

*Gazette* Project

Interview with

Roy Reed  
Little Rock, Arkansas,  
15 March 2000

Interviewer: Harri Baker

Harri Baker: This is a continuation of interviews with Roy Reed and Harri Baker. This is March 15th in the year 2000. Roy, we had carried your story right up to the point where you are about to get hired by the *Arkansas Gazette*. So, how did that come about? It is the year of 1956. I understand that a childhood friend of yours was a printer at the *Gazette* and was somehow involved in the process.

Roy Reed: That's right. His name was Stan Slaten. Stanley and I grew up together in Piney, on the outskirts of Hot Springs. We chased girls together. In fact -- I can't remember if I told this or not --- Stanley wrecked my Model A pickup truck because he couldn't stand it that the girl sitting between us was paying more attention to me than to him. He took his hands off the wheel just long enough to run off the bluff. Nobody was hurt. Stanley and I used to go out on the river, the Ouachita River, and put out trot lines. Now and then, we would get a hold of --- It seems to me the most whiskey that we were able to buy, between the two of us, was probably a pint or a half of a pint. With boys that are fifteen years old, that is about all it takes. We would build a fire and heat up wieners and do the things that

boys do that they consider necessary in growing up. We fished and went to church together, very much against our will. We had stayed in touch after I went off to college. He had become a printer up at the *Gazette*. When he found out that I was looking for a job, he put in a good word for me with A .R. Nelson, the managing editor.

HB: Were you still with the Air Force?

RR: I was still in the Air Force.

HB: You knew when your discharge would be?

RR: That's right. I was a two-year wonder. The time was about up. I had just begun to pay attention to the civil rights movement. In the South, [the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther] King [Jr.] had burst on the scene. The Montgomery bus boycott I had found fascinating. I couldn't stand it. I was in the Air Force and not working as a reporter helping to cover this magnificent story. I applied, first of all, to the *Delta Democrat-Times*, in Greenville, Mississippi, with Hodding Carter. He was actually Hodding Jr., big Hodding. He owned that paper and everybody knew about him. He had gone up to the University of Missouri and had made a speech. I had fallen in love with the whole idea of becoming a Hodding Carter, I guess, or at least working for him. He did not have any openings, so I couldn't get on there. I was actually offered a job with United Press in Atlanta. I turned it down, but for what reason I can't remember. I also knew about Harry Ashmore, who even in 1956 was a very well known Southern editor, in this same heroic mold. This is to say that he bucked the local authorities and local institutions. I thought

it would be a good thing to work for Harry Ashmore. So with the help of my friend Slaten, I got an interview. It was pretty much arranged by phone and by mail before I ever went down there. Nelson, I think, hired me on the basis of what Stan Slaten told him.

HB: Did you think about going back to Hot Springs?

RR: It seems to me that I had some conversation with the Hot Springs paper. I can't really remember. In any event, I don't think I was serious about going back there to work. I didn't have a very favorable impression of the paper at that time. My mother, of course, would have loved it if I had come back to work for them. That may have been why I made some inquiries. Little Rock was close enough, and I ended up working there. They hired me and two other reporters within either a few days or a few weeks of each other. The other two were George Bentley --- I think he went to work the same day that I did, covering the Pulaski County Court House. That was a very desirable beat. I remember being a little envious because I would have liked to cover the Court House. As it turned out, George held on to that beat for about thirty years. I didn't have a chance of edging in there. The other person that was hired about the same time as George was Bill Lewis. He came from the United Press, with considerable experience, writing fast and writing accurately. To this day, I admire Bill Lewis for the way he could turn out copy.

HB: Was he doing features in those days as he did later?

RR: No, he started out doing general assignments. In fact, he stayed on the general

assignment beat his entire career. He branched off into features and did criticism, reviews and that sort of thing. His great strength was always general assignment. In a way that is like the old [play and movie] "Front Page" idea of the rewrite man. You have seen the old poster, "Get me rewrite, Sweetheart." The rewrite man, as you know, was a very important person. He could take a set of facts called in by somebody else and turn them into English in a hurry. In fact, some of the great newspaper stories of all times were rewrite jobs. The sinking of the Titanic in *The New York Times* was a rewrite. Bill was more than a rewrite man. He wouldn't just take stuff from the phone. He would actually go out and cover stories. Every day was a different story. My first job at the *Gazette* was covering North Little Rock. That was kind of a traditional breaking-in place for new reporters. I had the impression, mistakenly as it turned out, that I would be there a few months and then I would move into a much more choice assignment of some kind. I ended up staying two years. By the time that I left, I held a record of tenure for North Little Rock. John Woodruff came later and broke my record. I stayed there two years, and it turned out to be great experience, although I didn't appreciate it at the time.

HB: Was there competition in the *North Little Rock Times*?

RR: There was --- not competitive in the same way that it became under Bob McCord and Tom Riley, after they bought it out. I can't remember the name of the family. It didn't have any pretensions beyond just covering the local events and being a good weekly paper at that time. The main competition was the *Democrat*,

the *Arkansas Democrat*. A man named L. D. Kerr was my counterpart on the *Democrat*. They were an afternoon paper and we were the morning. There was a lot of scurrying around and trying to beat each other. If we found out something, we tried our best to keep it a secret until the other guy's deadline had passed. It was great fun.

HB: Did they give you any kind of orientation or training? Or did you report to work and they told you to hit North Little Rock and you started looking up stories?

RR: I don't remember any training to speak of. My training consisted of being sent to North Little Rock in the presence of a guy who was then covering North Little Rock, a man named Charles Allbright.

HB: The same Charles Allbright that continues to write the column?

RR: Yes, the same. He was chomping the bit to get out of there because he had been promised the "Our Town" column as soon as they could find someone to replace him in North Little Rock. He was very happy to see me come. Our desks were side by side, and we shared a phone. In those days they did not have enough phones to go around. We shared a phone, Charlie and I. He went with me for two or three days, maybe as long as a week, no longer than that. He introduced me around to the mayor, key members of the City Council, the city clerk, Mr. [Percy] Machin, one of the great figures of North Little Rock history. He knew everybody in town. He had been city clerk for thirty or forty years, and he was getting up in years himself. About twice a week, when I would write the obituaries for North Little Rock, his name would be in it because he would be a

pallbearer at everybody's funeral. Everybody who was anybody had Percy Machin as a pallbearer. Anyway, Charlie introduced me around to the police chief, the main detectives, and people like that. He kind of got me going. He told me about the lay of the land and how the city was run. It was mostly poorly run in those days. Most interestingly, he introduced me to a would-be politician, William F. (Casey) Laman.

HB: Oh, boy, yes.

RR: He ran the furniture store across from City Hall. Casey's Furniture Store was like a government in exile. It was a hotbed of intrigue, people coming all hours of the day. They were conspiring with Casey on how to overthrow the government across the street. Casey quickly saw the value of having all the reporters on his side. He fed us enough information and good stories that we lined up to go across the street and spend time with Casey just about every day. We were getting the latest low-down on the supposed corruption of City Hall and who the scoundrels were. In fact, it was an attempt from Casey Laman that led to the single most interesting experience that I had in North Little Rock, the day that I was beat up over a story. Following a tip from Casey, I wrote a story about some minor scandal like replacing the screens on the windows of City Hall, or that caliber. It was just a question about how it came about, and there was a story in it. I wrote it. The story mentioned an alderman named Joe Donnell. He was an old-line Missouri Pacific worker and had been a member of the City Council for a long time, a powerful member of the City Council. In fact, it was commonly believed

that he was the most powerful politician in the town during this period. The mayor, a good old fellow without a strong personality, sort of did the bidding. The story mentioned Donnell and one or two others. The day the story appeared in the *Gazette*, I had a call from Donnell asking me to come to his house, a few blocks north of City Hall. I did, but with some trepidation. I knew he was going to remonstrate because there was no way that he was going to like the story that I had written. I was prepared to be told the other side of the story with some emphasis. I got there, and he had one of his co-workers on the City Council, a man named Dallas Bobbitt, another old Missouri Pacific worker, also a member of the City Council, in the living room with him. They asked me to sit down, and I took a seat in an arm chair in the living room. I thought it was kind of interesting that both of the men were standing up and never did sit down. After a few words of taking me to task on this story, the first thing I knew, Joe Donnell came across the room and was all over me, whaling away. As the police reports used to say, "So and so had been beaten about the head and the ears." I sure was beat about the head and ears. I couldn't get out of the chair even if I had had the wit to fight back. It was all over in no time.

HB: Both of them?

RR: No, Bobbitt was there purely as a witness. The next thing that happened after he let me go and got through beating on me was that one of them called the police. In a very few minutes a patrol car pulled up front. A couple of policeman came in. Of course, they knew these city councilmen, and Joe told them that I had come

out there and caused trouble. I don't remember if he had told them that he had to whip me to subdue me, but the suggestion was that I had come out there to start a fight. He demanded that I be searched for a weapon. I was carrying, as I always did, a pocket knife about 2 to 2 1/2 inches long. The police duly noted that I was armed with a pocket knife. That went into their report. I was pretty undone. I had some scratches and bruises around my head and my shirt. I can't remember if it was torn. I was pretty much a mess when I left there. I drove straight to the *Gazette* newsroom. I walked in, and Bill Shelton, the city news editor, took a look at me and said, "Good God, what happened to you?" I told him, and he immediately assigned another reporter, probably Bill Lewis, to write a story about this incident. The story included going to the police station in North Little Rock to get the official version of it. Anybody that had any sense reading the story the next day would understand that the police version was Joe Donnell's version and then there was my version. Luckily for me, it didn't hurt my credibility because Joe had a certain reputation in North Little Rock for being pretty tough and hard to get along with. It had the opposite effect of what he might have intended. I think he might have wanted to intimidate me into laying off these stories about malfeasance at City Hall. Instead, it emboldened other people to call me up and tip me off to other things that were going on. Before it was over, I had a pretty good collection of minor stuff. There wasn't anything huge going on like theft. It was just the usual stuff like favor your friends and stomp your enemies every chance you get. The story ended sadly. I'll never know if there was a connection

or not. It turned out that Joe was in bad health, which I did not know. In about a year, or less, he committed suicide with a shotgun. Even though I frankly despised the man, I hated to see him take his own life like that. There was another reason I felt bad about the situation. He had a sister who worked in the city government. She was the head of the City Health Department. She was a very competent woman who had been in the job for some time. One of my stories had involved nepotism, as I recollect, against a city ordinance for a city employee to be related to someone in the city government. That story angered some people who knew the sister and thought highly of her. They thought the *Gazette* was picking on her. Looking back on it, with the advantage of forty-some-odd years' hindsight, I probably should have handled the story in a different way. I thought well of her, and I regret that she probably went to her grave hating me.

HB: That is an incredible story for the 1950s. Did the higher ups at the *Gazette* talk privately to Donnell or anybody else in the city government? You would think the newspaper wouldn't take too kindly to one of their reporter's getting beat up.

RR: I don't remember exactly what they did. I do know that it was clear in my mind that the paper was backing me all the way. I never had any doubt about their support. There might have been an editorial. I am not sure. It didn't bother me a whole lot once the minor cuts and bruises healed up.

HB: It must have bothered Norma some.

RR: Yes, she was a little upset about it. I don't remember what my kids had to say

about it. Years later, when I was covering the White House and other exalted branches of government, I got a fair amount of mileage out of being able to boast that I was the only newspaperman that had ever been beaten up by an alderman. Others claimed they had been beaten by policemen and state troopers. I stayed on that beat for two years.

HB: Is that when you went to the State Capitol assignment?

RR: No, I don't think so. I think I spent some time on general assignment covering mainly the school beat. By then we are in 1958. I did not cover the Central High crisis, except for one day when the story washed across the river to North Little Rock to a high school. I don't believe I got this in the last interview. I did not have any reason to. The Central High, the school desegregation story, had been entirely a Central High matter and a Little Rock matter. Some high school students at the black high school in North Little Rock decided to test the idea of being admitted to the white high school in North Little Rock. In fact, the school board in North Little Rock had made some tentative arrangements to integrate the high school over there. After the big dust-up in Central, they quickly backed off because they did not want the same kind of trouble there that had happened at Central. When they backed off, some of these kids. . .

HB: Was this in 1957 or 1958?

RR: This was in 1957, the fall of 1957. These black kids appeared one morning at the high school. The superintendent of the school and the principal of the school met the kids at the front door and explained that the school board had voted not to let

them in at this time and turned them away. There was some scuffling. Some white boys got into it with the black boys. It was nothing serious, but there was a good bit of anger. All the news people were there because they had been tipped off that this attempt was going to be made. The superintendent was a man named Bruce Wright. I had a good bit of sympathy for Bruce Wright. I liked him. I had known him fairly well for some time. Suddenly, this man was at the top of the steps of the high school, confronted by this small riot, and realized he was in charge. The police came pretty quickly and broke it up. He was the man responsible. Here he was after the dust had settled, here he was surrounded by reporters, including a bunch of national reporters, two or three at least. — Also including a funny-looking man, who stood about 5'8", wearing a seersucker suit and a hat pushed back on his head. His hands were jammed down in his pockets. I had never laid eyes on this fellow before. I did not know who he was. He walked up. We were all trying to interview Bruce Wright. Bruce was literally speechless. I don't know if you have ever seen that happen. If a person is frightened enough, riled up enough, you can lose your voice. Bruce had lost his voice, and his eyes were glazed over. He was a man in some difficulty. I didn't know what to do. Here I am, a reporter, all of twenty-seven years old. I didn't know anything about handling a situation like that. I am sure that my friend L. D. Kerr of the *Democrat* was there and had the same feeling. We wanted to do something, but didn't know what. Suddenly, this little man, this funny-looking little fellow, walked right up to the front of the pack of reporters and started

talking. We could barely make out what he was saying. He talked in this very peculiar accent that, I learned later, was Tidewater, of Virginia. The vowels sound like --- “about” came out “about.” --- He talked a mile a minute. He never asked a question. He started off by identifying himself as Johnny Popham of *The New York Times*. I recognized the name at once. He was well known in newspaper circles. He talked old Bruce back into a state of sanity. He got him to answering the questions. As far as I know, Popham never asked a single question. He just talked. I later learned that Popham was one of the world’s greatest talkers. I never figured out how he got his stories because he never stopped to ask questions. He was famous, among other things, for covering the entire South by himself, out of Atlanta. He was afraid of flying or had a great distaste for it and when a story broke somewhere, he would get into his old Buick and drive to it. They said that stories would wait for Popham to get there. That was my first encounter with Johnny Popham. I later had more dealings with him when I went to work for *The New York Times*.

HB: Did he continue to cover the civil rights movement after it became a really big story for everybody?

RR: Yes, he did. In fact, he had already been covering it from the beginning in the earlier 1950s, from the time of the Brown decision in 1954 right on up. He had written some of the most perceptive think pieces, analytical stories for *The Times* about what kind of place the South was. He covered the South for twelve years. He left shortly after this visit to North Little Rock to be replaced by Claude

Sitton. More about him later on in my story. Anyway, I wrote the story that day for North Little Rock. As best as I remember, that is the only story I wrote in 1957 that had to do with school desegregation in Central High. The Central story was mainly covered by Ray Moseley and Jerry Dhonau, with a fair amount of help from Bill Lewis and one or two others. I did not start covering the school story until the following spring when I was finally sprung from the North Little Rock beat.

HB: That was 1958?

RR: Yes, late spring or early fall.

HB: Who replaced you in North Little Rock?

RR: Well, I believe it was John Woodward. It might have been Bill Whitworth. I am not sure about that. I just remember being so grateful.

HB: Did you write Donnell's obituary?

RR: I don't believe that I did. I think I was probably off the North Little Rock beat by that time. I think I would remember writing his obituary.

HB: You probably would have passed that one on to somebody else? So you are now at general assignment at the *Gazette* in the spring of 1958. Who were you working for? Were the general assignments in those days with the city editor?

RR: City editor, Bill Shelton. One of the greatest newspaper men I have ever known.

HB: Everybody says that.

RR: His wife, Dixie, refers to him as "the great stone face." He had the power to sit for hours without changing his expression on his face and without saying much.

He was a great hands-on editor. He made the assignments and read the stories when they came in to make sure it was the story he had sent the reporter to get. Frequently, it was not the story that he assigned, so he would send him back until he would get it right. He was also very good --- he was a born copy editor. He had a great feel for language and the niceties of language. Probably did more than any other single person to help me learn the craft of newspaper writing. As you know, it is a special kind of writing. It is very special. I remember, for example, I was taught by Bill Shelton that there is a principle called sequence of tenses, verb tenses. You do not violate this. If the first verb in a compound sentence is in the past tense, then the verbs that follow must be in the past tense. Unless there is some kind of rare exception to the rule. I remember that he taught me not to use false titles — that is, a string of nouns and adjectives in front of a person's name, pretending to be a title. A real title would be Mr. or Senator or Governor. I have a big file of false titles that I have collected for my own amusement. Years later, after I had come back to Arkansas, I wrote a piece for *The New York Times* about false titles. Shelton loved language and knew a great deal about it.

HB: Where did the city editor or copy editor function for the general assignment? Did your stuff go first to city desk and then to the copy desk?

RR: Yes. No copy editing to speak of takes place on the assignment desk. If there is an obvious mistake, the city editor catches it. Mostly, he just makes sure the story is complete. Then he shuffles it over to the news desk, or copy desk, for style or

grammar, or spelling, and headline writing.

HB: In those days, the copy desk did all the copy, wire copy, and everything?

RR: Everything. The sports department had its own desk.

HB: As always. A separate world there.

RR: Of course, the editorial writers handled their own copy editing. I guess the society desk handled their own reporting and copy editing. Bob Douglas, I think he was the telegraph editor when I went to work there. I remember being amazed at the yards and yards and yards of teletype paper that would go across Douglas's desk. He stood up, as I recall, with a bunch of spikes. These spikes would fill up in a matter of minutes. It would actually take an hour or two. It was an enormous waste of paper because what mostly comes in on the wire is not used. It can't be. The telegraph editor has the job of deciding which of all the things that happened in the world today must go in our paper tomorrow. That copy is then sent over to the copy desk for proper editing to put it into *Gazette* style. In those days, the *Arkansas Gazette* had its own style. It was special. Mr. Heiskell would not put up with the idea that somebody else would dictate the *Arkansas Gazette's* style. That is, when you capitalize words and when you don't, how the titles are written, whether they are abbreviated or spelled out. Dozens and dozens of peculiarities like that. Nowadays, everybody uses the Associated Press style book.

HB: Was the *Gazette* style written down, or was it just in the minds of the people?

RR: You know, I can't remember. It must have been written down. In fact, I think I remember Bob Douglas saying that he remembers writing the style book or at

least updating it at some point. I am sure it was written down.

HB: In the *Gazette* project they are looking for historical artifacts. A copy of the *Gazette* style book would be a marvelous thing if you had it.

RR: That is a good idea. I am glad that you mentioned that.

HB: Somebody must have taken one home.

RR: I bet Bob Douglas would have one.

HB: I have an AP style book that I kept from a newspaper.

RR: I despise the AP style because it isn't the one that I grew up with.

HB: It isn't the one that I grew up with either. I can't find anything in it. That probably isn't here nor there. What sort of things were you covering? We are going to get back later to Mr. Heiskell. What kinds of things were you covering as general assignment reporter starting in 1958?

RR: All kinds of things. As you know, general assignment reporters --- anything that comes down the pike that day that catches the city editor's eye. I sort of specialized in school coverage. I was not the only one. The school desegregation story was such a big running story for us. Even months after September of 1957, day after day, Bill Lewis, Jerry Dhonau and Ernest Valachovic covered all those stories. When Ernie Dumas came to work there, whatever year that was, he started writing some of those. It took more than one person. I remember, for a period there, the school board was sort of my beat. I was responsible for all their meetings and coverage. Virgil Blossom, the superintendent, staying in touch with him. I remember being at a school board meeting one night, [and] we got tear

gassed. It caused a great commotion. The organized segregationists were very angry [about] having to send white children to school with black children. They were still convinced that if they could cause enough trouble, they would get the federal government to reverse several generations of history and go back to the old ways of segregated schools. One of the things that they did was to get children in the high school, tough kids, to cause trouble for the nine black kids that were in Central. On the outside of the school, letters to the editors, speeches, sermons in some of the churches that supported segregation, and violence now and then. At some point, dynamite was set off in three or four places around town. Nobody was hurt, but it caused a good bit of damage. The Ku Klux Klan was behind that. This one night, at a school board meeting -- in those years the school board met on the second floor of the school administration building. It seems to me it was on Ninth Street or Louisiana. I really can't remember. To get to the meeting room, you walked up some stairs that led directly to an outside door. Somebody slipped through the front door in the middle of the meeting and set off the tear gas. It came right up the stair well, right into the meeting room. We were all up there, tearing up and coughing and sneezing and trying to get out of there.

HB: Was it a room with one exit?

RR: Yes.

HB: Did they find out who did that?

RR: You know, I can't remember. We all supposed at the time that it was somebody

in the Klan or some hot-head in the Citizens' Council. I am not sure that we ever did know. It broke up the meeting.

HB: Did you cover the STOP campaign?

RR: Yes, along with some other general assignment reporters. Before that, the Women's Emergency Committee got involved. I covered that. "Stop This Outrageous Purge" grew out of another school board meeting with a divided school board: half segregationists and half not segregationists, half law and order, split down the middle. The law and order folks walked out of the meeting, protesting an attempt to fire several dozen teachers who were thought to be integrationists, a purge of teachers. Yes, I covered that. It was an exciting time. In fact, from September of 1957 until about 1960, this was an exciting story. There was something almost every day in the public domain having to do with that story.

HB: I don't mean to deal with your professionalism, but is it tough to stay objective in that?

RR: Absolutely, it is. I don't know of a person on the reporting staff whose private feelings were not very much engaged. I would say that ninety-five percent of us were on the side of the integrationists. We believed it was a matter of principle, that it was the right thing to do. I believed at the time, and still believe, that we wrote our stories objectively. It was commonly believed around town and among the segregationists that Harry Ashmore stood in the newsroom every day and delivered orders on how to distort the news in favor of integration. In turn, Harry

got his orders from the Communist Party, U.S.A. That was widely believed. I was having coffee at Paladino's Cafe in North Little Rock, while I was still on the North Little Rock beat, and having coffee with somebody from the city hall.

Another man who was a friend of this other fellow, a well known businessman in North Little Rock, joined us for coffee. Before I knew it, we were talking about the *Arkansas Gazette* and its role in the Central High crisis, which had already occurred at that time. To my absolute amazement, I heard this otherwise responsible businessman referring to Harry Ashmore as a Communist. The man obviously believed it, that he was a Communist.

[End of Side 2 - Tape 2]

[Beginning of Tape 3 - Side 1]

HB: This is a continuation of an interview with Roy Reed on March 15, 2000. We were talking about covering the school business in Little Rock at that time. Did you try to cultivate sources among the segregationist group, those who were opposed to segregation?

RR: We had certain sources who were kind of automatic. We did not have to cultivate them. More about that in a minute. There was the lawyer, Amis Guthridge, the Rev. Wesley Pruden, one or two others who were well known spokesmen for the movement. Interestingly enough, I don't remember ever dealing with Jim Johnson at that time. Other reporters at the *Gazette* did and knew him quite well. He was one of our sources. These folks --- although they hated the *Gazette's* editorial page and denounced it every opportunity they had in public --- they got

along with the newsroom and the reporting staff. We got along with them.

HB: It was in their interest to get along with the news staff.

RR: I think this is one of the truisms of journalism that people outside of journalism don't really appreciate very much, that public figures and the journalists who cover them, both, have a stake in getting along. I remember, there was an example of this some years later. I was covering a re-election campaign of Governor [Orval] Faubus, which meant that I traveled with him, not in his car, but I followed his caravan along with other reporters. One day, at the end of the day, I must have been the only reporter still with him. We were at Hazen. In those days, it was known as a tough little town, in regards to the *Arkansas Gazette*. They had no use for us in Hazen. It was getting dark when the rally was getting over. We were in a field at the edge of town, quite a ways from houses and businesses. Just an isolated spot out there. Faubus had made a point of denouncing the *Arkansas Gazette* as he did in every speech, [calling] Ashmore by name, and then he said, "There is a *Gazette* reporter here in the crowd!" --- The implication being that he was there to tell more lies. He did not put it that way, but I could see people turn around and look me over. It was in a very threatening way. I frankly did not want to be left there with a bunch of that crowd. I did not know what to do. I stayed until everybody else had left. There was just me and Faubus and his handlers --- half a dozen young guys. As it happened, I needed to ask him something anyway, to clarify some point. Before we started to talk, he said, "Well, now, Roy, I don't want you to take it personally when I say things

like that about the *Gazette* and you.” He put his arm around my shoulder.

[Laughter] It was a touching and infuriating moment. I felt like he had put my, not my life at risk, but certainly my well-being. Later on, I used to hear George Wallace pull the same kind of thing. The point is there were no hard feelings past the moment. It was in our mutual interest to get along.

HB: Coming back to something that you said earlier, I think it needs a little more coverage. You mentioned the view among the anti-integrationist group that Harry Ashmore was standing there in the newsroom directing news. Let’s address that directly: did he?

RR: No, no, absolutely not! In fact, Harry Ashmore did spend quite a lot of time in the newsroom because it was his job. He was not just the chief editorial writer of the *Arkansas Gazette*, he was also the executive editor, which meant that his responsibilities were for the editorial page and the news coverage. He was the chief newsroom officer, if you will. So, naturally, he would spend a lot of time there, although his office was off in a corner of the building. He was in and out of the newsroom all day long. That was his job. Also, . . . he felt at home there. He was an old newsman, and he loved being around things that were happening. People were talking and things were happening. More than once I would see him over at the telegraph machines reading the latest wire stuff coming in from around the country. More than once, I have seen him, after a spirited conversation with some of the other editors and obviously thinking it was an editorial idea, look at his watch, realize it is close to the deadline . . . [and] sit down at a typewriter in

the newsroom and commandeered some reporter's typewriter and dash off an editorial. He could do it in minutes. He was a very fluent writer. Bob Douglas says he wrote exactly like he talked. He talked in complete sentences. He was a presence in the room, but not at all in a way that his enemies liked to think. First of all, he didn't believe in slanting the news. He felt the story as the facts had it was interesting enough. They didn't need to be slanted. They were not slanted. I am confident that you could go back today and look at the news stories in the *Arkansas Gazette* and go back to the *Arkansas Democrat* and read the news stories there, and you will find great similarities in the tone, in facts, and the way that they were presented. I am sure that we occasionally let our prejudice get into our copy. When that happened, I am also sure, that almost all the time, it was taken out, by Shelton or someone else on the copy desk. It figures that some of that prejudice would now and then get into our copy, but nothing like the segregationists wanted to believe at the time and wanted the world to believe. It was just not true. I remember once writing something that I would not have ever written as a more mature reporter. It was late at night, I was on general assignment, covering a speech by Governor Faubus on television. I was not at the speech. I think it may have been a television speech from a studio in town. I was parked in front of the set in one of the darkened rooms and made some notes. I had just enough space for a three or four-paragraph story. Whatever the main point of his speech was was what I used in my lead. I don't remember what it was, just that it was not true. I knew it was not true. The first sentence of my

story said, “Governor Faubus said tonight, blah, blah, blah,” and whatever he said. The second paragraph of my story consisted of a single sentence. It said, “This is not true.” Now, as an old newsman yourself, Harri, my guess is you would agree with me that it was not the way the story should have been covered. In looking back on it, I’m embarrassed that I wrote it that way and second, that whoever was on the desk did not rewrite that. It is unforgivable editorializing. Even if it is right, it is not the way we handle it. There are other ways to phrase it. It is the only time that I know of that I can remember that I ever let my personal feelings enter a news story and it got into print. I don’t think there was ever another time. I think about ninety-five percent of the newsroom did not agree with Governor Faubus. That is, they were on the integration side. It might have been a higher percent than that. The only reporter that I can remember whose sympathies were on the side of the segregationists was Bill Lewis. Bill, himself, has referred to this in public in recent years, that his own sympathies were not with the *Gazette* editorial page. In spite of that, he kept his feelings out of the copy. He just wrote thoroughly objective, straight-down-the-line, very factual material. He has used that to rebut the argument of the segregationists, that we were up there writing some Communist party line every day.

HB: Bill must have gone through a change of heart or mind later.

RR: Yes, I am sure that he did. It was a painful time for Bill. Even though I disagreed with him, I had some sympathy for his situation. Here he was in this newsroom where he was absolutely surrounded day after day after day by people who

disagreed with him. It must have been kind of lonely. Luckily, Bill always had known his own work and never had anything to doubt about it. I don't think he was terribly troubled, but it must have had some aggravation to it.

HB: Let's talk about some of these people at this stage. How about a little more about Harry Ashmore? I heard a story about Harry Ashmore in a bar, looking at his watch and saying, "I really need to go and write another editorial, but I need one more martini to get it done."

RR: Yes, but I think it was told by one of the out-of-town newsmen, a regular guest of Harry's at the Little Rock Club. He had a habit of taking these visiting newsmen over there to lunch every day. It was well known that Harry like martinis. He could drink two or three at lunch. Now, to put this into perspective, that was not all that unusual in those days, certainly not for a newspaper man. In New York, business people are famous for the "three-martini lunch." Harry was part of that. There was this one day when the rest of them left and he stopped at the bar on the way out and said good-bye to the others. He turned to the bartender and said, "I think I am going to have another martini." Then, after the briefest pause, he said, "You better make that a double. I have got to write an editorial when I get back."

HB: Were you a witness or was that folklore for you, too?

RR: I heard it secondhand. I was not there. I don't think I set foot into the Little Rock Club until after I left the *Arkansas Gazette*.

HB: By the way, is that a company membership to the Little Rock Club?

RR: I am sure it was. He and Hugh Patterson were members.

HB: Who else did editorials?

RR: Most notably, Jerry Neil. Jerry was one of the great wordsmiths.

HB: We should say here, just in case anybody doesn't understand it, editorials were anonymous. There aren't by-lines on editorials.

RR: Everybody in Arkansas knew that Harry Ashmore wrote editorials. In fact, he was credited for writing all of the editorials.

HB: The other side of that is if he is the chief editorial writer, he is responsible for it all. Neil wrote a lot of them?

RR: Yes, these two guys had dissimilar styles. People who knew could tell them apart by reading the finished product. I never paid that much attention. I just knew they were both terrific writers. In fact, for years, I went around thinking that Ashmore had written a particular editorial --- and it turned out, years later, that Jerry Neil had written it --- on the death of Joe McCarthy. The *Gazette* editorial page had been on his case from the beginning, one of the early critics of McCarthyism, but when he died, this editorial summed up his career in a rather lengthy editorial. It included all his misdeeds. Unlike a lot of other editorials around the country, it did not take the view, "Well, we had our differences with ol' Joe, but he was not a bad sort." That was the tone of a lot of --- well, the *Gazette's* editorial had none of that false amiability. It was just one paragraph after another, recording the sins of this awful man. The last sentence, I will never forget it. "Joe was a bad guy. The evil that he did will live after him." I always thought that Ashmore wrote that editorial, but Bob Douglas, years later,

straightened me out and said, “No, that was Jerry Neil.” Jerry liked long, rambling sentences. He never lost control of a sentence. He always wrapped it up. He was a very funny guy. He was from Berryville. He came from a prominent family. I think one of his ancestors was a governor of Arkansas. He had a terrific sense of humor. It was different from just about everybody else in the newsroom. He was very well read and had opinions on everything under the sun. One day we were reading the teletype. A story came over about a crash of a French airliner somewhere in Europe. We were all standing around reading and catching up on how many people had gotten killed. Jerry’s immediate response was “Everybody knows that the Frogs can’t fly airplanes.” It turned out that this was one of his deep seated prejudices, that Frenchmen were not up to flying airplanes, amongst a number of other things. He didn’t care for the Germans either.

HB: Did you see Harry Ashmore socially, outside of the office?

RR: No, not once. In fact, it never occurred to me that such a thing might be possible. If I had been a little more senior on the staff, I probably would have had an occasional drink at the Press Club across the street with Harry. By the time that I had gotten far enough along at the paper to be in a position to do that, Harry was gone. He left in about 1960, just as I was becoming one of the senior reporters.

HB: Was the Press Club across from the *Gazette* building in those days?

RR: It was.

HB: That must have been a private club of some sort, or illegal.

RR: It might have been both.

HB: That was before it was legal to buy liquor by the drink except for private clubs.

RR: I am pretty sure that it was legal, private club. I was never a member, but a lot of my friends were. Usually, its members were those who worked late. Somehow, I got off the late shift.

HB: There must have been a late shift.

RR: I never did with any regularity. Usually, it would just have been for a night meeting or a night speech or something that caused me to stay late. The beat reporters usually went to work about the middle of the morning, usually around ten or ten-thirty. Then they went home right around the time of the first edition's deadline, about six-thirty or seven. I was usually gone by then, home for a late supper. Somebody had to stay there until the last edition, and that would be at two or three in the morning.

HB: Did you have special friends on the *Gazette* staff?

RR: Yes, we tended to run together. A lot of *Gazette* parties were wonderful affairs. I am not sure they still have them. My guess is that they don't. Part of the reason that they were good events was the very special time that we were in, 1957, 1958, 1959. We knew that we were not popular around great parts of the city of Little Rock. We clung to each other. We would have these parties. I never was much for drinking. I was never a binge drinker, but the *Gazette* had a few of those. At these parties, you could count on two or three of these. Mainly, they were photographers that were falling-down drunk. Literally, falling-down drunk.

There was a famous night when Larry Obsitnik, the chief photographer, fell into a tub of ice cold beer. I don't even remember if I was there and saw that, or just heard about it so often that it became a part of my own memory. I do remember Chris Kazan getting drunk enough to pass out on the couch, more than once, at somebody's house. He was the son of a very famous man, Elia Kazan, the movie director.

HB: Really? I remember that name.

RR: He had come to the *Arkansas Gazette* to work. He had heard about it all the way from the northeast and wanted to work at this great newspaper.

HB: Was he a photographer or what?

RR: No, he was a reporter. He stayed two or three years, as I recall. I don't think he came to work there until the 1960s. We overlapped for a period of time. Chris was just a kid fresh out of Harvard, or wherever he went to school, somewhere in the Ivy Leagues, I think. He was a very decent young man. He had this charming combination of naiveté and worldliness that he had learned at home, living around metropolitan New York. He eventually married here to a young woman who had been married to Leroy Donald, Jeannine. They went back to Connecticut to his home. They lived there until he died at a far too young age. There was a succession of young men who came to the *Gazette* because of its reputation growing out of the Central High crisis, which was because of Harry Ashmore and J. N. Heiskell and Hugh Patterson. I am thinking of a man named Patrick J. Owens, for example, who came from Montana. He had worked all over

the northwest. He was a terrific reporter. Pat weighed about 250 pounds. He had hair that was never combed, never. He wore glasses that were never clean. I don't know how he ever saw out of them. It was like a windshield that had been hitting bugs. He had a wife and young son, and they went around town in a Morris Minor. Nobody could ever understand how they could fit into that tiny automobile. He was on general assignment during part of his time there. He wrote some of the best feature stories that I had ever read. He later went to work for the *Pine Bluff Commercial* and became the executive editor and chief editorial writer of the *Commercial*. He hired Paul Greenberg to be an editorial writer. Paul succeeded him at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*. Pat came back to the *Gazette* to write editorials and stayed for some time and then went to the *Detroit Free Press*, where he became rather well known as a labor reporter. During that period, he pulled one of the most outrageous stunts that I have ever seen. The *Free Press* went out on strike. It was out for months. In fact, it may still hold the record for the longest single strike in the newspaper industry. By that time, I was in the Washington bureau of *The New York Times*. We were living in Chevy Chase. I got a telegram from Pat Owens from Paris. By that time, he had been divorced from his Little Rock wife for some years and was going around with a very nice woman named Myra, who had two small children. Myra had a little money, and she had taken off to Europe with her two kids. Pat had followed her to Europe and stayed during most of the strike. He had nothing else to do so he took off and gallivanted around Europe until the strike was over. Then he had to

come home. He had used up all of his money. He went down to the American Express office in Paris. With a list, I later learned, of twenty names of old friends back home. He sent a simple one-sentence telegram to each one of us saying, “Please wire twenty dollars in care of American Express, Paris, to get me home.”

[Laughter] Of course, we all did. He stopped at our house on his way. Apparently, the strike was not quite settled. He ended up spending two weeks with us in Washington before he finally made his way back to Detroit to resume his job. Here was this man that my poor wife knew only from drunken *Gazette* parties back in Little Rock years before, unkempt, a terrible reputation for drinking too much, and all kinds of misbehavior. She dreaded terribly knowing he would be a houseguest indefinitely. Well, it turned out that he was a terrific houseguest. Norma speaks well of him to this day as the single best houseguest we have ever had. Among other things, he taught our son to shoot pool. He took him downtown and taught him. Back at the *Gazette*, he once covered a story that I used to tell my reporting students [at University of Arkansas, Fayetteville] about when I would lecture on problems that editors and reporters had seeing eye to eye. One day the King of the World came to Little Rock. This was a man, Bishop Homer A. Tomlinson, who was a self-anointed king of the world. He would go from one state capital to another. He had his own church in Harlem. He was a white man, but his headquarters was in Harlem. He would go from one capital to another with great fanfare announcing ahead of time that he would come on a certain day and that at a certain hour he would crown himself king of

the world. He would collect his press clippings and move on to another capital and another state. He came to Little Rock one day, and Owens got assigned to go out and cover it. He wrote what I am sure was a terrific story, at great length. Owens wrote at great length. Owens was furious the next morning when the story had been cut by about half. It was underplayed as he saw it. Rather than complain directly to Bill Shelton, which nobody liked to do, he took his complaint to Bob Douglas, who was the news editor. He had no responsibility for this at all. Pat knew he would get a sympathetic hearing if he was complaining about this treatment of his story to Bob Douglas. Douglas said, "Well, Pat, you know, there is something you don't understand about Bill Shelton and the way that he sees things." Pat said, "What's that?" "Well," he said, "Shelton was on to him. Shelton knows that he is not king of the world." [Laughter]

HB: Tell me about J. N. Heiskell.

RR: J. N. Heiskell, when I came to work, was in his seventies. He had perfectly snow white hair, [was] tall, straight, [with] interesting blue eyes. He was just beginning to be bent a little bit. It would never have crossed anybody's mind to call him anything but Mr. Heiskell to his face. Behind his back, we were bolder than that. We called him Mr. J. N. [Laughter] Occasionally, in anger, just J. N. We really kind of idolized the old man. He was the main owner of the paper since 1902, I believe it was. We all understood he was the youngest amongst us. He never advertised himself as the owner of the *Arkansas Gazette*. His title at that newspaper was editor. That carried enormous implications for the kind of paper

that it was. He had an executive editor that he trusted to get the paper out day by day and to run the daily operations.

HB: Harry Ashmore?

RR: That was Harry Ashmore. J.N. Heiskell, himself, was the editor. He was finally responsible for everything that went into the paper, ads, news content, and everything. We all understood that, and everybody in town knew that.

Occasionally, somebody would complain bitterly enough about some news coverage or some editorial, it would end up on the old man's desk. He would write a carefully crafted letter explaining, "If you have a problem, it is not up to Mr. Ashmore or somebody else, I am the editor of this paper. I am responsible." Like I say, we all idolized him. He was so far removed from us in age and stature that none of us presumed to know him. Harry knew him and knew him very well. I have heard Bob Douglas say that Harry was one of the great con artists of our business. He persuaded the old man to let Harry do things that the old man did not really approve of on the race issue. Mr. J. N. was an old kind of patrician segregationist. Not the bitter Ku Klux Klan kind who hated black people, but the kind who patronized black people and thought it was the white person's responsibility to look after these unfortunate human beings who couldn't really look after themselves. As we now know, there was more than a little racism in that attitude. He would never have stood for the kind of vicious, violent behavior that came with the 1950s. Although, it is my understanding, in the days of lynching, he was not as forthright and opposing as we might have expected a man

of his sensibility to be. It is my understanding that he did not take strong positions against it. He was not one who thought federal law was needed to handle the problem. He was old South. He was a nineteenth-century Southerner, with all that implies. We were not aware of that. All we knew that --- come 1957 and the crisis, all we knew was that the paper did the right thing and that must mean that Mr. J. N. was doing the right thing. It was only later that we figured out that Harry persuaded the old man, reluctantly in some cases, to do it. Harry and Hugh Patterson. Hugh was a vigorous integrationist, at least as much so as Harry. The two of them talked to the old man a lot, we later learned.

HB: At least he was persuadable. Was Mr. Heiskell a visible presence in the newsroom? I know he came to work every day way into his 80s.

RR: We saw him everyday at least once or twice. His office was back in another part of the third floor. He would amble through the newsroom with his glasses on. He was usually reading something, a piece of copy. He would often stop at the teletype and read something.

HB: Did he dress distinctly? That age and type often did in those days.

RR: Yes, he always wore a conservative suit and, of course, a necktie. Now and then, one of us reporters would be called back to his office to be talked to about something, usually about a story that he had suggested. He always had --- he had a great interest in history. He had a bunch of standing assignments, to follow through the city desk, of stories that he wanted done, at no particular time, but as time allowed. All of us reporters had a drawer full of these "J. N. H's," as they

were known. They usually always had to do with history. I remember writing a lengthy story --- it took me days and days to finish it --- about some North Carolinian who had opposed secession before the Civil War and was pretty much hounded out of the state for it. Mr. Heiskell was deeply interested in this man and his story in the 1950s. We would be called back to his office and the scene was this: it was the single most cluttered office at the *Arkansas Gazette*.

HB: You were called to Mr. Heiskell's office directly? This is an actual eye witness account?

RR: Yes. Shelton or somebody would say, "You need to go back and see Mr. Heiskell. He has a story or something."

HB: Did you go there all by yourself, one on one?

RR: Yes, just one on one. He was very approachable and very friendly.

HB: This was not something that you faced with trepidation?

RR: No, we weren't being called on the carpet or anything like that. He would not have handled a reprimand. That would be handled by one of the intermediate editors if he had been unhappy about something. These were all very pleasant visits because we enjoyed the old man's company. We understood we were in the presence of history, that he, himself, was a piece of history. His office was an absolute mess! His secretaries down through the years never were able to do anything with it. His desk --- In fact, I ended up with one of his desks. They bought new furniture one time and did away with the old ones. I realized that his desk must have ended up in the library, in the newspaper library. We were

invited to take these things, chairs, desks, whatever. I had his desk for years and finally gave it to somebody after transporting it to England and back. It was a huge, old, wooden desk. It had no great distinction. It would be piled, literally, three or four feet high on the back side and on the wings with newspapers. Old copies of the *Gazette*, *The New York Times*, or whatever newspaper would come across his desk that he wanted. Usually, he hadn't quite gotten around to reading it, but he wouldn't allow it to be thrown away. Then he had tables that were stacked high with old newspapers and clutter.

HB: Was there a separate floor for the executives?

RR: No, he was on the third floor, he and Ashmore. At this time, I believe he had the corner office on Louisiana and Third on the third floor.

HB: What was your conversation with him like?

RR: Very genuine and respectful on his part. If he called me by name at all, it would have been Mr. Reed. I am not sure that he ever called me anything. I don't remember that he ever called me Roy. I think that would have stuck in my mind. He was a civilized man and observed the niceties. I didn't see this happen, but somebody who had been in the men's room and overheard this came out and was laughing. We had a two-urinal men's room off the newsroom. One day the newest copy boy on the paper, a kid of about seventeen, found himself standing side by side with J. N. Heiskell. Mr. Heiskell felt that two men in such close circumstances needed to make some kind of conversation, not to just stand silent. So he said, "Well, young man, how long have you been with the *Arkansas*

*Gazette?*” The kid said, “Two weeks. How long have you been here?” Mr. Heiskell replied, “Fifty years.” [Laughter] That was the kind of thing he would do. Everybody understood him. They tell some outlandish story that I do not believe for a minute. Somebody put a young reporter up to going back to Mr. Heiskell’s office to look for a typewriter. This young reporter’s typewriter had broken, and there was not another one. This kid was sent back there and told there was a spare typewriter back in Mr. Heiskell’s office. The kid asked Mr. Heiskell, and he denied having a spare typewriter: “You can see, it is not here.” The kid looked around and, no, he could not see it. Then time goes by and weeks, months, and one of the secretaries finds a typewriter. It was indeed back there, covered up! There are a million old J. N. Heiskell stories. I know that our friend John Thompson, who is finishing a biography of J. N. Heiskell that he and Bill Rutherford started. It has a lot of those good stories in it, including that one about the typewriter, I believe.

[End of Tape 2 - Side 2]