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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with

Jim Bailey
Little Rock, AR
14 June 2005

Interviewer: Jerry McConnell

Jerry McConnell: [This is] Jerry McConnell. I'm here today on June 14, 2005, with Jim Bailey. I'm interviewing him for the University of Arkansas [Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual] History project on the *Arkansas Democrat* and *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*. First off, Jim, I need to start out by asking you if we have your permission to make this recording and turn it over to the [Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual] History department.

Jim Bailey: Yes. Absolutely.

JM: Okay, Jim. Now, let's just start at the beginning, and then we'll work our way up. Give me first your full name.

JB: James Clayton Bailey.

JM: When and where were you born?

JB: Columbia County, near Emerson, Arkansas, on October 13, 1932.

JM: Who were your parents?

JB: John and Annice Bailey.

JM: Were you born on a farm?

JB: Absolutely. [Laughs] Absolutely.

JM: Your father was a farmer?

JB: My father was a farmer. My grandfather was a farmer who had homesteaded most of that place.

JM: All right. What was his name?

JB: His name was George Bailey.

JM: Yes. So you did farm work as a kid growing up?

JB: Well, they tried to arrange that, but I did as little of it as I could.

JM: [Laughs] I understand that viewpoint. Where did you go to school?

JB: Emerson Public Schools, the first through the twelfth grades.

JM: And after that?

JB: What is now called Southern Arkansas University [Formerly Southern State]—a total of three and a half years sandwiched around a couple of years in the U.S. Army.

JM: You went to the army in between.

JB: I went to three years. I went to the army. I attended school 1950 to 1953. I was in the army 1953 to 1955, and was briefly back in school for the spring term of 1956.

JM: Did you get your degree?

JB: No. Not even close. [Laughs]

JM: Okay. What happened after the spring term of 1956?

JB: Well, all the time I was in school there, before and after military service, I guess you'd say I was an aspiring journalist. I worked for the school paper. I worked for the *Magnolia Banner News* as a stringer. I called in ball games to every media

outlet that wanted anything. In the spring of 1956, I applied for a job at the *Arkansas Gazette* sports department. Well, I applied for a job at the *Arkansas Gazette*. I preferred sports, but I was open to anything that they were open for. I got a nice note from Orville Henry, the sports editor, which said, “Your credentials seem to be well in order,” et cetera, “but, sorry, nothing open.” About two or three weeks later, just about the middle or the end of May of 1956, I got a phone call from A. R. Nelson, who was the *Gazette* managing editor. What had happened was Charlie Rixse, who was in sports at that time, was about to be shifted to the city staff. There was an opening in sports, so I came up and was interviewed by Orville and A. R. Nelson. For some reason [laughs], they hired me. I didn’t have a lot of credentials.

JM: Do you remember what day you started work?

JB: It was either the May 30 or 31, 1956, whichever one of those days was on a Thursday.

JM: And you started off covering the . . .

JB: Well, I started off wandering around the office trying to figure out what kind of world I was in.

JM: [Laughs] But you were assigned, at least pretty quickly, to the state college beat.

JB: That fall. Yes.

JM: You worked for the *Gazette* for how many years?

JB: From May of 1956 until it closed on October 18, 1991. Thirty-five years, a few months and a few days.

JM: We’ll come back to that *Gazette* experience in a minute. How did you get from

the *Gazette* to the *Democrat-Gazette*, and at what period of time? What did you do after the *Gazette* closed?

JB: Well, immediately after the *Gazette* closed, we had a pretty nice severance package. The package improved, depending on how many years you had been there. There weren't very many thirty-year people. I got a very nice severance package. I was old enough at that time to start drawing the company pension plan, so I didn't do much of anything until after the first of the next year. The *Arkansas Times*, which had been a magazine, switched to a weekly tabloid newspaper format in the spring of 1992. Of course, the change was based on the fact that there was only one daily newspaper left in town. And the *Times* added several former *Gazette* people—Max Brantley, Doug Smith, John Brummett. So I was over there until the end of 1993. I joined the *Democrat-Gazette* first as a freelance columnist in January of 1994, and was made a regular staff member about February 28, 1994. I retired at the beginning of January 1998. I still do columns for the *Democrat-Gazette* on a freelance basis, and occasionally some other work.

JM: Who at the *Democrat[-Gazette]* hired you?

JB: Well, I interviewed with Mr. Griffin Smith, who was the editor, Bob Lutkin, who was the managing editor, [and] Wally Hall, who was the sports editor.

Essentially, I guess, they all hired me.

JM: Okay. Bob Starr [John Robert Starr] was not . . .

JB: Bob Starr had retired. Of course, he was still writing his columns. But as far as managing editor, he had retired. I don't know exactly, but I believe he retired

approximately a year after they absorbed the *Gazette*.

JM: Okay. I don't know whether this is true—you may have heard this—but Bob Starr said that he would never hire anybody from the *Gazette*.

JB: Well, I don't know whether he said that or not. [Laughs] Bob Starr said a lot of things, and some of them probably conflicted. But I do know they hired Jerry Jones, who had been on the *Gazette* city staff for about as long as I had been at the *Gazette*. They hired him within a few weeks after the *Gazette* closed, so I don't think that's strictly true.

JM: Yes. Okay. So you worked there several years. What kind of a—you were on a regular basis—so did you go to the office daily, or did you . . .?

JB: Well, of course the first few weeks I was there I just wrote columns on a freelance basis. I did those down at the *Democrat* office. When I went on full-time, I did follow an office schedule. Five days a week, daytime—weekends open. The first thirty years at the *Gazette*, my “weekends” were something like Tuesday-Wednesday or Wednesday-Thursday.

JM: Yes.

JB: And, of course, most of the work was at night.

JM: Yes. From about 3:00 p.m. until midnight, or something like that.

JB: Right. Yes.

JM: What kind of operation was the *Democrat* sports department at that time?

JB: When I went there—when I joined?

JM: Yes.

JB: Well, that was a little over two years after they had consolidated with the *Gazette*

assets. The best I can recall, they had exactly the same sports staff then as they'd had when they switched from being the *Democrat* to the *Democrat-Gazette*. Or maybe a few part-timers had come and gone, but the basic staff was the same. Of course, that would be Wally Hall, the sports editor, and a crew of writers and the desk people. One of the young fellows who had been on the staff a few years left, and that was the opening in the budget that I filled.

JM: Who was that? Do you remember?

JB: Larry Isch.

JM: Maybe this is my own curiosity, but who made out the assignments at the *Gazette* sports department? Did Wally do that or did he have someone else?

JB: You mean at the *Democrat-Gazette*?

JM: Yes.

JB: Well, Wally was and is the boss, but by the time I went there, Jeff Krupsaw had become deputy sports editor. I had known Jeff slightly, back in the 1980s when he was a young fellow just out of the University of Missouri. He was on their staff as a reporter and writer. Jeff was back there by the time I joined up as the deputy sports editor, so he basically looked after the day-to-day schedule, like in past times you had at the *Gazette* when working with Orville.

JM: Yes. What kind of a sports section was it, by that time, at the *Democrat-Gazette*?

JB: Well, let me go back a ways.

JM: Sure.

JB: At the time the so-called newspaper war was raging, you had—by then, the *Gazette* was owned by Gannett, and the *Democrat* was owned by WEHCO

[Media Company]. WEHCO also owned the *Texarkana Gazette*, the *Hot Springs Sentinel*, the *Magnolia Banner News*, the *Camden News*, the *El Dorado Daily News*—papers I had grown up reading. In fact, I did a little part-time work for the Magnolia paper when I was in college. They were very thin little papers. Economy was the watch-word. So as the Little Rock newspaper war was crashing along, I thought, “If Gannett wins it and we get down to one newspaper, we’re going to have some kind of a chaotic version of *USA Today* with no Arkansas ties, or background, or institutional memory, or whatever.” And looking at the *Democrat*—looking at it from the point of view that I had seen all the other papers around the state related to it, that looked pretty grim, too. So what I’m trying to say in my roundhouse, haphazard fashion is [that] the *Democrat-Gazette* surprised me wonderfully in that they kept the staff, they built the staff, they kept the news holes open—they really put out a solid, matter-of-record daily newspaper. Going back to the question that started all this—what did I think—the sports section was quite large and adequate, and all the bases around the state were very well- covered.

JM: It was a big change from the earlier days at the *Democrat*, and a lot stronger section.

JB: Yes. And, of course, since then they’ve added a special Northwest Arkansas edition. It’s really a solid newspaper.

JM: Now, you’re talking about the entire newspaper, rather than just the. . .

JB: Yes.

JM: Let me ask one other thing. When you went on full-time, what were you doing

most of that time?

JB: I wrote two columns a week. One year I kind of covered the Dallas Cowboys. I went to the Cowboys' camp. I did a lot of features. I filled in on [Arkansas] Traveler [baseball] games. Basically, I was a feature writer and a columnist. I didn't have a beat, as such.

JM: Okay, let's go back now to your *Gazette* days. I know a lot of that we've highlighted in the interview for the project on the *Gazette*. Through your first twenty years or so at the *Gazette*--what kind of sports section was the *Democrat* through most of those early years there?

JB: The *Gazette*, as you know--well, as far as both papers were concerned, both had small staffs, small sports staffs. When I went there in 1956, you were there, Bill Bentley was there, [and] Chuck Miller was there. We had a couple of young part-timers, Eddie Best and Eddie Abel. Orville, of course, was the boss, and he pretty much wrote five or six columns a week, and did everything else. It was a very good staff, but a very small staff. The *Democrat*, for the most part, had an even smaller staff, and an even younger and less experienced staff. Neither sports section overflowed with space, but the *Gazette* usually had more than the *Democrat*.

JM: Okay. Of course, all during this time, you were working for Orville Henry, and Jack Keady was the sports editor at the *Democrat*.

JB: Yes, that's true. I was with Jack a lot at Traveler baseball games and during spring training. Jack was a very decent person and a very earnest person, but he just didn't have a lot to work with—in money, in people, or anything else.

JM: What kind of hand was he? As a writer, I guess you'd know that more so than as a sports editor—as a writer and columnist.

JB: Well, Jack was very knowledgeable, especially about baseball and golf. I didn't think he actually burned the world up as a wordsmith.

JM: Yes. You probably saw some of this—why was Orville so far ahead of him in coverage on the [Arkansas] Razorbacks? Did you ever form any opinion on that?

JB: Well, you know, Orville fell into the job as a teenager in the middle of World War II when he was draft exempt because of his small size. At that time, he was about five feet tall and weighed about 100 pounds. He eventually grew up to be about six-two and 120. [Laughter] And then finally added some weight. Ben Epstein, the sports editor, got a job with the *New York Daily Mirror*. The *Gazette* was a two-person staff then. They probably had one page of sports a day during the week, and three or four pages on Sunday. So he just sort of fell into it, and with World War II [going on], there was really not much sports activity, anyway. He was one of the—and I give Jack Keady credit for this, too, although he didn't do as much with it as Orville—when they hired John Barnhill at the end of 1945 to build a so-called modern [sports] program [at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville], both papers fell in with the idea, but Orville much more so than Keady. Orville was about twenty years old in 1945, but even at that point he spotted the fact that the University of Arkansas was a lot of long, twisted road miles away from Little Rock, and that was going to be the post-war sports thing.

JM: Orville, in my impression, probably worked a lot harder at it and probably made a bigger effort to cover the Razorbacks and to get involved with it.

JB: Oh, yes. I'm sure that's true. Yes. Orville worked at everything. In fact, he told me several times that he had to learn on the job. He was eighteen years old [when he started]. About all the sports he knew anything about prior to that was golf, which he liked.

JM: Now, then, let's move on to the newspaper war. When did that sort of get under way, and how did it get under way?

JB: Well, I believe that the Hussman group—Hussman Company—bought the *Democrat* in the spring of 1974. I think that's correct.

JM: It was 1974. That's correct.

JB: That general period of time. For a couple of years, it seemed like nothing really happened—nothing really changed. I do remember one thing from the first couple of years. Of course, the *Gazette* was morning, and the *Democrat* at that point was still afternoon. One of the first strategies the *Democrat* tried was the process of, as they called it, cutting down the *Gazette*'s box time. The *Gazette* went into all the newspaper boxes before daylight every morning. The *Democrat*'s boxes sat empty until the *Democrat* came out at around noon. For a very short period of time, they started bringing some copies of the *Hot Springs Sentinel Record* over there and putting them in the *Democrat* boxes each morning. I don't think that helped. So then—and I can't tell you what year this was—then the *Democrat* went morning—head to head. And that's really where the war took off.

JM: Yes. And after they went morning, the *Democrat* probably started expanding its sports coverage. Is that . . . ?

JB: Yes, indeed, over the long run, they sure did, but not all that much immediately. At what point did you go to Oklahoma City?

JM: I left in 1978. They were still afternoon then. I left in August of 1978, and I don't remember for sure when they went morning, but I would guess it was 1979 or 1980.

JB: Yes, it was pretty soon.

JM: Somewhere along in there, maybe.

JB: And Bob Starr came in as the managing editor, and also as a six- or seven- or eight-day-a-week op-ed page columnist. [Laughter]

JM: Yes.

JB: That's when the battle was joined. I think Mr. Hussman's resourcefulness and determination, and Starr's eager energy for battle were the two main determining factors.

JM: Maybe you can talk about the entire paper, but when did the *Democrat*—after that, did they start really increasing their coverage—maybe their space? They did do that. Is that correct?

JB: Yes, they did, and I don't know exactly what point it was. It was somewhere between 1980, 1983 and 1984—somewhere along in there. In the football season—I don't have any idea how many sports pages they had, but it seems like it was two or three or four times as much as the *Gazette* had on Sundays. Virtually every college football game in the country, even Ivy League—if the Associated Press ran fifteen inches on the wire of Army and Lehigh, or whatever, they'd have all fifteen inches in there under a big headline. Starr was always

shooting at Orville in his columns about his affinity for the Razorbacks and this, that, and the other. But the *Democrat* was also pouring tons of copy on the Razorbacks, of course.

JM: They were covering that really heavily by then.

JB: They were covering it heavily and, at the same time, blasting Orville [laughs] for covering it too much.

JM: In fact, did they start, maybe, even sending more reporters than the *Gazette* to cover the games?

JB: Well, it would be very hard for any paper to send more reporters to cover a Razorback game than the *Gazette* did, but they probably got up even with them.

JM: Yes. [Laughs] But they started making a lot bigger effort for expanded sports coverage.

JB: Oh, yes. Obviously, they thought sports was the *Gazette's* strong point, and that's where—they attacked both with increasing their own sports coverage and Starr's constant yammering in his columns about Orville. I told Orville once that it's strange that if he [Starr] thought the *Gazette* had such a weak point, he'd go to such pains to warn them about it.

JM: [Laughs] Did you see any impact, as far as the *Democrat's* increase? Were they getting increases in circulation at that time, or were you privy to that?

JB: Well, there was always a lot of controversy, especially at the *Gazette*, about their circulation. Supposedly, they threw papers to people who didn't *want* papers. In fact, one doctor here in Little Rock, I think, filed suit to make them quit throwing their paper in his yard. They started discounting classified ads. Maybe they had

free ads. I don't know if they were making that much impact on circulation, but they were doing things that kind of threw the *Gazette* off its accustomed course—off-kilter, you might say.

JM: Yes.

[Tape Stopped]

JM: Jim, when these changes began happening at the *Democrat*, and they got much more aggressive and expanded their coverage and everything, what was the *Gazette's* response?

JB: Inadequate. Eventually, you know, I think in 1985 or 1986 they took the *Democrat* to court for unfair practices, or something, and lost. I imagine it was rather hard for the court to give the paper that still led in circulation and advertising revenues a judgment against a competitor for unfair practices.

[Laughs]

JM: I think that must have been—that was violating the Sherman Antitrust Act. I think that's what it was.

JB: I don't know.

JM: I don't remember, but as I take it, what they were saying was that they were accusing the weaker newspaper [laughs] or the smaller newspaper of taking over [the market]. But, at any rate . . .

JB: Not long after that, the Patterson family, apparently almost sold the paper to some chain, but that didn't go through. Then, in October of 1986 they did sell to the Gannett system. By January of 1987, Gannett was totally in charge. They took over gradually through November and December. Of course, the theory was

that the Patterson family had no media assets other than the *Gazette*, whereas the *Democrat* company had these other media assets, and so forth. So I guess the Patterson family decided they'd just quit the field. They sold to one of the largest and, at that time, most expansive newspaper groups in the country. The publisher that Gannett sent in, Mr. Bill Malon—the day he met the staff there in the fall of 1986, he issued a quote that reverberated for many years, to the effect, “Gannett has deep pockets.” Well, they flexed those deep pockets. They joined in the great discount war--free ads, discounted ads. For the next year or so, I'm sure both operations just spurted red ink. But it wasn't the Arkansas newspaper group that blinked [laughs], it was the giant—Gannett.

JM: How did they operate the sports section after they got there?

JB: Oh, Lord, how did they operate it? Well, they sent in a fellow who had been on their Jackson, Mississippi paper. His name was Paul Borden. When Orville went to the *Democrat* in 1989--and, by that time, Orville was already living in Fayetteville—Paul Borden went up to Fayetteville. Gosh, we had a whole succession of sports editors or would-be sports editors. It seemed like each new one was a little more inept than the previous.

JM: Did Gannett greatly expand the sports page when they came in?

JB: Not greatly, no. Gannett did a lot of technological things—color, make-up, and so on. They didn't dramatically expand the space, that I recall. Usually, we had adequate space on days when there was obviously going to be a demand for a lot of space. Mostly, the war in those days got to be about body counts, in sports and in other things. “We had four people at that thing.” “We had six.” Ridiculous.

And the things that we were talking about were things that, in many cases, weren't worth really having more than one there, if any.

JM: Yes.

JB: It seemed like both papers got into a situation where they would hit something like a *bomb* one day: photos, articles, sidebars, time lines. And then they'd ignore the same subject for about three months. Just eye-catching stuff.

JM: Let me go back to one point. You said that at one point the *Gazette's* initial response to the big upsurge at the *Democrat* in sports, in space and coverage, and everything else was inadequate—in what sense was it inadequate? What did they fail to do?

JB: Well, by the late 1970s—1978 or 1979—the *Democrat* was running a lot of very aggressive television ads. The *Gazette* didn't really want to run any, I don't think. Well, when Gannett came along, they finally did. And they did some TV ads before Gannett came along, but they were pretty tepid things. They ran one television commercial that I recall, which very emphatically and aggressively refuted a lot of things that the *Democrat* had been saying in their ads. But they only ran it for a few days, and then it disappeared. The story I heard was that some *Gazette* readers had complained that the tone of that ad didn't fit the image of the *Gazette*. So, after that, we never tried to fight fire with fire.

JM: This was pre-Gannett. Did they open up much space or hire extra people in the sports department?

JB: They would replace people who left, but they didn't really expand the number of people that much. And the space was, of course, almost always at a premium.

JM: Yes.

JB: I mean, the things the *Democrat* was doing—opening up a lot of space—and I’m speaking now specifically of sports—opening up a lot of extra space, doing a lot of extra things—the *Gazette* did not in any way respond in kind.

JM: Yes. What was the general reaction or your reaction when the Pattersons sold out to Gannett? Were you aware beforehand that they were trying to sell?

JB: Well, everyone was aware—I want to say that the decision in that *Gazette v. Democrat* legal thing—I want to say that decision came down around the spring of 1986. Within another two or three months, it seemed the *Gazette* was negotiating with a newspaper group that wound up not buying them. That was in about the early summer or mid summer, then that kind of faded away. But, yes, it was obvious to everybody that they were looking for buyers. And then, of course, the sale to Gannett was announced in October, I think.

JM: What was the general attitude at the *Gazette*—I’m talking about the staff—or the mind-set during this period of time when the *Democrat* got much more aggressive and the *Gazette* didn’t seem to? Was there quite a bit of disenchantment amongst its staff?

JB: Well, I don’t think, as a whole, the staff was alarmed that much. Some knew that the *Democrat* was making headway, not particularly in sports. John Robert Starr was—he got that editorial op-ed page column—he was the town crier. [Laughs] He attracted a lot of attention to the *Democrat* that they would not have gotten, otherwise, with a standard managing editor.

JM: Yes. So there probably wasn’t any real feeling at that time that the *Gazette* was

going to lose the newspaper war?

JB: I wouldn't think that there was any feeling that the *Gazette* was going to lose the newspaper war among the general staff. I can't really speak for anybody but me. I never thought that they would. I tell you, when I started to realize that they not only could lose the war, but probably would, was after Gannett turned everything loose on the *Democrat*—throwing their discounted advertising and everything back at them, and so on, and so on, and so on. It was very costly to both sides. And when the *Democrat* stood firm after a year or so, I started thinking—Gannett is a massive corporation, but it's got stockholders. Of course, on the other side, it's just, essentially, one man.

JM: Walter Hussman.

JB: Who can either push forward or decide to fall back. So by the end of 1987 and the middle of 1988, I realized that the *Democrat* was in it for the long haul. I knew that the Patterson family had already bailed out. I didn't know how long Gannett would throw all that red ink down the hole [referring to operating at a loss] in Little Rock. Then in August of 1989, when the *Democrat* hired Orville, I *knew* that was it.

JM: Yes. Were you privy to Orville's thinking when he decided to move to Fayetteville?

JB: Yes. Well, I wasn't privy to it in advance. I understood why. He wanted—he got tired of arguing with the ownership about space and budget, and one thing and another. He just wanted to be up there close to his main sources because his main thing at that time was writing about the Razorbacks, as it had always been. But he

wanted [to be] up there. He wanted out of it. The interview that Orville did for the *Gazette* [oral history] project—I think anybody interested in his reasons for wanting to go to Fayetteville, and then his reasons for wanting to go to the *Democrat*—he pretty well spells it out.

JM: It's spelled out there. But he wanted to respond—to meet them head on—with greater coverage, bigger staff, more space . . .

JB: Yes. I don't know about all the details, but he wanted to get down in the trenches.

JM: Yes.

JB: He essentially felt if we kept doing what we had always been doing, but with a little bit more space, and so forth, we wouldn't have any trouble. Now, I don't know whether he was right or not. He wanted to move to Fayetteville, I think, mostly, to be away from all that sort of stuff.

JM: The *Gazette* had never been overburdened with space itself as far as the paper and sports department, in particular.

JB: No, absolutely not.

JM: And particularly—at least back in the early years when I was there and you were there.

JB: I think the *Gazette*'s—of course, the *Gazette*'s most glorious years were during the [1957 Little Rock] Central High desegregation thing, and the Pulitzer Prizes [they won for their coverage]. I think the paper was best, probably, from about the middle 1960s until the middle 1970s.

JM: You're talking about both sports and . . .

JB: Sports and the whole paper.

JM: . . . the news side, too.

JM: Yes. We had some great people out on the news side: Ernie Dumas, Doug Smith, Roy Reed. Great columnists: [Charles] Allbright.

JM: Ray Moseley was there during that . . .

JB: Well, Ray was gone by then, but he's the same kind of guy I'm talking about.

JM: Yes. Ronnie Farrar may have been there . . .

JB: He had been there and gone. Yes. But after—well, Mr. [J. N.] Heiskell died shortly after his 100th birthday in 1972—everything just kind of seemed like it went on automatic pilot until the *Democrat* declared war. Then we had a lot of trouble getting off of automatic pilot. [Laughs]

JM: Yes. They just didn't respond very much for a long time. As Orville said, he just got tired of fighting it. Do you think that—and this is an unfair question, but I'll ask it anyway—what's your perception that, at some point in there, it was true that the sports department was the strength of the *Gazette*, or at least one of the strengths, as far as its circulation, because people subscribing to the . . .

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

JM: This is Jerry McConnell again with Jim Bailey on side two of our tape-recorded conversation. Jim, as I started to say earlier, this may be an unfair question, but did you have any indication how accurate the *Democrat* perception was that, at least from a reader's standpoint, the sports section of the *Gazette* was its strength?

JB: Well, I think everybody in the state pretty well understood that except the *Gazette* ownership. [Laughter] Orville was one of the rare assets who could single-

handedly sell papers.

JM: At one time, it seemed to me that—and this was maybe in response to the loss of readers and advertisers during the integration crisis—that the *Gazette* had made some effort, though, to strengthen its sports department. Is that a true assessment?

JB: From the time I was there, I always felt we had a very good staff considering the *size* of the staff. A while ago, we counted up [and] there were about four to six staff members when I went there, including part-timers. It soon got up to six or seven or eight or nine. And that was about it until—we had quite a few warm bodies there when Gannett was there.

JM: Yes.

JB: Of course, all metropolitan papers have bigger staffs now than they used to. That's obvious.

JM: What was the difference—and you may have touched on this earlier—what did you perceive as the difference between the *Gazette* staff and the *Democrat* staff? I'm talking about the sports staff in those years.

JB: Well, Orville was an amazing value to the paper because he was, statewide, considered the last word on the Razorbacks. And the Razorbacks were the statewide passion. So he was going to blow away anybody the *Democrat* put against him, no matter how talented, determined, or whatever that the other guy was. In most other things—you headed up the high school [sports] coverage. After you, Wadie Moore headed up the high school coverage. Whoever the *Democrat* put against them were invariably young people, new to the business, and, in most cases, new to the beat.

JM: Yes.

JB: And everybody that they dealt with and that we dealt with--when something happened, they would be looking to Jerry McConnell or Wadie Moore, not the young fellow who had been at the *Democrat* on the beat for maybe a few weeks or a few months. [It was the] same with me, covering the state college [sports].

JM: State college. Yes.

JB: And, for example, you know, we had George Bentley. He was the king of the courthouse. He covered the courthouse. I'm sure that if anything broke over at the courthouse, everybody would say, "Oh, where's George Bentley?" They didn't say, "Oh, where's that guy who's working for the *Democrat* this week?"

JM: So one of the big differences between the staffs was just that the *Gazette* staff was a lot more stable, stayed around longer, and had more experience. And the *Democrat* had a big turnover.

JB: Well, the *Democrat* had a turnover, but there were so few people involved it was hardly ever a wholesale turnover.

JM: Yes.

JB: They had some good people. They had a great photographer, Will Counts.

JM: Yes.

JB: Well, later on, they had Fred Morrow, a very entertaining sportswriter. Martin Holmes—a good, solid newspaper person. They had good people over there, but they just didn't have *enough*.

JM: Yes. And in a lot of cases, they didn't keep them very long.

JB: Right. Because if the person had any talent or any real driving ambition, they

would—well, you know, I can't swear to this, but I believe it's true. You and Rixse—I know you and Rixse came from the *Democrat* to the *Gazette* in 1955.

JM: Right.

JB: I've heard that in that period of time, A. R. Nelson, the managing editor of the *Gazette*, and the fellow who was his counterpart at the *Democrat* at that time, more or less struck up an informal agreement that they wouldn't cross-hire.

JM: [Yes].

JB: Well, that was altogether to the *Democrat's* benefit [laughs] because there were a lot more people at the *Democrat* who would want to be going to the *Gazette* than vice versa.

JM: Yes. Yes.

JB: And I think that lasted about six or eight or ten years. I know after I got there, I can't remember anyone for several years coming directly over from the *Democrat*.

JM: Not directly. One of the others who did--but he didn't come directly--was Charles Allbright.

JB: Yes.

JM: But I think he came right after he got out of the service. I'd heard at some point in time that they just had a policy that they wouldn't raid each other's staff. Well, the *Democrat* wasn't going to do a whole lot of raiding on the *Gazette*.

JB: Well, Charlie Allbright was doing "Our Town" in 1956 when I went to work there, but he had only been there a fairly short time.

JM: Yes.

JB: I think he came out of the army instead of from the *Democrat*. I know he had been at the *Democrat* previously.

JM: A lot of this, I guess, was also just—on a lot of the change happening in the sports coverage by the two newspapers, and as it came on later on, sort of similar to what was going on across the country. The people seemed to be expanding their sports staffs and increasing coverage. Is that true?

JB: I think so. Yes.

JM: Yes.

JB: I think the Little Rock newspaper thing was pretty much in line with the national trend, although maybe a little slower.

JM: Yes.

[Tape Stopped]

JM: Jim, forgive me for saying so, but it's always been perceived that you were one of the best writers—not just sportswriters, but one of the best writers, and certainly one of the best sportswriters to come along here in years and years. Everybody would testify in the *Gazette* [oral history] interviews and elsewhere to that talent, and how they admired your style. How did you develop your style?

JB: [Laughs] I don't know. If anything, my style was a lack of style. I guess subconsciously I took cues from a lot of writers that I'd been reading and admired. For example, there was a New York sportswriter named Frank Graham, Sr.—there was also a Frank Graham, Jr., who wrote for the *Saturday Evening Post* later. Anyway, Frank Graham, Sr.—I loved the way he put himself in the context of what he was writing without calling himself “I.” For example, he

would cover himself by saying, “Casey Stengel said such and such, and such and such, and such and such, to someone who came in the pass gate.” That was him.

JM: Yes.

JB: Or, “Such and such fight manager said such and such to a fellow who didn’t pay to get in.” Well, I thought that was kind of cute. I never adopted that. But I liked the way he evaded calling himself “I.”

JM: Yes. How much influence did Orville have? Did he give you much direction on your writing style?

JB: Yes and no. He would send you out—you would write something. If it was all right, normally, he didn’t say anything to you. If he didn’t like it, he would sit you down and critique it.

JM: Yes.

JB: One of the first things I did was cover the Southwest Open Tennis Tournament that they used to have at Little Rock Country Club. I had been at the paper maybe three weeks then. I had seen people out on the court playing tennis, but I had never watched a match. I knew nothing about tennis. So I went out there and bumbled through it for a week. They played a few matches one day, and my lead was that the favorites, whoever they were, had advanced. And the headline said, “Favorites Advance in Southwest Open Tournament.” I walked in the next day, and Orville called me over. He showed me that, and he said, “Favorites always advance in tennis tournaments. It follows form more than any other sport on earth. You’ve got to look for a different angle. You wrote a wooden lead, so, therefore--Chuck, Chuck Miller, the desk man--wrote a wooden head.” Okay. I

bought that. But, of course, over the next couple of years, I realized that anything you wrote wouldn't keep Chuck from writing a wooden head. [Laughter]

JM: I understand. [Laughs]

JB: But that's what Orville would do. He would tell you very practical things. Things that when you thought about it, "Well, yes, that makes sense. Sure."

JM: Yes.

JB: But, no, he never did sit me down and say, "You should write this way," or "You should write that way."

JM: The *Gazette's* sports style—was it pretty similar to the news side style?

JB: Orville's style wasn't similar to anything you ever saw. [Laughs] No telling what Orville would write.

JM: Yes.

JB: Or what approach he would take.

JM: Yes.

JB: We were basically supposed to stick pretty close to the *Gazette's* style book, but usually we couldn't find the style book. [Laughter]

JM: Yes. This is switching areas now—how about the fringe benefits when you were at the *Gazette*? How did they change over time?

JB: Well, we always had a health-care plan, to some extent. I can't remember when the pension plan started. I went there in 1956. I'm assuming the pension plan may have started by the middle 1960s. I don't know. Somewhere in the 1960s, I would guess. One positive thing about Gannett, they did improve—the short time they had the paper, they improved our pension plan and they did improve other

benefits. Originally you made contributions to your pension plan, and, eventually, even before Gannett came in, the paper assumed all of it. So when the *Gazette* closed, I was of an age where I could take—I was old enough I could start my pension if I wanted to, which I did. I didn't know if in five or ten more years I'd be able to find Gannett. But the money that you had contributed yourself, you could either take that in a lump sum or you could absorb it in the spread over the years. The lady who ran personnel at the *Gazette*, a very good, wise lady—she said, “Take the lump sum.”

JM: Who was this?

JB: Barbara Carter.

JM: That wasn't Mary Nell Moseley, was it?

JB: No, no. She was dead. I'll fix that when you . . .

JM: And when you finally arrived at the *Democrat*, did they have a pretty good benefits package?

JB: They had a profit sharing plan. I wasn't a staff member long enough to participate in it. I assume it was pretty good, but I didn't participate in it.

JM: After you arrived at the *Democrat*, though, I take it from what you said earlier that you were apparently—well, I don't know whether the word is—impressed by the job they were beginning to do or that they were doing.

JB: Yes, I was. I was extremely well treated over there. I really was.

JM: Yes. By . . .

JB: By everybody.

JM: Okay. Do you see any impact—and I'm not sure it would be as prevalent in

sports—between having one newspaper now as compared to having two?

JB: Well, A .J. Liebling, who was a great newspaper critic for *New Yorker Magazine*—I never will forget something he wrote one time. This was back in the 1950s, I guess, but already some papers—there were beginning to be more and more cities with only one paper. But he said, and I can't quote him exactly, but what it amounted to was any paper, no matter how inept, no matter how wrong-headed—as long as the paper *exists*, there's always a possibility it might, even by accident, blurt out an important truth. So, in an ideal situation, to me, every major market would be competitive. At least two papers. But that's not realistic anymore.

JM: Yes. Yes. Okay, Jim. I think we have covered the bases pretty good here today. I'm just wondering if there's anything else that you may think of that you'd like to say about the *Democrat*, the *Democrat-Gazette*, or the transition?

JB: Not at the moment.

JM: All right. Thanks very much. I've really appreciated it.

JB: Well, it's good to talk with you.

JM: Yes. Well, it's always good to talk with you because we did it daily for sixteen years.

JB: Yes, you were kind of my professional big brother in the office. [Laughs]

JM: Well, I don't know about that. But, at any rate, it was a great time together. I appreciate your help on this. Thanks very much.

JB: Thanks for asking.

[End of Interview]

[Transcribed by Cheri Pearce]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]