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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with:

Connie Elkins
30 June 2004
Little Rock, Arkansas

Interviewer: Brenda Tirey

Brenda Tirey: This is Brenda Tirey. I'm at the home of Connie Elkins in Little Rock, Arkansas, preparing to do an interview with Connie for the *Arkansas Democrat* oral history project for The [David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History at the] University of Arkansas [at Fayetteville]. Connie, you've signed a release, right, for the university to use your—your tape as they see fit?

Connie Elkins: Right.

BT: Tell me about yourself—where you were born and where you grew up before your long and illustrious history in newspaper work.

CE: [Laughs] I was born in Fort Worth, Texas [June 21, 1925; Ms. Elkins died on January 17, 2009], and my parents separated by the time I was four, when I went to live with my father's sister in Tucker, Arkansas. And except for one semester in Vicksburg [Mississippi], where my father was living at the time, I attended school in England, Arkansas.

BT: Which is right next to Tucker, right?

CE: Nine miles from Tucker. Then I went to Draughon's business school briefly after graduating.

BT: And Draughon's business school was is in Little Rock?

CE: In Little Rock, yes.

BT: When you were growing up, what was your idea of what you would do when you became an adult?

CE: I wanted to be an artist, but first I wanted to be a torch singer in a club [laughter], but I was a little girl then. [Laughs]

BT: Did you sing? Did you have a good voice?

CE: Well, I didn't have a great voice, but I'd learned to sing. [Laughs] And I still like to sing.

BT: Now you have a daughter who is a professional singer.

CE: A singer, yes.

BT: Betty Tomboulion, who has made recordings.

CE: Yes. She's the musician in the family. My sister is a master of the piano, too. She's absolutely tremendous on the piano.

BT: Were you a musician as well? Did you learn to play any instruments?

CE: No, I wanted to learn to play piano all my life, but when I was a little girl I didn't have a piano. I had a neighbor who told me I could practice on her piano, but I knew it was driving her crazy. So I told my aunt I didn't want to take [piano] anymore [laughs] because I knew my playing was far from professional.

[Laughs]

BT: And . . .

CE: And I married at eighteen [years old] in Pine Bluff to a Pine Bluff guy.

BT: Where did you meet your husband?

CE: I met him at the Pine Bluff Arsenal, on the assembly line.

[Tape Stopped]

BT: Let's go back to your art ambition. What kind of art did you do?

CE: I sketch. I just sketch. I did some work in pastels for a while, and I have a lot of books that are supposed to tell me how to draw, but I just mostly doodle.

[Laughs]

BT: Do you still do that?

CE: This is the most recent one here.

BT: Connie's going to show me one of her recent pastels.

CE: No.

BT: Oh, her sketches? She calls them her doodles.

BT: When did you graduate from high school in England?

CE: I graduated at sixteen. My sixth grade teacher taught me grammar. She did not want to teach school. She was the daughter of the school board president, and he couldn't find a teacher, so he made her teach right out of college. And she happened to like English and grammar very, very well, and she was a whiz. She taught me all the grammar that I needed all through high school. Every question I asked her she answered. [Laughs] So I just breezed through English from then on.

BT: Did you graduate early?

CE: Yeah, I graduated in eleven years.

[Tape Stopped]

BT: Was the Pine Bluff Arsenal your first job?

CE: Except the part-time job I had in school with a five-and-dime store, my first job was with a little bicycle company. They said they wanted me to clean up these files, and there were rows and rows and rows of files all messed up. And [laughs] my pay was \$10 a week.

BT: [Laughs]

CE: And I said, "Uhn-uhn. This is not for me." I worked one week. [Laughs] And then I went to work for Dunn and Bradstreet [a provider of credit information and credit reports. I worked with the credit tickets. But the girl that filed had been there three years and she got \$18 a week, and I thought that's just not enough. [Laughs] I decided I didn't want to work there. Then I went to work at the Arsenal.

[Tape Stopped]

BT: Was World War II on then?

CE: Oh, yes, yes, yes. The summer of 1943 is when I went to work there.

BT: What did you do? You said you worked on the assembly line.

CE: I worked on the line packing cluster bombs into wooden boxes. Later I packed them in strips of metal that would come apart when they were dropped from airplanes.

BT: And you met your husband there.

CE: I met my husband the first day I went to work there. He was a smart-aleck and didn't pay any attention to me. Other people came down and talked to me. but he didn't. And a few weeks later, I walked up to go to work as he was talking to somebody. I just listened, and he looked at me and he said, "I didn't know they allowed babies to work here?" [Laughter] So we didn't get off to a really good start.

BT: [Laughs] And you were eighteen at the time.

CE: I was eighteen.

BT: And how long did you work at the Pine Bluff Arsenal?

CE: I worked till the summer of 1945.

BT: After you were married did you live in Pine Bluff?

CE: Yes, we lived at the Arsenal Projects. Government housing. And my son was born eleven months and three days after we married. We had a very brief engagement. [Laughs] Our first date was September the nineteenth, and we got married on New Year's Day.

BT: Did you stop working, then, you got married?

CE: No. The war was over in the summer of 1945, and we all lost our jobs. The foreman across the street from me who worked out at the arsenal lost his job a week after I lost mine. And my husband worked three weeks longer. He was in [the] poison gas [section] in a hush-hush job that he couldn't discuss. He worked three weeks instead of one. Then he transferred to the Stuttgart Air Force base [Stuttgart Army Airfield] and worked there till they closed it down [in 1946].

Then he had a hard time finding a job. Finally ended up as a postal carrier and then a clerk.

BT: Did you stop working after your son was born?

CE: I didn't go to work again until 1954. I stayed home. It was hard to find jobs after the war because all the veterans that came back got the jobs. In the spring of 1954 I took a test for a copy editor, and then I was off to the races.

[Tape Stopped]

BT: At the *Pine Bluff Commercial*? Copy editor or proofreader?

CE: Proofreader. [Editor's Note: At this point in the newspaper industry, a proofreader read galleys of printed columns for errors after the type was set] That was the job, proofreader. I made a whole seventy cents an hour. In forty hours that was twenty-eight bucks, and the government took \$5 of 'em, so my take-home pay was \$23.

BT: A week?

CE: A week.

BT: What were your working conditions like at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*? It was a daily newspaper then.

CE: I worked right next to a Linotype machine, and we laid the thermometer where the copy went into the machine. And at 6 o'clock in the morning and it was 103 [degrees Fahrenheit], so it was a hot job. I had a fan underneath me, but I couldn't have a fan blowing on the table, because I couldn't work if it blew on the paper copy I was reading. You know, paper proofs.

BT: And the reason it was so hot is that the machines had big pots of molten lead that produced lines of metal type for the printing press.

CE: Right. There was a double row of the Linotype machines with four in a row, and they were all hot. There was a floor fan at the end of them, but it just didn't help much.

BT: That was not a news type job, proofreader. Were you the only proofreader?

CE: Yes, I was. There were girls that punched tape [strips of paper containing the information for print copy that were fed into the Linotype machines], but I think I was the only proofreader. I did work briefly as a tape-setter. I got that job when the former tape-setter was fired for inserting into a wedding story that the bride's father had "shotgun in hand." But I started out as a lowly proofreader. Then we had a [news] editor that didn't edit his copy. He just sent it back right off the AP [Associated Press] wires. So I was really editing. When he resigned his job and went to, I think, Fort Worth [Texas], my foreman recommended me for that job. I had just enough sense to know I didn't know how to do it very well. I had to lay out the paper [including] the front page and select the news. And I edited my copy before I sent it back.

BT: How long were you at the *Commercial* before you were made the news editor when the news editor left?

CE: Oh, probably a year.

BT: Did you get a raise?

CE: I got a small raise. When—when they raised the minimum wage I made a nickel more than the minimum wage. I worked a year at that, and I finally decided that

they were taking so much advantage of me that I said I wanted a raise. At that time the city editor was taking the place of a managing editor most of the time. He said, "Well, [you] don't deserve it." And I [laughs] said, "Well, if after all this time and I'm only making a nickel an hour more than the janitor, the boy that mops up, then I'm in the wrong line of business. [Laughs] So I'll give you thirty days' notice." [Laughs]

BT: And did you?

CE: When the publisher came in, I got the raise in fifteen minutes.

BT: The publisher came into the meeting you were having with the city editor?

CE: No, what happened was I didn't say anything after that. I just went back to my desk and went to work. And as soon as the publisher came in, the city editor went to talk to him in private. I didn't hear what he said.

BT: How long had you been doing the news editor's job before you got that raise?

CE: About a year. Not quite a year after the minimum wage was raised to a dollar an hour. Nobody had much money back then. Groceries were so much cheaper than they are now. And, of course, the whole [pay] scale was on a much lower level than it is now. I remember years later, when I was still working at the *Commercial*, I thought, "If I could just make \$100 a week, I'll have it made in the shade." Well, \$100 a week this day and time is nothing. [Laughs] Nobody can live on that.

BT: When I started at the *Commercial* in 1963, I made \$75 a week.

CE: Oh, great. [Laughter] Well, that says it, doesn't it?

BT: Were you the only editor then? Were there any copy editors working for you or did you do all the editing?

CE: I had one assistant that worked some editorial stuff after I got to be news editor. The city editor edited his stuff pretty well, so I didn't have heavy editing on that copy. It was just on wire stuff that I had heavy editing to do. And I did lay out [all the pages].

BT: And you made the decisions about what news appeared, and where?

CE: I'd work from 6:00 [a.m.] to 3:00 [p.m.], or 6:30 to 3:30 sometimes, and I would go home and listen to the 5:30 news. If I had the main stories that they had, I felt like I had made the right decisions. But I would compare what the national newscasters chose as their main stories with what I was doing. I thought I did a really efficient job of that. I learned how to know what was important.

[Tape Stopped]

CE: Of course, when the war in Vietnam was on and we pretty well knew that's one thing that we would cover as well as we could. What was going on in Vietnam, and the consequences in the nation of the controversy over the war. In 1960, I realized that I was gonna have another baby, and I already had two more babies after my son. So I quit work and I didn't take a leave or anything. I just quit. When I realized I was gonna have to go back to work, I guess in 1962 when [my youngest], Cynda was about two. When I went back to [the *Commercial*] I decided, "I'll never work a news editor job again unless I get paid a certain amount," and I wasn't gonna work it for what little I had been getting. I would edit advance wires and [staff news copy and daily] wires, but I wasn't gonna take

the responsibility of news editor. The boy that was doing the news editing was also a sports editor. He was just kind of filling in during that time, and he was determined that [laughs] that I was gonna be news editor again. He kept trying to sneak [me into that job]—you know. He'd say, "Will you do this tomorrow for me? And will you do that?" I [laughs] finally told him, "I am not gonna do that job for the same amount of money that I got before. I am not ever gonna sit down and do that job again." [Laughs] So the city editor overheard me. He said he just realized then that I really had a stubborn streak [laughs] that when I said something in that tone of voice, I meant it. [Laughs] And so I did win that job and the raise, but it wasn't a big raise.

BT: So you did become the news editor again for the salary you wanted?

CE: Yeah, for the salary I asked for.

BT: By then did you have copy editors working for you or were you still the only one doing most of the [editing and] layout work?

CE: I didn't have anybody working for me except occasionally on the editorial stuff. The only headline that I had ever written before I was a news editor the first time was a headline on a Jack Anderson column that was one of the columns I edited for the editorial page. That's the only headline I had ever written. So I just started from absolute [laughs] scratch, as they say. [Laughs] My foreman when I was a proofreader told me initially when he recommended me for that [news editor] job, "If you don't like it, I'll take you back in the back shop and you can have your job back." About six months after I went to work, the pressure was so great on me and I was having such a hard time dealing with all of it, that I went

back to him. He said, “You’re not born with alligator skin, you have to grow it.” So I turned around and went back to the desk and [laughs] went back to work. A few months later I went back to him and he said, “I don’t have an opening right now.” Laughs] So I thought, “Well, I’m stuck. Might as well make the best of this.” Anyway, I did like newspaper work. It was a far cry from regular office work. Once you learn the routine of an office job, it gets to be a bore, you know? It is so much repetition. Newspapering was not. You had new news daily, all sorts of news. And I was intermittently news editor through those years that I worked at the *Commercial*.

BT: You have four children, a son and three daughters, right?

CE: Right. Cynda, the youngest, was born in 1960.

BT: And you worked most of the time that they were fairly young.

CE: Right. I hired a maid when I went to work in 1954. She got \$8 a week and I got the rest of my \$23. [Laughter] But I figured I would be making more than that. I had enough confidence in what I was doing that I didn’t feel like I was gonna stay at seventy cents an hour.

BT: Were you interested in news and newspapers and did you keep up with news before you started working for one?

CE: Oh, I was fairly interested in it. I remember having some guilty feelings about not being more aware of the news, because I was busy with the children. I sewed for ’em and I knitted and I cooked and did those things like a housewife does. And we had some lean years. I lived with my mother-in-law almost seven years.

BT: It was not that usual to have women in newsrooms at the time you were there.
Were any other women in the newsroom?

CE: When I started out there the only women at the *Commercial* in news were the women's editor and her assistant. [My job] was considered a man's job initially and I was the only woman news editor that the *Commercial* had up till the time I left in 1980.

BT: Now, were you news editor all that time from the 1960s on?

CE: No, intermittently.

BT: You would—you would ask from time to time to just be a copy editor?

CE: When they hired someone [to be news editor] I was copy editor again, and then I would be a news editor because they needed me as a news editor for a while.

While I was news editor, the best copy editor I had was leaving if he didn't get the news editor job. I knew he wanted my job, and so I couldn't face doing all by myself. He was the only good editor I had, so I went in and said, "I'd like to switch with him Monday," because I was gonna lose him if I didn't.

BT: Who was that?

CE: That was Larry . . .

BT: Lingle?

CE: Yeah, Larry Lingle.

BT: So you gave up your job so that he would stay?

CE: Right. Then he didn't. He couldn't take the pressure, and he didn't last so very long. So I worked it a while again, I think, and then another guy was hired and they gave him more money and then raised him because he was not too happy.

But he left anyway. So then they gave me back the job, [laughter] and I worked at the salary that I had gotten before. I'd worked it a year when I went in to Gene Foreman, who was the managing editor at that time. I told him that by now I hoped to get a raise to what they had paid the boy that left. And Gene said, "Well, I hope so, too, and I will let you know." Well, a couple weeks went by and he didn't let me know, and I went in and asked him. He said that Edmond [Freeman], the publisher, had turned my raise down. He said I needed to be sure that the paper went out on time all the way down, then I would be considered for a raise. Well, that meant that I had the responsibility of every single employee all the way to the pressmen. In other words, if anyone in that paper didn't do what they were supposed to do all the way down the line, my [raise wouldn't happen. My raise depended on it. Then I just absolutely lost it. [Laughs] I told Gene, "If I had one bit of pride, I would tell you that I would leave right this minute." I didn't have a way to go home then. I was crying in the office, and that was just humiliating to me there. But, oh, I guess a week later, Gene took over as news editor for me that day and said that I would be his [copy] editor. So he read everything that I edited that day. I mean, he really edited it, and checked my work all the way. Then after that I got the raise. But, oh, I was so mad.

BT: How long did it take to get the raise?

CE: Just two or three weeks after that.

BT: Did he work the news editor job the whole time till you got the raise?

CE: [Laughs] Gene wanted to do that paper all by himself. He did a lot of planning on what he wanted in them. He did a memo one day that said he wanted an

innovative layout. So I did a front page that was different, and the next day I got a note that says “Don’t do this anymore.” [Laughter] On my interior pages I used a lot of horizontal makeup, where the readers would read horizontally instead of up and down on a lot of the stories. And I noticed that after I did that, Gene would lay out pages very similar to the ones I was doing inside.

BT: An aside about Gene Foreman. He had come to work at the *Commercial* while *The New York Times* was on strike.

CE: Right.

BT: He had worked at the *Arkansas Gazette* as a state editor, I believe.

CE: *Arkansas Democrat*, too.

BT: The *Democrat* was after the *Commercial*.

BT: I think he went from the *Gazette* to *The New York Times* and had come to work in Pine Bluff while *The New York Times* was on a strike.

CE: Right, right. That was it. He figured that he was just interim, you know? I think he stayed longer than he intended. But what Gene Foreman did was teach me how to combine leads and to judge the important stories and to combine related stories into concise leads and then edit them in, so I would have stories that sometimes combined three stories. And he taught me how to make them a good length. He just was a smart man, and he was a great editor. I just tried to learn what he wanted to show me, and he did [teach me a lot].

BT: Was he the only one you ever worked for who tried to do that?.

CE: He taught me, yes.

BT: He eventually went to the *Newsday* newspaper in Long Island [New York], and then became managing editor of *The Philadelphia [Pennsylvania] Inquirer*.

CE: He worked for *Philadelphia Inquirer*, yes.

BT: And I think he has retired from that job.

CE: One time when he was at the [*Commercial*], he told me that I could hold my own on any desk in the nation, the *Times* or any other desk. And I was so proud of that compliment, because I would just hug that thought to my head. "I'm really good because Gene said I was." [Laughter]

BT: He was in Pine Bluff at a time of a lot of news in Pine Bluff. The civil rights movement was active in Pine Bluff for one.

CE: We had new paper mills that were doing a lot of advertising and brought a lot of advertising from other businesses, related and not so related. On Wednesdays when we did food pages a lot of times we'd have sixty-page papers. It was nothing [unusual]. And we had a bank of food items and [other] features, articles that we could fill in anytime because we had so much news space to fill. Those big pages were just a lot of work.

BT: For the news editor?

CE: For all of us. Yeah, for the news editor, but those [pages] had to be laid out and of course, we had hot type in the back. I'm not sure what year they built the new Third and Beech building.

BT: It must've been 1964 or 1965.

CE: Somewhere in there. The amusing part was the first heavy rain that we had in the new building, the roof leaked all over. [Laughs]

BT: Just like the old building on Main Street.

CE: Just like the old building.

BT: When I went to work at the old *Commercial* building, every time it rained everyone sprang into action to put wastebaskets and buckets onto all the desks and move the desks out of the water.

CE: Right. [Laughs] When did you go work there?

BT: I went to work in 1963. I started as a copy editor.

CE: Yeah, but you went to some other job at the paper.

BT: I eventually was a general reporter.

CE: Yeah, I lost you and then I had Larry [Lingle].

BT: I had never been a copy editor. I applied for a job there because Bob Gisler, who I had worked with at the *Fort Smith Times-Record*, worked there and said it was really a good newspaper. After I applied, Bob called and told me to send a new letter because they had fired the managing editor and hired Gene Foreman for that job to get him to stay.

CE: Yeah, yeah.

BT: Was Bob Gisler the news editor?

CE: Yeah, he was. I was a copy editor as much as I was news editor. Also, I filled in for Alice DeWeese, the women's editor, when she took her three weeks' vacation each year. Later, I also did weekly profile features on people selected by the city editor and wrote reviews of Community Theater plays and nationally known acts that performed at Pine Bluff Convention Center.

BT: Did you get paid extra for the writing chores?

CE: No, but I liked doing them. I did get a free ticket to the plays and other performances. When I got to do a review by [the rock and roll band] KISS, I sneaked into the theater early and saw the band without makeup, which gave the lead singer Gene Simmons a fit. I also saw the Jackson Five [called The Jacksons when the group had a Pine Bluff concert on May 24, 1979], Elvis Presley, Willie Nelson, Bob Hope, and Natalie Cole. My daughter Cynda enjoyed going with me to the concerts [when Cynda was in high school in the 1970s]. The only show I ever panned was [rock and roll group] Cheap Trick, which was so loud it could be heard in the next county.

BT: So you did a lot of things at the *Commercial*.

CE: But I'd never been a reporter. So the last couple years that I was at the paper I decided that I wanted to be a City Hall reporter. And I covered , all the mayor's meetings, City Council meetings and the commissions, all of that. And that was interesting to me. I hadn't done that before.

BT: Did you like it as well as editing?

[Tape Stopped]

BT: And then you went back as news editor?

CE: No, I left—while I was in [reporting] job, [Lyndon Finney], the [*Arkansas Democrat*] assistant [managing] editor called me to come to work. . . . After I had blown up about not getting a raise [as news editor], I had gone to [then-*Democrat* managing editor] John Robert Starr and talked to him [about a job]. He said that he knew I was a good editor, but he was hiring college kids that he didn't have to pay as much. So I went on back.

BT: Do you remember about what year that was?

CE: It was when the guy they hired after—after Larry Lingle quit as news editor. I was just an interim news editor.

BT: Was [the one the hired after Larry] Paul Nielsen?

CE: No.

BT: John Henry?

CE: No, no, no. It was blond-headed boy that didn't stay long. Later on it was John Henry, who was a wonderful boss. John Henry was a neat guy to work for, very laid-back and good-natured. One of the reasons the job was so pleasurable was because of John Henry.

BT: Was he the news editor or managing editor?

CE: He was the news editor and I was a copy editor. The news reporting came in the late 1970s. The last the job I had at the *Commercial* was City Hall reporter. In 1980, John Robert's office called me again. The assistant [managing] editor [Lyndon Finney] asked if I wanted to come to work for them. I thought about it. And I thought, "No, I'm going to work for the prestige paper." So I went to [Bill] Rutherford [then the *Arkansas Gazette* news editor and managing editor] and I got the job there.

BT: So you got a job at the *Arkansas Gazette* as a copy editor?

CE: Uh-huh. That was in September of 1980. And [Bill Rutherford] introduced me, saying, "This is Connie Elkins. She has twenty-something years as an editor and she's gonna be senior copy editor." And right there he did me in, because there were two young slot men who said to themselves, "She's not gonna be senior

anything.” I would write a headline, and one of them would say, “We don’t use that word in a headline.” And I would pick up the paper the next day and that word would be in a headline. So I realized it was personal, and nothing I did suited one of them, and the other one kind of joined in. One day he showed me a run-over page [for articles continued from the front page] and said, “Look at this. This is so gray it looks awful.” And I didn’t say a word. But I thought later, “It was his fault what that page looked like.” I mean, he was the one that laid out that page. It wasn’t I.

BT: But he acted like it was your fault.

CE: Yeah, acted like it was my fault. One thing about the *Gazette* that those two slot boys did that I didn’t understand. When I was news editor, I would look at the copy and scan it, and I would say, “Twenty-two inches of this story would be plenty to tell it and give me a couple of inches to spare on layout.” And they [copy editors] would [cut it to twenty-two inches]. When I got wire copy at the *Gazette*, I had no idea how much they wanted of it. They had just the sloppiest editing that I ever saw, the slot men and the wire editor.

BT: Who cut the articles?

CE: The wire editor would take a news story and she would just add on three or four versions of the story in one. It was terrible to have to edit it, you know, because she left so much repetition in them. Anyway, I thought she didn’t do a very good job. I didn’t like the way they edit. And [the *Gazette*] had this habit of writing a really tough story and then putting a very innocuous headline on it. The reader had to get to the fine print to get the rough stuff of it. A story that came over my

desk to edit was really, really very accusatory. I kept saying that my [way of] editing was to say exactly what the lead said [in the headline] and not edit [in] any kind of editorializing [in the article]. I didn't want to add anything to the leads, and I didn't. So my headline was really strong. I kept saying, "This is the strongest story I've ever read." And I kept saying it.

BT: What was the story? Was it a local story?

CE: I don't remember what it was. It was from the *Gazette* writers. And, boy, when it hit the print, all hell broke loose. [Managing Editor] Bob Douglas was furious and Bill Rutherford was upset. And they couldn't fire me because the headline said exactly what the story said, that much and no more. But they put me on six months' probation. And during this time this one slot man made my life absolutely miserable. I didn't ever do anything that he liked. It was very personal, the insults. And I promptly gained fifty pounds.

BT: Were you commuting from Pine Bluff at that point?

CE: No. I commuted for about six weeks and then I decided to move up here. It was unpleasant to commute and wear out my little car. That 100 miles a day was not gonna help my car. And Cynda had transferred from [the University of Arkansas at] Fayetteville, and was going to UALR [University of Arkansas at Little Rock]. She wanted me to come up because she was living with an aunt that she didn't want to live with. So I came up and we lived together until I moved back to Pine Bluff [in 1987].

BT: What happened at the *Gazette*?

CE: Eventually Rutherford said he had to let me go. Clearly I was a disruption because they were not pleased with me. The two slot guys, especially one, just did me in.

BT: How long were you at the *Gazette*?

CE: I was there maybe a year and a half. I decided—oh, I was so happy to get fired. But I was fifty-five years old and I'd been fired from a job that I had been doing for umpteen years. So I went to the employment office and I took a test. A lady [who worked there] said she thought I was really qualified for a Department of Education job, so I filled in an application for it. I got a letter back that they weren't hiring anybody but college graduates, so I was automatically out of [consideration for] that. I was renting my house in Pine Bluff [to a woman who] was an insurance adjuster, and I thought, "Well, I could do that." I didn't think it was all that interesting, but I was about to start training for it. Then I decided, I don't think the *Democrat* will hire me after I turned [Lyndon Finney] down, but I'll go talk to him. So I told him I told him I had gotten fired, and why I thought I'd gotten fired. I explained everything to him, and he said, "What would it take to hire you?" I said, "The same pay that I was getting at the *Gazette* and Sundays off." I'd been working Sundays. He said, "Well, when can you come to work?" So I gave him a date, and there I was. And almost as soon as I started, Silas Dunn decided he would take me on as his assistant.

BT: What was his title?

CE: I think he was news editor. I never did figure out everything that he did before he quit in a huff. He laid out religion pages for one thing. They wanted him to put

all the letters to the editor that had religion in them on one of his pages and he got mad and quit. I'd been two or three weeks trying to figure out what he wanted me to do. When he quit, they started giving me first one thing and then another. I kept doing this, doing that, doing something else. About a month later John Robert said, "I just want to know what happened. Nothing's different [since] Silas left." He said, "I can't tell the difference. I just want to know what's going on." John Robert smiled, and I said, "Well, you know." [Laughs] I ended up doing the editorial headlines and editorial columns, and then I was doing religion pages and then I was editing [Lewis] Grizzard and another comics [page] column.

BT: Lewis Grizzard, the syndicated humor columnist?

CE: Yes. Lewis Grizzard. I ended up doing just all sorts of things. I was making some mistakes on the editorial page, and I had told him, "I've reached the saturation point." They had given me so many different jobs to do. Then I ended up doing the wire advances, and I would delegate all the different types of stories. I'd send all the food and women's news to one editor and the business news to another editor. I'd transfer them and keep the [rest of] the advanced wire copy. I had advances and features from the *Los Angeles Times* that I edited and laid out when they needed an extra features page. And then I did all the tabloids.

BT: The tabloids for the weekend editions, or the special advertising [supplements]?

CE: I did the supplements like fashion and garden, and stuff like that. I had a really versatile job. I laid out the comics pages and read those columns.

BT: You weren't working usually on a daily deadline?

CE: The only deadlines I had were the tabloids. When I would get a tabloid, well, they wanted it right now. Then I had the religion pages deadline once a week, but no daily deadlines. The rest of the time, I did all sorts of things, like feature pages and then all the advance stuff.

BT: So you were your own boss?

CE: Right. They just pretty well let me alone.

BT: They trusted that you knew what you were doing.

CE: They trusted me and then I did it. [Laughs] It was fun. So the last years that I worked were really fun. Then in 1987, my ex-husband decided we were going to sell the house in Pine Bluff, but I told him that he'd have a little pot of money and I'd have a little pot of money [from the sale] and we wouldn't have anything to leave to the children. So I moved back in and he couldn't sell it because the [divorce] decree said I had lifetime possession. So I commuted from 1987 to 1991. In 1991, I decided I was still on top of the game and it was time to quit. I was sixty-six [years old]. I was tired of commuting. I rode the AP&L [Arkansas Power and Light, now Entergy] van over half the time, so I didn't use my own [car] much. Now, I'm eighty-two. I have a couple of doctors that say I'm sharp as a tack, but I don't think so.

BT: I think so. Had the *Democrat* become a morning paper when you went to work there?

CE: It was a morning paper when I went to work there. The slot man that made my life so miserable [at the *Gazette*] wanted to work at the *Democrat* while I was

there. . . . I kept saying, “Well, if you do hire him, now, he’s not going to be my boss.” The supervisor said, “No, he won’t [be].”

BT: He wasn’t your boss, right?

CE: No. But they hired him. Almost immediately he wanted to take over the slot job and be over all the copy editors, but they wouldn’t allow it. I was glad of that. Anyway, early one morning before most people came to work, he [the supervisor] confessed to me that he had hired him. And I said in a very loud voice, “What an incredibly stupid thing to do.” I looked up and the business editor was there. My voice had run into the wall behind him and echoed back, I think. I looked at him and he was grinning from ear to ear.

BT: Who told you he’d hired him?

CE: I can’t remember his name. That’s awful. Anyway, he said, “Well, you won’t be under him.” So when he came to work, the shock on his face was unreal. I’d been working all that time [laughs] and he didn’t know it. I was at the *Democrat* the whole time that I had left the *Gazette*. Later on, he was talking about how to spell a company’s name. It was Procter and Gamble, and Procter’s spelled with an “e.” He said, “No, it’s spelled with an ‘o.’” I said, “Wanna bet?” And he said, “Yes. What do you want to bet?” I said, “A Coca-Cola.” And he lost the bet. He kept wanting to buy me a Coke. And I don’t really like Cokes. I said, “Well, not now. I’ll get it later.” That just wore at him like you wouldn’t believe. That’s when they turned down his plan to take over that part of the paper, and made him book editor.

BT: Did you ever become friendlier?

CE: Yeah. We were civil all the time and he didn't ever make it hard on me again. They said that when I retired and they were taking up money for my going-away present he gave more than anybody. I don't know whether it was a guilty conscience or whether he was just so happy for me to leave. Anyway, he's okay. He's changed and I've changed, and I don't hold any malice toward him whatsoever. And I think he's doing well. He was going through a really rough time about that time, I think.

BT: And you actually ended up with a job that you enjoyed more at the *Democrat*?

CE: Oh, yes. It was like a ray of sunshine to walk in there. The only time anyone got jealous of me was one girl that thought I wanted the slot, and I finally told her—I said, "I've been there, done that. I'm not in the market for it at all." And after that, she was nice to me. Everybody seemed to welcome me. They hadn't formed any of the preconceived perceptions about me, and that really pleased me. It was so nice to be working around friendly people. Of course, I remembered Ray.

BT: Ray White or Ray Hobbs?

CE: Ray White [the *Democrat* design director]. I didn't remember many [other *Democrat* employees who had worked at the *Commercial*]. I remember more of you at the *Gazette*, but you worked different hours. I came on at 1:30 [p.m.], and worked till 11:30 [p.m.] By the time I came to work you had a couple hours [in the newsroom] and then you left. And I was busy during that time and I didn't get to be with you all.

BT: You've seen a lot of change. When you started out as a proofreader, copy editor, and news editor, you were working on paper copy.

CE: Yes. Paper tape was punched into Linotype machines. And they made paper proofs. A lot of the time that I was news editor we had paper copy that came in from AP and a [wire] service from Los Angeles and our group of papers. [Wire service copy] came in all caps [capital letters], and so we underlined the letters we wanted to capitalize. We were on computers at the *Commercial* before I left. We didn't have paper copy. They scanned the local copy into computers.

BT: Through a scanning machine?

CE: Yes.

BT: And then you had computers on the copy desk?

CE: We had those in the 1970s all the time. But in the 1960s we had paper.

BT: Was everything computerized at the *Democrat* when you went there?

CE: Right.

BT: Layout, too?

CE: No. We sent [page layouts] to the back shop. When they bought the *Gazette* from [Gannett in October 1991], they had to do away with the composing room. . . . The *Democrat* computers were old-fashioned when I came to work there [in 1982], and they went down a lot. When they bought the *Gazette* from Gannett, they used all their good stuff. They used the printing plant, too.

BT: Were you at the *Democrat* when the *Gazette* was sold and closed?

CE: I had been told [about it] the month before [the sale]. All of them invited me to come up for the big celebration the next month when [the *Democrat*] bought out

Gannett. [*Democrat* Publisher] Walter [Hussman, Jr.] came and made a big announcement and everybody cheered because the war was over. They had won the war.

BT: During that time the newspaper war was going on, did you feel any pressure, or was your job removed from that?

CE: No. I just did my little job. They did split up my job, I understand, after I left.

BT: They now have two people doing what you did all by yourself?

CE: I think they split it up with three people. . . . I'm sure those people have other things to do, too. But I was glad that I had retired. I didn't want to be carried as a burden to the editors. I wanted to be able to go out knowing that I knew what I was doing and they knew what I was doing.

BT: What have you enjoyed most in your newspaper career? What job did you like best?

CE: Well, it's hard to say. Being a copy editor took a lot of pressure off me, because I didn't have the ultimate responsibility of getting everything out. If you remember, we worked a lot of Friday nights [in Pine Bluff] when we would put out some of the Sunday pages. It was sort of a happy-go-lucky time when I was copy editing. To have the responsibility of the whole paper [as news editor] was not quite as much fun, but it was more challenging. It brought a lot of satisfaction to know that when I put out a paper, the pages looked good, the pages looked good, it was readable and there were few errors. I had some bad errors, a couple bad errors early on. We had a rule that every title had to be spelled out.

BT: Like "superintendent" you wouldn't abbreviate.

CE: Like attorney general. Between editions we would edit [to update] the front page, and this boy wrote out “Attorney General,” [in making changes to an article] and in the second edition it came out “A Horney General.”

BT: [Laughs] And you had missed that?

CE: It was final edition and there was nothing we could do about it. He wrote “A-T-T” and the two Ts together looked like and H, followed by “O-R-N-E-Y.” They separated the A from the Ts and made them an H [in print].

BT: And this was done in the print shop?

CE: Yes. And there was one little editor who was editing a feature story about [then-President Richard] Nixon’s two daughters. It was a write story in all caps, and she was [underlining] the letters that should be capitalized. The story said the Nixon girls would bob small curtsies. We had a florist whose name was Bob Small, and she capitalized the article to read, “The girls would Bob Small curtsies.” She said, “Oh, I just put it on automatic.” [Laughter]

BT: And these were in Pine Bluff?

CE: Yeah, those were in Pine Bluff.

BT: Well, Connie, it’s a career you never planned.

CE: I never planned, but I had fun. . . . You never knew what you were going to read. I enjoyed editing Bob Lancaster’s column when he was a [*Commercial*] stringer doing southeast Arkansas news. He wrote in such a neat way and he broke all the rules, but his writing was so good you had to go along with it. Harry Pearson’s writing was so clever that it was really hard to edit because if you cut out very much, it didn’t make sense. He was a really good writer though it was really hard

to shorten his copy because he would pin one paragraph over the next, and if you started cutting, you'd end up with not good copy.

BT: And Bob Lancaster is now a columnist for the *Arkansas Times* weekly [newspaper]. And he became a Nieman [Foundation] Fellow from the *Arkansas Democrat*, I think.

CE: I think he did.

BT: And Harry Pearson was the investigative reporter at Pine Bluff and went on to be a reporter at *Newsday* in New York, and then started his own magazine.

CE: Yes.

BT: A lot of people passed through the *Pine Bluff Commercial* who went on to bigger things.

CE: Just a lot of you. And a guy named Tom McGowan [became a lawyer] and he married a judge here. He was at Pine Bluff, too.

BT: He was one of several young people who came to work at the *Commercial* after they attended Oberlin [Ohio] College.

CT: Right. Young, smart boys they were. I think most of them came under Gene Foreman, didn't they?

BT: I think so, but then they worked for Tom Parsons after he left.

CE: Yeah, they worked under Tom. Tom was really full of himself back then. When he came to work I was forty and he was twenty. Then he went to Little Rock and when he came back down to Pine Bluff, he always changed my age to be twice as old as his was. He would put on the bulletin board, "Say happy birthday to

Connie Elkins, she's such-and-such age." Whatever was double his age. So I kept getting older and older and older.

BT: Was he the managing editor when you quit the Commercial after working as a reporter?

CE: Yeah.

BT: That was when you decided to go back to editing, on to something better?

CE: Yes. I just wanted to say I'd done it [reporting]. After a City Council meeting, I'd come in late and do my copy in the early hours, but I didn't mind because I've always been a night owl. But it was work, and copy-editing was play until I got to the *Gazette*. [Laughter] It was a different setup and I didn't think it was as well-organized as what I'd been used to. But the reason the work was not pleasant was the attitudes.

BT: That was when the newspaper war was going on.

CE: Yeah. Walter was trying to compete with [the *Gazette*]. It wasn't real competition early on, I don't think. But I think the paper kept getting better and better, or else I got used to it more.

BT: The *Arkansas Democrat*, now the [*Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*]?

CE: [Yes.] When the Pattersons sold [the *Gazette*] to Gannett, they pretty well did [it] in. The Gannett innovations did not set well with the traditional *Gazette* readers. The *Gazette* was such an established paper, and Gannett made changes, I think, that didn't work out.

BT: Was Gannett the owner when you worked at the *Gazette*?

CE: No, the Pattersons. Hugh Patterson [was the publisher].

BT: Connie, thank you for taking time to talk to me.

CE: I talked too much, too long.

BT: No, you talked just as long as you needed to. Is there anything else you'd like to say about working for a newspaper or working for the *Democrat*?

CE: I wouldn't change a thing. I realize that my job didn't set the world on fire and that probably no one will ever remember me. I never won an award of any kind, but I made friends. The boys [I knew from the *Commercial*] that worked at the *Gazette* when I came there said that I was the one that made it bearable when they were working [in Pine Bluff] because Tom [Parsons] would bawl them out, and I would give them dignity. So I felt really good about that. I have people right now at the *Democrat-Gazette* that remember me and with affection, I think. I'm thankful for every friend, every person that even likes me. It was fun, not earth-shaking by any means. Just an ordinary job.

BT: Right.

CE: But it beat Dunn and Bradstreet. [Laughter]

BT: And the Pine Bluff Arsenal, probably.

CE: Yeah, and the Arsenal. I worked hard at the Arsenal.

[End of Interview]

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