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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with

Jerrilyn L. [Carter] Clay
Little Rock, Arkansas
18 July 2005

Interviewer: Mara Leveritt

Mara Leveritt: It is July 18, [2005]. This is Mara Leveritt. I'm at a restaurant called Grady's in Little Rock with Jerrilyn Clay. [This interview is part of the University of Arkansas Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History's project on the *Arkansas Democrat*.] Jerrilyn, you've just signed the form, so now we can get to the business of talking about the time you spent at the *Arkansas Democrat*. Would you say something into this microphone so I can make sure that it's picking up your voice?

Jerrilyn Clay: Sure.

ML: Why don't you say your name and tell me what years you were at the *Democrat*?

JC: My name is Jerrilyn Clay.

ML: And what was [your last name] then?

JC: It was Carter. I was at the *Democrat*, I believe, from 1977 through 1978.

ML: Okay.

[Tape Stopped]

ML: Are you a native of Arkansas?

JC: Yes, I am.

ML: Where were you born?

JC: Born and raised in Little Rock, Arkansas. I grew up in the south end of the city.

ML: Your parents did what?

JC: My parents were Reverend and Mrs. Frank James Stewart. My father was an AME [African Methodist Episcopal] minister for forty-something years, and my mother was a school teacher. I was one of eight children. I was the fifth of their children. I graduated from Parkview High School, [Little Rock]. I would have been in the final graduating class of Horace Mann [High School, Little Rock], but they disbanded that year, and they dispersed us to the different schools. As a result, I spent my last year at Parkview.

ML: Graduated what year?

JC: 1972.

ML: Then what?

JC: I attended the University of Arkansas at Little Rock [UALR]. Somewhere around that second year, I decided on a journalism major. Once I completed school . . .

ML: You graduated in what year?

JC: 1977, actually.

ML: Okay. And you did major in journalism.

JC: Yes, I did. Journalism and news writing—major writing. One of the professors—I believe it was []—suggested me for a position. He got a call from the *Arkansas Democrat* at the time, and they were looking for a copy editor and a

reporter. I did a little reporting, but the bulk of what I did was copy editing.

ML: So you went right from UALR into reporting?

JC: Yes.

ML: Wow.

JC: My proudest moment was when I had a front-page feature on the Chinese population in Camden [Arkansas]. I think that was my first byline.

ML: And that would've been within a year of graduating?

JC: It would've been within a couple of weeks of graduating.

ML: Oh, wow!

JC: Yes.

ML: Do you still have a copy of that?

JC: I sure do.

ML: [Laughs]

JC: I have a copy of *everything*.

ML: You do?

JC: Yes, I do. And I didn't report very much. The first assignment they sent me on, I absolutely *panicked* and thought, "Oh, my God! I don't know what I'm doing!" They sent me to the courthouse to report on some trial. I still don't remember what the outcome was, except that I don't think it was a really sunny article that I wrote. But I did that, and I wrote obituaries.

ML: And who were you reporting to? I mean, who was the hierarchy on the reporting side?

JC: I'm not really good with names—whoever the city editor would have been.

ML: Was that Bill Husted at that time?

JC: You know, I really don't recall.

ML: Okay.

JC: I'm just not that good with names. But I remember I did an article on Pinnacle Mountain. I remember that. I think my claim to fame with my oldest son [Brandon?] was that I climbed Pinnacle Mountain when I was about two months pregnant with him. I made it for the paper. Yes. For the paper.

ML: And got paid for it. [Laughs]

JC: But I think copy editing was just my love. I read constantly, anyway, so it exposed me to just a lot of what was going on in the world at the time, current events—things of that nature. I've always had a critical eye for the [] writing, so once I did that, I was just smitten.

ML: How did it happen that you moved from reporting to editing? I went from the copy desk to reporting after about a year on the copy desk.

JC: Yes.

ML: I decided I wanted to try reporting and got a job, but how did it happen that you went the other way?

JC: I actually think—if I remember correctly—I think that when I first went, it was kind of a temporary something. I was doing the fill-in—the writing and things like that. I think—if I remember correctly—what happened was that as soon as the job came open on copy, I took that. That's when I knew it was going to be a permanent job.

ML: Okay. So that would have been in what year?

JC: I believe it was 1977. I'm pretty sure that it was early 1977 because I had just graduated.

ML: How long did you stay?

JC: Through 1978—some time in 1978. I would say probably a little over a year.

ML: Okay. Do you remember any of the other people who were on the copy desk at the time?

JC: I remember Lyndon Finney.

ML: He was the chief copy editor, right?

JC: Yes. And Patsy McKown. I remember Patsy.

ML: Right.

JC: And, of course, Beverly Hood, or Beverly Jones.

ML: Yes. I'll be talking to [her] this week.

JC: Yes. Leslie Newell, who's now Leslie Peacock. Oh, and Eric Harrison.

ML: Eric is still [with the paper, now the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*]—isn't that amazing?

JC: I know that David Walton was there at some point, but I don't remember if he was there at the same time that I was or if I just had a chance to see him afterwards.

ML: Can you describe, for someone who doesn't know, what a copy desk looked like, or what people at the copy desk would do? What you did as a copy editor? How would you explain the job?

JC: They would basically review the writing—you know, the reporters' writing. We'd review for grammar and content and accuracy. We also—sometimes, for instance, if an article had to be cut down in order to fit into the newspaper, we would do that. And we did the headlines.

ML: Were you on computers then?

JC: Yes, we did use computers.

ML: They already had the computers when you were there?

JC: Yes, but they were *humongous*. I remember that. They were huge.

ML: Do you mean the screen and . . . ?

JC: The screen—just the whole set-up. You know, like computers now are relatively compact?

ML: Yes.

JC: But they just were huge, and you pulled up to them. You sat at them, and you ran the story through, and you reviewed them. Now, some information would come off the wire.

ML: Into the computer?

JC: If I'm remembering correctly, it would just come off the wire. It would print a copy onto paper. For instance, any article that someone wrote was already on computer, so then you'd take a look at it, and you'd make corrections.

ML: When I was on the copy desk, it was all paper. No computers on the copy desk at all. And when I was there—I think it was about 1975—they made the transition to some computerization. But it wasn't total. As a reporter, for instance, when you were reporting a story, were you typing it on a computer?

JC: Typewriter.

ML: On an IBM Selectric?

JC: That's correct.

ML: That's what I had, too. Wasn't that a great machine?

JC: [Laughs]

ML: Then, as I recall, we would scan it. We'd type it onto paper, then run the paper through a scanner. The scanner would feed the copy into a computer. Then that

would go to you on the copy desk.

JC: Yes. And that's what I think when I'm saying "on the computer." They weren't on the desk itself, they were off to the right. You would sit there and go through [the articles] and edit.

ML: Right. Okay. So you were always getting up out of one chair on the rim of the copy desk and moving to another chair in front of the computer. Going back and forth. I remember doing that, too. I had forgotten that. So, were the AP [Associated Press] or the wire services—were those still in the boxes along the east wall with the glass tops to kind of muffle the sound?

JC: Yes.

ML: So news was still coming in that way, then the editors would rip those off and hand them to you. So you'd read the wire services on hard copy?

JC: Yes.

ML: Who was sitting in the slot?

JC: Sometimes it was Lyndon, and sometimes it was Patsy.

ML: Do you remember who was the main one?

JC: Lyndon.

ML: I don't know that anybody has found out where Patsy ended up.

JC: She was good to work with.

ML: Yes, she was. My memory of her is [that] she knew so much.

JC: She taught me how to write headlines.

ML: What was there to learn about writing headlines?

JC: I think when I first started, you had to know how to count the headline out—that certain letters took two spaces. You had to write a relatively concise repre-

sentation of what the article was going to be, but it had to make sense, and it had to fit into that certain amount of space.

ML: Whatever the editor had decided for that layout.

JC: Yes, whatever was assigned for the layout. And it just had to—you know, get the crux of the information.

ML: Did you like doing that?

JC: I loved that. But I remember that when I first started at that, I just was *horrible* at it.

ML: The counting part or getting to the crux part or . . . ?

JC: Getting to the crux of it and making it make sense. She was just the most patient somebody on that. I remember one day she told me, "You know, Leslie, first time, she struggled." And she said, "One day, she just took off." I said, "Okay. Maybe I'll do the same." Then one day I said, "I'm doing really good. I know how to do this." I enjoyed that a lot.

ML: Do you remember any big stories that you worked on as a copy editor? Were there any big events during that time that you remember?

JC: Son of Sam [Reference to serial killer David Berkowitz, who murdered six people in New York City during the 1970s].

ML: That went on for a while.

JC: . . . and that Elvis [Presley] died [on August 16, 1977].

ML: Did you write the Elvis [headline?]? [Laughs]

JC: I don't remember.

ML: Did you save the papers that you did the copy editing on it?

JC: No, only those where I had [stories].

ML: Copy editors seem to be the forgotten heroes. They are behind the scenes like in theater—making it all possible. Speaking of stories, let me jump back to the time when you were reporting and you did the story on the Chinese population—at Camden, did you say?

JC: Yes.

ML: You were just out of school, right?

JC: Yes.

ML: How did you go about it, and what was the story?

JC: Well, to me it was an eye-opener because, first of all, I had no idea of the feelings of Chinese people in Arkansas, let alone that Camden had, you know, a pocket of them. I do recall that the gentleman that I spoke to—and I don't remember his name, but he was the president of some Chinese-American Association, or something, in Camden. And it was just kind of eye-opening. As an African-American, you're well aware that prejudices exist against African-Americans, but you never think that it affects anybody else, or that the social structure would be set up to be discriminatory in some ways that it may not even intend to be discriminatory. I remember talking about things like getting a haircut—something that might have been simple to someone else, but if you were Chinese-American and coming into the community, you'd have to *find* somebody to cut your hair. And, you know, you just don't think about things like that.

ML: What about the whole experience of being an African-American and woman at the *Democrat*? Did you find any discrimination, or were you treated differently, did you think, in any way?

JC: I never thought that I was treated differently. I was treated extremely well, but

there were certain things that I would notice that maybe someone else wouldn't notice.

ML: For example?

JC: For example, I was editing an article that someone had written, and if it was crime beat, then they would tell as the description, "Black male, six feet tall." That could be *anybody*. But for a Caucasian—if that was all they had on the Caucasian, they wouldn't print that.

ML: They would say "white" or "Caucasian"?

JC: Yes, they just might say "Caucasian male," but that would be the crux of that—you know, the essence of that. Whereas, if you're going to give a description of a black male, it needs to be a concise description, such as fair-skinned or dark-skinned or large "Afro" [hair style], or short hair, or gray eyes, because it almost sets the tone of all black men. People just didn't think about that.

ML: I don't think I understand exactly. So what you're saying is that at that time at the paper, the description of a white suspect [was] . . .

JC: Pretty well detailed.

ML: Pretty well detailed.

JC: If they were going to give a description, it was going to be detailed.

ML: And if it was an African-American suspect . . . ?

JC: It would be very generic. And it wasn't anything that I think anybody did intentionally, I just don't think they thought about it, you know? Different hair textures and lengths and different skin colors and things like that—so if you're going to give a description, it needs to be a precise description and not just really generic.

ML: Did you ever point that out to the editors? How did they respond?

JC: Yes, actually, I wrote a response to it.

ML: Did you ever have a sense of how different that time was in the paper's history from what it had been in the 1950s when it was seen as a newspaper of segregation, primarily, as compared to the *Gazette*, which was saying that we've got to follow the law of the land? Did any of that play out in your family's awareness of the history of the *Democrat*?

JC: I think my family wouldn't take the *Democrat* until after I started working for it.

ML: I see.

JC: Once they did, then they would read it. They still would not subscribe to it, but they would read it. They'd read anything that I had anything to do with. But [there] was still the notion that it wasn't to be trusted.

ML: Yes. What about as time went on? Did they change after you were working there? Did they begin to perceive the paper differently?

JC: I actually don't think that [there] would have been major acceptance of it, had it not been for the newspaper war and the combining of the papers—the *Gazette* and the *Democrat*.

ML: Why did you leave?

JC: Well, my husband at the time got a job in Houston [Texas]. He had graduated from college there, and he got a job in Houston. So we moved to Houston.

ML: Quite a lot of us move around. [Laughs]

JC: Yes.

ML: Oh, I want to back up. I asked about being an African-American woman. What about the woman part of that at the paper? How do you think, if at all, that that

played into your employment experience?

JC: I really didn't see any correlation. It was just a good place to work. I thought there was quite a bit of camaraderie there. I really did enjoy my time there.

ML: So did I. Okay. You left and went to Houston with your family. Were you still planning to work when you got there?

JC: Yes, but that's a totally different market. Houston is considered, I'm assuming, a relatively major market because I was met with "If you don't have five years of experience, don't even bother to apply."

ML: So when you went to Houston, having had a front-page story on the *Arkansas Democrat* and having more than a year on the copy desk meant nothing.

JC: Nothing.

ML: Where were you applying?

JC: *Houston Chronicle*, *Houston Post*, a couple of magazines.

ML: How surprising—how discouraging that must have been.

JC: Well, the experience served me well in other ways.

ML: Like what?

JC: Well, for instance, I took a temporary job. It was called Bank of the Southwest at the time. They just needed someone to verify employment on credit card applications. I went in, and I think by that time, Brandon, my oldest, must have been a couple of months old. I went in and I got this temporary job. They were trying to put together these letters and send them to creditors. I wrote a couple of letters and sent them out, and that's actually how that segued into that job. I wound up staying there over a seven-year period. So, you know, just the ability to write and to communicate really was what led to me getting that job.

ML: Did going to Houston, both in terms of newspapering and cities in general—did it give you a whole new perspective on size?

JC: Oh, culture shock! It was. Things that you took for granted that you could do here, you just did not do there.

ML: How so?

JC: Your relationship with neighbors or how I raised—in fact, that was the major incentive of wanting to come back was that I had children to raise, and it just is *not* a city that I wanted to raise children in. You know, the crime rate was horrible there, and traffic was massive. I tell my twenty-eight-year-old that if we still lived in Houston, he *still* wouldn't be driving.

ML: [Laughs] Yes.

JC: So it was just things like that.

ML: What about the perspective of newspapers? Did you subscribe to a newspaper there?

JC: No. I would pick up a newspaper over the weekend, but I didn't subscribe to a newspaper [].

ML: Did you see a difference in the newspapers from what you had grown familiar with in Little Rock—either the *Gazette* or the *Democrat*?

JC: Not really. There was just a lot more of it in Houston.

ML: [Laughs] Same thing, just more of it. When did you come back?

JC: I came back in 1985.

ML: By then, did you realize that journalism was not going to be your career?

JC: Yes. By that time, I knew it would always be something that I would use, but I knew that I would probably never have a "career" in journalism again.

ML: And today—how do you think that experience in journalism informs you of media? When you—compared to, say, friends and neighbors who did not major in journalism or have that experience at a newspaper—when you're considering news today from all the sources that are out there, how do you think your assessment of that news might be colored by your experience as a professional?

JC: For one thing, I don't take news as gospel. When I was coming up, if you read it in the newspaper, you pretty much believed it—the same thing with what you got through the electronic media.

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

JC: I don't necessarily believe—I believe that a lot of stuff we get is colored or, you know, it's slanted by the view of the news organization. Who is it? Is it Fox News that says, "Fair and unbiased?" Please! They just have such a major slant. You can find news to report—whatever [it] is that you want to have reported—wherever you're outlook or your notion is. All you have to do is flick about the channels, so I use whatever I get almost as a baseline of information. But I don't view it as the gospel. I used to think that whatever someone would put in writing for a newspaper would be really objective, unbiased reporting, and that's just not the case. I will never forget, and it just broke my heart, when somewhere—I guess it must have been in the eighties [1980s]—that when I came back, there was a girl's body that they found on Rockefeller's playground.

ML: They found what?

JC: They found the body of a girl on Rockefeller's playground—the school. The Rockefeller Elementary [School]. And the news coverage of that was *hor-*

rendous.

ML: In what way?

JC: It was determined that she was a prostitute and that someone had killed her, and they reported that she was a working girl, which was okay. That was all right. But they reported that she was on food stamps and that she took welfare. They reported that her father was raising some of her children. They reported—the whole thing was to make—it made such a negative impression, almost like, "Well, it's okay [that she was murdered] because she kind of might have deserved it." By the same token, when you turn around and you read coverage like [Lori McCool?]*]*—the coverage that they had this past year.

ML: Can you say something about her by contrast?

JC: Okay. By contrast, "She was this poor, little, innocent girl who killed her mother, *but* she only did it because this big, bad guy made her do it." The coverage was just horrible. There really is a *slant* and a *bias* in the news that you get, you know?

ML: What do you conclude? Do you think that there is such a thing as objective reporting?

JC: I don't think it exists like it used to.

ML: You think it actually did exist at one time?

JC: Yes, for the most part. You know, people always see things through their own perspective, and that's okay. But it's just that now there's a feeling that you cannot trust what you read in a lot of places. You know that you've got to be an independent thinker and you've got to dig a little deeper than what they give you on the surface.

ML: Yes. And that raises one more question about perspective.

JC: Yes.

ML: I once got into a discussion with an editor about assigning people to different stories. This editor thought that if the story is about black people, you should send a black reporter.

JC: They still do that a lot, don't they?

ML: And I felt, "Now, how can you do that? If it's a story about Chinese that are in Camden, and you don't have a Chinese person on the staff. What do you do?"

JC: Send down the black girl. [Laughs]

ML: Well, perhaps, maybe. But I know this reporter was very concerned. He said, "I shouldn't go into a situation where I'm reporting about black people because I don't know anything about that culture." He was acknowledging that.

JC: Yes.

ML: He said, "I should send somebody who *does* know something about that culture." And I was saying that it's important for a reporter to try to understand everything new and different. I mean, I'd report on Boy Scouts and I was never a Boy Scout—that kind of view.

JC: Yes.

ML: We all are going into something that is in some way new to us. What's your view on this debate—which I believe still does play out in newsrooms?

JC: I think that there might be some instances where that is legitimate—that they would probably deal more with things like features where you're not reporting hard news. It may be something that you would want—there might be instances with things like features, for instance, when you might feel another African-

American can maybe draw more out of other African-Americans, or that if there's a particular perspective required, that that might be legitimate. But I think if you're reporting news—I ought to be able to report—news is *everybody's* news. *You* don't have a news and *I* don't have a news. If we're reporting hard news facts, then I think *anybody* ought to be able to cover that.

ML: That's a good distinction.

JC: Yes. I can see where there might be times when you would want to do that, but, you know, sometimes it's actually offensive. I mean, it really is, if you take a look at it, that African-Americans or men or women or gays or straights or anybody is so different that they can't be identified with, or they can't be reported on by anybody not like themselves. One of my brilliant ideas that they never did let me do [laughs] was that I wanted to go up and interview this guy up in the northwest who was speaking to the KKK [Ku Klux Klan]. And they were, like, "Have you lost your mind?" But I didn't see why I would not have been able to do that. Do you know what I'm saying?

ML: Exactly.

JC: I could not understand what they would've seen about him that would make them think that I couldn't relate to him on some level. I probably wouldn't have liked to very well, you know? I mean, he may have said some things that, if I thought he was an intelligent person, might even have offended me, but I felt like I should be able to go and sit across a desk from *anyone* and ask them a question and accept the answer that they were going to give me, because whatever the answer they were giving me was simply going to be the answer that they saw from their point of view.

ML: So it seems to me, then, that you might have felt that decision not to give you that assignment was an insult to your professionalism.

JC: No, I didn't think it was an insult to my professionalism. I think, one, they were looking out for my best interests, and the other is that they were weighing what the benefit would have been. The pros and the cons of the situation, that the pros didn't win out over the cons, you know?

ML: It's all—there's a lot of weighing that goes on in newspapers. It's all judgment—every bit of a newspaper.

JC: But as far as I saw, it was like he wasn't going to say something that I haven't already heard. Still, you know, it probably was a pretty good idea that they didn't let me do it.

ML: I like that story. I'm glad you told me. [Laughs] Okay. Then, since the *Democrat*—kind of wrap up where your career and your personal life have taken you.

JC: I am a divorced mother of five children. I have five grandchildren. I worked for Federal Express [FedEx] for sixteen and a half years. I drove a truck for them. I currently work as their international customer associate. I do training in international shipping documentation and processes, and I also assist customers in getting packages through [United States] Customs when they're having difficulty with that.

ML: Do you like it?

JC: I love it. I do. One of the smart things that God has always done—He has never allowed me to chart my own course because He has always known what's going to come ahead. For instance, when I went to Houston and I couldn't get into a newspaper, He used those skills to get me into banking and to help me progress

with that. When I left Houston and came back to Little Rock, I thought, "Well, I should just be able to walk into any bank and get a job." Well, I didn't know I was going to remarry and have two more children. My job at FedEx [Federal Express] allowed me to work part-time for a lot of years and still make a decent salary, so I'm able to be almost an at-home mother.

ML: In your current position, or anywhere along the way with FedEx, do you still find those old copy desk skills or that journalism degree paying off?

JC: All the time. I'm forever having to write letters or do proposals or—you know, there's always something that I have to do in written form, and they are invaluable to me.

ML: Are you dealing with people in other nations?

JC: Yes, I am. Most of what I do is with people here, but I am required to communicate with Customs locations in different countries.

ML: So, there, again, working with people who are not exactly of the same background and experience as you. [Laughs]

JC: I don't think that a day goes by that there is not some way that I don't have to draw upon my journalism. You know, I'm always writing something or—and it's really exciting to me when my kids will call me from—my son can be in Chicago—"Mom, what's a word for—?" And he's looking for a word for something for his writing.

ML: Jerrilyn, this has been a pleasure. Thank you very much.

JC: Thank you so much. You have been such a joy. Thank you very much, Mara.

[End of Interview]

[Transcribed by Cheri Pearce]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]