

*Gazette* Project

Interview with

Al Neuharth,  
Telephone Interview  
25 May 2000

Interviewer: Anne Farris

Anne Farris: This is Anne Farris. The date is May 25, 2000. I'm conducting an interview for the Arkansas Center for Oral and Visual History on the history of the *Arkansas Gazette*. Could you identify yourself for the record?

Al Neuharth: I'm Al Neuharth.

AF: Can you tell me first how you came to buy the *Gazette*?

AN: I don't know what you mean.

AF: Well, how did it come about that Gannett would buy the *Arkansas Gazette*?

AN: Well, that was a period in Gannett's history when we were in the newspaper acquisition business.

AF: Right. And why were you interested in the *Arkansas Gazette*?

AN: It was brought to our attention that there was a possibility of the *Gazette* being acquired. [We began] the usual business procedures and made inquiries and talked to the Patterson family, the owners, and ultimately worked out a satisfactory deal for both parties.

AF: Right. Were there any reservations at the beginning about getting this paper? Public companies weren't really getting into competitive markets like that at the

time.

AN: Well, if we'd had any reservations, we wouldn't have done the deal.

AF: Well, right. But I think initially in all sorts of deals there might be some problems or reservations even if they go through.

AN: That is correct. In all business deals there are pros and cons.

AF: Can you exemplify some of the pros and cons?

AN: No, I would just simply tell you that obviously the pros outweighed the cons, so we made the deal.

AF: Right. Well, did you ever feel at any point that it was a mistake to buy the *Gazette*?

AN: No.

AF: Let me ask you — I can't remember when you stepped down as chairman and turned it over to Mr. Curley.

AN: April 1, 1989.

AF: Okay. And did you ever talk to Mr. Curley about the way the *Gazette* was run or how the newsroom was run?

AN: You mean after that date?

AF: Right.

AN: No.

AF: What about before?

AN: Before, when I was chairman, I was involved with the way everything was being run at the Gannett Company.

AF: Right. So did you have any impact or say on the sale of the *Gazette* to the *Arkansas Democrat*?

AN: No.

AF: So you wouldn't have had any involvement?

AN: Since April 1, 1989, I have not had any involvement in any decisions, large or small, at the Gannett Company.

AF: Right. If you had been running the *Gazette*, would you have sold it?

AN: I do not know. That's a hypothetical question that I cannot answer.

AF: Well, but it's in retrospect, too, looking back.

AN: Right. And I cannot answer that. That's a hypothetical question, and I won't engage in that. I do not know.

AF: Were you aware of the sale at the time it was occurring?

AN: You mean the sale to Gannett?

AF: No, the sale to the *Arkansas Democrat*.

AN: No, I was in no way involved. I'm retired. I was retired.

AF: Right. When Gannett bought the *Arkansas Gazette*, were there any commitments made to the Patterson family about maintaining the editorial page principles or voice?

AN: I'm not sure I understand your question.

AF: Well, I wonder if you had made any sort of indication or commitment to the Patterson family that the *Gazette*, under the ownership of Gannett, would retain the editorial direction that the paper had taken in the past?

AN: I'm sure we would not have done that, but I am equally sure that we told Hugh Patterson that we had admired the editorial philosophy and positions that he and his editor, Harry Ashmore, had taken through the years, and that since we admired that, there was every implication that we would try to continue along those general lines.

AF: Right. Well, you're right when you said earlier, of course, that Gannett was buying a lot of papers around the nation. And I wondered if, during your tenure of overseeing the *Gazette*, you handled that paper differently than other papers given its history, given it tended to have quite a reputation for its autonomy? Did Gannett try to handle that paper differently than the acquisition of other papers?

AN: The answer is we handled each paper differently. Every acquisition was treated individually based on its community, its market, its employees, its past philosophy. All of that was taken into consideration. There was no formula across the board. Every Gannett acquisition was handled individually and differently, including the *Gazette*.

AF: Right. Well, then can you just tell me briefly how you approached handling the *Gazette*, given all those characteristics?

AN: How we approached handling?

AF: Right.

AN: Well, first of all, Hugh Patterson, who had been running the paper for years made it clear that he wished to retire upon the sale. And so that meant that we had to put into position other management.

AF: Yes.

AN: And John Sigenthaler, does that name ring a bell with you?

AF: Yes, it does. I saw him at the Freedom Forum in Nashville, Tennessee.

AN: John Sigenthaler was my point person in negotiations for the acquisition of the *Gazette* and he was my point person in installing management to succeed Hugh Patterson at the *Gazette*. John Sigenthaler has the long-time reputation as a leading Southern, liberal journalist who was a friend of Harry Ashmore's, a good acquaintance of Hugh Patterson's, so he seemed to me to be the best qualified person at Gannett to handle that transition. And you may wish to talk to him if you haven't already done so.

AF: Did you and Mr. Sigenthaler discuss what particular direction you would like to see this paper?

AN: Yes. I told him I'd like for it to become the winning newspaper or surviving newspaper in Little Rock.

AF: But it didn't. It lasted five years.

AN: I understand that. But you asked me whether we discussed it, and I told you what we discussed.

AF: Right.

AN: You have to remember that at that point I was supervising nearly one-hundred daily newspapers, a lot of television stations, and radio stations. And no one who runs a corporation that size can or should pretend that he or she can get into details or specifics. He or she should set general goals and then hire the right

people to try to make those goals work.

AF: Right.

AN: And so, in the case of the *Gazette*, I told John Sigenthaler and John Curley, and Doug McCorkindale, and others that our goal should be to make sure that the *Gazette* won the war in Little Rock. And then they had to figure out [Laughs] how to do that.

AF: Right.

AN: And that's it.

AF: Right. And so there was no commitment in the beginning, internally, to have it just last a certain number of years?

AN: I beg your pardon?

AF: There was no decision or commitment internally from the beginning that Gannett would acquire and hold the paper for only a certain number of years?

AN: The private and public commitment was to win the war in Little Rock.

AF: Right. Do you think that perhaps you owed something to Arkansas not to surrender to the *Democrat*?

AN: Did I owe something?

AF: Did you think, at the time, that perhaps you owed something to Arkansas not to surrender to the *Democrat*?

AN: Well, I didn't surrender. Again, I want you to make sure that what we're talking about here is pre-April 1, 1989, post-April 1, 1989. I will not discuss anything that happened post-April 1, 1989, because I do not discuss anything that happened

at Gannett after my retirement. But at the pre-April 1, 1989, the commitment, the instructions, the policy was to try to win the war in Little Rock.

AF: Right. Surely, you must have some thoughts about the way the paper was handled after 1991.

AN: Yes, I do have some thoughts.

AF: And do you care to share those?

AN: I will not share those.

AF: You will not share those?

AN: No.

AF: Why not?

AN: Because I do not share any thoughts publicly with anything that has happened at Gannett since my retirement nor anywhere else once I retired. I just don't do that.

AF: Well, let me go back then. Let's go back a minute to the purchase of the *Gazette*. Did Hugh Patterson approach you to buy the *Gazette*?

AN: No.

AF: So you approached the Patterson family, or Gannett approached the Patterson family?

AN: Gannett or its emissaries approached the Patterson family.

AF: Right. And did you find at the time the price to be too high, too low? How long did the negotiations go on?

AN: I don't recall how long the negotiations went on, but the price was too high

because it's always too high. Every asking price of every newspaper or anything else for sale is too high. That's what the seller should do. And then there were negotiations, and I don't remember how long they lasted, but they ended up at a price that the buyer and the seller considered fair.

AF: Were there other news-holding organizations considering purchase of the paper also?

AN: I do not know. I suspected at the time that Mr. Patterson had other discussions, but I was not privy to those, so I do not know.

AF: Can you briefly describe to me how you did plan to win the war when you bought the paper?

AN: No. No, I've already told you that I, as the CEO and chairman of the company, said, "Okay, guys. We've got to win this war in Little Rock. Now, you're all smart, and here are your roles." And then I appointed certain people to do certain things. As I said, John Sigenthaler was the point man on that operation, and John Curley was the president. And, at that time, CEO of Gannett — I was the chairman, so I did not do that. I do not do that. I hire very good people and give them a goal.

AF: Right.

AN: And expect them to achieve it.

AF: Well, is there anything else I need to ask you about this?

AN: Ask anything you want to, but I hope you understand that there are certain things that I'll answer and certain things I cannot answer.

AF: Right. Well, I did hope you'd give me a little more detailed description of your negotiations with Hugh Patterson.

AN: Well, I can understand why you would hope that. [Laughter] When I was a reporter I always hoped that I could get every last detail out of everybody I talked to. Sometimes I did and sometimes I didn't.

AF: Right. [Laughs] It's always difficult to interview a reporter.

AN: Maybe, maybe not. [Laughs] Anyway, I'm trying to be honest with you and accurate, and I'm trying to make clear what I can talk about and what I can't or won't talk about.

AF: Right. Well, it seems that you could talk about the negotiations with Hugh Patterson to buy the paper. I don't know that that would be such private information.

AN: Well, I don't know what you mean. I don't remember specifically. It went on over a period of weeks. We were together several times over martinis. Both he and I loved martinis. So we had lunches and dinners, but I can't — first of all, I can't recall. Therefore, I can't tell you where we started, where we went next, or where it ended up. I don't even know how long it went on. I just don't know that.

AF: Yes.

AN: Your best source for that is John Sigenthaler since he was my point man from the beginning.

AF: Right. Well, I just wondered if you had any opinions, too, about the way the

*Arkansas Gazette* was operated at the time?

AN: I thought it was an excellent newspaper serving the people of Little Rock and much of the state of Arkansas in a very, very good way. And that, financially, it had some difficulties because of the competitiveness of the market, but I thought that as a newspaper product serving the reader in the communities, it was excellent.

AF: And you thought you could turn that around --- the financial situation?

AN: Yes.

AF: Yes.

AN: We thought we could turn it around and win the war or we wouldn't have bought it.

[Tape Stopped]

AF: Right.

AN: Okay. Well, good luck. It's an interesting project, and I hope you enjoy doing it.

AF: Thanks.

AN: Okay.

AF: Goodbye.

[End of Interview]