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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with

Rod Lorenzen
Little Rock, Arkansas
27 July 2005

Interviewer: Arlin Fields

[00:00:00.00] Arlin Fields: Okay. This interview is part of the [Pryor] Center for [Arkansas] Oral and Visual History Project on the *Arkansas Democrat*. We will transcribe this interview and make it available for those interested in Arkansas history. We will give you the opportunity to review the transcript, at which point you will sign a release. All I need you to do now is tell me your name and indicate that you are willing to give the center permission to use this tape and to make the transcript available to others.

Rod Lorenzen: Yes. My name is Rod Lorenzen, and I give my permission for the Center to use the tape and the manuscript.

AF: Rod, tell us a little bit about your current position and what you're doing now.

RL: I own a bookstore in Little Rock. I've had this store about fifteen years, and I had another bookstore in town that I started in 1974. I had that one for twelve years

and then sold it. And it's still going; that's Wordsworth Books and Company.
And the name of my present business is Lorenzen and Company Booksellers.

AF: Okay. Tell me a little about your parents. Were they native Arkansans? Or how did they come to be in Little Rock?

RL: My mom was born and raised in Little Rock. Her dad was a train man, and she grew up in a little neighborhood close to the train depot in downtown Little Rock. My dad was from Nebraska. He met my mom when he was stationed in North Little Rock at Camp Robinson during World War II. They met; they married in 1944, and my older sister was born in 1945.

AF: Tell me when you went to work for the *Arkansas Democrat* and how long you were there.

RL: I started working for the *Arkansas Democrat* the week I turned fifteen, which would have been [in] 1966. I went to work in the sports department. I worked at the *Democrat* until about 1972, when I left to take a job as managing editor of the *West Memphis Evening Times*. I was twenty-one. I stayed there at that job about six months and then decided I wanted to return to Little Rock. I went back to work for the *Democrat* and stayed there about two more years until I went into small business.

AF: How did you come to get the job at the *Democrat*? Whom did you apply to? How did it go that you got the job?

RL: Well, my older sister had a high school friend who had worked part-time writing sports articles for the *Democrat*. Normally, I would have been playing baseball in the summer, each summer, but when I was thirteen, I stayed out that summer and

worked for the Little Rock Boys Club as the official scorer at Little League and Pony League games. My sister urged me to check into working for the *Democrat* part-time as a sports writer; she thought maybe that was something I could do. I did know how to type. My father taught electronics at a business college in Little Rock, and the summer that I was eleven years old I took a typing course, so at age thirteen I could type fairly well. So I suppose—because of the fact that I could type and that I'd been around sports quite a bit, this helped me get the job at the *Democrat*.

AF: You said your sister had a friend who worked there?

RL: Yes. His name was Larry Carter, and I believe he went to Mabelvale High School. And probably in the mid-1960s he had worked there part-time as a sports writer.

AF: Well, tell me who you interviewed with and what the process was like when you were going to work at the *Democrat*.

RL: I talked to Jack Keady, who was the sports editor at the time and had been for, oh, I'm going to say about twenty years. And I think Jack just mainly wanted to make sure that I could type. They needed kids to cover junior high sports events. So he sat me down at a typewriter and told me to type out my name and address, and maybe—it seems like maybe he had me rewrite a sports article or something like that. But he was watching me type, I think, mainly. Wanted to make sure I could do that. I guess I passed the test because I started covering junior high football, basketball games, track meets—you know, working one or two nights. And since the *Democrat* was an afternoon paper in those days, we would have to be at work

around 5:30 or 6:00 in the morning to turn in our articles and then I would go on off to school.

AF: Was the routine different on the weekend?

RL: Yes, the routine was a little different on the weekends. We had to work a split shift on Saturday. We would go to work about 6:00 on Saturday mornings and put out the Saturday afternoon paper. We'd work until about 11:00 a.m.; that was when the first edition or the first edition would come out. Then we'd go home, and we'd come back about 4:00 on Saturday afternoon and put out the Sunday paper. We would work until about midnight. Although until I was sixteen, they used to make me go home at 10:00 on Saturday nights because that would have put them in violation of the child labor laws. So I promptly left at 10:00 every Saturday night.

AF: Tell me about some of the memorable personalities you worked with in your first stint with the *Democrat*.

RL: Yes, I think one of the guys I really was fond of and seemed kind of larger than life at the time, to me, was named Bobby Joe Howell. H-O-W-E-L-L. Bob was from Arkadelphia [Arkansas]. He'd gone to Ouachita Baptist University [Arkadelphia]. He was just a big, strapping fellow, really affable, kind of loud. But he loved baseball; he covered the Arkansas Travelers every summer. He would go to spring training in St. Petersburg, Florida, and get to know all the players. And by the time he got back to Little Rock with the team, he would have made up nicknames for all of the players, and he would use those nicknames in his stories and game accounts the rest of the summer.

AF: Okay, there was Bob Howell. Who else [was] in the sports department?

RL: Well, the slot man in the sports department when I started was a fellow named Rhine Seymore. R-H-I-N-E. S-E-Y-M-O-R-E. I believe. Somebody would need to check that. Rhine was also from Arkadelphia. He and Bob Howell were about the same age. Rhine went to Henderson State University in Arkadelphia, so he and Bob always had kind of a rivalry about those two schools, since they are just across the street from each other there in Arkadelphia. Rhine was a really nervous guy. I think he just seemed like one of those guys who could not relax and always seemed to have the weight of the world on his shoulders. He was very hyperactive and always pushing us to get our stories in quickly so he would have plenty of time to get the stories to the composing room and then get the pages made up and get the paper out.

AF: What about some of the younger hands around who you crossed paths with there?

RL: Let's see, about the time I started—let's see, David Baer—B-A-E-R—who went to Central High School was there. Arlin Fields also went to Central. He started working. We would always be there early in the mornings and work a couple hours and then go on off to school. And lots of times we'd be working at night covering sports events, especially on Friday and Saturday nights. After I'd been there about a year—let's see, John Brummett—he'd been attending McClelland High School, and he would later go on to work at *The Log Cabin Democrat* and the *Arkansas Gazette* and also *Arkansas Times* magazine, where he has written a column for a couple of decades now. I think he's currently working for Stephens Media Group. Another guy who came on about the time Brummett started was

John Bloom. B-L-O-O-M. John was going to Parkview High School, and he would later work for *Texas Monthly* magazine and also the *Dallas Times-Herald*, as a movie reviewer. He worked under an alias, Joe Bob Briggs, where his persona was kind of a redneck movie reviewer; he would review Grade B movies. Of course, it was just intended to be a humorous column. He also did kind of a stand-up comedy act as Joe Bob Briggs. He wrote several humorous books under that name and also appeared in a couple of movies.

AF: Did he present the kind of personality at that time that would lead you to believe he was headed that direction?

RL: John was a real quiet and unassuming guy. He was very smart. He was in the Honor Society at Parkview High School, but he was really quiet. So it was kind of a surprise later to understand that he had become a stand-up comic of sorts and also been in movies and was actually kind of a celebrity around the country. He also had had a movie review program on one of the cable networks for a few years.

AF: When you later came back for a second stint at the *Democrat*, what did you do and who did you work with?

RL: Well, I went back to work for the sports department. They needed someone at that time, and I just wanted to finish up my degree at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. That would have been about 1972, I think. And I think the managing editor at that time was Jerry McConnell, who'd been with the sports department at the *Arkansas Gazette* for a long time.

AF: Who was managing the paper at your first stint when you were there?

RL: The managing editor when I started to work at the *Democrat* in 1966 was Gene Herrington. Gene had been in the newspaper business in Little Rock for a long time, and he later left and went to work in public relations for one of the utilities. That would have been about 1972. He was replaced by Gene Foreman, who came to the paper from the *Pine Bluff Commercial*.

AF: What sort of transition in management did you see with Gene Foreman?

RL: Well, Gene Foreman was a very demanding boss. He was probably the best and the toughest guy I ever worked for. He had very exacting standards for the way that he wanted things done. I think people really worked hard for him, and he just demanded that. Lots of times you would get something torn out of the newspaper, and it would be marked up with a red grease pencil, and it would be a note from Gene, you know, calling your attention to some error you'd made. I think most everyone in the newsroom really wanted to avoid getting those in their boxes. But Gene was a hard worker, and he just wanted that from everybody he worked [with]. He was interested in having a good product; he was interested in good journalism standards. Unlike a lot of people I've worked for in the newspaper business, that was just a priority with him. And to illustrate the kind of guy he was, when he had a hernia operation, he spent all of his time recuperating in writing a new style book for the newspaper.

AF: Did Gene bring in some new faces and fresh blood?

RL: Yes, he sure did. He had some really talented writers that he brought in from the *Pine Bluff Commercial*. One of those was Fred Morrow, who later became the sports editor. Fred was a really fine writer. Another one who came from the *Pine*

Bluff Commercial with Gene was Bob Lancaster. Bob went on to become a Nie-man Fellow, and he's still writing a column for *Arkansas Times* and doing their book reviews now.

AF: Tell me a little about the physical plant and atmosphere of the old *Democrat*.

RL: The *Democrat* was housed in a three-story building and is still there at the inter-section of Fifth and Scott Streets in downtown Little Rock. The building itself had been the first YMCA in Little Rock, the Young Men's Christian Association building. It was kind of run down when I started there in the 1960s. They had an elevator that barely worked. I usually avoided getting on that. But, actually, the steps weren't much better; they were kind of shaky, or you'd bounce on them just a little bit going from the ground floor up to the sports department on the second floor. The place just was kind of dingy. The desks were old. The typewriters were really old and very hard to operate. You really had to pound them. Really nothing changed much like that in the physical appearance of the place until the 1970s, and the paper finally committed to improving the newsroom and buying some new equipment.

AF: So tell me about some of the evolutions in the way the work got out that you saw in your years at the *Democrat*. How was it done in the early days as opposed to later?

RL: Well, when I first started at the *Democrat*, of course, computers hadn't come along yet. And the printing was all still what we called the hot type operation—that is, Linotype machines were used. And there was really a lot of physical labor involved in putting out a newspaper, especially in the composing room. We

would just do our stories on manual typewriters and then pass them on to the slot man, and a lot of times they would just get cut to pieces and re-pasted. That's just how people edited back then. Then that copy would be sent on up to the composing room where it was set in type. In the composing room, the printers would take the lines of type and put them in a chase, which held type upright, and then you would just put in the stories and the photos. Then they would make a matte of that; they would take a big piece of damp cardboard and press it down onto the type, onto the page, then they would make a cast of hot metal out of that. And when that dried, they would bolt that onto the press, and that was that page of the newspaper.

AF: So as a representative of the newsroom, what was your physical role in all this, and how did you interact with the guys in the pressroom?

RL: Well, after I'd been at the paper a couple of years, one of my jobs was to actually go up to the composing room and oversee the makeup of the sports section. I would just have to stand there with a printer, the printer being the actual person who put the type into the chase and arranged the type in the page. Since the workers in the composing room at the *Democrat* were union members, they were the only ones who were allowed to touch the type. But we just had to stand there and oversee the entire process. I did have to learn how to read that type upside down and backwards. You really had to have that ability to cut stories as the printers were putting them into the chases.

AF: You say upside down and backwards; why would that be necessary?

RL: Because when that type was printed onto the page, then it would be correct, where

you could read it.

AF: Tell us a little about who you worked with in the print shop and what kind of guys they were.

RL: Well, the foreman of the composing room was Fred Campbell when I first started there. There were also a lot of deaf guys. That was one of the vocations they were trained for at the Arkansas School for the Deaf in Little Rock. One guy that I remember pretty well had been there for years; his name was Victor Bullock, Sr. He was also a big golfer in town and played in a lot of tournaments, so he was pretty well known around town. Although I could not sign the deaf language, I got along pretty well with the deaf printers. We were all working for the common goal to try to get a paper out for the day, so we were always pretty much on the same page. It was easy to get along with them. If I had to, sometimes I would write notes to them, or vice versa.

AF: What about on a day-to-day operation in the newsroom? What was the atmosphere like, and how did people tend to behave on a daily basis?

RL: Usually things were kind of frantic in the newsroom. Everybody smoked and drank. Everybody was stressed out. Everybody was working on a deadline. There was a lot of yelling in the newsroom. If somebody was upset about something, then everybody else heard about it. It was a loud place to try to work when you were trying to write a story, especially when I was a teenager. It was kind of distracting the first few months that I worked there and then it was kind of like being at a zoo, for example. It was loud. There were always people yelling for this or that, or yelling for somebody. And we had kind of a crummy phone system, so

people would just yell out the names of people who had phone calls. Or they were cussing, or they were mad about something. But there was—I think you just had to learn how to kind of shut all that out and go on and do your work. So it really taught me how to focus on the matter at hand, I think, because you just had to get your work done. If you were working on a story, you just had to get it done and do the best you could do at it, because you were only going to have "X" amount of time to do it.

AF: I would be interested to know, as a very young person walking into this business, what preconceptions you carried into the newspaper business and how it might have been different from what you expected.

RL: I'm not sure I really was aware enough of the whole newspaper process to have many preconceptions about it at all. I wasn't sure I really even understood how everyone worked at a newspaper. It took me a while even after I started working there to figure that out, because I would just be given some really simple tasks to do. After I'd been there for a few months, then I began to get a pretty good idea of how—what was needed to put out a paper every day. But I will say it was a very stressful job, and I think it's very stressful for anybody who does it. And I think—for example, everybody smoked and drank coffee. Of course, we had to be there at 5:30 or 6:00 every morning, so everybody was trying to wake up. A lot of people compensated for it by drinking, I think—compensated for the stress. There was a lot of that in the newspaper business. There would be guys throwing up in the bathroom early in the morning sometimes. You know, it's not a very pleasant thing to consider, but I think it certainly kind of underscores the whole

idea of stress in the newspaper business. It was probably way too much stress for teenagers. And that's mainly—you know, when I was at the *Democrat*, mainly teenagers were putting out the sports section. I mean, we had maybe one or two real adults in there. The company just was not going to pay an adult a living wage to work there. That was one of the real—it's a real shame.

AF: Well, from what you said, it seems that you got on-the-job training in the newspaper business. How do you think your introduction and learning of journalism would be different from someone who learned it in college or in a journalism course?

RL: Well, I think they could learn it in a much less stressful situation. You know, they say practice makes perfect, and I—I felt like I was kind of thrown into a situation. I mean, certainly I wanted to work, but—and the people in the sports department were pretty good about bringing young people along, I think. But overall, there was just a tenseness, a nervousness—kind of an edge to everything. And it was very easy to pick up on that and kind of feed into it. Probably unnecessarily so. But I—you know, in a way, you got sort of a rush of being on a deadline, but that's probably not the best way to get into journalism, really, in retrospect. I mean, I just wanted to work part-time, and it was cool to see your byline and say you worked in the newspaper business. That carried a certain amount of power with it, I think. But I think school probably would be the best way. Maybe some kind of limited part-time work. Because I think a lot of people burn out in the newspaper business; it's a very demanding job. If they really care about it, and they're going to do a good job at it, then they're going to work a lot more hours

than they get paid for, just because they want to do a good job and be conscientious. I think one of the ironies of having worked in the newspaper business for so long—yes, it pays so poorly, and it demands so much, and yet the owners often can't even pay a living wage.

AF: How would you say—have you seen any change in the standards of journalism from the time you were working in the sports department and newsroom up through today? Have you seen any changes?

RL: Yes. Personally, I think they've slipped a little. Of course, it's easy for me to sit here in my early fifties and say, "Well, back in the day, we all had great writing." Well, that's not true at all. But I do think one example would be using the computer. I think when computers came in—it was a lot harder to edit on a computer [early on]. When I first started to edit some copy, we would just rip it to pieces and reassemble it. We'd work at it until we thought we had a good story. When computers started coming in, I think my own editing style changed some just because it was difficult to move stuff around on a computer. You didn't have it all in front of you. It was clumsy to try to move blocks of text around on a computer. And my own feeling was that I probably edited less on the computer than I would have on hard copy. I was a tough editor; I would mark up the copy a lot. Or rearrange it. And I felt I probably did less of it on the computer just because it was more of a hassle. But I still read the newspapers every day. And the *Democrat* [Arkansas Democrat-Gazette]—for example, I do see bad headlines. I see stories that don't explain everything. You've got to say in a story, "What does this mean?" "How did this happen?" "Where's it going?" And a lot of times those

questions are just not answered on a news story the way they should be. Of course, in television you expect that kind of thing, but you really don't want to see that on a newspaper.

AF: You mentioned how the computer revolution impacted the way you did your job. How else did you see the transition to computers affecting the newspaper business and the people that worked in it?

RL: Well, one of the results was that computerization began to take away jobs from my friends in the composing room, so I had really mixed feelings about that. I mean, all of a sudden, here we were in the editorial department using computers, and basically we'd become the typesetters. And up until then, the company was paying guys . . .

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

RL: . . . and probably did see that computers were coming, and they were going to take their jobs. Which is exactly what happened. One of the things they tried to do was to organize our union. Excuse me. The composing room guys were hoping to organize the newsroom. And we actually did go through a campaign. It was kind of odd because we would have been part of the printers' union. I was for the union. I knew they had the union in Memphis. The writers made really good salaries and really good benefits over there. I also felt that the interests of working people—even if you're a so-called white-collar worker—generally is served better if you stick with your fellow workers, so I was very much in favor of that. But the organizing effort failed in the newsroom at the *Democrat*. And it really

wasn't much longer until the computer and the new cold-type process began to eliminate a lot of the printers' jobs.

AF: Tell us about this organizational effort. How did that begin? What happened?

RL: Well, we had a few meetings with the head of the printers' union from the composing room. George Fischer was his name. George wanted to try to get the newsroom organized. It would have been kind of strange in that it would have been sort of a white-collar union—I mean, white-collar workers joining a blue-collar union, which was kind of unusual at the time. But I think that would have been the International Telegraphers Union? ITU maybe? Or they were a branch maybe of the AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations]. Anyway, there was another—the *Memphis Commercial-Appeal*—the reporters were organized over there, and they had a union there. And I believe a fellow did come over from the *Commercial-Appeal* and speak to us. But we did apply to vote on that. I think the organizing effort failed by about two to one, something like that. So that was pretty much the last of the union talk at the *Democrat* as far as I know.

AF: Was the move to organize the newsroom actively opposed by management?

RL: Oh, yes. They absolutely opposed it. They claimed—they also claimed as many newsroom workers as they could for management. Of course, management—people who were considered to be management could not vote in the election, so that probably took away some "yes" votes. But I think, by and large, the problem really was just more of a snob thing. I don't think the reporters really understood that they maybe needed to be represented by a union. It seems they just—even

though they had low pay and few benefits. I just don't think they took a long-term approach. Obviously, they didn't, or we'd have had a union then.

AF: What, in general, was the relationship between the print workers in the print shop and the guys on the editorial side? What did they think of each other?

RL: Well, of course, the guys in the composing room were blue-collar workers. And the folks in the—the reporters and the editorial [staff] in the newsroom were all so-called white-collar workers. The blue-collar guys did not care very much for the people in the editorial room. I think they thought we were all kind of snobs, and it seemed they probably resented the education level. They even made fun of them a lot of times. They kind of resented editors coming up and telling them what to do in the composing room. Even though I had worked in the composing room quite a bit, I got along with these guys pretty well, I think. I just tried to be friends with them. I hopefully never tried to lord it over them that I was an editor or whatever. But I think they had a lot of resentment toward the people in the editorial department in general.

AF: Did it really matter much what the people in the editorial department thought about the printers? How many people in the editorial department actually interacted with the printers?

RL: Really, not that many. Because you just had two or three editors in the composing room, maybe, overseeing the printers as they made up the pages. Of course, that was in the days before computers. After the computers, the composing room basically vanished as so much work was taken over in the editorial rooms. It used to be very physical work putting out a newspaper, especially in the composing

room, but that really changed. And now about the only physical work done in a newspaper is running the press; there's more involved in that. But the composing room as we knew it—when I started working in the newspaper business—is pretty much gone.

AF: What was the composing room like? What did it look and feel and smell like?

RL: Oh, it was a very noisy place. You didn't want to wear good clothes in there because there was ink all over everything. It was really noisy because the old Linotype machines were running all the time. As those machines cast a line of type, it would rattle down into a tray until you had a tray full of type, and that was about maybe one story. Then that would be carried off to be put in a form where one newspaper page would be put together. The printers yelled at each other a lot, and they were always telling jokes. Of course, it was a stressful place. They had very strict deadlines up there. They had to get these pages put together. When you filled up one of these forms, which represented one page of the newspaper, then a cast would be made out of that. They would take a soft piece of cardboard and put it over the form that held all the type and the photos, and they would send that through a press that would mash it down and make an impression on that piece of cardboard. Then that piece of cardboard—hot metal would be poured onto that, and they would make a cast out of that. When that cast set up, that would be bolted onto the press. And that was one page of the newspaper. So it was pretty physical work. They would shove those forms around on these heavy tables on wheels, and the thing would be shoved around the composing room quite a bit.

AF: You said in some ways it was a rather trying entry for you into the business because of the pressure and your age and those sorts of things. But what lessons and what capabilities did you gather early on that have served you well later in your life?

RL: Well, I think—obviously, you get put into that situation where you're on a deadline every day, maybe on several different deadlines actually, and you've got to be able to think on your feet and react. Especially to late-breaking news. You've got to be really organized. And you have to have the ability to work ahead, to some extent. I've covered a lot of events where I didn't have time to write anything down on paper. You just had to take your notes and call the paper and dictate a story off the top of your head—that's what we used to call it—just in order to make a deadline. It didn't make for great writing, but there's not always great writing in a newspaper. Most of us just—just run of the mill—it's just reporting, and you've got to get the job done, and you've got to do it in the time that you're allotted. But those are things, certainly skills that you acquire in the newspaper business. I did. And some of those things I certainly brought into small business with me. And things that I still practice.

AF: This off-the-top-of-your-head reporting—how did the physical process work? If you didn't write a story on paper, what happened?

RL: Well, basically, you would just have to take your notes. Say in a sporting event, you could maybe go ahead and write the highlights out, if you had time to do that. But you just looked at your notes and went with what you had. You had to just kind of make it up there on the spot.

AF: But how did it actually get to the newspaper, and how was it handled as physical copy?

RL: We would just have to call it in. You'd always have to have access to a phone. If you were in a press box, for example, there were usually telephones in a press box, so you were okay on that. Then you would dictate it to somebody at the paper who was sitting down at a typewriter, and they would type it all out and then take that copy to the slot man. Then it would be edited, and the slot man would figure out what kind of headline to put on it and give it to an editor. The editor would go over the story and write the headline and then send it on to the composing room.

AF: Let's talk for a second on what you might regard as some of the most memorable experiences you've had. You've spent all these years being a newspaper person and a reporter. There's bound to be some things that stand out in your mind.

RL: Yes, I think one of the—I did practically all the jobs in the newsroom at one time or another for some period of time, from writing sports to being a slot man to doing general assignments reporting and features and even an editorial once in a while. I think interviewing personalities was a lot of fun. And I think one that stands out was probably Johnny Cash, the singer. He was a native Arkansan, and he was just such a genuine type of guy. A lot of personalities really don't want to be interviewed or don't want to take the time to be interviewed. But he was a very gracious man and just really down to earth. Certainly, I think that was the image that he had among his fans. So that was a lot of fun talking to people like that.

AF: Where were you when the newspaper war between the *Democrat* and *Gazette* oc-

curred?

RL: Well, I think I probably had just left the business, but I followed it real closely because I had friends at both newspapers. I'd actually had a job offer at the *Arkansas Gazette* to work as a business writer, and I turned it down. A few months later, that was the end of the newspaper war, [and] the *Gazette* was gone. I think that was around 1991. But I hated to see the demise of the so-called two-newspaper town because, obviously, the less competition you have, I think, the more the product's going to suffer. And when you've got two newspapers pushing each other, the reporting's going to be better. The reporters are going to be hungrier, and they want to outdo the other paper. And the big winner in all this, of course, is the public. Even though I never felt the *Democrat* was a great newspaper, I think, if nothing else, it served to keep the *Gazette* folks on their toes and pushed them a little bit. There was certainly good reporting at the *Democrat*, too; I'm not saying there wasn't. But I think in general it's a shame to see the demise of so many newspapers over the last couple of decades, and the consolidation of the media because it's just too easy for the winners to put out a bland product. For example, if they don't want to do any investigative reporting, they don't have to do it. Investigative reporting is expensive, and most places just don't do it. If they're making plenty of money—now that they're a monopoly, they're not going to put on any extra dollars to try to do anything that might make a difference. I think newspapers do make a difference, but I think they can always do more. And it's kind of sad to see the consolidation of the media. I heard recently that there are seven big companies that run all the big newspapers, movies, and big media out-

lets. Only seven companies. We don't need more consolidation, we need more diversity. We need more people speaking up for people that are impoverished, people who are getting ripped off. Who's going to do that kind of work? Who's going to be the voice for those kinds of people?

AF: So do you think when there were two newspapers the competitiveness of the situation was on the rank and file workers' minds every day?

RL: Oh, yes. I know it was, because you would hear people saying, "Well, so-and-so from the *Gazette's* going to be on this." Or, "They're going to call the *Gazette* first." Or, "They're going to have this story first." And people would talk about that. So yes, there was a sort of competitiveness. I remember if I was covering something, if I had been writing notes and missed something and there was a *Gazette* reporter next to me, I might have said, "Hey, what happened right then?" And the reporter wouldn't tell me. I mean, that happened. Sometimes it would happen at a sporting event—you'd be trying to make notes and something big would happen. You missed a big play, and you ask the competing reporter, and they just wouldn't tell you. That happened to me more than once, so I learned how to pay attention.

AF: When you think back on your years in the newspaper business, what tends to stand out in your mind the most? Is it your own personal experience? The people you worked with? The professional situation at the time? What things stand out in your mind when you think back on those days?

RL: I think just the fact that I was a kid working in the newspaper business, and it was an atypical experience. Gosh, by the time I was twenty-one, I'd already been

working as a professional for five years in the newspaper business. Six years, I'm sorry. And I just—most kids just do not have that level of responsibility. When I was eighteen, I was the slot man for the spots department, and I was responsible for three or four pages daily and eight or ten pages on Sunday. And everything had to be close to perfect. But it wasn't always. You wanted to make it perfect, but that didn't always happen, so you just had to get close. And for being eighteen, I felt like I was close most of the time. If you weren't perfect, there was always somebody to let you know, so you would just do better the next time. But it was a lot of stress and a lot of pressure. I don't think it was all that healthy. I think that happens a lot in the newspaper business. You know, it takes a lot out of you to do newspaper work, I think, because you want to be conscientious and you want to do a really good job, and it really taxes you emotionally a lot, in a way that a lot of jobs don't. A lot of jobs can be a grind, but they can be a grind without being an emotional grind.

AF: You started working in newspapers at a young age. When did you first start being aware of and following newspapers?

RL: Well, at the time of the desegregation crisis at Central High School in Little Rock in 1957, I was six years old. And we got the *Democrat* every afternoon, so I knew from watching television and from my parents that there was a lot going on at the school. I didn't really understand it, but I would get the newspaper every afternoon and sit down with it on the floor in the living room and just decipher as much of it as I could with my six-year-old reading skills. But I was able to keep up with it really pretty well. Being able to read when you're a kid—having good

reading skills is kind of a way to decode the adult world, to some extent. You can kind of start getting into that a little bit. Like, maybe I couldn't get all the answers from my folks, but I could find more, or find other answers in the newspaper. So it was important to me as a little kid.

AF: So at a young age you developed some sort of love of the written word that has stayed with you?

RL: Oh, yes, I think so. I think there's no question about it. When I was about ten years old, my older sister was in high school—she was six years older than me—and I would get hold of her high school literature book and read the short stories in there. And they were just amazing to me. I didn't always understand them, but certainly I could read the stories. And it gave me kind of a world to sort of retreat into as a kid and think about the questions raised in those stories, and what the possible meanings of those stories were. So I've been pretty well connected into the printed word for a real long time. I've worked in it, or in and out of it, for about thirty-five years, I would say. I also worked—I also helped start *Arkansas Times* magazine here in Little Rock in 1973. Of course, it was called *Union Station Times* then for a while. I later worked as managing editor of *Arkansas Business* magazine in 1990.

AF: Let's—short term—go back and—I'd like to get the chronology of your résumé. When you started at the *Democrat*, when you—just step by step.

RL: Yes. I started working at the *Democrat* in 1966. I had just turned fifteen years old. I started working there in the sports department covering junior high school sports events. I stayed at the *Democrat* until I was twenty-one. I also worked on

the copy desk and did other jobs in the editorial department, general assignments reporting, writing features, book reviews, movie reviews, and even contribute editorials on occasion. When I was twenty-one, I took a job with the *West Memphis Evening Times* as the managing editor. At the time that was about a 10,000 circulation daily newspaper, except for weekends. I had that job about six months and then decided to return to Little Rock and finish college at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. Then I started working back at the *Democrat* in the sports department—that would have been about 1972—and stayed there a couple more years. During that time, I helped start *Arkansas Times* magazine. I did get back to work at the *Democrat* [in 1978]. I worked weekends part-time on the copy desk for about a year. I also had done stories off and on for *Arkansas Times* over the years. I also worked for *Southern Magazine* for a while doing book reviews. In 1990 I was managing editor at *Arkansas Business* magazine for about a year. I had just sold my other business—I started a business in 1974 and sold in 1988. [I] worked at *Arkansas Business* for about a year and then left there and went back into small business.

AF: What would you like to say or touch on that we might have skipped over?

RL: I don't know. I'm really fond of the newspaper business. It's changed an awful lot, I think, since I went in there. But I think the need—the basics are still there. You've got to get the story right; you've got to get it out to people; you've got to do extra on it if you can, I think. And, gosh, I've written a lot of stories freelance where I spent hours on them and didn't get paid much at all for putting in that kind of work. But I think conscientious reporters are going to do that. That's just the

way it is. And they're going to do it because they love doing it, and they love writing. I certainly miss that aspect of the business. I don't miss the low pay. I don't miss the stress. It's a shame that the media outlets, and the newspapers in particular, can't—I mean, they've been notoriously bad about paying a living wage, and always have been. So I would certainly like to see some changes in that regard, just for the sake of the reporters and editors who work there.

[00:59:00.14]

[End of Interview]

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