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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with

Mara Leveritt
Little Rock, Arkansas
27 April 2005

Interviewer: Mel White

Mel White: My name is Mel White. This is April 27, 2005. We're at my house in Little Rock, Arkansas, and I'm talking to Mara Leveritt. I need to get this on tape. You understand that this is a project of the [Pryor] Center for [Arkansas] Oral and Visual History archive at the University of Arkansas, and it will be available for the public to look at, and it will also be on the Internet for the public to look at.

Mara Leveritt: I understand that.

MW: And we've already signed the paper that says you understand this.

ML: Right.

MW: They've asked us to talk about where you came from, your early life, and even your parents' names and where they came from, if possible. So do you want to just kick off the thing here with your life?

ML: And that leads probably into one of the important things that I have got to make

clear on the front end of this. When I was at the *Arkansas Democrat*, I was not Mara Leveritt by any stretch. My name at that time was Margaret Arnold. And that was the name that I wrote under. It was not until I was long gone from there that I changed it to Mara Leveritt.

MW: Very good.

ML: Okay. My life began in 1947 in Chicago. I left there with my family, which was a military family in the army. We moved to Denver [Colorado] when I was five. I grew up in Denver and attended about a dozen different schools before I graduated from high school.

MW: Can you tell us your parents' names?

ML: My father was Robert [Patrick?] Blyth. B-L-Y-T-H. Which has always made me think that there might be some connection with the [Bill] Clinton clan.

MW: That's right. His real father was named Blythe, wasn't he?

ML: Yes. His name was spelled with an "e," but we think that all of us probably came from the same part of northern England. So that's my father. My mother was Mary Ruth James. [?] on my father's side, and Ruth and I are [named for?] my mother's side. There were teachers on both sides of my family. I had a great-uncle on my mom's side of the family who was the principal of the Jesuit high school in Chicago. So we grew up with a lot of discussion and verbosity.

MW: Jesuits are well-known for their intellectualism, aren't they?

ML: Yes. There was sort of an emphasis on it. That was how you got points in the family, by knowing words. It was fun. It was a nice environment. I graduated from a Catholic girls' school when I . . .

MW: This would have been about 1965 or . . .

ML: Yes, exactly 1965. I started college at the University of Colorado at Denver Center, married midway through, moved to Oklahoma, and had two children there.

MW: Chris and Barbara.

ML: Chris Arnold and Barbara Arnold Cockrell. We moved on from there with my husband at the time, who was Mike Arnold, to here in Little Rock. I knew as I drove across the border from Oklahoma into Arkansas and saw Fort Smith and saw some hills and some trees—the Arkansas River—I had a very strong sense that this would be my home for the rest of my life, and I'm glad that it has been. While my children were still young, I completed my degree at UALR [University of Arkansas, Little Rock] and immediately applied for work at the *Democrat*. To my amazement, I was given a job.

MW: Similar to my story. [Laughter] Were you involved in journalism at UALR?

ML: No. I was not. Oh, well—yes, but not officially. I was part of the journalism department, and I really did not think a lot of it. There was one class in journalism law that I thought was excellent, just superior, but by and large, it wasn't very challenging or even very interesting, I thought. I was kind of appalled by the idea that they took whatever you wrote for class assignments and put it automatically into the student newspaper if they wanted to. And at the time, there was an alternative paper on campus called *Essence* that was being run by Alan Leveritt. I found that a much more stimulating paper and decided that I wanted to write for it. So I found myself in the curious position of writing for *Essence*—in fact, I became editor of it for a while—and at the same time having my assigned work for

classes at UALR being published in what we considered our rival newspaper on campus. It was an interesting introduction to the kind of journalistic battles that we soon played out in much bigger arenas here in Little Rock.

MW: So you graduated in 1974.

ML: Yes.

MW: Shall we talk more about what happened at school before that? Or do you want to move on to post-graduation?

ML: Yes. Let's move right on. [Laughter]

MW: Okay, so you got out with a journalism degree.

ML: Yes.

MW: And you looked for work, and you thought of the *Democrat*? Or what?

ML: Yes. At the time, everyone at UALR was pretty much the same, saying, "You have a chance at the *Democrat*. You have no chance at the *Gazette* because the *Gazette* picks and chooses nationally who it wants to come work there." So I took everybody's advice at the school and did not even to approach the *Gazette*.

MW: Let's rewind the memory tape here a little bit. Did you have strong feelings about newspapers as you were growing up? Did you look at them and think, "This is a good one. This is a bad one"? Did you think much about it at all as you were growing up?

ML: No. I didn't have much discernment, and my parents were not newspaper readers. As I recall, we only got the Sunday paper during the whole time that I was growing up. And the only kind of other political writing that came into the house was some kind of conservative newsletter that I think my mother had signed up for

from a radio show. We were very—almost illiterate in terms of newspaper quality.

MW: Did you have any feelings about the *Democrat* and the *Gazette*? And had you been in Arkansas long enough to really develop any feelings about them by the time you graduated from college?

ML: Yes. I subscribed to the *Gazette* from the time I arrived here; I was not a subscriber to the *Democrat*. I remember reading—in fact, I think it was even before I enrolled at UALR—an article by Roy Reed in the *Gazette*. I believe it was about hunting—coon hunting—in the woods around Paris, Arkansas. It was of such a high-quality that some smart editor had put it on the front page, and I thought, "This is what writing really can be about." It made me feel good about signing up for journalism, and that was kind of the standard I had set for myself. But I was not familiar on a day-to-day basis with the *Democrat*. When I first got here, I didn't know the history of either paper. It only began to sink in in bits and pieces after I began attending UALR and then, of course, in my time working at both papers. To this day, I feel that I've been sort of handicapped by not having the sense of the history of those papers that people here have gotten just in the air that they've breathed. At the same time, I've also felt that I have had an advantage in that respect, at least in terms of reporting on Arkansas, because I did not come in with some of the baggage that I think people who have grown up here have carried in terms of a lack of curiosity.

MW: Did you know anybody at either of the papers by the time you graduated? Personally—friends—or professionally, or anything? Do you remember?

ML: Alan Leveritt, whom I later married and who started *Essence* at UALR, had worked at the *Democrat* and the *Gazette*? I didn't know anybody else, I don't think. I was going in very cold, but I had some good recommendations from my teachers. And I had a body of work, actually, by the time I graduated, from both papers at UALR [laughs].

MW: Talk about how you got hired. Talk about coming in and who you'd speak to. How did that proceed?

ML: I spoke to Jerry McConnell, and I was pretty confident. I pretty much went in with the idea that anybody would be silly not to hire me. But then, I also was not applying to be a reporter.

MW: Oh, really?

ML: No. That was way beyond my aspirations at that point. I applied for a job on the copy desk because I figured I could do that and sort of work my way up to reporting. And, in fact, I'm glad I did that. I really liked the experience. I still have my spike. I learned a lot. That was a time when we were right on that cusp between computers and handling copy the old way. I learned to count out headlines and do things in a way that nobody, or very few at papers today, can remember. And I'm not that old, but the transition happened right then.

MW: It was an odd time, because I was there, I guess, at exactly the same moment, and my story is very much like yours. I came here and talked to Jerry McConnell and got a job on copy desk. Tell me, do you know when you actually started? The date?

ML: No. No, I don't.

MW: But you graduated in 1974.

ML: Yes.

MW: So it would have been later that year?

ML: Yes, I think so.

MW: Okay. And Jerry McConnell was the managing editor.

ML: Yes.

MW: Do you remember whether the Hussmans had bought it yet?

ML: I was never there without the Hussmans. They were the owners the entire time I was there.

MW: Right. Let's talk about some of those people. I think that Ralph Patrick was the city editor.

ML: Yes.

MW: Larry Gordon was the assistant city editor, I believe.

ML: Yes.

MW: Bill Husted was—what was Bill?

ML: Bill might have been city editor. Who was state?

MW: Okay, I shouldn't have said—I may be wrong. Anyway, Ralph was sort of the head news guy.

ML: I know that we had the spiral stairway that went up to engraving upstairs from the newsroom on the second floor.

MW: Those were the days when there were still printers, and we had to send our copy off to get the printers . . .

ML: It was another world up that spiral staircase. It came down right between the edi-

tor's desk and the copy desk.

MW: Right.

ML: I remember one time when I was very, very new on the copy desk, thinking that it was going to be my last day at work there because Ralph Patrick, who had always gone up and down—he was sort of an intermediary between what was being produced in the newsroom and what was getting done upstairs. Ralph came down, hung off of that spiral staircase midway and yelled, "Head bust," and held it up, and it was "It's," with an apostrophe "s" when there should not have been an apostrophe, and it was on the front page, and the mistake was mine.

MW: Oh, did it [hit?] the press for a while?

ML: No, no, he stopped it. He saw it. He was always up there checking

MW: Hey, there's no better way to learn.

ML: I can't write the word—either way—without remembering.

MW: Well, just for the sake of the archives here, since this is supposed to be historical, let's talk about—the *Democrat* was at Fifth and Scott [Streets] and the newsroom was on the second floor.

ML: Yes.

MW: Those were the days when there was an actual copy desk with a U-shaped—why don't you describe the copy desk and what the slot was, and all that?

ML: The copy desk was horseshoe-shaped. All of the copy editors—I seem to recall that there would have been eight or nine of us. What do you think?

MW: Well, I don't think there were that many on duty at any one time. There probably were at least that many, but people came in at different times. I think usually

there were maybe five or six.

ML: At once. The copy editor sat in the middle of the "U," [at] what was called the slot. And this was in the day of—everything was on paper. Coming in on the Teletypes and literally ripping and reading and just tearing off AP [Associated Press] stories, UPI [United Press International] stories, and all of the other services. I remember how loud the room was—it's always startling going to a newsroom now—it was loud and rather smoky. I think the days of reporters smoking and drinking kind of went out with the noise. But it seems that this transition all seemed to happen at once.

MW: The AP wire service machines were in these box-type things with lids.

ML: Yes. To try to control the noise.

MW: Right. And when somebody wanted to check it, they'd go over and lift the plastic lid, and suddenly the noise went up a couple of levels.

ML: Yes, those were all along the east wall of the newsroom. And our copy desk was in the southeast corner of the newsroom. The editor, the wire editors—all the editors were continually going there, checking. Then if something really big happened, there were bells. I remember, years after I left the *Democrat*, I was in the newsroom just passing through when the [Space Shuttle] Challenger exploded. I looked up and saw it on a television in the newsroom. And there were certainly no bells. All of that had passed, and now it was life with these big stories coming in on television and computers.

MW: I was there. Sheila Daniel. You. Leslie [Newell] Peacock . . .

ML: She was Newell at the time, wasn't she?

MW: Yes, Leslie Newell. Patsy . . .

ML: McKown.

MW: McKown, right. She was the assistant. Patsy would come in and be the slot person. "Slot man" as they called it in those days.

ML: Right. Right. And our job was to basically read a story, get the sense of it, and the copy editor would have given us instructions for the size of the headline to be written. And we had to write the headline, which I still think is a pretty cool thing: to put a headline in a paper.

MW: Tell what counting heads was.

ML: It was—there was so much space for a one-column, two-column, or three-column head, so you would have a headline that was going to be three columns wide and two lines deep—of a particular size, pica size and point size. Knowing that, you knew that the big letters—Ms and Ws, capitals—had a certain count—two. And the skinny ones—Ls and Is—had a half. The others were in-between, and you had to figure out the words and spaces and make this all come to fit like it was supposed to.

MW: Right.

ML: And also make sense and convey a sense of the story.

MW: Right. You had to actually learn to count each letter and total it up in your head and make sure that it wasn't too long or too short to fit in this one-column or two-columns or whatever.

ML: And you did that over and over again. Every story in the paper was divided between the number of people on the copy desk.

MW: Right.

ML: And now it's done instantly by computers.

MW: Of course, and no one needs to count anymore. Jerry McConnell used to give out—I think it was Jerry—the Headline of the Week Award. Remember that?

ML: Just when you mention it.

MW: Every week, he would pick out the best headline of the week, which might be something cute or witty or concise, or something. I can't remember if there was an actual award of five bucks, or whether it was just put on the bulletin board.

ML: Did you ever get it?

MW: I think we probably all got it. There were not that many of us.

ML: I just remember him complimenting me on a headline about an oil spill. I wrote a headline that said something like, "Oil One, Earth Nothing"—something that conveyed some sense of environmental loss. And it was so opinionated—I can't imagine that it ever even appeared.

MW: In those days, when an AP story came in, or a wire story, we weren't really even allowed to mess with it that much, unless we could shorten it. We couldn't rewrite it because it would have taken too long. Basically, our job in those times was simply to cut it to the right length and write a head for it.

ML: Right.

MW: But when the reporters' copy came in, we could ask questions or have them re-do it in certain cases, let's say.

ML: Yes. And that was where we were supposed to be very alert to whether the reporters had made mistakes, because we were sort of the last line of defense for—

presumably—for the paper. If the editors had missed anything—streets that should have been boulevards or avenues or lanes.

MW: Misspelling somebody's name.

ML: Yes. Famous or not, but that we should have known. Yes, I'm afraid that most of my memories are in the "learning experience" category. I remember one of the first things that I ever wrote. Somehow, Stephens, the investment banking company, was mentioned in an article, and I had misspelled it, or I let it get past in something that someone else had written. In either event, I remember Jerry McConnell calling me into his office and leading me to the window of his office that faced north across Capitol Avenue. At that time Stephens, Inc., had its headquarters directly across the street from the *Arkansas Democrat* building, and he pointed out to me that there was that P-H in the middle and not a V.

MW: Jerry was a very nice man. He did not scream and yell; he just corrected you, and in a nice way.

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

ML: Yes. And I think that's why so many of my memories are of mistakes that I ended up learning from. You carry those lessons with you in everything else you do.

MW: When you were still on the copy desk, and I was too, I guess, the people we dealt with were basically the slot man—which was what they called, in those days, the person who sat in the middle and passed out the stories to the copy editors, the city editors, and the state editors—and I suppose Jerry, who was the managing editor. But I don't recall us having much contact with anybody else. I don't recall

[Walter] Hussman [Jr.] being around the newsroom very much. Did you know those people very well at all? Was Bob McCord the executive editor in those days?

ML: Yes. Yes, and we saw him occasionally.

MW: Yes, right.

ML: But—now, he was almost kind of mythical.

MW: Bob?

ML: Yes. From where I sat. I think the copy desk kind of liked it that way. It was a little clique. Everybody interacted, and there was a certain character to the copy desk. We got to sort of look down our noses on all the reporters and just about everybody else in the place, except that we were at the bottom of the heap.

MW: Well, I will say though that there was a feeling in those days—I don't know what it is like nowadays in newspapers, but there was a feeling that really a good copy desk person was almost more valuable than a really good reporter, or at least as valuable. *The New York Times* copy desk was legendary. The *Gazette* copy desk was very well respected. So even though you and I both went there because it was a place to start, really, it was a position of importance at a newspaper. Or should have been.

ML: I think there was a pride about it. I think there was a sense that we were the guardians of grammar; we were the guardians of spelling; we were—for all of my mistakes—we were the ones who were supposed to understand things that maybe reporters, who were having to write and move in that big world out there . . .

MW: And sometimes even phone in stories. They didn't even have a chance. Some

clerk would type the story as the reporter was literally phoning it in from an assignment somewhere. And we really had to clean them up.

ML: Right. And what the reader saw was what we put in.

MW: Right. And we should say that the *Democrat* was an afternoon paper in those days, which is not something that happens much anymore. I remember going to work some days, I believe, at 5:30 a.m. and getting off at 1:30 p.m.; or going in at 6:30 and getting off at 2:30, that kind of thing. Right?

ML: Yes. I don't remember the early hours that much, but I do remember one time after a huge snowfall when almost no one could physically make it into the office. I lived in the Quapaw Quarter, so Jerry called me and gave me, as I recall, the combination to the lock out front and asked me if I would go in and start working on the wire stories—basically doing the wire editor job—to get it going while everybody else was trying to find ways to get into town. This was January—an ice storm. And I remember just being in that newsroom all by myself ripping off the copy and feeling the weight of the entire world on my shoulders.

[Tape Stopped]

MW: Okay, this is supposed to be your interview, but I think I'll inject here that Sheila Daniel, who was on the copy desk and went on to work at the *Chicago Tribune* and the *L.A. Times*—and so did Carol Gordon. Carol Gordon, as I recall, was pretty high up at the *L.A. Times*, and she became some . . .

ML: Now?

MW: Yes, yes. At least she was for a long time. And Ralph Patrick went on to the East Coast, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, I believe. And Amanda Husted, who is

now Amanda Miller, is also at the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.

ML: Who's the one who went on to work at Apple [Computer, Inc.]?

MW: I think it was Microsoft [Corporation], wasn't it?

ML: Oh.

MW: Collins Hemingway.

ML: Collins Hemingway.

MW: Collins Hemingway was on the copy desk when we were there, and he went off and disappeared to go to Seattle to work with some obscure company called Microsoft. I think he now owns one of the Hawaiian Islands, or something. [Laughter] Anyway, let's see, do you want to talk some more about those copy editor days, or do you want to move on? You eventually became a reporter—moved on up to reporting.

ML: Yes, I decided—after reading enough of the reporters' articles that were being turned in—that perhaps I could do that. At least as well. I again went to Jerry and this was, I think, about one year after—I think I spent a year on copy desk. I went to Jerry and asked to get a reporter's job and was given one. And that was a big shift. The whole orientation of your life changes from working with the paper and the personalities around the copy desk to working with all of the world outside of the building and bringing all of that in. The first article that I was assigned was to go down to . . .

MW: Were you a general assignment reporter?

ML: Yes, at first. I was assigned to go down to the Department of Correction where some fellow was—his lawyers had arranged a press conference. It was interesting

to me because this was a man who had been convicted of murder in a pretty sensational case where several people were shot in a little general store. And it was ironic to me that this would be my first assignment as a reporter at the *Democrat*, because while I was at UALR I had been given an internship at KTHV Television and served a little bit of time trying to do the television thing. Once while I was an intern there, I was out on assignment with a photographer. We had been sent out to cover some park dedication or some kind of thing that they usually go and get a little bit of film for and put a little thing on the news. As we were returning to the station from that, though, the station—the news director at the station radioed the photographer, who was driving, and said, "There has been a shooting at Casscoe, get out there and get film." He said, "Well, I've got this reporter with me, what do you want me to do with her?" The instruction was to drop me off at a corner in town and not take me out there. They already knew it was a pretty grisly scene, and the news director didn't think it was fit for a lady to go out and cover that. I protested. The photographer was between a rock and a hard place. He really felt that he had no choice and just did what he was told and put me out on a street corner, and they sent a car to pick me up and take me back to the station. I was denied the opportunity to go and be the reporter on that story. So, as I said, it was ironic that once I was at the *Democrat*, the very first reporting assignment I had was to go participate in this news conference with one of the guys who was convicted of that crime.

MW: Wow. This was like a little corner grocery in the middle of nowhere.

ML: Right.

MW: Casscoe, which is a small town about ten or fifteen minutes from Stuttgart.

ML: Yes.

MW: Yes, I remember that because I've driven past that same little grocery store several times lately for different reasons. Anyway, that was your first assignment. To go to the prison.

ML: One of the early ones, yes.

MW: It was I guess Cummins . . .

ML: It was Cummins.

MW: Let's go back and talk about something here that probably we ought to, which is the plight of the *Democrat* and the *Gazette* in those days, which was 1974, mid-1970s. This was before the real—what you call the newspaper war started. I mean, this was before John Robert Starr came to the *Democrat*.

ML: Yes.

MW: Hussman had bought it—Walter Hussman, Jr., I guess, had bought it. But it was still an afternoon paper, not competing with the *Gazette* in the morning. And as such was not—at this point, was not, I don't believe, in the public mind, or even in *our* mind, considered a real rival to the *Gazette*'s supremacy in Arkansas. Would you agree with that?

ML: Yes.

MW: Why don't you talk a little bit about what your feelings were in those days working for the *Democrat* as opposed to, say, working for the *Gazette*.

ML: Well, by the time I got there, I had gotten a bit of a sense of history of the *Democrat*'s relationship to the *Gazette* during the desegregation crisis [reference to the

1957 Little Rock Central High School integration crisis]. Personally, I was allied with the stance that the *Gazette* had taken. [00:43:33.10] Probably I was more liberal than the *Gazette* had been at that time. They were standing for, as I understand it, the rule of law, which was that the schools should be desegregated, but with a bit of a "We're not sure we like this, but it is the law." And the *Democrat* had pretty much become, in the public eye, I think, at that time, a bastion of the segregationist sentiment in the city. [00:44:10.15] And for me, coming to Little Rock from out of state, [00:44:16.29] I was astonished at how—this would have been almost twenty years later, but I began to realize that people here who had lived through that, and particularly whose families had been involved in it, recognized other people on the street and could not do that without kind of a memory of which side of that situation each person they met had been on. It was like an invisible brand that I didn't see, but I began to realize that people here did. You knew who people were, and you knew that history. It was not forgotten. [00:45:08.09] At least as I began to understand this culture in Little Rock, Arkansas, those two papers represented a lot of that very recent traumatic history. And since the *Democrat's* position had historically ended up being the losing side of that, there was that underdog-ish kind of sense. And yet also a sense of pride that "We are an old paper and we do represent a lot of what is true of Arkansas, and that is our past." We are all of us in Arkansas saddled with that past, and we go forward, too. This was a new day for all of Arkansas, and for the *Democrat*. And Hussman kind of represented that new day, in terms of coming out of that history. And it may seem strange to have—or maybe overbearing to speak of something

that was so far in the past—a couple decades in the past—but it never felt that far in the past to me. All of it seemed palpable in those days. Very close at hand.

MW: That's interesting. This is probably an example of your saying that coming from outside Arkansas as an adult, you were seeing it in a different way than some of us do, because I don't really recall it seeming that close to me. But maybe that's because I experienced those twenty years here in Arkansas, whereas you didn't.

ML: Right.

MW: I mean, you came in and just saw it as it was in 1970—whatever—early 1970s—and knew the history of the 1957 Central High crisis. That's interesting that you would say that. But the *Democrat* was still a conservative paper. I mean, even after Hussman got it, it still had a conservative stance. But it didn't have that feeling that it had in the 1950s and 1960s of really being retrograde and almost nineteenth century-ish. I mean, an effort had been made at that point to make it look better. The overall look of the paper was not as old-fashioned as it had been even ten years before.

ML: Yes.

MW: There was an attempt to make it look like a better paper—read better and upgrade the quality of the paper.

ML: And in some ways I thought that it was a nice alternative to the *Gazette's* inclination toward stuffy at times. That the *Democrat* allowed in elements—you just would get some things that were refreshing in the *Democrat* in terms of local reporting that I think that the *Gazette* would have been just a bit too proud to have put in. That was actually, in my view, really nice. And what really was the best

part was that there were both papers; you had both. And, of course, by that time I was an avid reader of both.

MW: And the *Democrat*—again, my story is so similar to yours. I needed a job, and I was interested in journalism, and Jerry McConnell gave me a chance when I would not have had a chance on a bigger paper, probably the *Gazette*, for instance. And yet it was a young staff. Most of us there on the copy desk and a lot of the reporters were very young. And there are good and bad things about that. It's bad in that we didn't have the experience and the long knowledge of whatever we were covering that a fifty-year-old reporter would have. But it was good in that we did try different things, and we got a chance to continue our careers—to start our careers—whereas we might not have in another situation.

ML: I completely agree. I feel very fortunate about that—that there were not a lot of rigidities.

MW: There wasn't a big hierarchy there.

ML: That's right. And for young writers, especially, to have work actually make it into print, it was—without being stifled by sixteen layers of editing up the ladder—just to go ahead and write it, and do your best, and see it in the paper the next afternoon was just a phenomenal experience. And I always reminded myself that it was worth everything I wasn't getting paid for it.

MW: Well, I know how much—when I started I got \$125 a week.

ML: I don't remember how much I got. All I remember is that when I finally decided to leave, I made up my mind that I would stay if Bob McCord would offer me five cents an hour more.

MW: Wow. Tough bargainer then.

ML: I know. [Laughs] I said I needed the raise, and he very kindly said, "You're welcome to come back any time."

MW: Well, we're getting ahead of ourselves here. Looking at the place of the *Democrat* in those days in Arkansas—I had friends at both papers, eventually—or at least who had worked at both papers. And there was a sense that the *Gazette* was up in an ivory tower, and I'm not talking about editorial stance here. I'm talking about the staff itself. [The sense] was that we worked for this really excellent newspaper, and I don't mean the people personally were overly prideful, but there was a sense there that I don't think we had at the *Democrat* that, again, gave us the chance. The *Gazette*, to me anyway, in those days seemed like this almost inapproachable bastion of journalism that would have taken me a long time to even aspire to.

ML: Yes. Well, yes, it was almost the difference between being a kid and being an adult. The *Gazette* was grown up, and we were the kids. And there was a lot to do. We were all in that transition place in our lives where we were coming—doing this the first time. There's something just fabulous about that moment. And it was certainly good for us that there was the *Democrat* to give it voice.

MW: And that's not there any more because you've got one choice now. If you're a young graduate of UALR or any other school around here, there's only one paper now. I mean, there are certainly some good papers around the state—you can start at a smaller paper, but it's not quite the same as it was in those days. Well, let's go back to you being—you were a reporter, and one of your first assignments

was to go down to prison and talk to a convicted murderer. How did your career progress after that, as a reporter for the *Democrat*?

ML: I remember I was assigned to the education beat for a while, which involved, it seemed to me, sitting up most of the night at Pulaski County School Board meetings. They just went on all night long—some of them—and there was nothing to report on in the morning—just terrible.

MW: Did you go to Little Rock, too? And North Little Rock?

ML: Yes. I did all of the school board meetings. That didn't last long. Maybe because I never could find anything to report. I'm being just a little facetious. It seemed that they were interminable and got very little accomplished. Then where I seemed to thrive, and where I got put most, was general assignment and features. I liked that—just whatever stray kind of stories came along. Education was actually the only beat I ever got. [00:55:45.24] Very early in my reporting days, I was assigned to cover a legislative prayer breakfast before the start of the session. And at that point, I wasn't too clear on too much about the legislature. I didn't understand a lot about, or *anything* about, Arkansas politics. And what all a legislative prayer breakfast was supposed to entail, I just couldn't quite understand either. But I remember I came back, and my lead was something to the effect that either the legislature was lobbying God, or God was lobbying the legislature. And it got in. Whoever was the sports editor at the time—I don't remember who that was, but he was a pretty influential personality there—came over and complimented me on that. He thought that it was just so irreverent and so great that it had gotten into the paper. Then in came a storm of letters from readers who

weren't nearly as impressed. [00:57:21.25] But that story ran above the banner at the top of the front page.

MW: Oh, that's right. The *Democrat* used to have the banner down. They'd run a story above the—I'd forgotten that.

ML: Yes. And that was one of the first stories I ever wrote in my life. That's just what we're talking about—going from "Can I be a reporter?" to, probably within a week, having a story that high on the front page.

MW: Who was your boss in those—would you have reported to Ralph?

ML: Bill. Bill Husted.

MW: Oh, maybe he was the city editor.

ML: Yes, I think he was.

MW: And Ralph maybe was the state editor or . . .

ML: Yes, I believe.

MW: Maybe it was the news editor.

ML: That sounds right.

MW: And Larry Gordon would have been Ralph's assistant, I think. The assistant news editor. Okay, I think that's right. Ralph was the news editor. Larry Gordon was Ralph's assistant. Bill Husted was the city editor.

ML: And Amanda . . .

MW: And Amanda was maybe the wire editor?

ML: . . . wire editor.

MW: Right. Okay. And it wasn't that big a newsroom in those days, so those were like the main chiefs there.

ML: Right.

MW: You came in—from one day to the next, you really didn't know what you were doing, basically? I mean, sometimes you'd get an assignment a few days in advance, but you'd come in and Ralph would give you an assignment—I mean, Bill Husted would give you an assignment to "go cover this" or "go cover that."

ML: Right. Whatever sounded interesting to him that didn't fit into anybody else's category.

MW: Did you cook up your own ideas sometimes? Did you come in and say, "I want to do a story about blah-blah-blah"?

ML: Yes. Yes, I did. In fact, I tried to do that more and more and usually was given rein to do them. I remember very, very few times being told "no" on those. And it was expected that that would be what I would be doing, kind of looking around and being alert to ideas.

MW: So you pretty quickly progressed into what you sort of continued doing ever since, which is writing features on stuff—profiles—not so much newsy stuff, but “featury” things. You started doing that pretty quickly after you became a reporter.

ML: Yes.

MW: Did you—in those days, was there much give and take as far as editing stories between you and Bill? Say, when you turned in a story, did you sit down with him and talk about it? Or do you remember?

ML: No. It was—I never had that at a newspaper. I've never ever had that at a newspaper. It has always been, "Turn in a story and then turn your attention to the next

story." And whatever happened to that story was just what happened to it. It was—in fact, it was always kind of startling to me how little response there was from editors to anything that you turned it in. You turned it in and started on the next thing. And it was as though whatever you turned in never happened, because things were not mentioned again. I understand it was the turnaround and the daily-ness of the newspaper business that dictated that. At the same time, I think there was also kind of a culture that precluded much discussion of—that it would have been just too touchy-feely to say, "Good job," or, "Do you think we might change this?" [Laughs]

MW: Well, you and I both later worked for the *Arkansas Times* when it was a monthly magazine, and there's a whole different rhythm. I mean, your life starts—you start living your life according to this monthly rhythm. And looking back, newspapers are almost like you don't even have time to think. You're swimming, and if you stop swimming you're going to sink, you know. It just happens every day.

[End of Tape 1, Side 2]

[Beginning of Tape 2, Side 1]

[Tape Stopped]

ML: Right.

MW: Okay. Just bringing things up to date here. Do you remember any other features that had an influence on you? Do you remember a point where you said, "This is fun. This is what I want to do"? I mean, when you were writing a particular feature or at an assignment or something? Was there a gradual process to this, or did you just always feel that was where you were headed?

ML: I loved reporting from the first day I did it. I thought I was the luckiest person to be going out, driving to someplace that I had never been before, talking to someone [when] I had no idea what they were going to tell me—what was going to be said. Even though I sometimes envied the photographers, who, it seemed, could just say, "Oh, we're going out" and then come back and just push a little film through chemicals and have their work done. And I instead was going to have to sit and labor over the words. In truth, though, I was glad to be at the point of going out and meeting people and just getting acquainted with Arkansas—which I loved from the beginning—every corner of it. And the characters that I met out in all of the counties. I felt so privileged to see the things I did, and to shake the hands I did, and to hear the dialects that I was hearing. I knew that I wasn't ever going to be able to capture the richness of it in what I would try to write, but I got the whole value, I felt, of the experiences. The colors and the contours of the land, and the sounds of it. Every time I got in my car. Sometimes just the actual getting to places was an adventure. I remember one time having no money and an assignment out of town. I had to get gas in the car, and I was not sure how I was going to put this all together. But I remembered I had a Sears credit card, and Sears, at that time, sold gas. So I was able to make my way over to Sears and pump some gas into the car and get to where I was going to go—because you got paid after the fact for expenses. Basically, we were fronting the money for those kinds of little incidentals like gas. But I always thought it was just exactly what I should be doing, and [I] felt very fortunate to be doing it.

MW: And you enjoyed meeting the people and talking to new people and hearing their

stories.

ML: Every one of them. [01:05:52.28] I do remember that early on—but maybe everything just seems early on because it all was so early on [laughs]—Bill Husted came over to my desk and said, "There's been a house fire in someplace in south Arkansas—a trailer. A bunch of children burned to death. Grandmother lives next door. Call her up and get her story." And that was a real test.

MW: Some people would probably—I, for instance, would hate that.

ML: Well, I told him I couldn't do it. I told him, "I cannot do that. I can't call that woman and"—her children had died within the past twelve or certainly twenty-four hours—I mean, her grandchildren had died, right next door. She was in grief. And I said, "I cannot for the purposes of this business call up that woman." And he said, "Yes, you can. Do it." And I did do it. And I learned a big lesson, because she felt it was absolutely right that the *Democrat* should be interested. To her, it was a tragedy of global importance. And as I talked with her, I understood that just getting a call from a reporter at the *Democrat* matched in some way, or at least acknowledged, the scale of her grief. If we're going to report all of the horrendous big important things in the world, this was one of those things. And, yes, she was eloquent and spilled out her grief. I wrote a story. I learned a lot in that moment: that it's very presumptuous to assume that we know what's good for other people and what they should be protected from [01:08:20.11], and so forth. I always kind of just go try to be humble and not expect that they will or won't want to talk to me. But if they do, then I go ahead.

MW: Being good listeners has to be part of it. Tell us some more incidents that may

have been highlights of your reporting career there at the *Democrat*.

ML: Well, this is not a story that was ever reported. It's one that occurred inside the building. I went in one weekend to work on a story—and that was always happening, you know, you had your regular hours but there was always so much-in-my case anyway—that wasn't fitting into the allotted time. So I was going in at odd hours and working on something else. The newsroom was empty, the place was all quiet, and I was alone in there except for a janitor, who I said hello to. And tagging along with the janitor was a friend of his, and I said hello to him, too. Then I went to my desk and was doing some work. And at one point I got up from my desk. We had a mail slot over near the elevator. And I went to the mail slot and was standing there looking at my mail or reading the bulletin board, which was there, too, and it turned out that the man who was accompanying the janitor had left the janitor and crept up behind me and grabbed me behind the neck and put a knife in my back, and I could feel the point of it. He said, "Be quiet and come with me." And he started to drag me into one of the—if you were standing looking at the mail slot, do you remember what offices were off to the left? Like the business writer?

MW: Well, on the west side of the newsroom, as I recall, was sports and business. And the business was stuck over in the northwest corner.

ML: Yes. That's what I recall, too, and he started to drag me off into—is it Bobbie Forster? Her office.

MW I know who you're talking about.

ML: The business editor.

MW: Right, right.

ML: And I got indignant, and I said to him, "I cannot believe you're going to do this."

My overriding sense was we had been talking to each other just as human beings just a few minutes ago, and now he was doing this. And it turned out that he began to shake, and he paused, and he reconsidered, and he said, "Okay, I'll go. But don't tell anyone that this happened." He left. And I was faced with a choice of whether to tell anyone or not. On one hand, I felt that some sort of human bond had been breached. Then he had asked to have it reclaimed in a way. I thought, "Okay, I'm going to trust the human thing and not this violent thing." I—I honored my commitment that I wouldn't tell anybody. Then a couple of months later—at night—one of the women was leaving the building and was followed out of the building by a guy. And I thought, "I know that guy," and it was the guy who had done this to me. I told everyone at that point what had happened because I felt that she needed to be warned if he was still around and preying. Then people wanted to know why I hadn't reported it in the first place. I still consider that one of the more interesting little ethical dilemmas I faced along the way.

MW: What a story! Did anything happen to the woman who was being followed? Or did he just follow her?

ML: The guy was identified, and the locks were changed on the building. I know that. In fact, that was when that keypunch—that electronic number lock went in—after that incident. That earlier story about going in after the ice storm—must have been after that when the locks got changed.

MW: Yes, well, it was scary. It was a morning paper on Sunday, so quite often people

had to go down there on Saturday night to get the Sunday paper out, and sometimes there weren't very many people down there. At that point, people were walking to their cars at 8:00, 9:00, 10:00, midnight, whatever. Downtown. So it was a difficult situation sometimes.

ML: I never felt scared or worried about any of that—being outside in the dark. I never felt nervous about that. That's, I guess, why I was so amazed that something like that would happen inside the building.

MW: That was awfully brave of you. Did you have any sort of like—like an hour later sort of reaction like, "Oh, my God"—type thing? Or, you know, looking back and seeing how close you came to being attacked.

ML: Well, I was attacked. The difference was that he didn't follow through on what I assumed was going to be a rape. There were so many things at play in that experience—so many subtleties of the human experience. All I could do was kind of let it resonate and be what it was.

MW: Gosh. Well, that was an interesting story. I'm certainly glad it worked out the way it did. Any other highlights of your reportorial career that you'd care to mention?

ML: No, I wasn't even thinking of all of these highlights when I came in the door today. I thought if we just kept talking I was sure that they would keep on spilling out. At this point, I know—there is one thing that I've always been pleased with, and maybe this will be the last, and that is when I was started at the *Democrat*, the paper still had the policy of identifying men on the second reference by their last names only, as in "Mel White" on first reference and "White" on the second refer-

ence and thereafter. But women were always Mara Leveritt on first reference and then Miss Leveritt, or Mrs. Leveritt, or whatever it was, throughout the rest of the paper. Of course, this was already the mid-1970s, and I found that a rather quaint kind of thing to be doing still. At one time I was, again, standing at the mail slot thinking about that, and I'm pretty sure it was Jerry—it might have been Bob McCord, but one of them came over—I'm almost certain, though, it was Jerry McConnell—and I mentioned this. I thought the time had come for that policy to be changed. He pretty much said, "Yes, I think you're right." That was the end of that policy at that paper. And when I later on went to work for the *Gazette*, I had an almost identical experience there. This was during that first period when Gannett came in—who was the editor? Do you remember it?

MW: McIlwaine.

ML: Yes, I think so. At that moment, the *Gazette* had the same policy regarding women on second reference.

MW: Really.

ML: I was working at the *Gazette* at that point, and here the new management came in for whatever all that meant to the rest of the paper and the rest of Arkansas journalism history—but I thought, "If there's ever a chance to get something addressed here, maybe this is it." I asked to speak to him and made the point, and he said, "I think you're right," and it changed the next day. [Laughter] I have wanted to tell that story to somebody for many years.

MW: Mara Leveritt, champion of female liberation in Arkansas journalism!

ML: [Laughs] Well, at least on second references. [Laughter]

MW: I can think of a couple of things we need to go into, if you have time here. One of them I want to come back and just for a minute talk about—since this allegedly is for history here, let's talk about that transition from paper copy and hot type and all that to some more automation. You may not have a lot to say about that because you may have been a reporter already. The other thing is, let's talk about how you came to leave the *Democrat* and what happened after that. I think we need to cover that. How long were you—do you remember how long you were actually at the *Democrat* once you became a reporter? And did you stay a reporter until you left?

ML: Yes. I stayed a reporter until I left. It was not more than two years. And I went to the *Arkansas Times*, which had been begun by that point by Alan Leveritt, who had left *Essence*, where I had met him at UALR. Now he was running *Arkansas Times*, and I had been, throughout, involved with him and with the *Arkansas Times*. In fact, I went and pasted up the first issue of the *Arkansas Times* and was very closely involved with the folks who were putting that out.

MW: Let's [see] here, the *Arkansas Times* was started in 1974, probably?

ML: Yes.

MW: And was a monthly magazine of general interest, culture, politics—kind of irrelevant, somewhat counter-culturish monthly magazine.

ML: Even younger all-around than the *Democrat*, by far. It was started by people who were journalists or aspiring journalists who were, for one reason or another, not working or working full-time at either of the papers.

MW: Right. Now it has mutated into a weekly tabloid newspaper and [is] very highly

respected. But in those days, it was a monthly magazine and ran all sorts of features from arts to politics to . . .

ML: And a monthly magazine—in fact, it was bi-weekly.

MW: Oh, I didn't know that.

ML: Except in June. It didn't publish at all in the month of June [laughter]. That was the plan. It didn't last long. Everybody was going to take vacations. And on pulp, printed on newsprint at the time and morphed into very slick—and morphed back again to newsprint, which it is now.

MW: So you would have left the *Democrat* in 1978-ish?

ML: Yes. And went to work for Bill Terry, who had been at the *Democrat*, but not while I was there. He had been there formerly, and he was editing the *Arkansas Times* then, and he was editor—I mean, yes, he had left the *Democrat* and was now editing the *Arkansas Times*. I went and had a pretty unhappy experience with him as an editor and stayed for a short time and then . . .

MW: Bill was curmudgeonly.

ML: Yes.

MW: Let's say now that, again, anybody who was looking for your stories would see them under the name of Margaret Arnold in those days.

ML: In those days, yes. Yes. Then I left the *Arkansas Times*, largely because of differences with Bill, and at that point I went on to the *Gazette* and worked there for a couple of years. Bill left the *Arkansas Times*, and I returned to the *Arkansas Times* after that and worked with you.

MW: Correct. That would have been in 1980, I think.

ML: Yes.

MW: Talk for a second about—you're one of many people who went back and forth between the *Democrat* and the *Gazette*. Why don't you talk for a minute about the differences. What did you do at the *Gazette* first, and how were things different at the *Gazette* than they had been at the *Democrat*? And, again, we're talking here about 1980-ish or something—1979, 1980?

ML: Yes, late 1970s.

MW: Late 1970s when you went from the *Arkansas Times* to the *Arkansas Gazette*.

ML: Right. At that point, I had left my employment with Bill Terry very abruptly. He had wadded up one article I had turned in, and as he threw it across the room, I said that was the end of our professional relationship. And it was only a couple of years too late that I did that [laughs]. I was suddenly unemployed and wondering, "Does one go back to the *Democrat* at this point?" Even though McCord had given me that nice offer.

MW: Possibly he was ready for the five cents raise now. [Laughter]

ML: Maybe. I then decided that, having covered most of the journalistic [laughs] bases in town, I was going to make my stab for the *Gazette*. [I] thought, "How does one do that?" So I went into Carrick Patterson's office and told him that I would like to have a job, and he said, "Well, really, we don't have a thing available. Don't have a thing." And I said, "Well, I'll do just about anything." He said, "Well, we've got a half-time society writer position available." And I said, "Well, I can do that." Because I thought to myself, "It's all society, isn't it?" He said, "Well, why don't you pick out an assignment for yourself and go report on it

and give me a sample." And I thought, "You know, I've been writing in this town for a long time. You could look [at] what I've done." But I said, "Okay."

MW: Carrick Patterson was the son of Hugh Patterson, who was one of the owners of the *Gazette*—his family owned the *Gazette*.

ML: And he was the—what was his title? He was publisher, I think, at that time.

MW: Carrick?

ML: Carrick? Was he?

MW: I don't know.

ML: I think so. I think he was. But at any rate, whatever he was, he was the one that I went to. I heard that, or somehow learned—maybe saw it in the paper that Carrick sang opera. He was very good at Italian and singing. [He] had a good voice. It was right around Christmas time that I had quit the *Times*, and I saw that Carrick was going to be singing in one of those—what is it called? A Christmas madrigal. Carrick was going to be one of the singers, or one of the primary people there. So I decided, "Okay, they want somebody to report on society things, I'll go cover that and turn it in." That's what I did. [Laughs]

MW: You weren't sucking up to the boss or anything like that?

ML: No, as a matter of fact, quite the contrary. I thought it was really quite the gutsy move to go and review him. [Laughter] And I think he took it that way. He was very gracious, even though I hadn't written anything to flatter him. I had a lot of fun writing it, and I got the part-time job. After that, I had a lot of fun going around kind of taking a jaundiced view of society for a while.

MW: Boy, this is a new thing for me: Mara Leveritt, society reporter. Did you go to

Little Rock Country Club and all kinds of things, weddings and parties?

ML: Let's just say I was not the Phyllis Brandon of anyone's dreams. Fortunately, they decided that I was worth keeping, though not in that department. [Laughter]

MW: You could have renewed, revised, revitalized society reporting. [Laughter]

ML: Yes, I figured everything was sort of anthropological when you got right down to it.

MW: So you moved on to what?

ML: Right back to general assignment features.

MW: For the *Gazette*?

ML: Right.

MW: And how long did you stay there?

ML: For another—I was not there at the end. I stayed for another, maybe, two years at the *Gazette*, then I went back to the *Arkansas Times*.

MW: Can you talk a little bit about the difference between the papers'—I don't know— atmosphere, day-to-day operations?

ML: Well, while the *Democrat* was so young, as we've discussed—one thing that I noticed about the *Gazette* was it seemed that everybody had been there forever. There was a staid quality to the paper and the staff. They had stayed there for a long time, most of them. And there was a history that everybody knew about there and a culture that you were not really let into very easily. At the *Democrat* people would come and go, and people were new, and people were on the move sort of, and everybody understood that. In a way, it was kind of like my experience as a kid on a military base, where people made friends quickly, and you

kind of understood that we've all come from different places, and we're all going different places, but while we're here, we'll all get to know each other with the understanding that it's probably not going to last forever. And at the *Gazette*, it seems that the understanding was it *would* last forever.

MW: Some of those people had been there for decades. Literally.

ML: Yes. And they were tight, but at the same time there was a tremendous graciousness. I remember being so nervous at the beginning, sitting down to type on this new computer, and, for some reason, the space bar was just a problem for me. It was slowing me down and making me nervous. John Workman, who was a religion editor, came over, and I guess I told him my frustration, or he saw it on my face. And he said, "Oh, I think we can fix that." And he . . .

[End of Tape 2, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 2, Side 2]

ML: And he very kindly taped two popsicle sticks across the top of the space bar, and that raised it just enough that, for whatever reason, it worked for me and got me over that little moment. And it was just—one of many, many kindnesses from people. So there was not a coldness to the place at all, but there was a depth of history and presence that was kind of tangible, I felt.

MW: At this point—I think at this point John Robert Starr would have been at the *Democrat*.

ML: Yes.

MW: At this point there would have been a—this was the period of the, quote, "Arkansas newspaper war," unquote, between the *Democrat* and the *Gazette*. And at this

point you were now at the—you never worked with Starr?

ML: No.

MW: Do you have any recollections about that period? About the so-called war? Do you have any memories about that period? Has it affected you in any way?

ML: It was—it must have been like being in London and hearing the bombs go off outside, while knowing that your little life is just going on fine. In the meantime, I was doing my work, and I was happy. And I knew that there was serious, serious fate being decided all around me. But I was so insulated from that. I was really just a reporter—and glad to be, glad to be. The intensity of the competition was pretty easy to feel. But I just was pretty clear about what I needed to do, and glad that I didn't have the huge responsibility that Carrick did to carry on my shoulders.

MW: Were there any other former *Democrat* people you can recall who were at the *Gazette* then that you had worked with at the *Democrat*?

ML: [Bob] Lancaster wasn't there. No, I can't think of anybody. I can't think of anybody else at that point.

MW: I'm looking at a book here, Margaret Arnold's *Profiles* [reference to *Profiles: Real Arkansas Characters*], which was published by August House, maybe? In 1980. Would this have been things that you wrote when you were at the *Democrat*? I mean, the *Arkansas Times*?

ML: I wrote that after I left the *Arkansas Times* and before I got that job at the *Gazette*.

MW: Okay. So it's [?].

ML: Ted Parkhurst, the publisher at August House, just called me . . .

MW: Oh, really.

ML: . . . called me up one day and said, "Would you do a book of profiles?" I was literally between jobs, and he offered to pay me something for it, and I said, "Sure." This was right after I had told Bill Terry, "I'm out of here," and right before Carrick Patterson offered me that society job.

MW: Well, I'll be darned. I'd always assumed these were things that had appeared in the *Arkansas Times* and were just collected. These were done especially for this book.

ML: Yes.

MW: Well, I'll be darned. Okay.

ML: The profile of Mary Sims had been published before. That's the only one.

MW: Okay, but you got Bill Clinton, who went on to . . .

ML: Pardon me, the piece on Billy Joe Tatum had also been published before.

MW: Billy Joe Tatum, who was the wildflower and wild foods expert up in the Ozarks. You've also got Riverside Drive, which was an interesting, funky little neighborhood down in downtown Little Rock that is no longer there. And several other people, including Bill Clinton, who wanted to become something or other.

ML: Yes, president. And Thaddeus Honeycutt. He took the back picture of me that's on the cover, and I took the picture of him that's on the back of the book. He died just a few months ago.

MW: Really? I don't know who he was. I've forgotten.

ML: A friend.

MW: A friend. Well, if I can be unprofessional for a second, it's an absolutely gorgeous

picture of you. And not a bad picture of him on the back. [Laughter] Well, that's interesting. I didn't know that. I just always assumed these were collected from the *Arkansas Times*. And this is not signed, so as soon as this interview is over, you can do that. Okay. After the *Gazette*, you went back to the *Arkansas Times* around probably 1983-ish or 1984, because I was there.

ML: I think I was there by the end of 1982, but maybe not.

MW: No. No, because I went there in 1982, and I was there while Bill Terry was the editor for a year. Then Bob Lancaster came in and became editor. And you didn't come until after Bob was there.

ML: Yes, that's right.

MW: So it would have been at least 1983 and maybe even 1984. . .

ML: Okay.

MW: . . . when you came to the *Arkansas Times*. And, again, this is when it was a monthly slick magazine, as we say.

ML: And being beautifully edited by you.

MW: It was an interesting staff. We had a great staff. Including Bob Lancaster and Mike Trimble and Mara and some other people. And even Olivia Farrell, bless her heart, always pretty much left us alone and let us do what we wanted to do.

ML: That's right. There was a lot of good work and a lot of fun and a certain amount of craziness.

MW: [Laughs] Why don't you just give us the *Reader's Digest* version of your life since then. Let's see, I left in 1990, and that was fifteen years ago. So what about your life since?

ML: And you look pretty much like you did when you left. You left in 1990?

MW: Right.

ML: I left in 1995. I had done a lot of—actually, my reporting took a pretty big turn. I began to do much more serious kinds of reporting than I had done at either of the papers. I think that was partly because I had been given an opportunity to. And I found I liked it. I also began writing a weekly column, which I also enjoyed a lot, and continued on with that through 1995. That was the year that I divorced Alan Leveritt and left the paper pretty much all at the same time. After that, I did continue to write my column for the *Times* for a while, and I have very happily maintained my relationship as a contributing editor with the *Arkansas Times* since then.

MW: Let me interrupt—I'm sorry, but when you left, had it become a weekly at that point? Or was it still a monthly? It was a weekly at that point?

ML: Yes, it was a weekly.

MW: Okay.

ML: It became a weekly very soon after the *Gazette* folded. In response to that vacuum that was perceived in the . . .

MW: Right. Several people came over to the *Arkansas Times*, and this became a weekly sort of counter-viewpoint to the *Democrat* and [an] outlet for, basically, intelligence.

ML: And certainly an opportunity for a lot of displaced people. And a source of comfort for a lot of readers who were aggrieved to find themselves with nothing but the *Democrat-Gazette*. So I stayed—I continued to write there at the *Times*, then

left in 1995 and continued to write columns for another couple of years. I still contribute articles to the paper. I have written a couple of nonfiction books in the meantime. And that's what I do.

MW: Well, let's not be too shy here. Tell us about the books. Again, sort of *Reader's Digest* version here.

ML: One was a book about corruption in Saline County surrounding the prosecuting attorney. And the second book was about the murders of three eight year olds in West Memphis and the subsequent conviction of three teenagers for those murders. [The] first book was called *The Boys on the Tracks* and the second book *Devil's Knot*.

MW: Right. And you've been doing those sorts of things since you left the *Times*. This is now 2005, and you live in The Heights area of Little Rock. Are you working on another big project now? Are you at liberty to say?

ML: In the idiotic life of someone who tries to write books—I know you share that particular form of idiocy with me—I've got a proposal at Simon & Shuster right now waiting for an answer. So we'll see. If it's a "yes," then I'll be off on that for another couple of years. And if not, I may go apply at the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* [laughter].

MW: Well, you can't ask Bob McCord, because he's not there anymore.

ML: No, he's at the *Arkansas Times*.

MW: Well, Mara, I just wanted to see if you had anything else you'd like to say, or if you covered everything you'd like to talk about.

ML: And more.

MW: And more? [Laughs] Well, I've enjoyed it pretty much, and I've learned a lot. I certainly could go on a lot longer, but I know you have a life to live. You understand that I think they're going to send both of us a transcript of this assuming the tape works—please, please. And we'll have a chance to review it and make ourselves seem smarter, I'm sure.

ML: Let's hope.

MW: Okay. Well, thanks a lot, Mara.

ML: Thank you, Mel.

[End of Interview]

[Transcribed by Lu Ann Smith-Lacy]

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