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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with

Steele Hays
Atlanta, Georgia area
30 April 2005

Interviewer: Amanda Miller Allen

Amanda Miller Allen: This is Amanda Miller Allen. This is an interview with Steele Hays. It was conducted on April 30, 2005. It is for the [Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History's project] on the *Arkansas Democrat*. Steele, thank you for agreeing to be part of the project. For the record, you've agreed to participate, and [you] know the interview is being taped and that it will be transcribed and donated to [Special Collections] at the University of Arkansas, [Fayetteville].

Steele Hays: Yes, I understand that, and I agree.

AA: Steele, can you state your name, address, and your current occupation? Please spell your name for me.

SH: Sure. I'm Steele Hays. S-T-E-E-L-E. H-A-Y-S. I live in Roswell, Georgia. I am currently senior director of marketing communications for Best Software in the Atlanta area. What else did you need? Is that it?

AA: That's enough for now. Tell me a little bit about your personal history. Where and when were you born? Who were your parents and your grandparents?

SH: I was born in Little Rock, [Arkansas], on September 12, 1953, which, for historical note, was the wedding day of Jack [John Fitzgerald] Kennedy and Jacqueline Bouvier. Kind of interesting.

AA: Oh, wow! [Laughs]

SH: Fifty-one years ago. My parents were Steele Hays and Sarah Brown, from St. Louis, [Missouri]. My dad had grown up in Little Rock and Washington, D.C., because his father was a member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Arkansas—the old Fifth Congressional District. They had moved back and forth somewhat, between Little Rock and Washington. My mother's parents were from [a small town near Chicago], Illinois. My parents met in Washington, D.C., and married. They moved back to Little Rock just before I was born. Dad joined a small law firm in Little Rock with one of his best friends he grew up with, Maurice Mitchell.

AA: So you grew up in Little Rock?

SH: I grew up in Little Rock. I went to Little Rock public schools, and graduated from Hall High School. Then I went to college at Yale [University, New Haven, Connecticut]. I was looking for my first job when I got out of college. I thought I wanted to be a photographer or a photojournalist, and came and knocked on the doors of the *Arkansas Democrat* and the *Arkansas Gazette*. I called on several of the commercial photographers in Little Rock that I knew—Greer Lyle and Tom Harding. The two photographers said, “You don’t want to be in commercial photography,” which was kind of sobering. The *Gazette*—I don’t remember that I even had a chance to break through and talk to anyone at the *Gazette*, but I did

talk to Jerry McConnell at the *Democrat*. Jerry said, “Well, we don’t have any openings for photographers right now, but we have a couple of openings for reporters. Can you write?” I said, “Well, I’ve certainly written a lot in college, but I haven’t written for a newspaper before.” He said, “Well, bring me something.” So I took my senior paper to him, and Jerry offered me a job [laughs] on that basis, which I realize now is unusual. You usually have to pay your dues, obviously, but I just kind of happened into it, I guess. He probably thought, “Oh, he seems like a bright, young man. We’ll give him a shot.”

AA: That’s fairly incredible.

SH: Yes. So I was hired at \$130 a week. I really enjoyed it.

AA: What year was this?

SH: That was in January of 1976.

AA: I was trying to place when you were at the *Democrat*—whether we were there at the same time.

SH: Sure, we were.

AA: Well, I *know* we were there at the same time, but I couldn’t remember at what point you came and at what point you left. How long were you there?

SH: I was there a year and a half, from January of 1976 to August of 1977. I left because one of the things I had not done in college that I wanted to do was to travel to Europe. I wanted to spend some time traveling before I got into a career or family obligations or anything, so I was trying to save some money [to] go travel in Europe. I finally managed to save enough money. I spent four months in Europe, from August through November of 1977. In fact, I even wrote a

couple of stories while I was there. I had kind of pre-arranged it with Jerry McConnell. I went and wrote a couple of stories about the Arkansas Economic Development office. The state government had opened a European office in Brussels, which was somewhat controversial. Some people were skeptical about whether that was really a worthwhile thing to do. They also questioned the credentials of the director who was appointed by [Arkansas Governor] Frank White to run that office, a guy named Bunny Adcock. So I made it a point to go to Brussels and I spent a couple of days interviewing and meeting with Bunny Adcock. So, I wrote a couple of stories for the *Democrat* from Europe.

AA: When you came to work at the newspaper, what were you assigned to do?

SH: I was a true cub reporter. They would send me to [do] the lowest-level assignments, things that more experienced reporters [laughs] didn't want to do. And they knew I wouldn't say no or protest anything. So, I covered the civic club lunch circuit. There was often news that came out of those. The Rotary Club or the Kiwanis Club or the other types of civic club lunches—they'd often have speakers, so that was one of the things I did. [Laughs] I also did a series of feature articles at the time that had been around for a few years, called "High School of the Week." I would go out and spend a day—it was a circuit. It was every one of the—of course, as you know, there are three public school systems: Little Rock, North Little Rock, and Pulaski County. I guess, all told, there were probably twelve or fifteen high schools between the three systems. I'd go out and spend a full day at each one of those high schools and write—it was a full page. I can't remember which day of the week it was. I want to say Wednesday or

Thursday. But the following week there would be a full page—we'd use three or four stories. We'd pick an outstanding student, an outstanding teacher. We'd try to find something unusual that a group at the school was doing. You'd do something on one of the athletic teams, and there would be a photograph. I would shoot the photos and write the stories. I had a full page of those every week. That was one of my things. I think it was a good training ground, actually. I met some very nice people.

AA: When you first came to work there, since you had no newspaper background, who was your mentor? Were you assigned a mentor, or were you just sent out on assignment?

SH: I think I learned the most from Bill Husted and from Ralph Patrick. Larry Gordon was the city editor when I first started. I sat next to Mark Oswald, and in front of Julie Baldrige [Speed]. I wasn't assigned a mentor. I didn't really go with another reporter. To get advice and some editorial help—Ralph Patrick, in particular, was very helpful. [He] tried to help me learn the basics of news value and news judgment, and how to organize and present the facts in a story. Bill Husted did, too. I think I caught on pretty quickly.

AA: So would you come back from an assignment and write the story, or would you talk to them?

SH: No. I would always write something first and give it to them, so feedback came in the form of feedback to what I had thought was the most interesting or worthwhile news angle in the story. I didn't usually try to discuss what he thought was the story there. I would take my own crack at it right out of the box.

AA: Okay. What was Bill Husted's title then, and what was Ralph's title?

SH: Ralph, I believe, had the title of metropolitan editor or assistant managing—no, I'm fuzzy.

AA: I'm not sure, either. He might have been assistant managing editor at that point.

SH: He may have. And Bill moved up and replaced Larry Gordon when Larry left.

AA: Yes.

SH: Larry went to *Newsday*, I believe.

AA: Yes.

SH: But he was there for about the first—I guess somewhat less than a year that Larry was there. It seems like half my time was with Larry Gordon as city editor, and then half with Bill as city editor.

AA: I believe when Larry was city editor—was James Scudder also an assistant city editor?

SH: No, James moved into that title later—or maybe he'd had it earlier and gone back to just reporting.

AA: Oh, I think maybe he had—he had been earlier.

SH: Yes.

AA: Okay.

SH: Then on other titles, Larry—I'm sorry—Jerry McConnell, who was the managing editor and Bob McCord was executive editor. Bob had an office in the corner there, and Jerry had the first cube, or office, to the left of Bob's.

AA: Can you talk a little bit about some of the other contemporaries who were there?

SH: Sure. I will come back, if you want to, and talk some more about other things I covered because my answer was only really the first six months or so.

AA: Well, let's go ahead and talk about that now.

SH: Okay. I guess as I proved myself somewhat, I got a lot more interesting jobs and assignments. One of the things I liked the most was the huge variety of things I had a chance to be exposed to. I've covered tornadoes, murders—I went on a police manhunt for these two escapees from the Oklahoma Prison System, Paul Ruiz and Earl Van Denton, who the police chased all over western Arkansas. [They] killed five or six people in the course of about ten days of being on the run.

AA: I remember that story.

SH: I was riding around with a state policeman in his car driving through the mountains of western Arkansas, not knowing whether we might come over the crest of the hill and run into the guys. And, in fact, I had been on that manhunt for about three days—they couldn't find them—so the weekend came, and I took a break and came back to Little Rock and had the weekend off. I had planned a camping trip with some friends and with Melody, who is now my wife—I don't think we were married at the time. We went up into the Ozarks north of Russellville and were camping for the weekend. Ruiz and Van Denton had been running around about fifty or eighty miles south of there, but I remember Melody was very frightened [laughs] that somehow they might show up in the vicinity of where we were camping out, and we couldn't have done anything about it. Then I covered political campaigns. I covered the 1976 Congressional race for that south

Arkansas district—I think it was the Second District [Editor’s note: Arkansas’s south district is the Fourth Congressional District.]. That’s when Beryl Anthony won that race—a pretty contested race with four or five candidates in the Democratic Primary. That was interesting. I traveled extensively with all those candidates in that race that summer. Let’s see, what else? When people would come to the airport—when anybody was coming through and had a press conference at the airport or other things—I had a chance to do a lot of interesting, unusual spot news stories that weren’t on anyone’s regular beat. Later, I think, about the last year, I did a lot of feature stories. Bill Husted felt like I was a good feature writer, so I wrote big pieces. I remember I did one on all the television [news] personalities in Little Rock, and interviewed all the anchormen and weathermen—[there were] three at the time—on the network stations. And that was a success, so I did one on the radio personalities in town. I remember, back on the television [story], I got Roy Mitchell, who was one of the leading anchormen. He kind of let down his guard and was talking about how frustrating it was—he’d go to the supermarket, and people would come up and say, “I know you! I know you!” And the other kinds of things that come with being a minor celebrity in a town like Little Rock. I think his bosses didn’t feel like it reflected well on the station’s persona of being—having their fans or their viewers who were loved and appreciated. I went up to a commune in north Arkansas near Calico Rock. I went down to do a travel story—Melody and I like to go to Natchez, Mississippi. I did a piece about the antebellum homes in Natchez.

[Laughs] Sometimes I got some funny assignments. I remember I was assigned

to do one on women's fashions. I can't remember why. I think they were for looking someone who was a non-fashion writer to do something and look for a different perspective. So I did a piece in the Sunday paper. And you remember the *Democrat* tried to play up feature stories to compete with the *Gazette*, which was more the paper of record. But I remember on one Sunday I had two front-page stories—one on women's fashion and one on the coal industry in western Arkansas. I got a note from Walter Hussman saying how impressed he was that one reporter was able to cover two such disparate subjects. [Laughter] It didn't come with a raise, but it was a compliment from the publisher.

AA: Did you get very many notes from Walter Hussman personally?

SH: That was the only one I recall.

AA: Speaking of Walter Hussman, were you there during the transition period, or had he already bought the newspaper when you joined the *Democrat*?

SH: He had already bought the newspaper when I joined.

AA: I cannot remember when the sale went through. It seems like it might have been 1974, so the turmoil from the change in ownership had settled down by the time you came on board.

SH: Yes. You asked about other contemporaries—James Scudder was there. Bob Sallee was the longtime police reporter.

AA: I remember Bob.

SH: Mark Oswald was there. Mark was covering city hall. David Terrell and Jim Allen were political reporters there. I believe Brenda Tirey was at the *Democrat* at that time before she went over to the *Gazette*. And, of course, I went over to

the *Gazette*. Brenda went over to the *Gazette*. David Terrell went over to the *Gazette*. Jim Allen went to the Associated Press [AP]. Robert—who was the chief photographer?

AA: Robert Ike Thomas.

SH: Robert Ike Thomas. Steve Keesee was a photographer. Let's see, Leslie Newell [Peacock] was on the copy desk. Randy Tardy was one of the business writers. Roger Armbrust actually covered city hall. Was it Roger Armbrust or Armbruster?

AA: Armbrust.

SH: He covered city hall, and then he left. That's when Mark Oswald picked it up. Julie Baldrige [Speed], who sat behind me—she wrote the column that's kind of a consumer affairs—or it was kind of a Q and A [questions and answers]—she fielded questions on anything you wanted to know, kind of tracked down answers to tough questions for readers.

AA: Do you remember what the name of that column was?

SH: No, I don't. "Ask Julie"?

AA: That's what I was thinking, it was "Ask Julie." [Editor's note: The name of the column was "Answer Please."]

SH: I think it was. The *Democrat* also had a regular, or maybe *sporadic* is a better word—there was a regular front-page column of "Where are they now?" that would run in a box at the bottom of the front page about every other week. I used to write those sometimes. "Where are they now?" Or, "Whatever happened to—

?" It was like a retrospective. You'd go back and follow up on a news story from ten or fifteen or twenty years prior.

AA: Yes. I remember those, and I thought they were quite interesting.

SH: Yes, I thought so, too.

AA: I don't know why newspapers don't do them anymore.

SH: I did one I still remember on Yeager. I can't remember his first name. Was it Bill Yeager? He was a union leader who had been involved in some very high-profile strikes and labor disputes, and had been a leader in the labor movement. He was an outspoken guy. He described himself as a "hell of a union man." That was the headline. I don't know why I remember that. I went to school with his daughter. There were some interesting ones in that category.

AA: Can you talk about what the newsroom was like during the time you were there?

SH: Sure. It was on the second floor. Of course, it was [a] big, open newsroom with concrete columns that were the only dividers in the room. It was very large and open. There was the horseshoe-shaped city desk/copy desk. There were the administrative clerks—I can't remember their titles—who were part of the first handling of copy. We wrote copy on the IBM Selectric typewriters, [and] double spaced the articles. I want to think one of the clerks was Nancy—oh, Nancy Miller was also there. I didn't mention Nancy Miller earlier.

AA: Yes. Nancy was a reporter and later assistant city editor.

SH: But then there were two clerks. I can't remember the technology. They would scan in—there was a process that the copy went from on paper to scanned in, and it got into a digital form [Editor's note: It was a primitive form of Optical

Character Recognition]. But the editors were still marking up copy on paper with red pens and copyediting marks.

AA: That was an interesting period, as I recall. Before it went to the scanner, the editors would put black marks through any words they wanted to note out.

SH: Yes.

AA: As it scanned, it would stop at the black mark, and someone would have to type in the correction.

SH: Oh, is that right? It was a transitional period. It was halfway in the old days and halfway into the new computer and digital age.

AA: Was the copy desk at that time on computers? Did they have three or four computers set up?

SH: I honestly can't remember, but I think so.

AA: There was a period with the scanner where there were about four or five computers in the whole newsroom—or terminals.

SH: Yes, and the copy editors were dealing with them. That's probably what was going on.

AA: Yes. And the copy editors—I was on the copy desk at that time, and it was just *bizarre*. [Laughs]

SH: It was a neat place to be with all the different sections of the staff—the city desk, the state desk, the business section, and the sports section back in the corner. There was society and food and the women's section off to the right. It was all in one big, open room with a lot of hustle and bustle. It was fun, interesting and exciting.

AA: Could you estimate how many people might have been on the floor?

SH: Yes, I would say at least forty or fifty, I would think, if not more.

AA: Did you know all of them?

SH: I would say I knew two-thirds or three-quarters within the first year. And some I never really got to know. But you certainly got to know virtually everybody over that time. There were people coming and going from the staff, and people—some had earlier shifts or later shifts or nighttime. But you really got to know people, I think.

AA: Do you remember any stories about any of your colleagues that were funny or instructive about what the *Democrat* was like in those days?

SH: Well, Bob Sallee was an interesting character—kind of a classic old police reporter. I don't think Bob was very well-educated, but his strengths were forming good relationships with the cops where they felt comfortable with him. He was kind of a "good ol' boy," and he had a talent for getting the cops to give him [laughs] confidential information, so he could report a lot more than what was just read or released by the public information officer, whether it was the Little Rock Police or the Pulaski County Sheriff's Office, or the [Arkansas] State Police. Bob, I think, used to get some pretty good scoops by having those relationships. That's really the nature, I think, of those old-time police reporters. Later, Wayne Jordan, whom I worked with at the *Gazette*, had the same kind of ability. Of course, sometimes those guys would get too cozy with the police and cover for them—they wouldn't report things they knew that reflected badly on the police because that would shut off their access to information. I think that was a

dilemma. I can't remember the details, but Bob used to have some pretty colorful and funny stories about criminal escapades, that he would get the juicy details of things.

AA: Do you remember his collection of photographs?

SH: I do not. Were they police photographs?

AA: Of course. [Laughs]

SH: Of a gruesome or bizarre nature. I don't think I ever had an opportunity to see those.

AA: I know the joke in the newsroom was that he was more of a policeman than he was a reporter, at times. [Laughs]

SH: Yes. Roger Armbrust was kind of a colorful character. Roger had long hair, and I think he kind of was a hard partier, but he was fun. I remember he had kind of a loud, booming voice, and sometimes he'd be shouting. I think he also had a little bit of a temper [laughs] or just a boisterous personality. Maybe I can remember, now that I'm thinking about it, some shouting matches between him and the editors at different times about things. And, of course, Larry Gordon was a pretty volatile guy. Larry was a big smoker and a hard drinker, and he was kind of the classic, old-time newspaperman. I think there were some shouting matches, now that I think about it. Anything like that that broke out, everybody could hear it and see it. But I can't remember more of the details since it's been so long ago—nearly thirty years, hasn't it?

AA: Yes, it has.

SH: I remember I called in a story once. The Jefferson County Courthouse had burned in an early-morning fire. It was, of course, a beautiful old historic building and a landmark. I went down there—drove down early—and it had burned down. I called in a story, and I used the word “debris,” saying “there was lots of debris after the fire.” And it got into the paper misspelled. [Laughs] I remember I had driven back to the newsroom in the middle of the day, and I remember the paper came out and Larry saw it. It was a front-page story, a big lead story about the courthouse burning down, and there was “debris” misspelled. I think it was D-E-B-R-E-E. [Laughter] Larry just hit the *ceiling*! I remember him slamming the paper down. He was so embarrassed and angry. I don’t know how it happened. I had called it in, so I was somewhat protected. But somebody had written it wrong, and in the rush to get the story in the paper, it didn’t get corrected.

AA: Talk a little bit about the deadlines. We were an afternoon newspaper at that point.

SH: Yes. As I recall, the first deadline for the state edition was at 7:30 a.m., and then the deadline for the city edition was at 11:30 a.m. My day usually started at 6:00 a.m. as a general-assignment reporter, so you’d had a chance to—the first people in would be reading the *Gazette* to see what stories they had in their edition, and [would] try to follow up. That was one of the things we tried to do. If we had missed something, we’d try to follow up quickly and get our own version so we didn’t have to use the AP or UPI [United Press International] rewrite of the *Gazette*’s story. So, we’d be scrambling early in the morning in an hour and a

half to cover anything we had missed. I know that was one of the drills. Then sometimes . . .

AA: So you were calling people early in the morning?

SH: Yes! We were trying to get them on the phone early in the morning, which was a challenge. Police departments were generally answering the phone, but you couldn't get somebody in a—like a mayor of a town around Arkansas—or whatever else—or a person. Whoever was in the news as a public figure, or whatever. But you certainly tried to rouse people at home and call them early to get a quote and get the facts, and write something that way. I also remember sometimes I would cover the police beat one day a week. I guess Mark Oswald picked that up because he was Sallee's first backup. Other times, it got passed around. One or two mornings a week I'd come in at about 5:00, and I'd go to the police station and look at the overnight blotter and try to quickly get anything in the paper. But even with an 11:30 deadline, you didn't have a lot of time. The stuff you covered in the afternoon would be written for the next day's edition. One of the things I liked about it was you came in early, but you got off early, so you had a normal day. Sometimes you'd be off by 3:00 and feel like you still had part of the day left to go do something else. I enjoyed that when I was at that age.

AA: What was your longest day working there?

SH: It was probably on some of those police manhunts, which was almost twenty-four hours of going out and—or on a political campaign where I was covering the candidates in that south Arkansas congressional race. I'd go spend the day or days or a week or so riding with them in the car as they made their appearances

from early morning to late evening. They were trying to shake as many hands and speak to as many groups and go to as many towns [as possible]. And that was a big Congressional district, so those were long days. But it was fun and interesting, so I don't remember feeling bad about it. I was just tired.

AA: Even when you were in your twenties?

SH: Even when I was in my twenties.

AA: What age were you when you were at the *Democrat*?

SH: Well, let's see, I was twenty-two or twenty-three in 1976.

AA: Fresh out of college.

SH: Fresh out of college. I had spent one year working—I skipped a year in college and just worked for a year to take a break, so I was a little bit older than your average fresh graduate, but just by a year or so.

AA: What did you do in that year?

SH: I worked on [a] construction crew, and then I traveled. I went up to Colorado for a couple of months, then I went to Maine, and then drove across the Trans-Canadian Highway with a friend who had a car. I had a great year.

AA: It sounds like it was a wonderful break.

SH: Yes.

AA: So you left to go to Europe for a few months?

SH: Yes.

AA: When you came back, did you try to come back to the *Democrat*, or not?

SH: I wasn't sure I wanted to stay in Little Rock when I was traveling. I thought about trying to go out to Northern California. I had some good friends from

college in the San Francisco area, and that had been one of my goals, to get out there. But I certainly had enjoyed the reporting very much, and I met Melody, who's my wife now. But I was torn about whether to come back to Little Rock or go somewhere else. When I got back from my travels, I did come back to Little Rock. That's where my family was and where Melody was. I certainly came back without being sure about what my plans were. I had actually gotten calls while I was gone from John Robert Starr, who had come in as the editor of the *Democrat*, while I was traveling. I also had a call from Jimmie Jones, who was the state editor of the *Gazette*. Jimmie had called my dad because he knew my dad. Jimmie had been a courthouse reporter, and my dad was a lawyer and a judge. Jimmie called my dad and said, "I want Steele to call me as soon as he gets back in town." But John Robert Starr had done the same thing. He said, "I want your son to call as soon as he gets back from traveling." When I got back, I went and met with Jimmie Jones. He offered me a job on the state desk at the *Gazette* at \$100 more per week than I had been making at the *Democrat*. I thought, "Well, this is a pretty good deal." I liked Jimmie very much. I didn't ever go meet with John Robert Starr. I thought the *Gazette* was the paper—it was the leading paper. It was larger, and I thought it had a great staff. It seemed like it was an exciting opportunity to join the *Gazette* at that time, so that's what I did.

AA: Well, we're almost out of tape, and it looks like this is a good point to turn it over, so let me do that, and then we'll continue.

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

AA: Okay, we're recording again. Do you think of anyone from that time period as a mentor—from that period at the *Democrat*?

SH: Probably. Yes, I think most of Ralph Patrick. Ralph was really helpful in giving me feedback and trying to teach how to write a news story, and how to assess what was worth reporting, or how to use the inverted-pyramid concept of putting your most important information at the top and working down. And Bill Husted, I think, was also—Bill was so encouraging and positive to me about my writing. He helped me gain self-confidence, and I kind of let myself go and write with more freedom or colorfulness, or less within a narrow, conservative reporting style to a more expressive style. I thought of a couple more stories that were interesting, in the category of feature story. I remember once—and a story I enjoyed very much was going out with—I don't know how we found this, or whether it was Bill's idea or something. But I went out with a commercial fisherman named Tom Brannen, who is still making a living catching catfish in rivers around the state—just being a one-man fisherman. He had his own fish market with two or three stores that sold catfish and other kinds of what some people would call fresh fish, I guess, but bream and carp. Catfish was the “high end” of the commercial fish. [Laughter] There was Young's Fish Market. I went out and rode around with him in his boat. He would use nets and trot lines. We were up on Lake Dardanelle, and he would move around the state to different lakes and rivers at different seasons, as he felt the fishing was better at certain spots. He was a colorful character. I enjoyed that very much. I spent at least three days with him riding around in his boat and pulling in fish. That was fun.

AA: So you spent three solid days with him, not just going out and seeing him between other assignments.

SH: Yes.

AA: Was that typical? Would they allow you to just cut loose and do that?

SH: Yes, I guess. Bill liked the—they felt like they were getting good stories. Remember, there was such an emphasis on trying to make the *Democrat* a writer's paper and a paper for people who enjoyed good writing and longer stories, compared to the news hole available today, I think. With the influence of *USA Today* and others, there's a premium, I guess, on the cost of newsprint and everything else. But I would write huge, long stories and fill it up. We were trying to use that as a major point of difference with the *Gazette* at the time.

AA: It seems to me there was a feature story on page one every day. Is that your recollection?

SH: It seems like it. Yes.

AA: And that that was at least what they tried to do.

SH: Yes.

AA: After you left and went to the *Gazette*—you were at the *Gazette* how long?

SH: Four and a half years.

AA: So you were there during some of the intense newspaper war.

SH: Oh, yes.

AA: What was that like for you?

SH: I enjoyed my time at the *Gazette* very much. I was on the state desk for the first year, which meant that we covered everything outside Pulaski County. So we

covered the other seventy-four counties of Arkansas. A lot of it was telephone work, but other times, if there was a story happening, I would also go out and spend two or three days [covering it]. I loved driving out all over the state. It was fun and interesting. Getting out of the office was what I enjoyed the most. Then Ernie Dumas, who had been the leading political reporter for the *Gazette*, was moved to the editorial page, and became an editorial page writer. Ernie left the capitol beat, and they offered me his job. So I was one of three *Gazette* reporters at the state capitol for the last three and a half years. I covered the Legislature—the House side. We'd go out to the capitol virtually every day. There was a small newsroom out there that both the *Gazette* and *Democrat* reporters shared, as well as a reporter from the Memphis *Commercial Appeal*. Sporadically there would be someone from the Fort Smith *Southwest Times-Record*, the *Springdale News*, or the *Pine Bluff Commercial*. And AP and UPI, all crammed into a fairly small room. [Laughs] So, I was at the *Gazette* four and a half years covering state government three and a half years. Bill Clinton was just coming in as governor when I went out to the capitol. That was interesting, and, of course, he was defeated in a surprise upset defeat in 1980 by Frank White. So then Frank White came in. I had covered Frank White for his run and upset of Clinton. After two cycles of legislature, I began looking ahead and trying to think whether that was really what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I decided it wasn't, so I left and went to graduate school in New York to study business. I thought about doing a joint program. I went to Columbia [University], and they have a great journalism school, of course. I thought I would get a joint degree in journalism and business

because one of my interests was potentially going into newspaper management. But when I got up there, I realized that journalism school is really about, I think, giving you the opportunity to practice as though you're a working journalist every day. In journalism, I think that's far more of what it's all about than a body of theory, or studying law or medicine or something. So I realized that I didn't really think, after I had been reporting for six and a half years, that I had that much to gain from going and getting a graduate degree in journalism. I never pursued that, and ultimately decided not to go into newspaper management, or I just didn't have that opportunity. Actually, I did work on a summer job for a newspaper. Between my first and second years I worked at the *Trentonian* in Trenton, New Jersey. I was kind of a backup ad salesman, so I had a view of another side of newspapering. The company—it was a small network of newspapers that owned—the *Trentonian* had sent me over there and asked me to kind of analyze what they were doing, as well as write up recommendations to the head of the company. So I did that, too. I wrote up three or four or five pages worth of observations. They were in a very tough, competitive newspaper war with another newspaper in town. So that was another interesting perspective on newspaper wars in those days. The *Trentonian* versus the *Trenton Times*. The *Trenton Times* was owned by the *Washington Post*, I believe. The *Trentonian* was owned by a man named Ralph Ingersoll of the Ingersoll newspaper chain. Anyway, the end of my newspaper career was that summer job at the *Trentonian*.

AA: When you were at the *Gazette*, the newspaper war was heating up. The *Democrat* may have gone to morning circulation at that point, or do you recall that?

SH: I don't think that happened—I think that happened after I left. I could be wrong, but I think the *Democrat* remained an evening paper through 1982. That's when I left Little Rock. When did it shift?

AA: It shifted in 1978 or 1979.

SH: Oh, then my memory is faulty. I'm glad you reminded me. I remember the free classifieds being a huge competitive issue that was beneficial for the *Democrat* and harmful for the *Gazette*. That's right, John Robert Starr, who really kind of wanted to attack the *Gazette* in a very head-on way—I guess the switch to morning publication came at that time.

AA: Very soon after he joined.

SH: It was interesting—there was an awful lot of—there had always been competition between the *Gazette* and the *Democrat*, but when Starr became editor, it got into the *pages* of the paper. He would use his column to be very critical of the *Gazette* in a more explicit, kind of “in your face” way than there had been before. I remember there was that famous photograph of Starr with a knife in his teeth squatting on top of a newspaper sales box on the sidewalk. I think that ran on the front of the *Arkansas Times*. That kind of symbolized that it was a street fight. The *Gazette* had always been the leading paper, and they weren't smug or arrogant, but I think they started to get more and more nervous and concerned. You could sense some—had filtered into the newsroom at the *Gazette* from the publisher and the business team—the senior leadership—that they felt pressure on

the business side, especially the loss of revenue from free classifieds. So there was a sense that you had to fight harder and work harder to put out a better paper and maintain the distance—the circulation of the *Gazette* was higher, and they tried to protect and maintain that lead. But I remember it got narrower, as the *Democrat* gained some circulation during that time.

AA: Did anyone at the *Gazette*—your colleagues—did you all ever discuss, “Well, what *if* the *Democrat* actually wins this war?”

SH: That was inconceivable, as I remember. I really think that was inconceivable. There was just the feeling that the *Gazette* was the oldest paper west of the Mississippi, and had been there since 1816 or whatever, and the *Democrat* was taken seriously as a threat, but I just don’t think people felt that that was realistic—that the *Gazette* would lose. Later, after I left, I’m sure that became more of a concern and more of a prospect than in 1982 when I left. I can’t remember that really being something that seemed like a perceptible threat or possibility.

AA: Who was your competition when you covered the state house? Who worked for the *Democrat* at that point?

SH: Boy, I’m drawing a blank because there were a number of people who had switched from the *Democrat* to the *Gazette*. David Terrell—I think David was still—when I went to the capitol, David was still on the *Democrat* side, but then he switched and was hired by the *Gazette*. Then later he went to the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*. So David was a *Democrat* reporter when I first got there. I’m trying to remember who else. I guess Brenda Tirey, also, was a *Democrat*

reporter at first, and then during the four years I was at the capitol, she came over for the *Gazette*. I can't remember—some younger reporters came in, but I really—I can't recall their names as well of who covered—there were no longtime veteran reporters after David and Brenda came over from the *Democrat*. The *Gazette* had an advantage in having more experienced, longtime tenured reporters at the capitol. Do you recall the names?

AA: I was sitting here trying to think, and nobody comes to mind. Was Al May there?

SH: Al was there when I was at the *Democrat*. I didn't mention Al's name. Al covered state government politics when I was at the *Democrat*, and by the time I came back from my travels and went to the *Gazette*, Al had left and gone to the Atlanta paper. I believe that was his first offer, or did he [go] somewhere else along the way?

AA: He went to Raleigh, North Carolina.

SH: He went to Raleigh. That's right. The *News and Observer* first, and then came to Atlanta later. But, no, Al had left. But you're right—he was covering politics when I was on the city desk at the *Democrat*, but I never competed against Al when I was at the *Gazette*, covering politics.

AA: I'm drawing a blank, too, on who would have been your competition. What were the big stories at the state house when you were covering . . . ?

SH: Bill Clinton's first term. He was a bright, ambitious—the youngest governor in the country. He brought in a group of people that he'd met in college and law school and some of the political races he had managed or been involved in elsewhere, like in Texas. So he had some unusual, bright young people running

the state government. But they came in with a little bit of a “know-it-all” or “we-know-better-than-you-do” attitude, and that was one of the issues. There was some perceived arrogance and some missteps on their part in interacting with more experienced members of the Arkansas state government bureaucracy, as well as the legislators.

AA: Yes.

SH: So that was one of the big stories. Of course, Clinton raised the gasoline tax and the [vehicle] license fees in an effort to raise money for highway construction. That was controversial two years later when Frank White ran against him. [White’s] motto was “Cubans and Car Tags.” And, of course, the Cuban refugees—many had been sent to Fort Chaffee, and rioted in 1978 or 1979. That was controversial, and that was a big issue. Let’s see, what else at the capitol—oh, there’s a famous story called “Sawyer.” It was really not a very big deal, but it became symbolic, I think, of the mismanagement or naivety on the part of the Clinton [gubernatorial] Administration. They had put a bunch of money into a program to train people in skills—low-income or disadvantaged people in a skill—they put money into something called “Sawyer,” to train people how to cut wood. It came out that after \$150,000 or whatever, a pitifully small amount of wood had been cut and made available. So they calculated it was about \$4,000 per cord, which any person could immediately calculate was a ridiculous waste in terms of what the cost should be. So that got an [laughs] awful lot of ink, and was an embarrassment for the Clinton Administration.

AA: Was there any hint during that time that Clinton had any problems with the ladies?

SH: You know, I've thought about that many times since then, and I don't think at that stage when I was there—just his first two years as governor—and then he was out for two years. Then he came back in, but I had left. I left in 1982. That was when he defeated Frank White in his comeback. I can't remember that being talked about. He and Hillary had only been married a few years. She was a very—I think they were very close. I just don't remember that emerging as an issue, that I was aware of. Maybe some people were, but I think it came just a little bit later—the Gennifer Flowers affair.

AA: Yes.

SH: I'm pretty sure that developed later when he came back into office.

AA: I remember when he first came into office, he had department heads who were in their twenties.

SH: Yes.

AA: And a lot of the “old guard” in Arkansas was quite appalled.

SH: Yes. They were kind of arrogant. John Danner and Nancy Pietrafesa. And they had some good people. In particular, I think Paul Levy, the head of the state energy department, did a really good job and stayed out of any controversy. I think he managed to communicate well with the legislators. But you're right, there were a bunch in that category.

AA: I'm trying to recall—didn't Julie Baldrige [Speed] leave the newspaper and go to work for the Clintons?

SH: Right. Julie was Clinton's press secretary, so I interacted a great deal with Julie, as all the reporters did. Her office opened into the reception area or the waiting room of the governor's office, so that [the] press secretary could see and be seen by anybody who had any business coming through the governor's office. So Julie was Clinton's press secretary. Actually, she had gone to the attorney general's office when Clinton was attorney general before he became governor. So I'm sure now that Julie went from the attorney general's office and worked in the Office of Consumer Affairs, and then moved over to the governor's office as his press secretary. She met Steve Smith in that time and married him. Steve had been in the AG's [attorney general's] office, and then he was one of Clinton's top lieutenants in the governor's office.

AA: Do you stay in touch with any of your colleagues from your *Democrat* or *Gazette* days?

SH: Yes. We stayed with Ernie and Elaine Dumas in Little Rock about a month ago when we visited Arkansas. We stayed with Ernie and Elaine, and we're very close with them. I stay in touch with David Terrell. We saw David and Pam, his wife, when we lived in Washington and they lived in Washington. I haven't seen David in recent years. We went and saw Jim Allen when he was out in San Francisco. Jim went to San Francisco with UPI or the Associated Press. Which was Jim with? UPI originally and then the Associated Press, I guess. I haven't talked to Jim in recent years. Who else from the *Gazette*? I'm very close with Leslie Newell Peacock. She works with the *Arkansas Times*, and we've seen Max Brantley, but I didn't see Max on this most recent trip to Little Rock. I guess

those are the main people. I'm very close with Tom Hamburger, who was the *Gazette* reporter in the Washington bureau.

AA: He was also at the *Democrat* at one time, wasn't he?

SH: I don't think Tom was ever at the *Democrat*. He was with the *Pine Bluff Commercial* as his first newspaper job, and then he joined the *Gazette* and was on the state desk in Little Rock. Then he went to Washington. If he was at the *Democrat*, I don't remember.

AA: I'm misremembering. I knew him when he was at the Pine Bluff paper.

SH: Yes.

AA: We had a friend who lived in Pine Bluff, and we met him in Pine Bluff. We were friends with him even though he was on the opposition.

SH: Yes.

AA: Let me ask you a few more questions. Did you learn anything from the *Democrat* that you've taken with you to other jobs?

SH: Well, I think I learned how to write, which has been invaluable to me in business. I've been in advertising and marketing for the last twenty years, and I think writing is a huge asset to someone in business. Especially the communication side of business. Being able to clearly express ideas and get to the heart of the matter, and organize your thoughts and present them coherently in an orderly, logical way—I think it's been a huge asset to me. I think that working under deadline pressure is a great lesson. I found that really interesting and stimulating in the newspaper business. That sense of pressure to make the most of your time and make every minute count in trying to collect your thoughts and get them on

paper. Then that sense of relief or even euphoria when you've met a deadline and could kind of let it go [laughs] because you couldn't do anything more about it. But I think I've used that in my life since then—the ability to focus your energy and your attention and your efforts to meet a deadline, and not get writer's block. You just start writing. You just apply yourself and make it happen. That has been helpful to me, I think, because the advertising business is a deadline-driven business, as is business in general these days. There are lots and lots of deadlines, and lots and lots of time pressure. And also the ability to come into work every day not knowing what you're going to do as a reporter and find yourself cast or thrown into something where you quickly had to absorb a lot of information to kind of get caught up and collect information you needed to know, and ask the questions. I think that's been very helpful to me. I really think I learned how to do that. How to suck information out of people and things or documents or a situation—to quickly sort things out and try to reach conclusions about what's going on. Being able to get at that quickly, I think, has been very helpful.

AA: And that would help you manage a crisis if you or someone you're representing are in a crisis, you would be able to say, "Tell me what I need to know," and then organize it and present it in a more effective way.

SH: Yes.

AA: What is the most positive thing you can say about your experience at the *Democrat*?

SH: Oh, it was *fun*. It was a wonderful, interesting learning experience. It was fun. It [was] great in my life and my professional development. They were wonderful,

interesting people, and there was a great camaraderie. I think it was a fun growth and learning experience in learning to write.

AA: Is there anything from the experience that you would say was negative or you wish could have been different?

SH: Well, for the most part, no. I didn't have any negative experiences. I think one of the things that [] left out with the longer term of journalism is two things. It's difficult to make a good enough living to support a family [laughs], I felt, so the compensation and your potential compensation working in the newspaper business is a challenge—a difficulty that drives some talented, good people out of the business. I think for me, at least, there wasn't enough of a career path that I could see. What I liked the most was reporting every day and being out of the office, and being in stimulating environments, and trying to meet those challenges, and write and report well. But the path upwards is to be an editor, which takes you out of the stimulating variety of day-to-day interaction with people outside an office covering stories, and writing—having the reward of expressing things well and having it printed, and doing a good job and feeling that sense of feedback, that you were really accomplishing something. To me, moving up to an editor's job, you'd lose the two most interesting things I valued. And, yet, that was the only way you could “move up” in any kind career way. Well, obviously, I guess, in terms of compensation, you become a columnist who kind of develops a reputation and becomes more of a brand or a high-profile celebrity that drives readership and loyalty, that the papers reward you on that basis.

[Laughs] But that wasn't what I aspired to, either. I think those were the two

negatives, I'd say, is that it's hard to have a clear career path as a reporter and still report, or that a fellow didn't have a good compensation. I think the job market in journalism is tough. There are a lot of good people who want to do it, and not that many good papers.

AA: I think a lot of your colleagues would agree with you on that. Do you do any writing personally now, or have you written for newspapers or magazines since you left the newspaper business?

SH: I manage a team of writers now, and I do some writing myself in terms of ads and direct mail and brochures. So, I write, but it's in more [of an] editorial role, and more [of a] management role of others in trying to establish a creative direction for marketing communications. So I write a lot. I also write a lot of communications in email, trying to define problems and define, "Here's how I'd like to proceed," or making recommendations. In the advertising business there will be a lot of "point of view" papers on strategy issues of how to develop an advertising campaign or market a product or launch a new product or service. I have written a lot in that way. I have not written any articles for publication in a long, long time.

AA: Well, I think you need to do that again.

SH: I think so, too.

AA: Is there anything that you'd like to talk about that we haven't covered?

SH: I think it's a shame that there's not still a newspaper war in Little Rock. [Laughs] I think competition between papers is a good thing, and that readers in Arkansas—it was beneficial to have two different points of view. There were two

different editorial policies, one more liberal and one conservative. The reporters worked harder to compete with each other and beat the other paper, and get the better reporting of a story. I think it's a shame—it's obviously not just true in Little Rock, but in the whole country. There are very few competing newspaper towns left anymore. There used to be lots of them, and I think that's a shame that we don't have that anymore.

AA: Well, I think I would have to agree with you. Is there anything from the interview you'd like to go back to and talk more about?

SH: No. I enjoyed our conversation.

AA: I did, too. It was *very* interesting. I learned some things that I didn't know, including I could have made a lot more money at the *Gazette*. [Laughter]

SH: Relatively, I guess. [Laughs]

AA: Thank you for your time, Steele.

SH: Thank you, Amanda.

AA: It was a very nice interview, and I appreciate you spending so much time.

SH: My pleasure.

AA: If you would like to add something at some point, let me know, and we can do that.

SH: Okay. Good.

AA: Thank you again.

[End of Interview]

[Transcribed by Cheri Pearce]

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