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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with:

Charles Kelly
Little Rock, Arkansas
18 November 2005

Interviewer: Jerry McConnell

Jerry McConnell: This is Jerry McConnell. This is November the 18, 2005. I'm sitting here with Charles Kelly in his home in Little Rock and we're—I'm doing an interview on the oral history of the *Arkansas Democrat* and *Democrat-Gazette* for the Pryor Center for Oral and Visual History at the University of Arkansas. I might point out before we start that Charles Kelly was a TV newsman, but he worked for the people who also owned the *Arkansas Democrat*—and over a long period of years—so I thought there might be something enlightening about how they operated the TV station. Along with—I know—have a lot of information on how they operated the *Democrat*. Charles, let's start from the beginning, though first I need to ask you, do we have permission to make this tape and turn it over to the University of Arkansas?

Charles Kelly: Certainly.

JM: Okay. Let us start from the beginning, where and when were you born?

CK: I was born in Converse, Louisiana, January 17, 1937. The first six years [I lived] in Mammy, Louisiana, then [moved] to Leesville for a while—all my schooling was in Leesville, which is in West Central Louisiana, [the] home of Fort Polk. Some people link me with that.

JM: I've heard of it.

CK: And after—keep going or ...?

JM: No. Let me ask you one thing—well, two things I need to ask you at this point. One, how do you spell Kelly?

CK: K-E-L-L-Y.

JM: Okay.

CK: No E-Y.

JM: Okay. No E-Y. Okay. What were your parents' names?

CK: Joseph and Alma.

JM: Okay. What did your father do?

CK: He worked for a wholesale grocery—drove a truck for most of my childhood—then he became a warehouse shipping clerk.

[Tape Stopped]

JM: Okay. Very good. Where did you go to school?

CK: Leesville [and] two years of college at LSU [Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge].

JM: LSU. Okay. And how did you get into television?

CK: With the United States Army.

JM: Okay.

CK: I joined the army—I had been a disc jockey. My goal was to be sportscaster, but [at] the small station I worked at in Leesville, my home town, and in Alexandria, Louisiana, I was a disc jockey. I didn't like being a disc jockey, wasn't very good at it either. And the army—the big thing then was “choice, not chance.” If you went in for three years, you got to pick what area you went into. If you went in for two, you usually wound up in the infantry and then had seven years of reserve [service]. And that seven years of reserve, to me, seemed just—you know, I didn't want that [to stand?]. So I went in—I don't know if I had even seen a television camera, if I had it was just—you know this was 1959 when I went in the Army. [I] went through basic training, then I went through advanced [training], which they called information school. Then I went to Panama where I fell into being sportscaster for the Caribbean Forces Network. A guy who had never even seen a camera before. Two weeks after I got there I was doing fifteen-minute sportscasts on TV. I got to do play-by-play on the radio [coverage?]. We had a really extensive radio. I did play-by-play on radio, of course not football—basketball and baseball. It was a *great* experience. I'm grateful to the United States Army. I would [like] to point out that it was one of the few times over a three-year period that we weren't shooting at anybody. So I didn't see much of the military life.

JM: Okay. How long were you in the army?

CK: Three years, two months, and two days.

JM: Okay. [Laughs]. Probably remember the day you were discharged. Okay. So what did you do after you got out of the Army?

Ck: Well, I said, “If I can't get a job in television [I'll go way up in the Army because

I liked the Army?]" And—well, I got a job at a station in Alexandria. So I—there I was doing music and sports. And from there I went to—I stayed there about a year—and then I went to KWKH which was my first contact with the organization related to the *Democrat*. Henry Clay was the owner of the radio station there. And he was on the board—had a partial ownership I think, I don't know how much—of the *Democrat*. He would fly to Little Rock on regular occasions from Shreveport, [Louisiana], to attend meetings and all, and I came up with him a couple of times for a cover of—one time [Todd] Stan Musial [Left-fielder for the Major League Baseball St. Louis Cardinals, 1941-1963] was here—so he [Henry Clay] was coming up and so I came up with him and did an interview with Stan Musial. I was with KWKH for three years, roughly, as I remember. About three years. But I wanted to get back in television—KWKH was radio, but we had a super news bureau. We had a fairly large—for [a] three-people news bureau—for a radio station, we covered the news well. I always knew I would get back in TV, but I really enjoyed working there at KWKH. And they were kind enough to try to get me to stay when I was going to the television station. I said, "No, I really want to go back to Channel 12 in Shreveport," really a first class CBS station. I wasn't there very long before they said, "Well, if you want TV, will you come to Little Rock? We'll get you back in the organization." And like I said, I was pleased that they wanted me back. They offered the job as news director. I took it.

JM: At Channel 11 in Little Rock?

CK: Yes.

JM: Okay. What year was that?

CK: 1966. The fall of 1966.

JM: Okay. Now then as I—if I am correct—is it true that Henry Clay and Mr. [K. August] Engel and some others went in together to start Channel 11, the CBS station? Is that correct?

CK: That is my understanding, yes.

JM: Okay.

CK: Well, they were working a radio—they had a radio station in Hot Springs. And from there to when television started coming in the—and the man who was general manager, B. G. Robertson, was from the Shreveport organization. He had been with Channel 11, I believe, since it signed on.

JM: So you came over to—what's the call letters?

CK: KTHV.

JM: KTHV, as news director?

CK: Yes.

JM: What kind of operation was KTHV then? And I'm particularly thinking about the news department.

CK: Maybe I can answer it this way. I took the job. I had stars in my eyes about being a news director. I worked for a really good guy down in Shreveport who was news director and he was upset with my leaving because he wasn't going to be able to attend the Radio Television News Director Association, which was coming up a week or two weeks after I was leaving. I wasn't going to be there to back him up, so I told him, "look, I'll go work a week, I'll come back and fill in here while you're gone and then go back to Shreveport," because we had that type of relationship. Jerry, my plan after that one week at Channel 11 was to beg him to

take me back. I thought I had made the worst mistake because I had come from a station that was top-line people, equipment, and attitude. Channel 11 did not have that attitude. That was not reflected at Channel 11, and I was so focused on being a news director that I really didn't look at the rest of it. And a week of it told me I had made a mistake. Well, as things happened I was too proud to initiate the contact with him. He left to go to [the] meeting before I got to Shreveport. And then he didn't come back until after I had to come back here. But things worked out great for me. I have had a wonderful life and all that, but that's how little things turn in your life. If I had seen him—had we crossed paths, as I fully expected us to do, I would have been back in Shreveport.

JM: Did things get much better at [Channel] 11 here?

CK: Well, it got better in one sense in that news then—you have to remember this was 1966. News was just—television news—was just starting to find itself. And we built, I felt, as fine a news organization—covering the news now. I'm going to separate the steak from the sizzle; the steak is covering the news, the content, how we covered it. I thought we had one of the finest news bureaus in the country. CBS told us we did. We were one of the few stations that they would assign stories to—to cover, because of the competency of the people we had and the kind of [?] what we had. What we didn't have—and this gets into the financial aspects of it—is good people. I could not keep good people. We never could put the kind of anchor people on the air and leave them there. The way the modern day KTHV has done—and I give them enormous credit—because we have slipped further and further as not a real contender. You know, and I think the new management and the new people they have there—they have had the same anchor

people now for how many years? That is a luxury I would have given anything to have had as a news director.

JM: So the high-priced people—the on-air personality which is what, I guess, to a degree, drives your viewership.

CK: Oh, yes.

JM: You just couldn't pay them enough money to [stay].

CK: Yes, they would get somebody good and Channel 7 would tape them and send it off to a station somewhere, [laughs] and they'd hire them. And then even—I have to be honest—let's see, I was there for eleven years—after six years, I think, I kept my own going attitude and level for most of that time, but I have to say for the last couple of years I lost—I won't say I lost interest—but it just wasn't the same. A lot of things had changed, but it was just the constant battle during that time of budgets. You know, it was not unusual for us to pay for something out of the newsroom, I mean not a major expense, but I remember buying a tire for a news car once, because the boss wouldn't buy one—they wanted to send someone out with a slick tire. So, I bought a tire. You know, we just didn't have the bells and whistles that the other stations had.

JM: You think that—I don't know whether you know that or not, but do you think that maybe that was a deliberate strategy on . . . ?

CK: Well I wouldn't call it a strategy. I wouldn't raise it to that level. It's just—B. G. Robertson told me once—you file a thing with the FCC [Federal Communications Commission] about your operations, your revenues, and expenses that the—he told me, and he said it with pride, which is interesting, that the FCC had contacted him [and] that they couldn't believe that you could operate a station that cheaply,

that inexpensively and he was proud of that fact. I mean, I think we were a good money-maker for the owners. I don't want to make it sound like they were brutal or anything like that, it was just that their concept—I think, now I wasn't part of it but—to me, their concept was that our job was to make money. We'd cut a product good enough to make money but as long as we were doing that, we were not going to worry about the quality too much.

JM: Not worrying about being number one in viewership.

CK: No, I don't think that bothered them a great deal.

JM: Okay, that was sort of my general impression, but I wasn't sure about that.

CK: And I stayed there—you would have fired me, if—another thing happened, in all fairness, during this time Channel 4 put together Roy Mitchell, Dave Woodman, and Tom Bonner, who were three of the best on air people I have seen in any market anywhere. Roy Mitchell may not have been a great newsman, but when he read the news he was very authoritative. Dave Woodman had that “boy next door,” “big brother” aura about him—just as super a guy off camera as he was on. And then you had Tom Bonner, whom the girls liked. So, they were—to me, they were a classic case of their sum total being greater than their individual parts, and that was tough competition. They ate our lunch.

JM: Were they generally number one in the market, then, that way?

CK: Yes. [Channel] 7 had the [University of Arkansas] Razorbacks, which kept them competitive. You know, they were the Razorback station, and that kept them in good shape.

JM: I guess Bud Campbell was there?

CK: Super [good guy?]. It was interesting, the first time I saw Bud Campbell, I said,

“This is your competition.” I saw the guy who was anchoring on Channel 4—this was before Roy Mitchell—and thought, “Well, he doesn’t worry me.” And I saw Bud Campbell and thought, “Well he’s not very good,” but what I didn’t have an appreciation for at that time was one—how hard Bud worked. He wasn’t a classic sportscaster, I mean, a smooth thing, but he—golly, he knew the Razorbacks and he worked at it very hard. [It] quickly became evident that superficially he may have not been that good, but content-wise he was outstanding.

JM: I heard from some other source that at some point in time—and maybe it was in the early years—but some of the on-air personalities, the anchors, so to speak, on the station also doubled as sales persons.

CK: No. Well, I—no. I am reflecting back now if there was anybody on-air. You had the noon show, which was not a news show. It’s conceivable—let me back up. I think one of our weather guys did some sales for a while, but I’d have to go—one of the reasons I stayed was the independence I had. I like to believe it was confidence when it may have been simply that I didn’t care, but I got very—there was only—in eleven years, there was only a handful of times where I had arguments, debates with the sales department or with management about “don’t cover this, cover that” or “one of our best sponsors is having a ribbon cutting.” You know, that kind of thing—that’s just the nature of the beast, I guess.

JM: Did you also have to cut corners on your equipment?

CK: Oh, absolutely. Well, with what equipment that we had. We didn’t always have equipment. A couple of guys bought their own cameras. We had a guy one—one I can think of—who bought his own camera.

JM: Is that right?

CK: Yes, he had some family money. The film, the processing, everything we did—we did it with less equipment. You know I think we had two sound cameras [and] the other stations had four or five sound cameras. We used to—[laughs] we had a radar, and the other two stations did not have a radar, but one of the guys said—one of our guys' lines was, "Well, some of these stations may have radar, but theirs didn't fly twenty-five missions over Okinawa like ours did." [Laughs]. It wasn't too accurate unless there was just a hellacious thunderstorm. Then you could pick it up.

JM: I was interested in that because, of course, I had been at the *Democrat* for a few years while Mr. Engel was the owner there and I have some sense that—somebody told me that he told them—that he didn't have any particular desire to be number one in the newspaper field in Little Rock. That he was interested in making money and that was his—you know, he wanted to make sure that their profit margin . . .

CK: And there is nothing wrong with that. I mean, I'm a great believer in the capitalist system and profit is not a dirty word. It is a necessity if you are going to operate, but there should be some balance. I was fortunate enough to work for an outstanding manager in Jerry Maulden at Arkansas Power and Light [AP&L] and Entergy. And Jerry would use the example of a business; it's like a three-legged stool: you have employees, you have customers, and have got investors. And you have to balance those three. They all three have to have attention because if you lose one, you are out of shape.

JM: Did the operation change much after Mr. Engel died and Marcus George and Stanley Berry took over?

CK: Not that I was able to tell.

JM: Of course, they didn't come over there till 1974.

CK: Yes. Yes.

JM: And you left in what year?

CK: 1977.

JM: 1977. Okay.

CK: Yes. They had offices there, but I'd have to say from my vantage point I didn't see them getting involved [unintelligible] in the day to day operations of the station.

JM: Okay. Who was the—was B. G. still the . . . ?

CK: B. G. and Ben—my last year [a] group bought out Channel 11 and Bob Brown who had been general manager at Channel 4 had gone to Arizona—I don't recall if it was Phoenix or Tucson—came back as a general manager. I worked with him for about a year before I left to join AP&L. He had started making some changes. They had started spending a little more money.

JM: Gannett—wasn't it Gannett the one that bought it out?

CK: Not at that point.

JM: Not at that point. That was there. Okay.

CK: But they had started to make some changes. I read as much as—you may be down on Gannett from the *Arkansas Gazette* aspect. I think they brought a credibility to the station, and have made it a—I don't know what the ratings are today but I would expect all three are pretty close together.

JM: Okay. Do you know—in those early years, and before the sale, who the other owners were? I mean, I know—I think there were several people.

CK: Well, there was Robert Lowry, who was an insurance fella [fellow] who owned part, and the Clay family out of Shreveport owned part. I think Engel had the majority, then on his death Marcus George and Stanley Berry. I don't know what it would . . .

JM: And then a bunch of others—nephews and nieces, I think, too.

CK: Yes. I don't know what the split was or anything.

JM: I think even [Robert S. "Bob"] McCord had a little bit. Bob McCord had a little bit in it, because he—when he came back to the *Democrat*—he put some money into the operation but that included for the TV station, too.

CK: Really. Well, I didn't know that.

JM: So, I think he had maybe 5%, or something like that.

CK: Well, I might of—did he do? I'm trying to remember—after I left, he might have done some editorial work.

JM: He did a few editorials over there. I think Marcus got him to come over and do some editorials and everything. But Lowery—which insurance company was he with...?

CK: I don't believe I know.

JM: Was he National Oldline?

CK: Yes. Yes.

JM: I thought he might have been.

CK: Senior never got too involved, and when he passed away his son had an office there. But again, I never saw any day-to-day activity.

JM: You left in 1977 and went to work with AP&L. You stayed with them until your retirement. And you went back to Louisiana, didn't you?

CK: Well, the last five years—I was with them twenty years—the last five years I was head of public relations communication for the whole system, so I was in New Orleans the last five years.

JM: Okay. Okay.

CK: I've always said I'm a totally converted Arkie except for three things: I still pull for LSU in football, drink chicory in my coffee, and I buy Tabasco in the big bottle.

JM: [Laughs]. Well, I can sympathize with you on the Tabasco. [Laughs]. And I do like strong coffee, but I don't particularly—never have developed a taste for chicory. But at any rate—I think that basically covers what I wanted to know. I was interested in the comparative ways that Mr. Engel operated the two organizations. Were you around any during the newspaper war?

CK: Well, I was at AP&L then.

JM: Okay, but you were in town here for a lot of that.

CK: Oh, yes. Mostly.

JM: What was your impression of what was going on between the two newspapers?

CK: Well, there are a lot of smarter people than I am who have tried to figure that out exactly. As we were chatting beforehand, I thought when—I'm having a senior moment here . . .

JM: Gannett.

CK: When Gannett bought them [the *Gazette*] I thought that was the death knell for the *Democrat* [crew?]. I thought that Gannett was a lot smarter than they were.
[Laughs].

JM: Correct.

CK: They make better television owners than I had seen them—then they made newspapers. Of course the *Gazette* made some—you can argue that the *Gazette* had been a little arrogant, and when they looked for sympathy some of the chickens had come home to roost, I think. But still it was an excellent newspaper in the end, and you hated to see it go. Bob [John Robert] Starr was an acquaintance and—I won't say a friend because Bob Starr used to brag that he didn't have any friends, and certainly I thought I was qualified there—but it was interesting to watch when you didn't have your life depending on the outcome. That would make it somewhat different.

JM: Did you ever imagine, though, there at the last, it being the *Democrat* that won the war?

CK: No. No. I mean I was—part of my job [at] Entergy was to, you know, “Well this is what the media is doing, this is things we need to do here”—my prediction was in a memo that I hope is still not floating around somewhere now that—I wrote what effect I thought it would have on us, because of the coverage and kind of reports and so forth, and then I closed by saying the real loser was going to be the *Arkansas Democrat* because Gannett would eat their lunch, or something crazy like that, which proves how much I did or did not know.

JM: You're—being in a sense a non-partial observer—what was your—up until the last, what was your impression of the two newspapers for the quality and . . . ?

CK: Well, I'd have to say I ranked the *Gazette* higher than the *Democrat*. To be candid, I'd have to say I did, but then part of that—I've never really sat down and thought this through—but part [of that] probably went back to—you know, there was a time when the *Democrat* was just as bad a paper as Channel 11 was a—you

know, when it was six sheets and not much, but there is no question it had made a remarkable improvement. The thing I liked about the *Democrat* was the—oh, “feisty” comes to mind, but that’s not a good word—it got itself involved in areas that traditionally might not have been covered. When it was us, I didn’t like it, [because as much as I might love that?] [laughs] there was a reporter with the *Democrat* who I did not like at all. He was knowledgeable and aggressive, but I felt more aggressive than knowledgeable.

JM: [Laughs]. Okay.

CK: But, no. I guess you get comfortable with a paper, and I was comfortable with the *Gazette*. But I always subscribed to both papers; always felt the need to have both papers.

JM: Okay, Chuck, I think that covers it pretty well. Is there anything else? Can you think of anything else that may bear on what we have discussed that you haven’t mentioned, or that you would like to mention?

CK: No. I don’t think so.

JM: Okay. Well, that went right to the heart of the questions that I wanted to ask and you answered them. I appreciate it, and thanks very much.

CK: Good seeing you.

JM: Good to see you.

[End of Interview]

[Transcribed by Geoffery Stark]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]

