas, not in a microcosm, but in the scheme of the entire nation. How do we stand nationally, as opposed to just a local story? So to do this I had to make long distance telephone calls to Washington, Atlanta, or Dallas. They did not like you to make long-distance phone calls at the *Gazette*. I don't even think you could make a long-distance phone call directly from your telephone. You had to get the operator first, and she had to clear you. So I would go to my editors. I'd say, "Look, I have to call

the U.S. Housing Department to see where Arkansas ranks on housing,” which was probably very low, you know, “Thank God for Mississippi” is what they always said. “But I’ve got to call Washington D.C. to get more information on this,” and they’d say, “Well, that’s a long-distance telephone call.” [Laughter] And I’d say, “I know, but this is important because it gives a broader vision than just beyond Little Rock or beyond Arkansas. It shows where we stand in the whole nation.” And they’d say, “Okay. But make it short.” So they’d let me call Washington. That was a big deal, but they understood the importance of that story and let me pursue it. I don’t think they ever stopped me.

DT: What about covering Bill Clinton? Granted, he was not a declared candidate in the early years, but I think there was a lot of – there were many people who thought he had national aspirations early on.

AF: Right. Which he denied.

DT: Which he denied every time. It seems like he was named in a book at one point, a fiction book, as the vice president in the year 2000, I believe. So he was often looked at as an up and coming governor. So tell me about what it was like to cover somebody who was thought of as being a possible president, particularly after the Jimmy Carter years when it was perceived as possible for a Southern governor to become president.

AF: I did have regrets that I never went back to work full-time and cover the legislature on a full-time basis, on a beat. I really sort of wish now that I had done that. Although I have two great kids now, so I have no regrets about the

way I handled it.

DT: Yes.

AF: But they had a philosophy that I thought was very good. And this may have come from Gannett, it may have come from the local angle, I don't know. But no one reporter should hound dog one candidate through the entire election process because they become too jaded. They become, sometimes, favored. They lose their objectivity in the coverage. So in 1990 they would put some of us on a candidate for awhile, then move us to another candidate, and I came back to work to help cover the election. And so I would hound dog Sheffield Nelson for a little while, and then I'd hound dog Clinton for a little while. So part of my coverage was with Clinton. The other great thing about working for the *Gazette* was I traveled with Clinton a lot, because he was all over the state every day pulling fourteen, sixteen hour days, going to six cities in one day. I mean boundless energy.

DT: How did he travel?

AF: Well, we traveled by state trooper car with a state trooper driving, or we went on private airplanes, which were donated by the owner of the plane. And Clinton had to report that donation to the secretary of state. So we could see who was donating the time in the airplane. The *Arkansas Gazette* would try to compensate for whatever cost it might be for our travel along with Clinton, but the *Democrat* either wasn't willing to pay for the trip, or they didn't want to send a reporter. On three-quarters of the trips I made with Clinton, I was the only reporter traveling

with him side by side. The *Democrat* wouldn't send anyone. It was great! It was wonderful to have exclusive coverage. Now, when we got to the small towns, the local reporter for that small newspaper, the weekly or whatever it might be, would show up and cover just that speech at that event, and then we'd jump back in the car and be gone. So I'd stay with Clinton hour after hour, day after day. I remember one night we flew in at 2:00 in the morning, and I was rushing to get off that plane, because he just talks non-stop and never sleeps. And he said, "I'll see you at the governor's mansion at 7:00 because that's when we were going to head out again. So I dragged myself over to the governor's mansion at 7:00, and he had just come in from a jog. I had my son in tow, who was almost 2:00 at the time, who I needed to take to day care before we left the city. Clinton said to the state trooper, "I'll have the state trooper drive you over to the daycare center and drop off your son." I said, "*Au contraire*," because I was very strict about never taking anything from the person I'm writing about. I also didn't want to arrive at my son's daycare with the governor's state trooper dropping off my son. I thought that would've looked pretty pretentious. So I said, "I'm going to take my son in my little Datsun over to the daycare center, and I'll come back, and then you'll be dressed, and we'll be ready to go." So that's what we ended up doing, but my son saw Bill Clinton, and he says, "It's Daddy! Daddy!" I turned to my son and said, "Oh, honey, he wasn't even there that night," and Bill Clinton just cracked up. He thought that was the funniest thing he'd ever heard. You know, it was quintessential Bill Clinton. He jogs up, he grabs my son, and kisses him and

oohs and ahs over him. He couldn't resist kissing anybody's baby. I could go on all day about Bill Clinton stories. But let me tell you this one because it relates to news coverage, and that's the important thing. One day we went to Fort Smith. His assistant, Trey Schroeder, was with us. There was almost always an assistant who traveled with us, and when we drove in a car, it would be a state trooper and sometimes an assistant. But on this particular day, we had flown, and we had stopped all over the state, like a puddle jumper. When we ended up at Fort Smith, it was evening. And Trey Schroeder said, "I'm going to take you to my grandparents' house because Bill Clinton needs some down time." I've never known Bill Clinton to need down time—except for these quickie naps he takes. "And then we'll meet up with him later." I said, "No. I really want to stay with Bill Clinton. I don't want to be shanghaied or carried off to some other place, and I don't understand the rationale behind this." And he said, "He just needs some down time." I argued with him, and I lost. This was not in front of Bill Clinton. I guess he was greeting crowds or something, but I put up a really big stink. I just didn't feel like I should be carried off. But I was, against my will, kicking and screaming. And we went to Trey Schroeder's grandparents' house, and we sat around the living room talking to his grandparents. And I was fuming. I mean, I was so pissed that I was being corralled like that. Fifteen minutes after we were there, the telephone rings, and it's Bill Clinton. And he says, "I want Anne Farris over here," and so Schroeder shuffles me into some car. We drive over across town to this black church. We drive up, and there's this gospel music coming out

of the windows, and it was just rocking. And we walk in the back door, and there's Bill Clinton in the middle of this small church just swaying and singing. It's a love fest. I mean, he's just going nuts. And he sees me coming in, and he waves, and I said to Trey, "Why did he call and want me to come here?" And he said, "He just wanted you to see this." [Laughter] I don't know whether he felt this would make a great public image, or what his intentions were. Let me go back to another story in Fort Smith, where Clinton had an exclusive interview with the *Southwest Times* editorial board. I was shut out of that, but I wasn't as upset, because that was their right to have him exclusively without me there. So Clinton's staff left me sitting in the lobby of the *Southwest Times* newspaper office. "They" being the Clinton gang, the traveling troupe. I decided to go out on Main Street and talk to people about the campaign, because this is a heavily Republican district. When you travel with a candidate, it's a dog-and-pony show. That morning we had come from a big breakfast where five hundred people showed up, and it was a love fest for Clinton. It was all Democrats, and they loved him. It's pretty clear that they all love Clinton, and they show you that they love Clinton. And they work the news to be directed that way. So I was left on my own for an hour, which I thought was great. I got out, and I started talking to people on the street and in the stores, and they hated him. They were sick of Clinton. He'd been in office for twelve years, I guess, in various offices in Arkansas. They were tired of him. They thought he was a Commie liberal. They thought he was Slick Willie, a sleaze ball, they just didn't like him, and they were

very vocal and adamant in their expression of that. I went back to the *Southwest Times* office in time for him to come out, and we all went back to Little Rock. I filed my story from the road. Back then, we had these Radio Shack

DT: TRS-80s. “Trash Eighties” we called them.

AF: I don’t even know how to describe them to a twenty-year-old today. They were the first laptops. They were heavy, but they were a little bigger than a laptop. And the screen was only about three inches by eight inches. You could only see four lines of your copy at one time.

DT: Ergonomically incorrect.

AF: Oh, yeah. It was this flat board with no pop-up screen. But they had to transmit your copy. It had an attachment coupler, which was like a cradle for a telephone carriage, but it had suction cups. And you had to dial the number and type in a code, which half the time didn’t go through. And you had to place the receiver on the suction cup couplers to transmit. So I was always having to ask Clinton to stop long enough to find a telephone so I could file my story, and he was always gracious in doing that. He didn’t have a problem, because I’m writing about him, of course, but I filed the story that night about the varying opinions of Clinton: that he was loved and hated. I told about the love fest breakfast with five hundred people showing up. But then, at the same time, here he was deep in Republican territory where he was scorned, and there was high disapproval from the people I had talked to, in the man-on-the-street interviews. The next day I showed up at the Capitol because he wasn’t traveling that day. When he saw me, he launched

in to me. Physically, too. He didn't touch me, but his sheer presence—he's pretty tall—caused me to back up against a wall, and he kept pointing his finger toward my throat and screaming at me about how unfair my coverage had been. Now, I take a lot of pride in my objectivity and my ability to pull back from any situation and show all ten sides, because that's usually how many sides there are to a story. And in this one, I thought I had been fair. I showed both sides. In fact, it was probably one of the fairest stories I had written. Some previous stories had been pretty isolated to my restricted view of Clinton campaigning, and the reception he was getting. So I was proud of the story, and I thought I had been really even handed. But he just tore into me. Veins bulging in his throat, he was red-faced and screaming at me about how unfair I had been. "How dare you stray from the campaign trail to talk to these people," he said. He accused me of going out of my way to find people who didn't like him. And I tell you, I'm a fighter, but I also know sometimes it's best to just keep quiet.

DT: Sure.

AF: So I just was very mute, and I finally said something like, "I stand by my story." I could care less what he said. In fact, to me, it was a compliment. I was doing my job. For him to get that upset, to me, was a confirmation that I had done exactly right. I guess because I was so quiet, he realized how loud he was, and he backed off and regained his composure. And he—this was classic Clinton, too, because I've had him mad at me for other things before like when I wouldn't play spades with him. Within just a few minutes, he had calmed down, and he came

back to make amends. He said, “Anne, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to do that. Now, we’re still okay, aren’t we? We’re still buddies. Come on, Anne, you know, we’re all right.” I just thought, “Hey, you know, whatever, you’re the one who blew up.” I just thought that was so interesting that he could change so quickly. He was so used to the press catering to him, and the *Gazette* has been accused many years since then of being much too favorable about Clinton and not coming down hard enough on him. He was used to the press being his playground, and so whenever there was a piece like mine, it just irked him to no end.

DT: Right.

AF: And he’s still like that. He never seemed to learn that lesson throughout his administration here in Washington, D.C., as president, that the press is not always your friend. Now he did endure unmitigated and perhaps unprecedented press scrutiny. But he didn’t seem to understand that good objective journalism is not all glowing. And he takes it so personally. Both he and Hillary Clinton become very personally aggrieved when the press says anything critical about them. And I just expected them to have a lot tougher skin.

DT: Do you think that is also a little bit of Arkansas, though, too? I think it was John Brummett, who wrote the column about Bill Clinton making a fool of himself at the Dukakis convention and giving a long speech where everybody in the nation was saying, “Who is this windbag?” And Arkansans woke up the next morning and were just as embarrassed as could be. And then Clinton redeemed himself by going on the “Tonight Show” and playing his sax, and acting like the cool

Southern governor.

AF: Right.

DT: And everybody was all excited, and they all felt great. I remember John Brummett wrote a column that said, "You're not Bill Clinton, you know, you don't have to be embarrassed for him, and you shouldn't be proud."

AF: Yes. But you know, that's how Arkansans are. It's a populist community.

DT: Right.

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

AF: . . . state politics, God, and football reigned in Arkansas, and they love and hate their politicians like they are their brother or sister. He embodied Arkansas and Arkansas embodied Bill Clinton, and for good reasons. One, he developed this incredible network of patronage and payback, and in many he was worthy of it. He is extremely intelligent. He was an enlightened governor. He was very progressive. He had a national presence. He earned some of that loyalty and respect from Arkansas, but the problem with Arkansas, too, is that they have an incredible inferiority complex. The smallest little thing, they'd take personally. But you attack their governor and the old adage holds: he may be a son of a bitch, but he's our son of a bitch. He had such a lock and a stranglehold on that state, and there were such a large number of Democrats. I mean, it's a Yellow Dog Democrat state, and he had such a loyal following that it drowned out the opposition, in many cases, over the years, and I think that was reflected in the

media coverage, particularly with the *Arkansas Gazette* being a traditionally liberal paper. He was a liberal governor at the time for Arkansas. You know, I think there are some people that would argue, “Well, no. He was much more of a centrist, which he is now, but we just didn’t realize it.” But you have to remember, too, Arkansas had a long heritage of statesmen who represented them in Washington and in Arkansas, and he was just one more in that legacy.

DT: Right. [J. William] Fulbright.

AF: Yes. Fulbright, [Dale] Bumpers, [David] Pryor, [Winthrop] Rockefeller . . .

DT: Wilbur Mills.

AF: So I think that’s one reason, in retrospect, the press and the *Arkansas Gazette*, in particular, seemed to perhaps give him more of a free ride than some other candidates.

DT: Right.

AF: But part of it was he was deserving. He was leading – he and Hillary were leading programs that were so progressive for Arkansas at that time.

DT: Right.

AF: The HIPPIE Program, an international children’s program founded in Israel, Hillary pushed for education reform.

DT: I think that a lot of people forgave a lot, because of their progressiveness on many programs.

AF: Right. And he had a real stranglehold on business, too, because he represented business interests very well.

DT: He certainly did.

AF: I mean, he was such a beautiful politician. The way he could talk about the atrocities of clear cutting, and then let International Paper go into new areas to cut.

DT: That's what I was actually going to say is I seem to remember kind of a hand shake that took place between Clinton and business where they said, "Okay. we've got the Good Suit Club together, and we're going to improve education," and a lot of people, in retrospect, said it was largely at the expense of the environment.

AF: Right.

DT: The environment meaning forestry and chicken plants.

AF: Yes. I don't know whether he was this foresighted and deliberate, but that formula of aiding business so that economic development would take care of the poverty in the state was something he foresaw. That basically is the national model right now, too. I mean business has run amuck since the Reagan Administration in the belief that prosperity will trickle down, and that the nation as a whole will benefit from the health of the business. So I mean, he had his own little model going in Arkansas during that time.

DT: What was the biggest story you worked on while covering Clinton?

AF: I think the biggest story for me at the *Arkansas Gazette* was in 1990. The gubernatorial race was just really starting to heat up, and Steve Clark was running against Bill Clinton for the Democratic nomination. Some people said Clark was

the first and only real threat to Bill Clinton's re-election. I don't know if that's true or not. We'll never know, I guess, because it never panned out. I walked into work and Max Brantley said, "The *Arkansas Democrat* had run an article about the secretary of state, about his use of state money. Although there was nothing proven wrong with the spending, but the *Democrat* had gotten some records about how he was using his expense account, and his salary, and they were looking at his use of state money. Max said, "Why don't we look at all of the seven statewide officers?" Which would have been everything from treasurer to land commissioner to governor to secretary of state.

DT: Lieutenant governor.

AF: Yes. Lieutenant governor, attorney general. That's seven constitutional officers. I said, "Great," and he said, "Get this straight. Find the expenses of all of them. Let's do a wrap up. Let's come back from their story with an even bigger, better story of all seven. Why focus just on the secretary of state?"

DT: Right.

AF: So I said, "Great. This sounds like a great story." So I went to the appropriate agencies to get the filings that they were required to submit to the state on how they spent their office budgets, their expense accounts, and their salaries. And they were all easily accessible, because it was public information. When I got the attorney general's information, it hit me like a cold slap. It was unbelievable. It was this very detailed explanation of Steve Clark's expenses that the state had paid for, and they were outrageously excessive, especially for Arkansas. We're

talking about constitutional officers who earn \$20,000 a year, including the governor at the time, and here was Clark spending tens of thousands of dollars on meals and travel. He had \$400 lunches. Now, we're talking Little Rock in 1990. You'd have to eat a hell of a lot of food. I don't even know where you could even accrue a \$400 dollar lunch bill in Little Rock. We found out later how he managed to have such a big tab at the end of the lunch, and it was happening every day. There was a \$400 lunch and a \$300 dinner in the same day, and he listed what the restaurant was, the amount of money that was spent, the date of the meal, and he would list the people who he had dined with to verify and justify that it was a state expense. He listed congressmen, federal judges, representatives from other attorney generals' offices. He also listed these very expensive travel expenditures to Hawaii or Washington, D.C. I thought, "How does this guy have the time or money to do things like eat and drink and travel?" He was all over the place. So I just thought, "This is too weird." I took it to Max, my editor, and said, "Look at this! This is unbelievable." And the other editor at that time was Kate Marymount, and she had come in from another Gannett paper. I don't know if you could say she was part of the Gannett regime but she was brought in under the Gannett regime. And she was really great. The important thing when you're a reporter, especially on investigative pieces, is having an editor who's just constantly pushing and saying, "Yes. Go get it. Make that call," because you wear down a lot of times. In this case, it was not that I was wearing down, I hadn't really even started, but she was really supportive. I wrote a story saying

that he had these exorbitant expenses, and I gave examples. In retrospect, this was a mistake that I made as a young reporter, and a mistake that my editors made.

DT: Showed your hand too early?

AF: I used examples of the people who had eaten lunch or dinner with Steve Clark and did not call them first.

DT: Right.

AF: We just listed their names as examples. I did not call these people, and the lesson I learned was you should never put somebody's name in the paper without calling them. And my editor should have said, "Did you call these people, and what did they say?" I take responsibility for it. I'm not blaming my editors, but between the two of us, we should have really done it. So the story went on the front page about how exorbitant these expenditures were, and the next day I walked into the office, and Brummett had a "Return This Call" slip. He said, "You need to call this woman. She called me this morning. Her name is Marilyn Porter. She works for the Clinton campaign, and she's listed in Steve Clark's expense accounts, and she is pissed because there is no way she would ever have lunch with Steve Clark. Here he is running against Bill Clinton! She thinks she's been sabotaged.

DT: She thought it was personal.

AF: Right. So I called her up, and she said, "I have never had lunch with Steve Clark. I never will have lunch with Steve Clark." Let me digress for just a minute. If we

had called those people before the story ran and gotten the denials like hers, we would have had such great lead time to work on this story and figure out what was wrong. But we didn't do that, and so what happened instead was I had a day to start calling a long list of people. I started thinking. There were federal judges on the list. There were congressmen. I started calling masses of people. Almost every person on the list said they were not there. Judge Arnold was one of the judges, and he kept three calendars.

DT: Morris or Richard?

AF: It was Richard. He kept three calendars, and he was certain. He said, "I can tell whether I was there or not. Let me go check my calendar." He looked up the exact date, time, everything. He had three calendars. He said, "I had lunch at that restaurant on that day, but I was sitting across the room from Clark with so-and-so. I remember when I left, I stopped and said, 'hello' to Steve Clark, but I have never had lunch with him." So suddenly we had these phantom diners. The next day, I had to write a piece saying there were massive oversights in these expense accounts. People who are listed were never there, time and time again. I went back to work full time then for a year starting on that day. There was no warning. We launched a major undertaking. There were seven reporters under me, helping make calls to all these people to figure out exactly what was true and what wasn't. I thought, "Well, wait a minute. If these are his expense accounts, there must be other stuff." I wanted everything. I went back to the attorney general's office, and they gave everything to me without question. I got all the telephone calls

from his home and from the attorney general's office.

DT: That he had claimed.

AF: Well, no. That he made. They were his actual billings from Southwestern Bell. They were the actual bills, so I could see every call he ever made from his office phone and his home because he charged everything to the state. It was like he had no personal expenses. The telephone logs were the mother lode. But I got airline tickets and everything that he claimed expenses for. I remember having to carry it out in a dolly. I was standing in the alley, and the attorney general's office is only two blocks from the *Arkansas Gazette*, but I called over there. I said, "Could you have someone come over here and pick me up." [Laughter] And so we took them all back over to the *Arkansas Gazette*, and the next day the state police went to the attorney general's office and confiscated all of those documents. So the *Arkansas Democrat* did not have it, and we did. We spent the next six months writing story after story after story based on these logs. We had to call these numbers, and a lot of the telephone numbers were to his girlfriends.

DT: He was not married?

AF: He was not married. He was divorced, and he had all these girlfriends he was calling long distance with state money. We'd call a number, and we would reach women who would spill the story, because they were jilted lovers. They would tell you everything. Then we would cross-reference the telephone numbers with that woman's name, and then we would find that woman's name on the airline ticket going to these various resort destinations. He had credit card receipts, so

we could call the restaurants and find his orders. We found \$80 shots of cognac and expensive entrees. It was a plethora of paper. It was a reporter's dream, and I can take no credit for the success of that story because it was just so easy. It was hard work because we had so many documents, but it was all right there. All we had to do was just call and verify or discount the information. We had such detail: the type of Cognac, and how many people had shots, and who was there. So we published this series of stories, and the stories prompted him to, within days, hold a press conference and drop out of the gubernatorial race. I was accused, not directly by him, but by the *Democrat* and in some of the court proceedings of having been a pawn of the Clinton campaign because they had come to me with this information. They had planted it. But that was never the case. No one from the Clinton administration or campaign had ever said anything to me or given me any of the information. I did all the reporting and writing independently. When Steve Clark dropped out of the race, Clinton had no Democratic contender. His reelection was a shoo-in. I don't know if I saved Clinton's election by these stories, but I sure as hell saved him a lot of money. Because suddenly, he didn't have any contenders. Later, in the general election campaign, Clinton and I were traveling through the state. And I asked Clinton, "What happened to Steve Clark? Why did he spend that money illegally and submit bogus expense accounts that he wasn't even required to file?" His answer was, and this is telling about the Clinton regime, and how Clinton had a one-man control over the state's Democratic party because he was so powerful and stayed

in office longer than he should have. Clinton said, “A group of Democrats got together in 1982. We all sat down, and we basically said, ‘You’re going to be the attorney general, you’re going to be secretary of state. Here’s the ranking order. Here’s the pecking order of Democrats in the state.’” Clinton said, “It was apparent to Steve Clark that he was going to go nowhere.” He was going to stay as attorney general because Clinton wasn’t moving out. It was all going to stay pretty much in place for a long time. And Bill Clinton said, “I think at that point, Steve thought he wouldn’t do more than what he was doing.” I said, “Are you saying, then, that you knew that he was submitting false expense accounts and that he was using his state issued credit card in a false manner?” He said, “Oh, no. I didn’t know that, but I just got the impression that he thought he was due more than he was getting because he wasn’t allowed to move up and beyond attorney general. He thought, ‘Well, hell, if I’m going to be required to stay attorney general, I’m just going to get paid for it.’”

DT: Have a good time.

AF: Yes. I do have one criticism of the *Gazette’s* coverage of the Steve Clark story. He dropped out of the race, was eventually indicted, debarred, went to trial, was convicted, and resigned.. I had written all the stories all along the way. It was my story, and they let me cover the trial. I told them I wanted to cover the trial. I didn’t want to give up the story. But, at the time even, I thought, “I don’t know if that’s such good journalistic practice to be writing about a trial that I had brought about.” I hope I did a good job of remaining objective, but he made vicious,

personal attacks against me. He saw me as the perpetrator of this whole thing.

He saw me as his entire failing.

DT: So did your name, then, come up in the trial?

AF: It did. My name came up in the trial.

DT: You had to write about yourself.

AF: Right. In retrospect, they should have assigned another reporter to cover the trial.

I think I did a good job of just writing it straight, and I didn't see myself as having a vested interest in the trial's outcome. I really tried to be objective as possible, but it probably was not good journalism.

DT: How do you account for, you know, the editors slipping up on that?

AF: I don't know, but I do remember questioning whether I should cover the trial with my editor Kate Marymount, who was also one of the best. I said, "I don't know if I should be covering this." She said, "This is your story. You can't give it up now. I'm surprised that you would want to." I said, "Well, I really don't want to, but I think we should think about whether I should cover this story or not."

DT: Did he end up doing prison time?

AF: He was disbarred, and he had to pay back the money . . .

DT: Oh, my lord.

AF: Which was a lot, but the amount was later reduced. I can't remember the exact penalty amount. He moved out of state and went to work for some health care organization or insurance company. A couple of years ago, someone told me he had written a book detailing his rise and fall, and that he was having trouble

peddling it to publishers. Someone sent me the manuscript, and he had a few harsh words for me, but his main grievance was with Bill Clinton. His argument was that Bill Clinton was a crook who never paid the penalty and went on to become president of the United States. And Steve Clark claimed that what he did, while wrong, (he did show remorse in the book) was no worse than what Bill Clinton did. It really took issue with Bill Clinton more than his own failings. It was as if he were saying that he could justify his behavior because he was no worse than any other politician in Arkansas.

DT: I guess the point I was trying to touch on a little bit ago is: did your editors at the *Gazette* make certain mistakes that editors at a big city newspaper would not have made? The Arkansas press in the Whitewater years came under criticism for not having scrutinized Clinton as closely as they should have and not having caught Hillary's [Clinton] wonderful investment in the pork futures or whatever it was?

AF: Right. The commodities. Yes.

DT: Did you see any flaws at the *Gazette*? Things that editors should have caught in Clinton at that time that perhaps could have, might have prevented a Clinton presidency, you know, one way or the other.

AF: One thing that did not exist in journalism as a whole nationally, or in Arkansas, was the gotcha syndrome, which has become much more prominent. And so the national media looking at Clinton's term occurred during the gotcha period, whereas the *Arkansas Gazette*'s survey of Clinton during that period was not in that time period. So you're working from two different time points of mentality

of whether it's gotcha or not gotcha. The essence of Little Rock, and it pervaded the *Arkansas Gazette*, too, was the good ole boy system. There were a lot of people at the *Arkansas Gazette* who were very cozy with the liberal Democratic regime. But I don't know of any specific examples *per se*.

DT: Well, for example Jimmy Jones who was state editor of the *Gazette* for a number of years, I guess, prior to you and I being there.

AF: Right.

DT: His wife was the state auditor, as I recall, Julia Hughes Jones.

AF: Right.

DT: And what I recall is that in a city that small, there were necessarily so many ties.

AF: Right. And like I said, I don't know any specific examples of dinners they might have had together in a social scene or anything like that. I know that I never fraternized or socialized with the Vince Fosters or the Webb Hubbells or that [Little Rock] Country Club crowd. I interviewed Vince Foster once on an article that was on a particular case he was doing.

DT: Right. Your husband was a labor lawyer?

AF: Yes. In fact these were his opponents in court. But that was his profession and mine was separate and different. I was not an advocate.

DT: I see. [Laughs]

AF: The reporters socialized, but there wasn't a lot of socializing going on between reporters and editors so much, at least for me there wasn't. So I don't know of any particular examples where they were actually that cozy with elected officials.

When Gannett bought the *Arkansas Gazette*, there were a lot of changes in the staff. For one thing, they were big promoters of minority hiring, and they brought in people from all over the country: African Americans, Asians. Gannett had a really aggressive campaign to diversify the newsroom more, and that was good. And they were promoting minorities to editor's positions, and they'd bring in reporters from Washington, D.C. But you know what? Those reporters didn't uncover anything on Clinton, either. There was nothing to prove that Bill or Hillary did anything illegal.

DT: Right.

AF: But Gannett brought in some "big city" folk. There was a managing editor Keith Moyers, who brought his wife Marilyn to be our writing coach. Reporters can always use a writing coach, and she was good. But the problem was that we were being paid practically nothing. They put her in the newsroom with us. We would sit there and listen to her calling catalog companies to order these hundred-percent linen sheets, because her husband wouldn't sleep on regular cotton. And she'd spend hundreds of dollars on one sheet and we're all really a little taken aback over these sort of big-city spending ways that she brought with her, especially when she complained that she couldn't buy such things in Little Rock. And when they moved into their home, she asked the reporters in the newsroom to help her move the furniture. I remember they came back and told these stories of how they had this massive armoire that she wanted up on the second floor for their television. They had to haul this heavy piece of furniture up the stairs, and

they were all aching and sweaty when they got finished. And they thought, “This is a little above and beyond the call of professional duty.” But the problem I had with her on a professional basis was she had a very formulaic writing style. When she was editing on a piece, she would rewrite it to fit that formula, and it was a very Gannett-oriented formula. It had to be short and crisp and understandable to a twelve-year-old reader. No kidding! She said, “You have to have a quote, and then you have to have a paragraph, and the last sentence in the next paragraph must refer then to the next quote, and you had to have the quote spaced out in a certain pattern.” And so all the stories would start looking the same because it was the same writing pattern. It was a pattern that allowed the copy to flow, and it read better and was sometimes a little more interesting, but it was so formulaic. Not all stories were suited to this. It would be great for feature stories, but not for hard news stories. But she used the style not matter what the story was. So it was very standardized. But Gannett would spend money to let us pursue and write good stories. They really let me do whatever I wanted, and it was great. I said, “We need to do a series on the homeless.” This was back when the homeless situation was getting national attention. So they let me have three months to travel with a photographer all over the state interviewing homeless people. They gave me lots of front-page and inside space. I did a four part series, and we really humanized it. We told the story of a homeless person, and the next day we’d come back and say what resources were available.

DT: And a new editor had come in.

AF: Right. But they did something new that the *Gazette* had not done before. Photographic essays accompanied these stories, and it was a wonderful compilation. We won a lot of awards for it, national awards. They gave me free rein. I said, “You know what? We should do a series on homosexuals.” Arkansas didn’t think it had a homosexual population. Well, they have transvestite bars in Little Rock that are open after hours, and there’s a big homosexual population for a small town. They gave me three months to interview people and write personal stories, and we won the Phoenix Award. They let me do a whole series on teenage pregnancy. Arkansas had the second highest rate in the nation. We traveled all over the Delta interviewing teens, including a twelve-year-old girl living in a shack without water or electricity out in the Delta who was having her second baby. Those were incredible stories. We’d follow up with the health care workers who were trying to reach out to these girls. Part of the series included school clinics and a profile of Jocelyn Elders, the head of the state health department at that time. She was a big advocate of handing out condoms in the schools, which caused quite a stir. So they let me do these great stories. They’d give me the months. They’d give me the resources of a photographer to travel around the state.

DT: This is under Gannett?

AF: Yes. Another example is when we decided to do a feature on Jerry Jones, the owner of the Dallas Cowboys football team because he’s from poor, humble beginnings in North Little Rock, and he and Tommy Robinson, a former U.S.

congressman in Arkansas, had both grown up together. There had always been rumors of shifty dealings of Jerry Jones's businesses very early on that allowed him to become a millionaire and eventually buy the Dallas Cowboys. He had connections with oil fields that the Stephens family owned in Oklahoma, Texas, and Arkansas. Part of the story was based in San Francisco and Calgary, Canada, where some of the oil companies were located. So the *Gazette* thought nothing of sending me to San Francisco and Calgary, Canada, which is a big step from "I had to get permission to make a long distance phone call" back in the 1980s. I was on the road for two weeks. I flew down to Dallas, and Jerry Jones picked me up from the airport in his limo. And he kept me with him all day long, because he was scared. He'd heard I was working on this story, and I think he was just trying to do anything he could to sway me. We went to the skybox. He took me down to meet Troy Aikman. At the end of the day, he took me back to the airport, and I flew home. I found out that he had some income tax problems and the IRS was investigating him. But I had only one anonymous source and the IRS would neither confirm nor deny it.

DT: Right.

AF: I was working with Marilyn Moyer on this story, and I was really disappointed that I couldn't pin it down, but I knew also that we couldn't go with just one anonymous source. There was no verification and everyone in the Cowboys' organization was denying it. Marilyn used very good judgment. She said, "We cannot run a story on that. I mean, do you understand what that would do to us?"

However, I think she went too far because the story came out a very soft feature story. I had a lot of other good, hard-hitting information about his early days and his oil companies. But she took out all of that stuff, and it came out to be this very light, featury story. And I raised hell. I argued and argued and argued with her, and it just seemed to fall on deaf ears. I could do nothing to resurrect the story. Years later I saw in the paper Jerry Jones was indicted for tax evasion.

DT: He finally got in trouble.

AF: Yes. He finally got in trouble for it. So I was right. My instincts were right, and my source was right, but she was right, too. You can't run a story like that.

[End of Tape 1, Side 2]

[Beginning of Tape 2, Side 1]

DT: So we're going to talk a little bit about the purchase of the *Gazette* by Gannett.

AF: That's fine. I can't remember how far in advance before Gannett actually bought the paper that there were rumors that the Patterson family was wanting to sell the *Arkansas Gazette*. And to my recollection, there had been overtures from buyers. But I think the sale hinged on the resolution of this lawsuit. I don't know if the Pattersons entertained offers before the lawsuit. I do know they had been losing money for years. It was a sieve. So I think they were pinning their hopes on this suit, which they ultimately lost, and very shortly after the resolution of the suit, there were rumors generating that they were actively seeking a buyer. Gannett, of course, was one of the interested companies. There was a lot of speculation about who would want to buy the paper in such a competitive market, and who would

be able to turn it around and recoup, or at least curtail, those losses. As the speculation grew that Gannett might be the buyer, a lot of us in the newsroom became worried. Gannett was the largest media corporation in the country, and it had started *USA Today*, which in the journalistic world was perceived with a lot of disfavor and even comical scorn.

DT: Sure.

AF: We couldn't believe there was a paper out there with no jumps, lots of photographs, and very light, fluffy stories. If there was a serious story, it was distilled into six paragraphs. A story about peace talks in Israel in six paragraphs? We looked at it as a laughable notion and felt it cut into serious journalism. When it was first launched, *USA Today* lost money. The Gannett Corporation was using its cable company revenue and income from other papers to keep it afloat. We had also seen Gannett buy up smaller papers across the nation, including the Jackson, Mississippi paper, and transform them into miniature versions of *USA Today*. In fact, the Jackson paper was called *Jackson USA Today*. So there was a fear that if Gannett bought the *Arkansas Gazette*, we were going to start looking like *USA Today*. To take a gray old lady like the *Arkansas Gazette* and transform it into that sort of paper was something we weren't really to eager to see. So I do remember when Hugh Patterson came into the newsroom to announce that Gannett had bought the *Arkansas Gazette*, it caused a lot of turmoil and speculation about where we were going and what was going to happen. And the changes, to my recollection, came slowly. They didn't

bring people in at a real rush, even though he had someone from Gannett there with him at the time of the announcement. The first changes were in the upper level management. What they did in advertising and business management, I have no idea, but as far as the news operation goes, they started with the upper level people. But they maintained all of our same editors in the newsroom. No one got fired. What they basically did was just add on. So all the editors remained the same, and some were promoted. But they did start bringing in new people from all over the country, and many of them had been with other Gannett newspapers. And some of them had the Gannett philosophy, and it caused a rift in the newsroom between the Gannettoids, as they were called, and the *Gazettetoids*. I was young, but the people they brought in were younger, go-getter reporters who wrote in a very light and conversational tone, which was not bad. Some of the writing at the *Arkansas Gazette* needed to be improved and not be so archaic. But even hard news stories would sometimes be very featury. I don't know if they had been trained to do that from the other Gannett papers they had been at. I don't know if they had been trained in journalism schools, at that point, that this was the new journalism, as Tom Wolfe coined the phrase.

DT: Sure.

AF: We made fun of them sometimes. I'm sure they made fun of us. But there was a division in the newsroom that had not been there. And then they brought in some editors who also had that approach, and I remember copy being changed to reflect crisper writing with shorter sentences. I had an editor tell me that I should never

write above the comprehension of a twelve-year-old. I told her I had no intention whatsoever of boiling my stories down to the comprehension of a twelve-year-old. I said, "If they are reading at the comprehension of a twelve-year-old, let's educate them a little." We had lively debates over copy, and I was spending a lot more time protecting my copy.

DT: I see.

AF: Now, that's not to say we didn't need a little more editing, but this was a new, more abbreviated, watered-down style. But let me say this: I think Gannett was aware how tenuous their position was in Arkansas. Many loyal readers discontinued their subscriptions once Gannett bought the paper as a form of rebellion. Discontented readers thought Gannett was this evil corporate giant coming in and taking over their hometown paper. Of course, the paper could have stayed exactly the same, and there would be people who opposed it. An eighty year old man told me, "I've been reading the *Arkansas Gazette* since I was twelve years old. I don't want my paper changed, and I don't want anybody else running it except the Patterson family." It was that sort of mentality. And I think Gannett was sensitive to that because I didn't see the *Arkansas Gazette* change to a *USA Today* format as quickly as I has seen the Jackson paper change. I think Gannett knew they couldn't afford to suffer a backlash, so they went in much more gently.

DT: What I recall is this series of front page very short news stories announcing the new editor of the *Arkansas Gazette*, and how many did Gannett go through?

AF: Well, during my tenure, I believe there were three.

DT: Three. Yes.

AF: Right. But I got the sense that they were bringing in people who didn't know that Arkansas is a very unique place. And I think they were really trying hard to bring the paper around, and whoever was brought in didn't get long to do that. And to their defense, I don't know if anybody could've pulled it around.

DT: Did they start doing free classifieds after Gannett came to compete with the *Democrat*?

AF: They did. I'm trying to think of some of the other incentives they had. I don't know if they went so far as to give out free papers, but they were really undertaking an aggressive campaign.

DT: Yes.

AF: But going back to the quality of the news. I'll never forget the day that they put a story on the front page that was so vastly different from anything the *Arkansas Gazette* had ever done. They put this article on the front page about a Wendy's commercial that featured Clara Peller, a little old lady who would exclaim, "Where's the Beef?" Today articles like that make the front page often, but there were many of us in the newsroom who were just astounded that the *Arkansas Gazette* would have an article like that on the front page. Gannett has changed the face of journalism in this country, but at that time, we just were in disbelief. There was a lot of objection from reporters directly to their immediate editor and then higher up. I think some people even went into the managing editor's office

and issued a formal objection to that sort of news story on the front page. There were also lots of letters to the editor from the public. But we didn't have a lot of control. These things were decided in the editors' meetings.

DT: Right. Which, as you said last time, the complexion of the meetings had changed somewhat. You had people of different races, and you had more women in there.

AF: Right. And you had a lot more Gannett people coming in, including the managing editors, who had the ultimate say on all this. And there were old *Gazette* people who didn't stand up to the new management. Maybe they didn't want to lose their jobs; maybe they agreed with them.

DT: There weren't a lot of other games in town, either.

AF: No. This was it.

DT: You know, if you had an established life, your kids were there, your house was there, all your friends were there, and suddenly you're looking and the options were basically the *Arkansas Democrat*, the *Arkansas Gazette* or the *Arkansas Times* magazine. What about those who just bailed, who just said, "Sayonara, Little Rock?"

AF: Well, I don't remember a lot of those, although, there were people coming and going because people came from all over the nation. After Gannett arrived, many more people came from all different places, which was good. There were more minorities, more women and more women editors. I had one editor, Kate Marymount, who was very good, and she had come from another Gannett paper. Their approach to Little Rock and the *Arkansas Gazette* was, "This is a short-term

gig. I'm an outsider. I'm going to just drop in and offer what I can." And that's good for objective news coverage, too. There wasn't that previous incestuous intertwining of self-serving interests between the Little Rock community and the newspaper. They cared less about stepping on someone's feet because they had no vested interest. They were much more gutsy than the old *Gazette* people in going after articles that could be critical. There weren't those loyalties.

DT: Well, could that have offended people, as well, who were the longtime Arkansans? This idea that, kind of, "Hey, we've got everything under control here," and then suddenly here's somebody from outside who is challenging them and feels no compunction about that.

AF: Yes, it could have. I know it did in the newsroom. There were people who had their sights set on becoming a publisher, or managing editor. They had their career plan all set, and suddenly Gannett pulled it out from under them.

DT: Sure.

AF: But back to your question. I do think there was a mentality that we should be more aggressive on some of the politicians, who we maybe cut a little slack for. I don't know if the old *Gazette* would have ever said, "No, you can't cover that piece." But Gannett encouraged it, and we ended up doing some great pieces. For instance, we knew that there had been a lot of abuses by Bill McCuen, who was Arkansas Secretary of State. And they gave me three months to look into the expenditures in his office, and he was much better than Steve Clark at leaving no paper trails. But he had questionable hiring practices that involved nepotism and

hiring loyal campaign staff. He was much more vicious than Steve Clark. If someone betrayed him, he would seek retribution, severe retribution, and they would be ruined in the state. So nobody would talk about his more flagrant behavior and there was no paper trail. I didn't find anything illegal, but I wrote about examples of fleets of expensive state cars, and his mother running the State Capitol gift shop. He was in charge of the entire State Capitol grounds, and he ran it like a country club. He rewarded people for their loyalties, and he himself moved into this house that was built on the capitol grounds and spent all this state money keeping it up. He loved keeping the capitol grounds immaculate, which was nice for all the people of Arkansas when they go to visit the capitol. But we called his house the "sugar shack" because he had all these girlfriends drifting in and out of there.

DT: Interrupt there for a second. I remember one story in which he had scrubbed the patina off of all the statues out there and just caused an outrage. People said, "This is part of the art."

AF: Right. Yes. Well, he thought it was dirty.

DT: Right.

AF: He was always doing stuff like that. He had a flamboyant side to him. He was a Harley-Davidson motorcycle rider, and he would dress up in the gear on weekends. When Harley-Davidson opened a new dealership in Little Rock, he showed up dressed in all of his gear. And he took one of his girlfriends on a motorcycle vacation out West, and there was some question about whether he had

used some state money for that, but he hadn't. Still, when the secretary of state throws his babe on the back of a motorcycle and heads out West, it was interesting. But he always worked in the shadow of both Bill Clinton and Steve Clark, and I think he was even a little intimidated by them. But they let him do his thing. I remember the state sponsored a series of public hearings about congressional voting redistricting. The law required three of the seven constitutional officers to attend. So Bill Clinton, Steve Clark, Bill McCuen, and I boarded a private plane from Little Rock, and we spent two or three days traveling around the state going to these hearings. Those moments in the plane were hysterical, and it was interesting to see the dynamics between Clinton, Clark, and McCuen. McCuen was like a little boy who had been reprimanded. He would sit in the corner of the plane and wouldn't say hardly anything. Meanwhile, here's Steve Clark and Bill Clinton jabbering away the whole time. You can't shut them up. And McCuen sat and ate jelly beans.

DT: I see.

AF: Another example of aggressive reporting on politicians was when I wrote series of articles on judicial nepotism. We found that judges across the state, low level, municipal, circuit court, and some of the state supreme court judges, were hiring their wives on a regular basis for secretarial positions in their offices.

DT: I see.

AF: This was not illegal, but some of them weren't working. They were getting paid, and not showing up. So I wrote a whole series of articles pointing out who the

judges were, who their wives were, how much they're getting paid.

DT: How did you document that they weren't showing up?

AF: I would get from people in the offices to tell me the wives' work schedules.

When the articles started coming out, the wife of the state supreme court judge did start showing up for work everyday. The *Arkansas Gazette* wrote a lot of editorials about it and, as a result, the state ultimately changed the code of ethics for judges. They rewrote those to say "you should not hire a family member in your office."

DT: Yes.

AF: So it did bring about change in the state rules. That's what newspapers should be doing.

DT: Yes. You know, I remember as an intern there, and I can't remember which year it was, 1984 or 1985. At one point I was going to work on some story, and I was all worried that I had to be there on time. And one of the older reporters said to me, "We don't get in too much of a hurry here at the *Arkansas Gazette*," and I remember thinking at the time that our competition did at the *Democrat*. And I don't think they were—this is my own opinion—but I don't remember a lot of the *Democrat* reporters being as wise as the *Arkansas Gazette* people.

AF: Or maybe it's smug.

DT: Okay. Maybe it's smug, but, also I remember some things that took place that just showed some real experience at the *Arkansas Gazette*. And the *Arkansas Gazette* even would hire some of the more experienced, older *Democrat* reporters

away. They would go in and pluck the cherries, basically. But the *Democrat* just seemed to have that kind of just aggressiveness. They were hungry.

AF: Because they were the underdogs.

DT: Exactly.

AF: And they really did have to work harder.

DT: Yes.

AF: Yes. I think that's true. Although in my mind, I always knew they were our competitors and that always made me get to meetings on time, or be less lackadaisical when there's no competition. So for me, the *Democrat* really kept me on my toes. But you're right. There was an attitude of, "Hey, we're the big paper and no matter what we do, we're going to stay the big paper."

DT: We won this Pulitzer in 1957 . . .

AF: Which, by the way, sat in a case in the front hallway as a constant reminder. It was their moment of glory from forty-six years ago. And they never lived up to it again.

AF: Right. Still living on the reputation, which in some respects was valid, but in other respects was not valid. It was a different time.

DT: Sure.

AF: So I think we should move onto the sale of the *Gazette*.

DT: I'm sorry. The war between the *Democrat* and Gannett?

AF: I never was able to predict that Gannett would sell out. I knew they were still losing money, but, to be perfectly honest, I really thought they were in it for the

long term. They had told us that from the very beginning, and I thought that they would stick it out. I thought Gannett was big enough that they could absorb the loss with their other entities, their other holdings. So I have to say I was a bit surprised when I started hearing rumors that they were going to sell it.

DT: Who did these rumors come from?

AF: They were in the newsroom. They were from other reporters and editors.

Suddenly, it cropped up, and I can't remember how long before they actually did sell the paper that the rumors started.

DT: Yes.

AF: But it was months before, and everyone blew off the rumors. It's not going to happen, we thought, because Gannett had just bought it. They're big. They've invested a lot. We thought it was just rumors, but, at some point, the rumors became substantial.

DT: And how did you know, at the time, that they were substantial?

AF: Because community businessmen were starting to entertain ideas of buying the *Gazette* themselves, so that they could keep the paper going with or without Gannett. And so Harry Thomason came forward as a prospective buyer. He had grown up in Arkansas and had read the *Gazette* since he was a boy. He didn't like what Gannett was doing with it, and he was now this very rich, famous producer in Hollywood. He and his wife [Linda Bloodworth-Thomason] were writing the TV series "Evening Shade," starring Burt Reynolds, which was based in Arkansas.

DT: Before that was “Designing Women.” So they had written and produced these successful sitcoms and were living in California, but came back to Little Rock and were still friends with the Clintons.

DT: Who else was involved?

AF: The other businessman was Walter Smiley, who had interests in investments. And he worked independently, but he had very close connections with every other businessman in town. He was a millionaire, and so he was entertaining the idea of buying the paper also. So Scott Van Laningham, a reporter in the newsroom, came to me, and Scott Van Laningham was a reporter in the newsroom, came to me and asked me if I would be on this *ad hoc* committee to try to save the *Gazette*. I told him I would, but I was the only woman on it. Scott Morris, another reporter, was the first one in the newsroom to learn that Thomason was interested in buying the paper. Scott Morris was in the airport and saw Harry Thomason sitting, waiting for a plane, and he went over and started talking to him. Harry Thomason told him, “Yes. I’m really interested. That’s why I’m here.” So suddenly, this committee we were on had ongoing meetings with these businessmen in Little Rock with the prospect of buying the paper. We also met with John Flake. We were taken into these elaborate boardrooms to sit down with these businessmen to talk about the possibility of buying a newspaper from the Gannett corporation that’s losing money. It was a longshot.

DT: Right. Right. I mean, what was the specific goal of the committee? Was it to find a buyer that was local or that was not a chain or just any buyer?

AF: To just find a buyer.

DT: Any buyer that was not the *Democrat*.

AF: Not the *Democrat*.

DT: Walter Hussman.

AF: Right.

DT: Okay.

AF: That was the greatest fear. God forbid that we should, after all these years, finally succumb and give in to the *Arkansas Democrat*. That's how strong the sentiments were, and I think there was a secondary motive of getting rid of Gannett. And also to not end a tradition of more than a hundred years of a paper's existence and going to a one paper town. It's interesting because we weren't very particular. We were willing to take whoever came up with the money. But we're talking millions and millions of dollars, and each businessman in these meetings would sit down and say, "Well, I've got to look at the numbers." And, you know, these guys are smart. That's why they're rich. That's why they're businessmen. They sat down with these numbers and almost laughed at us. "You think I'm going to assume this losing proposition? As a businessman, I just can't do it." And in every case their sentiments were that if their pocketbook wasn't talking, they would have loved to have done it. It was an exciting challenge to them. They wanted to maintain the *Arkansas Gazette* as a tradition in Arkansas, but as a businessman, it was impossible. They would have been crazy to spend that kind of money.

DT: Was it the debt that was the stumbling block or was it the actual inability to make future profit?

AF: It was both.

DT: Both.

AF: I remember Walter Smiley doing a calculation of advertising revenue for both papers. He said, "You know what it comes down to? This city doesn't have enough money to maintain two newspapers. It's impossible. Advertisers only have so much they're going to spend. There's just not enough money in the city for two papers. And there may never be. There's only enough to go around for one paper to make money. I'm sorry, but I just can't do it." And they all seemed so apologetic. They could see the disappointment on our faces, and I knew the whole time we were on this committee that it an impossible hope. But we felt we should try to make every effort we could.

DT: Sure.

AF: When we heard that the sale was so imminent, everybody started printing out hard copies of their computer files. Some people had even gone into the morgue and taken hard copy clips. It was really the only filing or cataloging of some articles.

DT: Right. There was by "reporter."

AF: Right. By "subject."

DT: And then by "subject."

AF: And then I think by "alphabetical," by people's names, too. If you wrote something about Clinton, you'd go to "C" and look under "Clinton." But they

were also taking out some photographs, including some of the 1957 integration. They were cleaning out the place.

[End of Tape 2, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 2, Side 2]

AF: But it wasn't mass hysteria going on. People were making preparations. I don't know whether people started looking for other jobs at that point. I think people didn't really know what was going to happen.

DT: Right.

AF: And then they started having these rallies that were pretty elaborate. The old guard within the *Arkansas Gazette* organized these big rallies outside the *Arkansas Gazette* building. They were "Save the *Gazette*" rallies, and there were buttons and posters and pens, and the whole community would show up. And I remember Max Brantley getting up on the podium and appealing for support from the community. We couldn't get a businessman to back it with money, but maybe we could tap into the populist spirit of Arkansas.

DT: Sure

AF: They'd block off the street and have a big flat-bed truck there with people standing up and making speeches. There was a real concerted effort to try anything to prevent the sale.

DT: Did you know that it was the *Democrat* looming, that they were just hungry to

swallow this paper?

AF: Yes. We knew it was the *Democrat*. To our knowledge, there were no other buyers out there.

DT: Right. And did Hussman actually make offers that led up to this, or you just knew his offer was coming?

AF: I don't know how far back he had been making offers. Whether he made offers the first day Gannett walked in or not, I don't know about that.

DT: Right. Right.

AF: But we knew when we were actively looking for other buyers, that the *Arkansas Democrat* was the prospective buyer, and, to our knowledge, the only one. So all these businessmen to whom we were making appeals knew they were competing against the *Arkansas Democrat*. It's not like the paper was just going to fold, and there were no buyers at all. They knew that's who their bidding competitor would be. And, again, I don't know anything about the negotiations or what went on behind closed doors. In fact, the day the paper closed, a group of us were trying to publish our final edition. Max Brantley was one of the main people who was getting news that the sale was going down. So he had dispatched a lot of us to cover the sale. And, again, I had questions about whether I should be covering a story when I was a member of this committee. I questioned it, and Kate Marymount, my editor, said, "Hey, you know, we've got to have you on the story, and you're not that actively involved."

DT: Things happen during wartime.

AF: Exactly. So I was dispatched, as were some others, to cover this story. My assignment was to go to the Excelsior Hotel and stand outside this room that reportedly contained Hussman and the bigwigs from Gannett and get them coming in or out. I went over there and stood outside the room. I couldn't hear what was going on inside, but I put my ear up to the door. I stood there for probably an hour and a half waiting to catch anyone who came out. And we didn't have cell phones back then. I had a walkie talkie, and I called in to the paper. Max Brantley was in the newsroom, and he said, "Come on back. It's done. It's all over." I questioned whether or not I should leave, but I did. It seemed like there would be time to get comments when they came out. But I went back.

DT: Right.

AF: Then I went back to the newsroom, and I started typing up what I had collected during that day to fold into the main story. And then the computer just went blank. Just a black screen, and everybody looked up and said, "What happened?" Gannett had just shut down the entire newsroom. Everything went off. There was no notice. There was no announcement that it had been sold. One editor said, "It's a done deal." But no one in the newsroom knew that it had officially ended. There was quite a commotion and lots of talk. Probably an hour later John Curly came into the newsroom. They set up a podium, and he made the announcement that the *Arkansas Gazette* had been sold to the *Arkansas Democrat*. People started crying. There was this hush over the newsroom, and

then everybody just kind of thought it was never going to happen because it was such a drastic departure from years of history. It came as quite a shock, even though in the back of our minds we knew that it was a great possibility. I'll never forget that day. I still harbor mournful thoughts about the loss of the people in that newsroom, the loss of the quality of journalism, and everything that was embodied in the *Arkansas Gazette*.

DT: What did you do right then? Did you just talk to colleagues? Did you call anyone?

AF: Gosh. That's a good question. I felt like I was in shock. I told you before, I was a stringer for *The New York Times*, and . . .

DT: Oh. [Laughs] You had a story to file.

AF: Yes, I did. I had a story to file. And that's what I did. I went and filed a story for *The New York Times*. I had called them earlier in the day when the deal was imminent. In fact, I spent part of my time waiting outside the hotel room calling *The New York Times*. I called the media reporter and told him it was supposed to go down today. And he said, "Oh. Thanks for calling me. File me some stuff, and we'll use it." And so I don't know if I did it the moment they said, "It's been sold," but I remember very shortly after, I started filing. I had an ancient Radio Shack laptop computer.

DT: TRS-80.

AF: Yes. And I filed a story to *The New York Times*. It was just a short little blurb they used. So I didn't have a lot of time to sit and mull over what had happened.

DT: Yes.

AF: And I remember trying to get a quote from some of the Gannett people, and they were unresponsive. So I just used what they had said in the newsroom as quotes.

DT: I see.

AF: Those were sufficient and probably better than from someone outside trying to cover it, because I was right there in the meeting of the announcement of the closing. So that was about as good as you could get.

DT: Yes.

AF: During the announcement, they said there were no assurances of any hirings. That was the *Democrat's* doing, and they couldn't promise anyone a job with the *Democrat*. They said we would each be given a severance check, but it wasn't very much.

DT: What did they tell you in the meeting?

AF: Not a lot. [Laughs]

DT: I mean, they told you the *Democrat* was buying the *Gazette*. Did they tell you what the *Democrat's* name would be?

AF: No. I don't recall. I remember that coming up later. And I think that was a decision the *Democrat* announced later, to my knowledge.

DT: I see.

AF: They didn't tell us a lot. They didn't seem that regretful or apologetic. They seemed very officious.

DT: This was Gannett making the announcement to you?

AF: Right. Gannett was making the announcement. People who had been brought in by Gannett. But they didn't tell us a lot. It was more procedural housekeeping matters, like, "you'll be allowed to come in for the next week or so and collect your things."

DT: So did they have goons at the door trying to stop people from coming in?

AF: They did. They had guards from that moment on. There were guards throughout the building and at the door who kept watch, and they did keep the office open for a pretty long time. It may have been two weeks to a month. After everyone was out, they continued to keep guards there for months and months afterwards. My role then as a stringer for *The New York Times* escalated, and they took me on full time because Clinton was running for president. There were a few occasions that I needed some information from the *Arkansas Gazette* files.

DT: Right.

AF: So I went to the *Arkansas Democrat* asked permission to go into the morgue and get some stuff. And they did let me in on one occasion with a guard, who stayed with me to watch me go through the articles I needed. But after that there were a couple more times that I asked for permission and they said, "No. Absolutely not. We have now cut off all access to that collection." And in fact, that collection sat there unused by the *Democrat* for almost a year. Here was a goldmine collection of historical documentation.

DT: Sure.

AF: And it just sat there unused and with no purpose for I don't know how long.

DT: Right.

AF: But everything remained untouched months later. There were still coffee mugs sitting on tables, and trash bins that had not even been emptied. The newsroom still looked like a newsroom.

DT: Bermuda Triangle situation.

AF: It was. There were papers on desks. No one had come through and cleaned the place up. It was weird and eerie. You felt like you were being haunted in a way, because there was all these remnants of a living, breathing newspaper.

DT: Sure.

AF: I'm sure when they needed the newsroom space for Clinton's war room, I'm sure they probably went in and cleaned it up then. And to this day, the building is still vacant. I mean, I was there in April, and it was still vacant.

DT: Has the name on it.

AF: I know *Arkansas Gazette* is engraved in granite above the front door of the building. It remains a relic.

DT: It will forever be.

AF: Some of us drew unemployment for a while. Some people were hired by the *Arkansas Democrat*, but someone at the *Democrat* told me that I would never be hired by the *Arkansas Democrat*. Anne Farris was banned from that newsroom. That was okay by me because would never desire to work there. So I could care less. I just didn't think it was a very good newspaper. I didn't feel like I wanted to step down to a lower grade newspaper. When I came here to Washington to

work for the *Washington Post* in 1995, I had a front-page story about campaign fundraising at the White House. I broke that story, and so it ran on front pages all over America, because it was first on the front page of the *Washington Post*. The *Arkansas Democrat* ran the story, but they took my byline off the story, because it was by Anne Farris. The *Democrat* vowed that my name would never appear in the *Arkansas Democrat*. I considered that a badge of honor.

DT: That's hilarious.

AF: I did ask someone, "Why does the *Democrat* hate me so much? I mean, what did I ever do?" Apparently, when I first came to the *Arkansas Gazette*, I wrote this story about a couple who were arranging adoptions. And this couple were friends of the managing editor. He thought it was horrible that I would write this article about their adoption business. And he held the grudge since 1985. So I never worked there, but a lot of people did go to work there. There were a dozen of us who worked at the *Gazette*, who just a couple of weeks after the paper folded decided to take our severance checks and all go to Cancun.

DT: Ah!

AF: Deborah Mathis was the person who orchestrated it all. So twelve of us packed our bags and flew to Mexico for a long weekend. And we had a great time. We celebrated, we mourned, and just sort of just took a breather and got away from it all. We swam in the warm seas, hung out in bars, and had a really good time.

DT: Yes. Yes.

AF: That testifies to the camaraderie we had, that we'd go on vacation with people

we'd worked with.

DT: Yes. Sure.

AF: The committee that tried to save the *Gazette* was so kind to have plaques awarded to those of us who had tried to help save the paper. I still have my plaque somewhere. It says something like, "To Anne Farris for her courage in trying to save the *Gazette*." I can't remember who planned that, but it was a formal recognition that efforts had been made.

DT: Yes. Yes.

AF: We failed and it was over. There was a period of withdrawal, realizing and acknowledging it was the end of an experience.

DT: Sure. There must have been some alcohol in the newsroom that day.

AF: [Laughs] There was. In fact, I remember somebody bringing in a case of beer and handing it out. There had been a prohibition of open alcohol and smoking in the newsroom. They sent people into a room to go smoke. There was one reporter who could not write unless he had a cigarette in his mouth. He just had this block. So he tried first just having an unlit cigarette in his mouth while he wrote; didn't work. So they finally moved a computer into the smoking room, and you can imagine the smoking room, which was filled with a cloud of gray slimy dust. And he would just be as happy as a clam smoking away and confined in there.

DT: Right.

AF: So you know, someone brought in this case of beer and was handing out beer, and people were lighting up cigarettes and cigars. They were not celebrating, but

smoking and drinking as an act of rebellion. One of the Gannettoids, said, “You know there’s no alcohol allowed,” and the guy who brought in the case of beer turned and said, “What are they going to do, fire me?” [Laughter]

DT: Yes. So there was no final edition, then, of the *Gazette*?

AF: There was no final edition.

DT: They shut you down. I’m trying to remember where I read the account—maybe it must have been in the *Arkansas Times*. I remember reading somewhere about Max Brantley going outside and carrying a sign around that said, “Will edit for food.”

AF: I didn’t know about that.

DT: Maybe that was in the *Democrat*.

AF: Maybe so.

DT: Yes.

AF: He had been a very strong, vocal leader in the “Save the *Gazette*” effort and didn’t mince words about it. There was so much energy, and camaraderie. We worked hard to meet daily deadlines, and then we partied hard. We liked each other’s company outside the office, and after work we’d go to a couple of places for food and drinks. There was one bar called International Bazaar around the corner. We’d go to dive barrooms, but this place, International Bazaar, was cosmopolitan for Little Rock. It was nice, the décor was nice, and they actually had international food, Middle Eastern, mainly. They had these paper lantern lamps that hung low over each table. Bob Douglas, a former editor, was at the

University of Arkansas and periodically would come back, especially during the “Save the *Gazette*” days. He just was always scowling about the paper lanterns. Deep down inside he was a puppy dog, really a great man and a great writer. But he was always grouching, maintaining this image of a hard-nosed guy. He said, “I don’t understand why you go to a that bar that—who can drink under a paper lantern?” He just thought that the place was too nice for journalists. But we didn’t seem to be too discriminating. In fact, we were there so much, they erected a plaque and put it in the bar with a photograph of all of us huddled around a table. There must have been twenty to thirty of us, and we’re all raising our glasses in the air. The plaque said, “This table belongs to the *Arkansas Gazette*.” We’re immortalized in the International Bazaar at least.

DT: Right.

AF: We had great parties. Stephen Steed was notorious for his ridiculously over-dressed New Year’s Eve parties. And he had a collection of tuxedos he had bought at thrift shops that were the most god-awful things you’ve ever seen. One was lime green, and another one was purple with velvet lapels and a spangled cummerbund. He had a different one every year. The women would put on tiaras and long dresses with white gloves above our elbows. Everybody would get ridiculously over-dressed and show up to this New Year’s Eve party, and we partied way into the night. We’d all end up going and having breakfast somewhere in our ridiculously over-dressed costumes. Those people were so much fun. They had a lust for life. Great sense of humor, quick wits, a self-

deprecating humor. The talk was shop, the talk was news, the talk was politics, the talk was gossip about other people in the newsroom or the management. We loved it. We just had a great time. They were some of the smartest people I've ever met. They had a great view on life, whether it be through humor or suffering or work. And they were some of the best writers I've ever met. They just had an interesting slant on life. I've never really worked or lived in a place where there was a concentration of people like that, and that came to fuel it even more. It was awfully concentrated.

DT: Yes.

AF: And who knows why they all came together as they did.

DT: Yes.

AF: But people stayed at the *Gazette*, too. When they came they stayed maybe for that reason.

DT: Yes. I remember just some of the great writers there: Mike Trimble I thought was a fabulous writer.

AF: Oh, yes. Mike Haddigan's a great writer, Stephen Steed's a great writer, Jon Portis is a great writer, Max Brantley is a great writer. And there's Ernie Dumas, Scott Morris, and John Brummett. Just a lot of talent. When I arrived I thought, "Oh, well. This will be like my other newspaper jobs: stay for a couple of years then move on somewhere." I ended up living there nine years. The people are so endearing. They value friendships, and we worked hard, too. It was just a great time. It was a wonderful experience. I feel very fortunate to have been exposed

to it, because I've really not experienced in any other situation like that in my career, unfortunately. I still stay in touch with a lot of people, and we've never had a formal reunion, per se, but we have gotten together over the years.

DT: Sure.

AF: One thing I hear them say whenever we meet is that they're still looking for that time, for that situation, and that uncanny combination of people. But they can't find it again. And that they know it's futile to look, but they still try because they miss it. And it's interesting that they hope that there will be some other place like that, and maybe there is. But it hasn't been recreated for me. I've not had that situation since then.

DT: Yes. A lot of those, too, it's the time of your life, you know, it's the age that you are.

AF: It was. It was.

DT: It was a largely a youngish group

AF: We were young.

DT: The old guys were there, too, and they were, you know, as much involved in the going out.

AF: Right. And you could learn a lot from those guys, too.

DT: Sure.

AF: I did. It was a wonderful experience for me. There were so many veteran reporters who you could learn from. They had great insights, and they taught you the tricks. It was always a growing, learning experience, and that's good.

DT: Yes. They were very encouraging, too. I remember.

AF: Oh, yes.

DT: I remember just as an intern, you know, doing my big story there was a group of kids started hanging out down by the Arkansas River, down between a couple of the bridges in North Little Rock, and it was this very, large just abandoned area. And what had happened—you know, I was very young. I was not much out of high school myself. I was a college kid. And some of these kids had been hanging out on the strip up in North Little Rock, and the mayor, Terry Hartwick, pulled up one day and said, “You all take your beer drinking and your pot smoking down to the river, and we’ll leave you alone.” And so these kids all started going down to the river, and I started going out and hanging out with them every night. And I went back and I told Max Brantley, “You know, I’ve got this story, and I think it’s going to be pretty good. There’s just this big congregation of kids down there.” It got bigger, bigger, and bigger, and one night it just blew up. And the police came down, and a bunch of the kids surrounded the police officers and threw bottles at them or something. I can’t remember what exactly happened. And I wasn’t there that night, but there was an AP [Associated Press] reporter there.

AF: Right.

DT: So I came in that next day, and maybe they actually called, but Max said, you know, “We want your story. We need it now. Write it.”

AF: Right. Now we need it. Now we got a peg.

DT: And so I had this mass of quotes and all these kids who had been there from day one, and who'd been there for the Hartwick meeting. And so I wrote this story, and then they did the bit with parentheses where they worked in what had happened concerning the police officers from the AP. And I filed this story, and the next day I came in the newsroom, and all these veteran reporters were slapping me on the back, and it just felt so good. I felt like I had written just the biggest story ever.

AF: Right.

DT: In truth it was just a story, but they were so encouraging and generous.

AF: Right. Which you don't find in newsrooms a lot. A lot of times you get a big story, and people don't like you for that.

DT: Right.

AF: But here everyone fed on everyone else's successes with big stories, because it was more important to get the news out and get the story first. I think everybody was excited about that and did take an interest in other people's successes. So it was an unusual place.

DT: Yes. An unusual time.

AF: Yes. It was.

[End of Interview]