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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with

Ken Kaufman
Telephone interview
25 March 2006

Interviewer: Jerry McConnell

Jerry McConnell: [Editor's Note: Ken Kaufman was seriously ill when I conducted this interview by telephone and didn't remember some of the details of his career. However, I worked with Ken at the *Arkansas Democrat* in the early 1950s and we became friends and remained friends over the years, so I have included portions of his interview that I could corroborate. I also consulted his son and a sister and their recollections are also included later in this interview.]

[This is Jerry McConnell.] I'm sitting here on a Saturday morning on March 25, 2006, interviewing Ken Kaufman [who resides in Wichita, Kansas] for the [Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History's] oral history project on the *Arkansas Democrat* and [*Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*]. The first thing I need to do, Ken, is ask you if I have your permission to make this recording by telephone and turn the tape over to the University of Arkansas [Fayetteville].

Ken Kaufman: You have my permission.

JM: I have your permission. Okay. Very good. Let's just start from the beginning

and find out how you got to the *Democrat*, and everything. Tell me first, Ken, where and when were you born?

KK: I was born November 14, 1925, in St. Louis [Missouri].

JM: In St. Louis. Okay. And what were your parents' names?

KK: Elmer and Margaret Kaufman.

JM: What was your father's name?

KK: Elmer.

JM: Elmer?

KK: Yes.

JM: Yes. Okay. Tell me your full name.

KK: Kenneth Clarence Kaufman.

JM: You were born November 14, 1925, in St. Louis. Your parents were Elmer and Margaret Kaufman. That's K-A-U-F-M-A-N. Is that correct?

KK: Correct.

JM: And your name is Kenneth Clarence Kaufman?

KK: Correct.

JM: Okay. Where did you go to school, Ken?

KK: Well, elementary school I went to St. Louis Public Schools—kindergarten through eighth grade, and then ninth grade through twelfth.

JM: Okay. In St. Louis Public Schools?

KK: Public school all twelve years.

JM: What high school did you graduate from?

KK: Southwest High School.

JM: Southwest?

KK: It was the newest high school in St. Louis.

JM: Yes. Okay. Where did you go to college?

KK: I went to college at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri.

JM: Okay. Did you graduate?

KK: Yes.

JM: Yes. Okay. Got a degree in what?

KK: I got a degree in English.

JM: Okay.

KK: They didn't offer a journalism degree, so I couldn't . . .

JM: But you took journalism. Okay.

KK: Yes.

JM: So let's proceed from there how you got into the newspaper business. Did you go into the service first?

KK: Yes. I went to school on the GI Bill. In fact, if it hadn't been for the GI Bill, I wouldn't have been in school.

JM: Okay.

KK: I enrolled and later finished my college at Westminster. I had one semester when I went off to the service.

JM: Okay. You'd been to one semester of college and then went into the service. Is that correct?

KK: I went through three quarters of school.

JM: Okay. And then entered the service?

KK: That's right.

JM: Okay. What service did you go into?

KK: Navy.

JM: You went into the navy. Okay. What did you do in the navy?

KK: I became a pharmacist's mate, which is one of the most esteemed positions in the navy. It is comparable to a nurse, only a little rougher.

JM: Yes.

KK: I often describe it to people as being like "M.A.S.H." was on television. [Editor's note: The TV show "M.A.S.H." revolved around the members of an American Mobile Army Surgical Hospital during the Korean War.]

JM: Yes. Okay. [Laughs]

KK: The navy had no female nurses. They were male nurses.

[Editor's Note: Ken's son, John Kaufman, who lives in Wichita, Kansas, said he remembers his father talking a little about his stint in the navy. John said Ken was involved in the landing on the beach at Okinawa as a pharmacist's mate, but had to carry a .50 caliber machine gun to help protect their camp when the Japanese tried to infiltrate it. "He killed people," John said. He said his father later had nightmares about his time in battle.]

JM: Yes. Okay. So when did you get out of the navy?

KK: I got out of the navy in June of 1946.

JM: Okay. So what year did you go into the navy?

KK: I went into the navy in January of 1944.

JM: January of 1944. Okay. So you were in about two and a half years, then?

KK: Correct. Yes.

JM: You got out of the navy in June of 1946 and then you enrolled at Westminster. Is that correct?

KK: That's correct.

JM: On the GI Bill?

KK: On the GI Bill.

JM: Okay.

JM: Yes. Okay. So you went to Westminster, and finished and got your degree at Westminster?

KK: That's correct. I never regretted a day of it, either.

JM: What?

KK: Never regretted a day of it.

JM: Yes, I'll bet. Then you got out of Westminster. Then what did you do? When did you get your first newspaper job?

KK: My first newspaper job I got, probably, in August of 1950.

JM: Where was that?

KK: That was at Rogers, Arkansas.

JM: Now, Rogers—what was that? *Rogers Daily News*?

KK: The *Rogers Daily News*.

JM: Yes. Okay.

KK: Everett Pate was the editor of it.

JM: What?

KK: Everett Pate—P-A-T-E—was the publisher.

KK: At that time it was an independent daily newspaper.

KK: It was considered a pretty good little paper.

JM: How long were you at Rogers?

KK: Not very long. [Laughs]

JM: Yes.

KK: Oh, I'd say about four or five months.

JM: Then what happened?

KK: Then I went on to the *Arkansas Democrat*.

JM: Okay. Tell me about how you got to the *Arkansas Democrat*.

KK: Well, let's see. It's kind of a good story, I think.

JM: I remember some of it. I thought so, too. Tell me about it.

KK: I started first with the *Rogers Daily News*.

JM: Yes.

KK: It was a nice little paper. I was dating the captain of the girls' basketball team. It would have continued, but I got bored with Rogers and she did not want to leave Rogers.

JM: Yes.

KK: I could see very little career there.

JM: Yes.

KK: So one [Saturday]—I went to Rogers in September, and come December, right after Christmas, I quit and told them I [was going to someplace else]. My first choice was the Fort Smith paper. They offered me \$49 a week. I felt that was an insult. That was the same as I was making at the *Rogers Daily News*. And I thought, "Well, why should I come all the way down from Rogers to work for them for the same amount of money?"

JM: Yes.

KK: Well, their theory was it was such an honor to work on the Fort Smith daily paper that I should be willing to jump into it.

JM: [Laughs] Yes.

KK: So I took off one Friday after I'd quit.

KK: And then picked up the one at—let's see, how did that work out?

KK: I drove to Little Rock, Arkansas.

JM: Okay.

KK: I arrived at about 5:00 on a Friday afternoon. I went into the [*Arkansas*] *Democrat*. I remember [Allen] Tilden was working late, and I went up to him and said that I was looking for a job. He quizzed me a little bit in a sarcastic way. He said, "Well, we'll take you on Monday morning." I said, "That would be fine. What will I get paid?" He said, "\$49 a week." [Laughs] The same as I would have gotten at the other newspapers.

KK: Then he said, "When can you start?" I said, "Well, I can start on Monday

morning." He said, "Well, be here at 6:00 in the morning and we'll put you on. I guess you don't have any place to stay, do you?" I said, "No. I've never been to Little Rock, Arkansas, before."

JM: Yes.

KK: "I don't know where I should go."

JM: He said, "Well, the photographer here on the paper—here at the newspaper, his mother had taken in boarders, and she may take you on." I said, "Oh, that would be just wonderful." So I got a place for \$1 a week—I don't know what I got paid then, but it was \$1 a week for a room in Ferd Kaufman's house.

JM: At whose house?

KK: Ferd Kaufman.

JM: Ferd Kaufman. Okay. Yes, I remember Ferd.

KK: He was a photographer.

JM: Same last name as you.

KK: Yes. Same last name, but we were not related.

JM: Yes. Okay.

KK: But he took me on, and they were very nice. His mother was a widow.

JM: Yes.

KK: I stayed on there for probably about two months.

JM: Yes.

KK: Also, when I was being interviewed, Tilden said to me, "I guess you need something to eat, too, don't you?" I said, "Yes." I thought, "Boy, this would be

too much to expect him to pay for my food for a week." [Laughter] But he didn't go that far. He said, "Well, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll put you on the civic club circuit, and you can earn that one meal a day covering civic clubs, and that should keep you from starving to death."

JM: Yes. That was covering their luncheon meetings where they'd usually have a speaker or something.

KK: Yes.

JM: Yes. Okay.

KK: And that worked very well.

JM: Okay. Now, this man that you were talking to who hired you—you said Tilden. That was Allen Tilden, right?

KK: Allen Tilden. Have you been in touch with Allen Tilden?

JM: Well, he's dead.

KK: Oh, he is?

JM: Yes, he is. It's a shame because I liked him, too. He hired me, also. He was the city editor at that time. Correct?

KK: Yes.

JM: Yes. Okay.

KK: He seemed a little hard to us, but I'm sure that's [because] we were straight out of college. We didn't know any difference.

JM: Yes.

KK: Then I went on the city beat, which was an open beat. My first assignment, I

remember, was to cover a job at Fort Roots Hospital. Fort Roots was a military hospital overlooking Little Rock.

JM: Yes.

KK: The job was to cover a meeting of those who worked with the insane.

JM: Yes.

KK: I didn't know how to get there. I didn't know where it was.

JM: Yes.

KK: So they assigned me to George Douthit as a cub reporter.

JM: Yes.

KK: George and I would go to Fort Roots, and I would write a story and he would come back to Little Rock.

JM: Yes.

KK: Well, I think the first deadline for the paper then was about—perhaps 10:30 in the morning, I guess.

JM: Yes.

KK: George and I went over there. I didn't drive. I had a car, but I didn't drive.

JM: Yes.

KK: I relied on George to take me over there and bring me back.

JM: Yes.

KK: George took me over, but he did not take me back.

JM: [Laughs]

KK: There I was, stranded at Fort Roots—without any transportation except the bus.

JM: Yes.

KK: I didn't get back until about 12:30 or so, and I sat down immediately and wrote a story for the city edition, which at that time was, I think, about 12:30.

JM: Yes.

KK: Does that sound right to you?

KK: Yes. So I sat down and pounded out a story for that edition and rushed it up to the city desk and gave it to Tilden. He looked at it and he just crumbled it in his hand and threw it in the waste basket. He said, "You just missed half our circulation."

[Laughs]

JM: Covering North Little Rock.

KK: That was sort of a beginning reporter's job.

JM: Yes.

KK: I think I was preceded by a guy by the name of Mullins. They turned over about every two or three [months].

JM: Yes. That was probably Bob Mullins, wasn't it?

KK: Yes, Bob Mullins.

JM: Yes.

KK: Then I worked [out of there?] there for [unintelligible] after Bill Secret.

JM: Yes.

KK: Unlike most of them who went over there, I enjoyed it.

JM: Yes. Did you?

KK: Yes.

JM: Okay.

KK: But I liked doing feature stories and [nintelligible].

JM: Yes.

KK: They had a very colorful mayor.

JM: Who was the mayor?

KK: Ross Lawhon.

JM: Lawhon. L-A-W-H-O-N. Is that correct?

KK: I think so.

JM: I think that's right.

KK: I remember he made his triumphal entry into North Little Rock, after getting elected, in a canoe dressed as an Indian.

JM: Yes.

KK: Chief Ross Lawhon.

JM: Yes.

KK: He came down the Arkansas River with a baton and feathers and all. [Laughs]

JM: Yes. Didn't he somewhere acquire the name Chief Rooty Tooty, or something like that?

KK: Yes, Chief Rooty Tooty.

JM: Yes. [Laughs]

KK: He was also famous for—they inquired about his job, and they thought he treated the prisoners in jail very harshly.

JM: Yes.

KK: He said, "If you don't like our jail, don't get in it."

JM: Yes. [Laughter]

KK: He was a nice guy.

JM: Yes.

KK: Then there was another politician that was quite colorful also.

JM: Who was he? Was it [William "Casey"] Laman?

KK: Laman. Yes.

JM: Yes. Okay.

KK: There was also a colorful—another guy—a city attorney. He and I—
they met over in the city hall building in North Little Rock.

JM: Okay.

KK: He seemed like a nice guy. I've often thought about him because I'm sure there
aren't many reporters and people like that who join the Toastmasters.

KK: Thompson. I think his name was Thompson.

JM: Okay. All right.

KK: We made trips around the countryside speaking.

JM: Yes.

KK: I'm not sure if [you've?] ever been to a Toastmasters Club, but if you say "uh-
huh" or pause in any way while delivering your talk, they have a buzzer that they
buzz.

JM: Yes.

KK: And it's rather embarrassing.

JM: Yes.

KK: And I think I got Marcus George to join. I'm not sure whether he went beyond that.

JM: You got Marcus George to join? Is that what you said?

KK: Of course, Marcus was a little different type, too.

JM: Marcus [was] the nephew of the owner [reference to K. August Engel] of the [Arkansas Democrat] paper, who later became an editor and owner. Okay. So how long did you stay on the North Little Rock beat?

KK: Oh, probably about six months.

JM: Okay. What did you do after that?

KK: Then I went to the state capitol.

JM: State capitol. Okay.

KK: I had two major assignments.

JM: Okay.

KK: One was the highway department and the other was the education department.

JM: Okay.

KK: Both of them were quite important at that time because they were controversial.

JM: Yes.

KK: The highway department had just elected a new board . . .

JM: Yes.

KK: . . . headed by Willie Lawson.

JM: Yes.

KK: And there was this [unintelligible]. Anyway, there were about six of them on the board.

JM: Yes.

KK: They traveled the entire state. I went along with the highway commissioners.

JM: Yes.

KK: And I would file stories along the way. Oh, it was very—oh, it was controversial.

[Laughs]

JM: Yes.

KK: [They went?] through each town. Well, there are seventy-five counties in Arkansas.

JM: Yes.

KK: And that's a lot of counties.

JM: Yes.

KK: But I sent a column for each newspaper [unintelligible].

JM: Yes.

KK: And they were glad to get them. They'd talk about the changes that were coming.

JM: Yes. Now, this was a time, as I remember, when the state had quite a bit of controversy over highways, so the legislature passed something—or the voters had passed something called the Mack Blackwell Amendment.

KK: That's right.

JM: And gave the members extended terms. They staggered their terms, but they did that so no one governor could gain control of the commission. Is that correct?

KK: That's right.

JM: Yes. Okay.

KK: And they also brought in an outside highway director.

JM: Yes.

KK: To replace Orval Faubus. [Laughs]

JM: The name is Herbert Eldridge. The reason I remember a lot of this, Ken, is that I think that I had covered them right before you did.

KK: Yes. Probably so.

JM: I had that same beat—the education department and the highway department. Then I left and went to the [*Arkansas*] *Gazette*. How long did you stay at the *Democrat*? Do you remember what year you left the *Democrat*?

KK: I left the *Democrat* in, I think, October of 1955.

JM: October of 1955. Okay. That was about . . .

KK: I stayed there about two or three years.

JM: Okay. What else do you remember about the *Democrat* at the time when you were there? What kind of a newspaper was it?

KK: Well, I thought it was a pretty good paper. It wasn't quite the classic that the *Gazette* was.

JM: Not quite the what?

KK: The classic. They covered good news, [but] the make-up wasn't as good as it should have been. I think I made \$53 a week.

JM: Yes.

KK: That's what Tilden offered me.

JM: Yes. Okay.

KK: My first assignment was to cover a tornado. It was a tornado in the spring of 1956. I had just arrived at the *Democrat* that day, and this big thunderhead came up. Well, everybody was sent out somewhere. There was a tornado that covered the state from Texarkana to Blytheville.

JM: Yes. I think that tornado was in 1952.

KK: Oh, was it 1952?

JM: Yes, I think so, because that would have been about the time you came there, I think. The reason, again, I remember that is because I covered it, too, and I was the one who tipped the paper off that there had been a tornado.

KK: Yes.

JM: And the first one—I was working the police beat, and I had talked to the state police. They told me there had been a tornado at Dierks.

KK: That was the same tornado.

JM: Yes. That was the same tornado. Yes. Tilden first sent Roy Bosson and Bill Secret to Dierks, and then they decided—we heard there were maybe three or four more people killed—it wound up being seven—and they sent me and George Douthit. Then, later on, it hit all over the state, and a lot worse, and they had half their staff in Dierks, almost. [Laughs]

KK: Yes. [Laughs]

JM: Do you remember where you went?

KK: No, they did not send me out. I worked at the desk they set up. It happened to be the night of the *Democrat's* employee party.

JM: Yes.

KK: I know we had beer, but I don't know what else we had.

JM: Yes.

KK: But we brought all that to that park that runs through Little Rock. What's that called?

JM: Boyle? Boyle Park?

KK: Boyle Park. And I had a command post there. Everyone else was one by one being picked off and sent out to cover the tornado.

JM: Yes.

KK: I think before it ended, just about everybody was out in the field.

JM: Yes.

KK: But I was new to Arkansas. I had never been here before. I would never have found Dierks or anything else. [Laughs] I would've been lost.

JM: Did they send you anywhere?

KK: No.

JM: No. Okay.

KK: I stayed with Tilden. I think it was . . .

JM: So you worked in the office, then?

KK: Yes.

JM: Yes. Okay. Did your pay every get better [laughs] in the three or four years you

stayed at the *Democrat*?

KK: No, I don't think so.

JM: Yes. Okay.

KK: That's one thing the old geezer Engel held onto [laughs]—the money. And we didn't have screens on the windows.

JM: Yes. Right. Okay.

KK: You would sit there working at the desk on Monday nights—or Saturday nights, I guess, when you worked late—these bugs would hit the fans [unintelligible] [and] fall down.

JM: Yes. Who else do you remember working on the paper at that time?

KK: Oh, let's see.

JM: You've already mentioned Douthit and . . .

KK: Scudder.

JM: John Scudder.

KK: Yes.

JM: Yes. That's S-C-U-D-D-E-R, I think, wasn't it? Why did you leave the *Democrat*, Ken? Do you want to tell me about those circumstances?

KK: Well, I don't know that there was much circumstances to understand. I always said I would never marry as long as I was in newspapers because I didn't think they paid enough.

JM: Yes.

KK: And I didn't want to get into that racket.

JM: Yes.

KK: I remember I'd go to somebody's house and they'd barely have enough to eat.

[Laughs]

JM: Yes.

KK: One of the few pastimes that I can remember us having was playing poker. We had kind of had a little poker [group?]. You were in it and I was in it—maybe about four or five.

JM: Yes.

KK: And about once a month we played poker.

JM: Yes.

KK: But this was a big deal for us, you know?

JM: Yes.

KK: I remember we didn't want to lose that kind of money.

JM: Probably penny ante poker, though. As I recall—and you confirmed this for me—you wanted to get married, but you didn't think you made enough money on your *Democrat* salary to be able to get married. Is that correct?

KK: That's right. Yes.

JM: Yes.

KK: After we got married, I applied for a job at the . . .

JM: Okay. I think you applied for a job at the Southwestern Bell Telephone Company. I remember they paid good—\$360 a month, which was pretty good.

JM: Yes.

KK: So I quit and went to work for the telephone company. Then Mary went to work for the state [government] with the Parks and Tourism department. We got married almost immediately.

JM: This was Mary Arnold you're talking about.

KK: Yes. The *Democrat* didn't like that at all that I quit and went . . .

JM: Yes.

KK: They were sort of mad at Southwestern Bell.

JM: They were mad at the telephone company? All right. But you quit and went to work for Southwestern Bell. How long did you stay with the telephone company?

KK: Thirty-seven years.

JM: Thirty-seven years. As I recall, you rose to be the head of their public relations [PR] department. Is that correct?

KK: Right. For Southwestern Bell.

JM: Yes. Okay. Were your headquarters in St. Louis at that time when you were head of PR?

KK: I worked at St. Louis.

JM: So you were back home, in effect.

KK: Yes.

JM: Yes.

KK: And later I got transferred to New York.

JM: Who was that for?

KK: For AT&T [American Telephone and Telegraph Company].

JM: Okay.

JM: Yes. How long did you stay with AT&T?

KK: Oh, AT&T—I stayed with them about four years.

JM: Okay. All right. Now, at some point in time, and I guess this was when you were in St. Louis—didn't you go back to school?

KK: Yes.

JM: Yes. Okay.

KK: Yes, I went back to school. I don't know why, except that I had always wanted to do it.

JM: Yes.

KK: And AT&T said they'd pay for it.

JM: Yes.

KK: So, over the years, I accumulated additional education.

JM: Yes. And this was at the University of Missouri. Is that correct?

KK: Yes.

JM: And Columbia.

KK: Columbia and Washington University.

JM: Oh, and Washington University.

KK: And St. Louis University.

JM: Okay.

KK: I acquired three degrees—a bachelor of arts . . .

JM: You acquired three degrees?

KK: Yes.

JM: What were they?

KK: They were all in liberal arts.

JM: But were they master's [degrees]?

KK: One was a master's and one was a doctorate and one was a bachelor's.

JM: Okay. So you got a bachelor's and a master's and a doctorate degree.

KK: Yes.

JM: And the doctorate was from the University of Missouri. Is that right?

[Editor's Note: Ken's younger sister, Janet Kassing, who lives in Naples, FL, said Ken actually earned his master's degree from Washington University in St. Louis while he was still working, but said after he retired he earned his doctorate at St. Louis University. She confirmed that the University of Missouri published his doctoral dissertation and I found some favorable reviews of it online. Janet said Ken later bought a log cabin in the historic little town of Maecystown in Illinois and was elected mayor.]

JM: Now, tell me this. I think that I had remembered—didn't you—and, I guess, maybe it was your doctoral dissertation—didn't you get that published as a book?

KK: Yes.

JM: You wrote a book.

KK: Yes.

JM: Okay, and it was . . .

KK: [The University of] Missouri published my book, my dissertation.

JM: Okay.

KK: The Dred Scott case.

JM: Okay. On the Dred Scott case? [Editor's note: Dred Scott was a slave who sued for his freedom in 1857. He lost his case.]

JM: Okay. What was the name of your book?

KK: *Dred Scott's Advocate*.

JM: Okay.

KK: *A Biography of Roswell Field*.

JM: Roswell Field?

KK: Yes.

JM: Okay. He was the lawyer for Dred Scott?

KK: Right.

JM: So that book is still around, isn't it?

KK: Oh, yes. I put a copy in the library in Little Rock.

JM: Okay.

KK: But [no]body was clamoring for it. [Laughter]

JM: Well, that's all right. Hey, getting a book published is a pretty good deal. Yes.

Okay. One question I'll ask you. How did you think that the *Democrat* compared with the *Gazette* at the time you were there?

KK: Oh, I think—to be honest, I think the people [unintelligible] would have preferred the *Gazette*.

JM: Yes.

KK: I always felt I would—in fact, I think I probably had a couple of chances at going to the *Gazette*. But I always felt [a] little like—they [the *Democrat*] gave me a job when I came down here.

JM: Yes.

KK: And [unintelligible] they deserved to get my best.

JM: Yes. Okay.

KK: I think most of the kids coming out of Fayetteville preferred the *Gazette*.

JM: Preferred the *Gazette*?

KK: Yes.

JM: Yes. Okay.

KK: I think it was recognized as the better paper.

JM: Yes. Okay.

KK: It was the state paper, I guess.

JM: Yes. Okay. Ken, I appreciate this interview. I know that you've been in ill health lately, so I really appreciate you taking the time to do this and everything. And, of course, I guess it's pretty obvious from our interview that we worked together back then, and we were good friends and remain good friends.

KK: I would be interested in reading it.

JM: Well, I'm really pleased to get this on the record because you had a really good career, both at the *Democrat* and with Southwestern Bell and AT&T. As I said, plus the fact that we have remained friends over the years. So I appreciate you taking the time to do this.

KK: Okay. Thank you, Jerry.

JM: Okay. Ken, thanks a lot. I really appreciate it.

KK: Good luck to you, old buddy.

JM: Okay. Same to you. I hope I can get out to see you one of these days.

KK: Yes. Okay. [Laughs]

JM: Okay. All right. Hang in there. Bye bye.

[End of Interview]

[Transcribed by Cheri Pearce]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]