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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with

Arminta Berry
Little Rock, Arkansas
3 June 2005

Interviewer: Jerry McConnell

Jerry McConnell: I'm here with Arminta Berry. It's June 3, 2005. The first thing I need to ask you is do I have your permission to make this tape and donate it to the University of Arkansas [Fayetteville, Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History]'s oral history project [on the *Arkansas Democrat*]?

Arminta Berry: Yes, you do, Jerry.

JM: Okay. You might start out by just telling me how you spell Arminta.

AB: A-R-M-I-N-T-A.

JM: All right.

[Tape Stopped]

JM: Okay. Now, let's just start at the beginning, Arminta. Tell me where and when you were born.

AB: I was born in Leslie, Arkansas, in 1926.

JM: What were your parents' names?

AB: Lillian and Oscar Nichols. N-I-C-H-O-L-S.

JM: Where did you go to school?

AB: Well, we moved here when I was about four to Little Rock for my daddy to work for Bud Finley in the drug—well, I don't know whether it was Economy Drug Store then or not. Then my uncle and daddy bought the Prospect Drug Store at Hillcrest when I was seven. That would be—what year was that? 1933.

JM: Okay. You went to Little Rock schools?

AB: We lived a block from St. Mary's, and I went to St. Mary's all my life.

JM: All the way through twelve grades, then?

AB: Yes.

JM: Okay. Where did you go to college?

AB: I went to college at Lindenwood [University] in St. Charles, Missouri.

JM: St. Charles, Missouri. Did you graduate there?

AB: Yes, I did.

JM: Okay. I know you worked for a while yourself at the *Arkansas Democrat*. How did you get to the *Democrat*?

AB: Well, I had gotten a degree in art. I had a job doing artwork in the display advertising . . .

JM: At the *Democrat*?

AB: At the *Arkansas Democrat*. I went to work in July of 1948.

JM: July of 1948. Okay. And that's where you met your future husband, Stanley Berry.

AB: I met Stanley and thought he was the handsomest man I had ever seen.

JM: Yes.

AB: I thought, "I'm gonna *marry* this man!" [Laughs]

JM: Okay. He had already been there just a few years, I think.

AB: 1945.

JM: He came in 1945. Okay. How long was it after you all met before you got married?

AB: We got married in January of 1950.

JM: Then you quit at that time?

AB: Yes.

JM: Okay.

AB: Well, the reason we hit it off—we both loved music. We were both into music.

JM: Okay. When you got married and quit the paper, did you ever work anywhere else?

AB: Well, I did some freelance artwork.

JM: Okay. Of course, your husband's full name was Chase Stanley Berry. He was the nephew of the owner of the *Democrat* at that time, K. August Engel. Is that correct?

AB: Right. That's correct.

JM: Later, Stanley became one of the co-owners of the *Democrat*.

AB: Yes.

JM: We'll talk about that a little bit later. First, tell me a little bit about your music. Where did you study music?

AB: Well, just all through grade school, high school, college. When I came home in 1948—back to Little Rock—I started playing in what was the symphony then. It

wasn't the symphony as it is now. We had different times that we would have a good orchestra and then go broke. Anyway, I played in the symphony for about thirty-six years.

JM: That was the Little Rock Symphony.

AB: Yes. The Arkansas Symphony now.

JM: And you played the violin, is that correct?

AB: Yes.

JM: I know that I heard somewhere along the line that Stanley just loved to come to the symphony and hear you play.

AB: He did.

JM: Yes.

AB: And he loved to sing. He was in the choral society and the choir—many things like that.

JM: How closely did Stanley keep you abreast of what was going on at the *Democrat* after you . . .

AB: He didn't. He was *very* closed-mouthed.

JM: Was he?

AB: He didn't talk about it.

JM: He didn't tell you what the conditions were or anything else?

AB: No.

JM: Since he was there a long time and involved with it a long time, let's go back and talk about his background. Do you remember where he was born?

AB: Yes. He was born in San Antonio, Texas, in 1910.

[Tape Stopped]

JM: What were his parents' names?

AB: Augusta and Albert Berry.

JM: Albert Berry. Okay. I was not sure when I heard something about it—did Augusta and Albert get divorced or separated? Did they separate?

AB: No, they didn't live together. She moved with Stanley and Joy to Tucson [Arizona] for Stanley to go to college there.

JM: Yes.

AB: [He?] stayed in Miami [Arizona], and they weren't divorced.

JM: Yes. Okay. But I didn't think they had lived together. Stanley went to Arizona State—is that where he . . .?

AB: No, University of Arizona in Tucson.

JM: University of Arizona. I was mistaken about that. Now, he got a law degree, now, didn't he?

AB: Yes, he got a law degree. Yes.

JM: Did he ever practice?

AB: No, he didn't. He got his law degree during the [Great] Depression and couldn't afford to—he just had to go to work at whatever he could do, which was working on the railroad for the first thing, and then various jobs during the depression.

JM: And he worked at a lot of other things, didn't he? Do you remember any of the other things?

AB: Well, yes. He did construction and worked in the shipyards in California.

JM: And did I hear somewhere that he was even an ambulance driver for a while, or a

hearse driver?

AB: Yes, a hearse driver. [Laughs]

JM: Okay. All right. But he eventually wound up coming to the *Democrat* here in 1945.

AB: Yes.

JM: Do you know if Mr. Engel asked him to come?

AB: Yes, he did.

JM: He did. He suggested that . . .?

AB: Yes, he did.

JM: At some point—in fact, Marcus [George] told me, who is, of course, his cousin, that he always expected to go to work for the *Democrat* himself.

AB: Yes.

JM: He took journalism at the University of Texas.

AB: Yes.

JM: So he came on up here about two years after Stanley.

AB: Yes.

JM: Of course, Stanley started out in the advertising department, right?

AB: Yes.

JM: And then he became—what did he become, business manager?

AB: Yes, when Roy Bragg died.

JM: Right. When Roy Bragg died, he became business manager. Do you know about year that was?

AB: Yes. It was December 1949.

JM: Okay. That's how Mr. Engel started out in the business, wasn't it—as the business manager at the *San Antonio Light* or something?

AB: Yes.

JM: Where did Stanley's family live? He was born in San Antonio. Did they live in San Antonio at that time or did they live outside . . . ?

AB: They lived in San Antonio until—oh, we missed that. They moved to Miami, Arizona, when he was about three, and that's where he went to school and graduated from high school.

JM: Okay. Miami, Arizona?

AB: Yes.

JM: Oh, okay.

AB: It was a copper-mine town.

JM: Yes. And his dad worked in the copper mine?

AB: Yes.

JM: Okay. But then he wound up—he came on to the *Democrat*. Then, I guess, from the time he became business manager, did he hold that position until Mr. Engel died?

AB: Yes, he did.

JM: And Mr. Engel died in 1968. Is that correct? I think that's the information I saw.

AB: That's correct.

JM: And he [Stanley] and Marcus inherited the paper.

AB: Yes. Well, and seventeen other people.

JM: Oh, really?

AB: Yes.

JM: I didn't know that.

AB: *Lots* of people.

JM: They had lots of other cousins involved, then?

AB: Oh, yes.

JM: So how did they wind up with control of it?

AB: Well, they were here. The others weren't . . .

JM: The others never had worked here or anything.

AB: No, and they didn't live here.

JM: Okay. Did they ever buy them out—the other cousins?

AB: No.

JM: No. They retained an interest in the paper.

AB: They did.

JM: Was it an equal interest?

AB: YesBpretty much so.

JM: Okay. And then in 1968 they inherited the paper and took over running the paper. And I believe they sold it in 1974. Is that correct?

AB: That's correct.

JM: Do you recall—did he ever say why they decided to sell the paper at that time?

AB: Well, it was losing money.

JM: Was it?

AB: It was losing money from the first because Mr. Engel had left them with some-
what of a debt with new [printing] presses.

JM: So Mr. Engel had bought some new presses. So when they inherited the paper, they also inherited the debt.

AB: Yes, they did.

JM: And I'd suspect—I don't know whether he ever said anything about it or not that, like most afternoon papers—afternoon papers were struggling at that time and losing circulation.

AB: That's right. Yes. [] both together. Both things together.

JM: Probably through that whole period that they owned it, about six years . . .

AB: They kept losing.

JM: They kept losing circulation all that time—and money, I guess.

AB: Yes. Right.

JM: And they sold out to the Hussmans. Do you know—did they advertise the paper for sale or did the Hussmans just sort of approach them first?

AB: I think the Hussmans approached them.

JM: Okay. I've seen somewhere what the figure was that they sold for—I don't remember it. But, at any rate, they sold out to the Hussmans. And then he [Stanley] and Marcus started running the television station. Is that correct?

AB: Yes. Mr. Engel had been in on that television [station] from the very first. He had been one of the first to see the need of television.

JM: Yes. And that was Channel 11, which became the CBS affiliate here in Little Rock. Correct?

AB: Right.

JM: Was Mr. Engel a principal owner of that? Did he own most of the . . .?

AB: No, there were some Louisiana people, and the Lowrys.

JM: The Lowrys.

AB: Three of them.

JM: Do you remember which Lowry that was?

AB: Bob Lowry was the son. I can't remember the father's name.

JM: Okay. That's all right. We can find that. You don't remember the names of the Louisiana people who were involved, do you?

AB: No.

JM: Okay. So when he died, of course, Marcus and Stanley—and I guess all the other cousins, too—inherited the television station, right?

AB: Yes. Right.

JM: And did they all retain an interest in the television station?

AB: Yes.

JM: But Marcus and Stanley basically ran the station from that time until—that was, say, 1974, I guess, that they went over there, until—was it 1994?

AB: 1994.

JM: 1994, when they sold it to Gannett.

AB: Yes.

JM: Okay. I'm told at some point in time that it was a stock swap or something with Gannett—that Gannett paid with the stock. Is that right?

AB: Yes.

JM: And not long after they paid them in stock—the worth of the Gannett stock really *bloomed* and it really went up.

AB: Yes, it did.

JM: Yes. It turned out to be a very good deal. Did Stanley ever say anything—and I think we're particularly here talking about the *Democrat*—did he ever say anything about the way Mr. Engel ran the paper? Did he have any comments on . . . ?

AB: No, he didn't talk about the paper.

JM: So he wasn't critical of anything, then?

AB: No, he wasn't. And he didn't even tell me how much money they were losing per day until it was sold and all over because he was just a person who kept things to himself.

JM: Yes. Now, do you remember how much they were losing a day when he finally told you?

AB: No, but it was a lot.

JM: It was a lot. Okay. Of course, I was there at that time [laughs] and I wasn't privy to that information, but we all had to know that it was struggling because the circulation was going down.

AB: Oh, yes.

JM: I remember when I first started working there in 1951 that we got paid in cash at that time.

AB: Yes, every week.

JM: Every week. Yes. We had to go down—I think Stanley handed out the little envelopes with the cash in it.

AB: Yes. That's correct.

JM: And maybe some women who may have helped . . .

AB: Miss Eatman.

JM: Yes. Fannie. Fannie Eatman, wasn't it?

AB: Yes.

JM: Yes. Okay. She's deceased, isn't she?

AB: Yes.

JM: Okay. Do you remember when they changed and started paying by check?

AB: No, I don't.

JM: I couldn't remember, either. I think they were still paying by cash when I left after four and a half years the first time.

AB: Yes.

JM: They were still paying in cash. But when I came back in 1971, they were paying by check. I think Marcus and Stanley apparently made several changes in things after they came.

AB: Yes, they did.

JM: Were they the ones who air-conditioned the building themselves, or did Mr. Engel get that done before they . . . ?

AB: I don't think he did.

JM: You think Marcus and Stanley did?

AB: Yes.

JM: I thought so, too. Somebody told me they thought that was the last major building in Little Rock to [not] have air-conditioning.

AB: Yes. Probably. [Laughter]

JM: I know the first time I was there that it was not air-conditioned. And, oh, in the

summertime it was very, very hot in there sometimes.

AB: Yes.

JM: But when I did come back, it was air-conditioned and they paid with checks.

There had been a lot of other changes there, too.

AB: They paid a little bit more, too.

JM: Yes. I'm not sure that this is a fair question, but I'll ask it anyway. Did Stanley and Marcus get along well?

AB: They did.

JM: Yes.

AB: Through all of these—I'm sure that they had differences—but all they went through, they were just fine with each other—very close to each other.

JM: That's good. Of course, Marcus had taken journalism and graduated in journalism, and Stanley had worked as a business manager. Then when they took over the paper, Marcus became the editor and Stanley became the publisher and in charge of business. That seemed to work fine?

AB: That seemed to be fine with both of them.

JM: Yes. Did you ever hear him say—and I know not too awfully long before they sold the paper—that the ITU—the International Typographical Union—tried to organize the newsroom?

AB: Yes.

JM: Did you ever hear him say anything about that? Was that a contributing factor in them deciding to want to sell?

AB: I don't think it was.

JM: Yes.

AB: Yes. I sort of knew about it, but, no, I don't think it was.

JM: Yes. I had heard one story at one time that—and I don't know who it was, and I don't know how true it was—that some union was threatening to strike or there was some problem, and Mr. Engel brought in a whole bunch of machines. I guess they were AP [Associated Press] machines, and he set them upstairs. He was going to put out the newspapers without these people if he had to. [Laughs]

AB: Yes.

JM: Did you ever hear him talk about that?

AB: Yes, I kind of remember that.

JM: But you don't remember the circumstances or anything?

AB: No, I don't.

JM: But all this time—of course, Stanley loved music. And, as I understand it, he was also a great history buff.

AB: Oh, yes, very much so.

JM: I think one of your sons said they really thought he would've preferred to be a history professor. [Laughs]

AB: Yes, he would have.

JM: How was working at the *Democrat* itself when you were there? What was that like before you and Stanley got married? Do you remember anything about the situation and working conditions?

AB: No, I don't. It was the first job I'd had out of college, so I had nothing to compare it to.

JM: Yes.

AB: As you said, it was hot! [Laughs]

JM: Yes—in the summertime. And you did what?

AB: I made up ads and did some artwork.

JM: Okay.

AB: I didn't sell advertising.

JM: Okay. Had you had training in that in college?

AB: Yes.

JM: What did you major in?

AB: Art.

JM: In art. Okay. Do you paint?

AB: Yes.

JM: Do you still paint some?

AB: Not right now, but I hope to again.

JM: Yes. Okay. So you all had how many children?

AB: Three.

JM: Three children. Okay. Two boys and a girl?

AB: Two boys and a girl. Yes. [Keith, Craig, and Leslie Lynne Berry]

JM: Okay. So Stanley died in January of this year?

AB: Yes, January 12, [2005].

JM: He had a long career at the *Democrat*. Let's see, that was 1945 to 1968.

AB: 1974.

JM: 1974. Yes. So he was there quite a while. How well did you know Mr. Engel?

AB: Well, I knew him very well because I would have him to dinner and the whole family—Ruby and Marcus and . . .

JM: What kind of person was Mr. Engel in private?

AB: He was very nice in family situations where we were. He seemed to enjoy the children. Ruby and Marcus had three, and I had three. I always had Stanley's sister [Joy Hendrickson?] and her children and his mother [Auguste Engel?] and his aunt [Lydia] for Christmases, and we'd just have a very traditional family-type Christmas, which he seemed to enjoy.

JM: He apparently enjoyed family. Now, one thing I'd like to go back on. You said Stanley's mother, Augusta Engel—she was Auguste Engel, right?

AB: Well, when she died, they looked it up, and it's A-U-G-U-S-T-E, and I had always thought it was Augusta with an A on the end.

JM: Yes. Okay.

AB: But it was Auguste with an E on it.

JM: She was Mr. Engel's sister, though, is that correct?

AB: Yes.

JM: And then Marcus's mother [Hedwig] was another sister [of Mr. Engel].

AB: Yes.

JM: Were there any boys in that family?

AB: They died early.

JM: Oh, did they?

AB: And another sister [Mehta]. There were five of them, and two of them died young.

JM: Yes. I assume, with all the cousins involved, that they all worked it out to everybody's satisfaction when they sold the paper and then when they sold the TV station. Is that correct?

AB: Yes.

JM: Did you ever hear Stanley say anything about Mr. Engel's theory of operations or operating the *Democrat* or the TV station? Did he have any . . . ?

AB: No, he didn't have anything to say. He was secretive. [Laughs] It was not only Stanley—it was Mr. Engel.

JM: Okay.

AB: When Marcus and Stanley—this happened to them—they were just—they didn't have a clue about a lot of things. Didn't Marcus tell you that?

JM: No, he didn't.

AB: Marcus is secretive, too. [Laughs]

JM: Is he? Okay.

AB: It runs in the family. [Laughs]

JM: I think it must run in the family. Yes, I sort of gathered that, too. And I'm not sure that it occurred to him at the time. But at any rate . . .

AB: I think closed-mouthed would be the word instead of secretive. [Laughs]

JM: Yes. I don't suppose you ever heard this either, for sure, but one of the stories going around is that the *Gazette* once owned the *Democrat*. Fred Allsop wrote a book on the history of the press in Arkansas and said that for three years, 1908 to 1911, that the *Gazette* owned the *Democrat*. And when they sold it, they sold it to the group that Mr. Engel was with—Elmer Clarke or whatever his name is, and

W. D. Branham, and they brought Mr. Engel in as their business manager from New Orleans.

AB: Yes.

JM: Did you ever hear Mr. Engel talk about that or did Stanley ever mention it?

AB: I never heard it until this minute.

JM: You didn't? This is the first time you'd heard it?

AB: Yes.

JM: Well, that's sort of an interesting rumor. And in another place—another book—says that the Allsops, who were partners with the Heiskells—that the Allsops group bought the *Gazette*. But Allsop says that the *Gazette* owners bought it, which would include both Heiskells, I guess, so I don't know. That's neither here nor there—just a little interesting sideline. How did Stanley feel about the newspaper? Do you know? Did he have a great deal of pride in the paper?

AB: Yes, he did. He really did.

JM: Yes.

AB: He worked very hard for it.

JM: Yes. And I'm assuming that after they inherited the paper that he probably spent a lot of time trying to figure out a way to get out of debt.

AB: Yes, he did.

JM: But, as I said, it was happening to all afternoon newspapers at that time. Apparently, people just didn't want an afternoon paper anymore, they wanted to watch TV.

AB: Yes.

JM: So that was maybe why the TV station turned out to be a really good deal.

[Laughs]

AB: Mr. Engel was a very wise person.

JM: Yes. He was a good businessman. So he apparently made a lot of good deals.

But Stanley remained a music lover all that time. How many years did you play in the symphony?

AB: Thirty-six.

JM: Thirty-six.

AB: And since that time, I'm in a more laid-back community orchestra—UALR [University of Arkansas, Little Rock] orchestra, which I'm in now.

JM: Oh, you're still playing out at UALR?

AB: Yes. Well, I went last night for the first time since last fall. I hadn't been able to go.

JM: You play the violin.

AB: Yes.

JM: Of course, it's classical music.

AB: Yes.

JM: I think you both loved classical music. Is that correct?

AB: Oh, yes, we did. And he even got me interested in opera, and we went many places to the opera. We went to Seattle [Washington] to see "The Ring Cycle" in German. He just loved opera.

JM: Oh, that's great.

AB: And he was in some of the operas we had. I'd be playing in the orchestra and he'd

be in the chorus.

JM: In the chorus.

AB: He wasn't a solo person. My mother brought the kids in to rehearsal one time, and they said, "Look, Daddy had green legs!" He had on green tights. [Laughs]

JM: I noticed that at Stanley's funeral you had a violinist playing. I thought he was marvelous.

AB: Oh, yes.

JM: He was really good. That one number he played near the end—I've forgotten the name of it.

AB: "Meditation."

JM: "Meditation." Right. That was absolutely beautiful. It was stunning.

AB: It was. If there hadn't been another thing at the memorial, that would have been enough.

JM: Yes. That's great. Well, I think we've about covered most of the ground, Arminta. Can you think of anything else that you remember about the paper or about Stanley's association with it that you care to mention?

AB: No, I can't think of anything that you haven't covered.

JM: Okay. Well, I really appreciate this. I appreciate you sitting down for this interview. I think we'll close down. I believe I did get your permission?

AB: Yes.

JM: And I got your name, and we got your parents' names. So thank you very much.

[End of Interview]

[Transcribed by Cheri Pearce]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]