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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with:

Al May
Telephone Interview
16 April 2007

Interviewer: Jerry McConnell

Jerry McConnell: This is Jerry McConnell. I'm here in my home in Greenwood, Arkansas, on April 16, 2007, preparing to do a telephone interview with Al May, who is in his home in McLean, Virginia. Al, the first thing I need to do is ask you if I have your permission to tape this interview and turn it over to the University of Arkansas oral history archives. [Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History, Special Collections Department, University of Arkansas Libraries]

Al May: Yes, you do. You have my permission.

JM: Okay, very good. Al, now, you have been with George Washington University for about ten years and—as I understand—and you've been program director—journalism program director and—and you're teaching at this time. Before that you worked at at least two other newspapers, I think—the *Atlanta* [Georgia] *Journal-Constitution* and the *Charlotte News*—or was it Raleigh [North Carolina]?

AM: *Raleigh News*.

JM: *Raleigh News and Observer*.

AM: Right.

JM: Before that, apparently, you got your start at the *Arkansas Democrat*. Is that correct?

AM: That is true.

JM: Okay. Well, let's get you there.

AM: Okay.

JM: And let's—let's go through your resume, your history. But first I need you to give me your full name.

AM: Albert Louis May the third [III]. [Laughs]

JM: Okay. And Louis is L-O-U-I-S?

AM: Right.

JM: Okay. All right. And where and when were you born, Al?

AM: I was born in a naval hospital in Oakland, California, in December 28, 1948, when my dad was a Navy doctor on his way overseas after the war. He had stayed in the Navy, and we were headed toward the Philippines.

JM: Yes.

AM: I ended up being born in California—and would later live there in the service. So I'm a native Californian, although my family is Southern.

JM: Yes, okay. So did you go on to the Philippines with him?

AM: I did. I did.

JM: Yes.

AM: I spent my first, I guess, three years. I can't remember exactly. Three or four

years. Three years, I think, in Subic Bay in the Philippines.

JM: Yes, okay. And then did you come back to the [United] States?

AM: Right. Dad stayed in the Navy. We ended up—he left the Navy in the mid-1950s and moved the family to Poplar Bluff, Missouri where he got into a medical practice with the McPheeters family, who owned the Lucy Lee Hospital there—a small hospital. And there was a Navy medical connection that had led him to go to Poplar Bluff.

JM: Okay. What was this family's name? How do you spell McPheeters?

AM: M-C-P-H-E-E-T-E-R-S, just like it sounds.

JM: Okay. And what was the name of the hospital?

AM: Lucy Lee Hospital.

JM: Lucy Lee. Okay.

AM: Lucy Lee.

JM: Okay.

AM: Which is still there.

JM: Yes, okay.

AM: A regional hospital and—and he had looked for and wanted to bring—he had grown up in southern Mississippi in Biloxi.

JM: Oh, okay.

AM: And had wanted to move to a small town. He ended up getting this connection because the senior owner of the hospital had been a naval officer. Anyway, so we—the family ended up moving there. So I grew—I spent from the second grade through high school in Poplar Bluff.

JM: In Poplar Bluff. Okay. What was your father's name?

AM: Albert Louis May, Jr.

JM: Yes—well, obviously. [Laughter] Okay. And what was your—what was your mother's name?

AM: Elivia. E-L-I-V-I-A.

JM: Okay.

AM: May.

JM: Okay. What was her maiden name?

AM: Clodfelter. C-L-O-D-F-E-L-T-E-R. She was from Atlanta [Georgia].

JM: Oh, okay—so they were Southern.

AM: And she's still living.

JM: Is she?

AM: And he's—he is passed. My mother grew up in Atlanta. My grandfather was a conductor on Southern railways. So on my dad's side was southern Mississippi. And on my mom's side it was several generations Georgia and Atlanta.

JM: Yes. Yes, okay. So where did you go to the first grade?

AM: In Jacksonville, Florida, where Dad was stationed and spent his last year in the Navy.

JM: Okay. But then—then after that you went through—all the way through school at Poplar Bluff, Missouri. Graduated from high school there.

AM: Right.

JM: Okay. Then—take me through your—did you go through—to college then?

AM: I did. I went straight from high school to the University of Missouri at Columbia.

JM: Okay.

AM: And had no inkling that I was interested in journalism. I was a history major and

a political science minor. I had gone to school, as most doctors' sons do, with the expectation that I, too, would be a doctor and come home. But it was clearly [laughs] I had no appetite—aptitude for it. [Laughs] I got there and—and did terrible in the sciences and then kind of wandered over and then did pretty well—a pretty good student in history and political science, which was kind of my interest. I also was in Navy ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] because this was the late 1960s and so we had the draft threat. I had joined Navy ROTC in part because my dad had been in the Navy and partly because I knew that I was going to get drafted or go anyway. So I was also a Navy ROTC undergraduate in college.

JM: Okay. And your original degree there at Missouri was a bachelor in history, right?

AM: Right, a BA [bachelor of arts] in History.

JM: And with a political science minor.

AM: Right.

JM: Did you stay and go into graduate school, then?

AM: No, I went into the Navy.

JM: Oh, did you? Okay.

AM: When I graduated from college in 1970, I went on active duty because I'd been in Navy ROTC. I ended up being put on an old 1945-commissioned ammunition ship, which was named the *Mount Katmai*. The Navy has this perverse notion of naming their—or they did—I don't know if they still do—their ammo ships after volcanoes.

JM: Yes. [Laughs]

AM: The Katmai—Katmai was a mountain volcano in Alaska.

JM: Yes.

AM: I spent almost two years on active duty and one—one deployment to Vietnam, which we—the ship rearmed destroyers and [aircraft] carriers in the South China Sea up and down the gun line. Spent about ten months overseas.

JM: Did you ever . . . ?

AM: That was 1971.

JM: Did you ever come under fire?

AM: No. The only fire I saw was going the other direction.

JM: Yes.

AM: And most of the time—I mean, it was—I think it was actually classified as hazardous duty because [laughs] we were rolling around on a lot of ammunition. But . . .

JM: Yes.

AM: . . . it was a—did you ever see the movie, *Mr. Roberts*?

JM: Oh, yes.

AM: That's what it was. [Laughs]

JM: Yes.

AM: It was a—it was a real working surplus—I mean, kind of cargo ship . . .

JM: Yes.

AM: But the Navy was interesting, and I came back and—we came back after the deployment, and I stayed in the Navy a short time. [This] was when [President Richard M.] Nixon was mothballing a lot of the Navy. And I got an "early out" [early honorable discharge]. I had a three-year active-duty commitment. I got out

almost a year early. More than a year early, I guess. So I didn't know what I wanted to do because I found out thirty days before that I could get out early—get on the early-out list. I didn't know—have a really—an idea of what I wanted to do. I was thinking about law school. I didn't really know. I went back home after I got out of the Navy and went back to the University of Missouri. I went back to the political science department to see—I think I went to—I think I went to the history department, too, but I was kind of seeing what was available. I had planned to go to law school, but I had missed the time for the LSATs [Law School Admission Test] and I needed to take the test, so I ended up staying—anyway, I went to my former adviser in political science, and he said, "Well, why don't you just take some grad [graduate] courses," and I got real interested in that. I enrolled in the graduate program in the political science department and had an intention and got interested in—and also I got a teaching assistantship where I was actually teaching, as a graduate teaching assistant, American government.

JM: Yes.

AM: And really thought I was really interested in making a career as an academic. And in political science, so I had—so I did that for a year. I guess this would've been 1972 through 1973. And then I got—and, you know, and I think this is kind of an interesting point about me and my connection to the *Democrat*. How important the *Democrat* ultimately became to me was because I had not done any journalism.

JM: Yes.

AM: I mean, I hadn't done it in high school. I hadn't had the interest, and so many of us that ended up in the profession kind of have it in their blood and, you know,

started out when they were kids. And [they] worked years and years and worked summers and all that, and I didn't. I didn't have the—I didn't have an inkling that I even had the aptitude for it until the—it was the spring of 1973 when I was in the grad program in political science. This was the Watergate year.

JM: Yes.

AM: And I got real interested in the journalism that was going on, and it was in the summer, or about into the spring, and I knew I was going to spend the summer working on my thesis for my graduate degree—my master's degree. I thought, "Well, wouldn't it be interesting?" You know, I was kind of interested in journalism, so I walked across—literally, the political science department is on the other side of the street—the corner—from the journalism school. I just walked across the street—walked in and said, "Can I take a—you got any summer courses?" They had a course in introductory news writing.

JM: Oh, okay.

AM: And I signed up. And got in, and that was it. [Laughs]

JM: Yes. That caught you, huh?

AM: It hooked me, and I wasn't terribly good at it. Like I said, I had never written a news story. I had no idea what this was really about, and I had always been an interested reader and always was very interested in politics and government, but I wasn't even a newspaper reader. I fast became one and finished up my master's in political science and moved seamlessly right into the master's right there—in their master's program at [the University of] Missouri School of Journalism. And was there through the fall of 1974. My last semester was in the Washington reporting program . . .

JM: Yes.

AM: In lieu of doing a thesis for your MA [master of arts] in journalism—you go to Washington [DC] for your final semester and actually report on the Hill. And so I went in the—I went in the summer of 1974 and then in the fall. That was a great time in Washington. This was when Nixon was—had left office you know, and all of this. It was really a heady time. And so I graduated with my MA—well, two MAs, actually—at the end of 1974.

JM: Okay. So—so you finished up when? In winter or something?

AM: December of 1974.

JM: December of 1974. Okay.

AM: Yes. That's when I finished up. Yes.

JM: Yes. Okay. Well, of course, Missouri has always been one of the more storied journalism programs in the country—college journalism programs. So you were—[laughs] you were in a good spot. After you graduated, then how did you get to the *Democrat*?

AM: Well, one of the guys—Ralph Patrick, then the city editor . . .

JM: Yes.

AM: There had been a relationship between the Washington program, and my memory fails me here. I can't remember precisely—Ralph visited—Ed Lambeth, who ran—who's now an emeritus [professor] at Missouri—ran the program. And we—what we did, we wrote stories about the local congressional delegations back for newspapers in the country. For example, I wrote a lot for the *Aniston Star*.

JM: Yes.

AM: Now, I think the *Democrat* had been taking some of that at one point. But any-

way, regardless, Ralph had come and visited the bureau, and I had met him. I had always had a real interest [in working in the South]—and he was kind of, I think, looking to . . .

JM: Yes.

AM: He was in town and he met with a couple of us, I think. But I know I met with him and he heard my story and being from that area. I mean, literally, I grew up, what, a three and a half hour drive north of Little Rock.

JM: Yes.

AM: When I graduated, I was looking for jobs. One of the places I sent a letter to was to Ralph. And I can't remember how long it took. But I ended up going to work for the *Democrat*. I ended up coming down, interviewing at the *Democrat*, and Ralph didn't have any jobs in the main newsroom, but they had decided to open up this bureau in Hot Springs. [Laughs] Here I was—you know, I was coming out of this heady experience of Washington and all of that, and you all still—you all hired me and then dispatched me to set up this bureau in Hot Springs. That was quite an experience.

JM: In what way?

AM: Well, it was just a huge learning experience. I mean, I literally—despite, you know, the good training that I'd had from Missouri, I still didn't really have a lot of experience as a reporter or as a newspaper writer.

JM: Yes.

AM: I mean—and so it was a—of course—[laughs] there were no young people in Hot Springs. [Laughs] Here I was—I was single. I was in my, what, early twenties. Ralph had convinced me—when he hired me, he convinced me that Hot Springs

was this great cosmopolitan place. I got down there and discovered really what it was was this old resort town. I mean there was not a lot to do, and they put me—they put me in the—the Hussmans—what's the name of the newspaper the . . . ?

JM: The *Sentinel Record*, I believe.

AM: Yes, the *Sentinel Record*. They put me in the *Sentinel Record*, who wasn't overjoyed to have me. They stuck me back in an office almost into the—next to the back shop. I had this little desk and a phone, and all the people who worked around me were the guys working in the back shop. Laying out the paper. It was a real introduction to my first newspaper job. It was great, too, in the sense that it—I mean, I learned a lot. I wrote a lot. I actually had to turn my copy in—this was before computers. We had the mimeo[graph]—you could—you could send it over the wires, but maybe they didn't have one there.

JM: Yes.

AM: I used to get up every morning in my apartment and dictate all my stories. Who was the woman that took the dictation?

JM: Probably Mabel Berry.

AM: Yes, Mabel. So Mabel would—sometimes Mabel would call me, wake me up, and I would literally lay there with a cup of coffee and read the copy to Mabel.

JM: Yes.

AM: You know, one of the things it taught me—and I think this is where I really did learn my journalism and the fundamentals of it—is the ability to write clearly, to be able to write conversationally. And to write on deadline. I covered everything on from Oaklawn [horse] racing to—I'd go out and do color stories on the crowds during the meets—I was only there eight months. And I did—you know, the local

stories—waking up the local alligators in the alligator farm. [Laughs] Just kind of stuff like that. They had a Miss Arkansas pageant there. I covered that. But, of course, I wanted to be a political journalist. All of this was—it was very, you know, enriching. I was there for eight months, I guess. Or close—eight or nine months. And I do not remember why you—I mean, I wanted to come to Little Rock to be in the main newsroom, and I wanted to cover the legislature and politics. That's what I wanted to do. I finally convinced you all to move me.

JM: Yes.

AM: I moved up—I was less than a year in Hot Springs. I don't even remember if you replaced me in Hot Springs.

JM: I can't remember that either, although we did hire at one point in time, and—and he may have just started out as a—a guy named Mike Masterson.

AM: I knew Masterson. He was the editor then of the *Sentinel*.

JM: Okay, was he already the editor then? Okay. So . . .

AM: Yes, yes.

JM: I don't know whether we—we had used him—we used him at some point to file stories for us, too, but I don't remember at what point that was.

AM: Right.

JM: But—so I—I don't remember either if we—if we did replace you. At any rate, you moved on up to—do you remember what month you started at the *Democrat*?

AM: No, I don't.

JM: Okay.

AM: It was relatively early in . . .

JM: Nineteen seventy-five

AM: Nineteen seventy-five

JM: Yes, okay. So you moved—you moved up to . . .

AM: It may have been January. It was relatively early in 1975.

JM: You moved up to the *Democrat*, then, after eight or nine months. What did you start out on after you got to the *Democrat* [in Little Rock]?

AM: General assignment.

JM: Okay.

AM: Then the county courthouse. Working with Bob Sallee [laughs] who was just an absolute joy. And Sallee, of course, had been there forever at that time or seemed like it to me. He was the senior reporter. I don't remember how long I was—I was down at the courthouse. I mean, I was doing GA [general assignment]. But shared that little—the little bureau in the Pulaski County Courthouse with Sallee.

JM: Okay, he—he was no longer the police reporter at that time, then?

AM: No, he was covering the county [government and courts].

JM: Yes. Okay. All right.

AM: I remember him as an old police reporter.

JM: Yes. Well, I think he went back to it, too, later on. At any rate—so you were—you were down there—do you remember what kind of stories you covered during that era?

AM: During when I was a GA?

JM: Yes.

AM: Well, I do remember one. Probably the first crack at a national story was I covered Wilbur Mills' Masonic trial. [Laughs] [Wilbur Mills was chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee from 1957 to 1975.] When they kicked

Wilbur out of the Masons after the—after the—the last episode of the Fannie Fox
...

JM: Fannie Fox.

AM: . . . thing, you know?

JM: Yes.

AM: You know, he'd had a drinking problem and then he'd kind of convinced everybody that he was reformed, and then he showed up on the stage with Fannie in Boston [Massachusetts] and then it all started again.

JM: Yes.

AM: Well, the Kensett Masonic Lodge had a trial. [Laughs] I covered that, and what I always remember about that was that—because everybody else had had deadlines. Because that was—we were a PM [newspaper which was delivered in the afternoon]. I remember the trial got out. We couldn't actually cover the trial. We were out—it was a stakeout around it, I remember that. All the [television] networks were there and all that stuff. It was the first really big national story I ever covered. Anyway, Wilbur had snuck out the back. Everybody else [the other reporters] had to go file, and I went to Wilbur's house because I didn't have to file until the morning. I went to Wilbur's house and knocked on his back door, and he came out and talked to me. And, you know, I'll never forget it because he was wearing these shorty pajamas. He was not the most attractive man. [Laughs] I swear he might've had a little to drink, but I don't—I can't prove that. But we sat on his back porch and he talked for an hour, but he didn't say anything particularly newsworthy. I remember I got some comments from him after the trial, which everybody else had to follow the next day.

JM: Yes, yes.

AM: Another story I remember as really a baptism of fire was the—do you remember when this tornado hit Cabot, Arkansas?

JM: Yes.

AM: I literally was in the newsroom when—you know how those storms come through—there had been a call that they—there were these tornadoes that were going up the freeway toward Cabot. I and a photographer—I can't remember his—it wasn't Robert Ike [Thomas], but it was somebody—jumped in a car and literally chased this tornado. It went into this little town of Cabot, which had—the tornado had hit the center of the town and killed a family in a pickup truck. I want to say it was, like, five people. It just kind of like swooped down and then killed this family. This was the first time I had covered any kind of disaster. One of the things about it was that Ralph sent me—he was the city editor—sent me to talk to the [victims'] family, and I remember never having done this, you know? And summoning up the courage to go knock on this trailer park—in this trailer park on a mobile home door not having any idea how I would be greeted. And having—the family, you know, were so impressed that we cared enough to talk to them, in a sense. They brought me in, sat me down and gave me coffee. Gave me pictures, gave me all kinds—just—and so it was really one of those kind of real learning experiences that I think is where—I mean, I truly learned what a lot of people would've learned earlier in their careers, I learned it at the *Democrat*. Just doing these mix of stories and a lot of this, because I became far more specialized after the *Democrat*. I largely became a specialist and did mostly politics and government for the rest of my career. But for that—almost three years I was with the

Democrat, I really did learn all kinds of [things] and get all kinds of journalistic experience.

JM: Okay. The—I don't guess this is real important, but the photographer could have been O. D. Gunner.

AM: I don't remember.

JM: Or Glen . . .

AM: I want to . . .

JM: Or Glen [Moon?] or . . .?

AM: I think it was a woman.

JM: Oh, okay. Well, there was a Jan Housewirth at one time.

AM: Might've been Jan.

JM: Yes, okay.

AM: I remember Jan.

JM: Yes, okay. But at any rate . . .

AM: Yes, I think it was. I can't remember, but I think . . .

JM: Well, that's all right. Okay, and so then—any other stories you remember before you got sent to the capitol?

AM: Nothing jumps out—nothing in particular.

JM: Yes, okay. At some point, and we might as well discuss it here—what kind of paper was the *Democrat* then? What did you think about the *Democrat*?

AM: You know, I've thought about it, and it's hard for me to say what—I cannot remember that I thought about it at the time as much as I can looking back on it.

JM: Yes.

AM: I remember what I thought, and I still think it was a jewel of a little newsroom

with—and I think I was really fortunate. I don't mean this to flatter you or anybody else, but I was fortunate to go to a newspaper where I had really good editors. And a very talented but small, scrappy staff—and that's what I remember.

JM: Yes.

AM: I mean, it was small enough that a beginner could get good stories and get a lot of attention from the editors, and that sort of thing.

JM: Yes. Do you . . . ?

AM: I wasn't lost in a cog. There was a scrappy feel to the place. At the time, the paper was still an afternoon newspaper.

JM: Yes.

AM: It was bleeding circulation. It was not a place where you looked for a lot of future [laughs], necessarily.

JM: Yes, yes.

AM: But I didn't really go there. I mean, I—I had planned to move on. I mean, you know, that's how you've advanced in journalism. I'd gone there with this kind of, you know: "What an opportunity all this is." As it turned out, it was a terrific opportunity. But there was the sense, you know, that we were up against the big *Gazette*. The *Gazette* had a huge—a much larger staff.

JM: Yes.

AM: You know, but we were pretty scrappy.

JM: Yes.

AM: There were very talented people there. I mean, I'm . . .

JM: Who do you remember from the . . . ?

AM: Oh, I remember a lot of them. Scudder . . .

JM: James Scudder.

AM: James Scudder was just a marvelous human being. And, actually, James got me interested in being a Nieman Fellow later, because he had been a Nieman Fellow. And a marvelous writer. And then—well, David Terrell, Ralph, Amanda Husted, Bill Husted—oh—oh, Bob Lancaster. I mean, a terrific writer. Another Nieman Fellow.

JM: Yes.

AM: You know, and in the [laughs]—in the—what were there, a dozen of us or so in the newsroom?

JM: Something like that. I probably have a staff roster from that period [laughs] somewhere in my drawer.

AM: And it was really small.

JM: There weren't many. Yes.

AM: But they were bright. They were . . .

JM: Yes.

AM: It wasn't like it was, you know—I mean, it was a—very professional, and everybody was pretty charged up, as I remember. There was—you know, a lot of going out afterwards and drinking and, you know . . .

JM: Yes.

AM: And it was a real—I can . . .

JM: A real newspaper. [Laughs]

AM: Yes, yes, it really was. I mean, it was.

JM: Yes.

AM: You know, the pay was lousy.

JM: Yes.

AM: We didn't—it was hard to get to go anywhere because you had the expense, you know. But it was great.

JM: Was Husted still a reporter then, or was he assistant managing—city editor?

AM: No, he was still—he was still a reporter. He became an editor after I left.

JM: Did he? Okay. Then was Gary Rice there any of the time that you . . . ?

AM: Oh, yes. Yes, yes, a great guy.

JM: Yes, Gary—I don't—you may not know this—Gary is now a journalism professor.

AM: Where?

JM: At Cal-State Fresno [California State University at Fresno].

AM: Oh, really?

JM: Yes, yes.

AM: Well, that's where we all of us hacks end up. [Laughs]

JM: [Laughter] Well, I don't know about that, but that's where the ones who know journalism wound up sometimes. But anyway—so how did—how did the *Democrat* at that time compare with the *Gazette*? Do you remember your view about—about it at that time?

AM: Oh, it was just such a—it was—it was somewhat a paper of record, more of a traditional *New York Times*—cover everything record piece. And I highly admired the—the *Gazette*. I never applied at the *Gazette*. Not—I can't—I don't know if I ever had a reason why, other than I did not expect to stay—well, my goal was to go back to Washington and to get to a major paper. I hadn't grown up right there so I was always looking to leave. I had gone there with the idea of spending

three—three years or so kind of—you know, starter paper—doing well, get going, and then move on. I never did apply at the *Gazette*, even though I had a high regard for the *Gazette*—particularly, people like Ernie Dumas, who I just thought was one of the truly best journalists I've run into.

JM: Yes.

AM: And Ernie and, oh, what was the other guy's name? Doug . . .

JM: Doug Smith?

AM: Doug Smith.

JM: Yes.

AM: Just top-notch people that were—Linda Tirey?

JM: Brenda. Yes.

AM: Yes, Brenda Tirey, right.

JM: Brenda. Yes. Was she at the *Gazette* by then or . . .?

AM: Yes, yes, she was at the *Gazette*.

JM: Oh. See, she'd been at the *Democrat* before that.

AM: No, I know. But it wasn't, you know, and they all treated me terrifically.

JM: Yes.

AM: When I moved up to the capitol, which I can't even remember—was it—? It must've been some time in 1976.

JM: Yes.

AM: [David] Pryor was governor—whenever Pryor got elected governor. We had—I think—I want to say Terrell had been the capitol person, and he moved to do something else. Ralph moved me up, and I was up there in this little newsroom.

Bill Simmons was there for AP [Associated Press], and Sylvia Spencer for the

UPI [United Press International]. There were, like, four *Gazette* people. [Laughs]

JM: Yes.

AM: I mean, I was kind—I was—you had the two wires and me.

JM: Yes.

AM: Then the four *Gazette* people.

JM: That was probably Dumas and Doug Smith and Brenda.

AM: And Brenda and what was the other woman's name? Oh, gosh. Sorry, I can't remember her name.

JM: I can't think of who it could've been. []

AM: Then every once in a while, this guy—a Douthit?

JM: Yes, George Douthit. Yes.

AM: Yes. It was me against them.

JM: Who was George working for at that time?

AM: George was working for his own—didn't he have a little string of his own . . . ?

JM: Yes. Yes, he may have. He may have [].

AM: Some sort of news service he was running out there.

JM: Yes. Yes, that's possible.

AM: He was an interesting character. I met some great characters there. But I was up against the *Gazette*. They beat me all the time, but I would beat them enough. So I think they—they treated me terrifically. They didn't treat me like—they treated me great. Even though they would whisper around me. [Laughs] They wouldn't tell me what was going on. Oh, and John Bennett at the *Commercial Appeal*.

JM: *Commercial Appeal*.

AM: He didn't actually work—he had a different bureau. He was in and out all the

time. That's how I met John. It was just a great little scrappy press corps and I learned about political coverage doing it. And—and up against the bigger paper and up against the paper that—you know, every day they just beat my brains out. I'd get up and try to figure a different angle.

JM: Well, of course, they had—they had been there for a while. They had experience, for one thing, and—I'll have to say in my view that Ernie Dumas was maybe the best I ever remember at covering the state capitol.

AM: Oh, yes. I mean, he was—and he had—and he had such sources. I had to be careful working a story because I—he had such loyalty of people up there, I knew that if I started asking questions about a story, it would get back to Dumas in about five minutes.

JM: Yes. [Laughter]

AM: I always—and, you know—and—and Ernie, later on, actually, helped me get the job at the *News and Observer* through Claude Sitton. It was Ernie that had recommended me through—that's how I—that was the contact.

JM: Yes. Okay. So you wound up—you wound up staying at the *Democrat* 'til when—about 1978? Is that right or . . .?

AM: Yes, March of 1978.

JM: Yes. The rest of that time you were out at the capitol?

AM: Almost all of it. I [laughs] remember one story that I—you know, two stories that I had. One was in 1976 [presidential] campaign, I guess. And Ronald Reagan came through. The first time I ever interviewed a presidential candidate—you all—for some reason decided—I can't remember the details—and I ended up flying to Tulsa and getting to interview Reagan on the flight from Tulsa to Little

Rock.

JM: Oh, okay.

AM: That was my first, you know, trip. [Laughs] I thought that was huge. Then I covered a little bit of George Wallace. I was doing a little politics and the legislative sessions. In at least one—I can't remember which session—it was after I had been there for a while—you sent up Lancaster to help me. Lancaster and I worked together on a couple sessions. We actually were toe to toe with the *Gazette* on that. Lancaster was so good. He was writing, I think, the beginning of kind of narrative journalism that we see later on. I mean, Bob was really doing these kind of large pieces that—they were almost opinion pieces, but they were—but they were kind of literary treatments of the event in a circus and great descriptive writing. And Bob—I learned a lot from Bob.

JM: Analysis—analysis-type pieces.

AM: Yes. Yes. I think we actually did pretty well—I mean, it's not—it wasn't anything Bob really wanted to do.

JM: Yes.

AM: I learned a lot from him, and it was great having him up there, because he had been to the *Philadelphia* [Pennsylvania] *Inquirer* and he was experienced. I learned a lot. I—particularly, I think I learned a lot about writing from him and James Scudder. I still will not forget the best lead in any newspaper I have seen was when they buried Gerald L. K. Smith. [Scudder's lead was] "They buried Gerald L. K. Smith today at the feet of the only Jew he ever liked."

JM: Yes.

AM: [Laughs] I remember that.

JM: Yes, I remember that because—I remember that because I—and I've told this story before. I was the managing editor at the time, and they brought it back to me. They said, "Can we say this?" [Laughter] I said, "You bet." I had the same reaction. I said, "That's the best lead I ever read. You bet we can say it." I don't think—I—if we ever got a complaint, I never heard it.

AM: Oh, is that right? Nobody complained?

JM: No, I never heard any complaints.

AM: Well, you know, it was just genius. [Laughs]

JM: Yes, yes. But the guy—he was great. But any other particular stories you remember through that time that you were at the capitol?

AM: Well, I remember the time—I remember the time—I went to Eudora. They had a race riot in Eudora—down in the Delta.

JM: Yes.

AM: That was the—this is my Robert Ike Thomas story. Which I swear he almost got me killed. Robert Ike had gotten a pilot's license. Do you remember this?

JM: No, I'd forgotten him having a pilot's license.

AM: Yes, he had a pilot's license, and he flew us down to Greenville, Mississippi.

JM: Oh, boy. Okay.

AM: And we rent a car. We drove back across to Eudora, which is just on the other side of the river [Mississippi River]. We got into Eudora, and this was, like, the day after they'd had a significant race disturbance in the town. I can't remember the issues, but it was a—one of the last, I think—you know, in the South like this. We went—and the—and the cops had done some beating up. I'll never forget going to this police station in Eudora and—in this—in this old concrete station, and

going inside and seeing some of the [laughs] meanest-looking cops you ever saw in your life, all sitting around in this little bitty room with the chief of police sitting in the middle of it. I came up to him. I said, "Hi, I'm Al May with the *Arkansas Democrat*, and can you tell me a little bit about what the disposition is of these people that—" I was trying to interview him.

JM: Yes.

AM: And Robert Ike was standing behind me. And they're just seething with anger. They just don't want me there, you know? They're very rude and—you know? Robert Ike keeps trying to take a—aim his camera and take a picture of the police chief. Every time he'd do that, the police chief would raise his arm over his head and say, "Now, I don't want any pictures. I don't want any pictures." I was just trying to get out of there. [Laughter] Robert Ike's—so I say, "Stop, Robert Ike." [Laughs] "Don't take any pictures." Robert Ike puts the camera down and lets it drop on his—in front—hanging on him. He waits 'til the cop takes his hands down. He's got it on a timer. I'm standing there [laughs] interviewing him, and there's this loud click. [Laughs] And everybody—and he says, "Did you take my picture, boy?" "Oh, no, I didn't—" [Laughs] That was when we left. We got out of town because I thought, "Oh, man, we're going to get—we're going to get the hell beat out of us."

JM: [Laughs]

AM: Well, of course, we didn't. But I remember the Eudora story.

JM: Yes. That sounds like one that Husted tells, I think. He went to Marianna earlier and I believe it was—I believe it was Robert Ike in there, and—and they had people—I think they were inside the little newspaper office . . .

AM: Bill got actually beat up, if I remember right.

JM: Yes, he got—he got manhandled some.

AM: He did.

JM: Robert Ike—he said Robert Ike was going to fight them [laughs] and then he was saying, "No, no! Hey, you're going to get us killed." [Laughter] At any rate—okay. Anything else that you—that you remember in particular in the way of stories?

AM: Oh, there are a lot of them. I did some—we did some investigative work—oh, I remember one story that was—it was kind of my introduction to kind of Washington in a strange way. You remember Ed Bethune?

JM: Oh, yes.

AM: Okay. Ed Bethune had been nominated for U.S. Attorney by [President Gerald R.] Ford. And [U.S. Senator Dale] Bumpers had—was quietly stopping it. We smoked ol' Bumpers out on that. That was the first time I ever met Dale Bumpers—meeting him at the airport. When me and Terrell—in fact, I've still got the picture—I'm looking at it right now—of me and Terrell—both of us look like we're about grade school, interviewing Bumpers about why he was stopping Bethune's appointment—because Bethune was real popular and there were some other things. I remember that story, and we—and he finally—because we wrote the stories, he finally ended up back in office. That's the first time I ever met Dale Bumpers, and Bethune went on to glory or whatever.

JM: Yes. I guess—was it later that he was the 2nd District congressman?

AM: Yes. Yes, yes—kind of made him start his political career, kind of. It was one of those things where it backfired on Bumpers because he made him kind of a cause

célèbre. I remember—and I remember just some . . .

JM: Incidentally, Ed Bethune was married to George Douthit's daughter.

AM: Oh, yes?

JM: Yes.

AM: Yes, I think I knew that.

JM: Yes.

AM: Yes, yes. I remember that story, and I don't—there are a lot of other stories. I remember a lot of the—just covering the legislature because we would—and I would never have this experience again—even though I've covered two other legislatures and the Congress—was that they actually set the reporters—the reporters essentially had floor privileges in the Arkansas legislature. I mean, you could move around—you could go out on the floor. You could—and you sat—they had this row of desks—in the senate, at least. I can't remember what the house did, but it may have been the same—where the reporters' desks are literally in front of the podium. So it's like the legislator is actually talking to you. That was one of the stranger experiences—and I loved it. I loved it. That was my first experience with what I was interested in doing, which was I was interested in government. I was interested in politics, you know, and just learning how a legislature worked. I learned it at the Arkansas legislature. I mean, I remember some of these characters—Mutt Gibson. I just remember—you know, some of these guys that were just these old, stereotypical Southern guys. And then you had some young bucks who were coming along.

JM: Maybe—maybe you meant Mutt Jones.

AM: Mutt Jones. Right.

JM: Yes, you said Mutt Gibson. There was another guy.

AM: Yes, there was a guy named Mutt Gibson, wasn't there?

JM: Yes, there was a Gibson there, and I can't—he could've been—he could've been Mutt, too. I don't remember, but . . .

AM: There were a lot of Mutts. [Laughs]

JM: Mutt Jones was the famous [laughs] one of the two, although there was a Gibson from southeast Arkansas who was . . .

AM: Oh, yes, that's who I was thinking of. He was an old trial lawyer.

JM: Yes, who was—yes, who was . . .

AM: He was just a—and he fancied himself this real orator. He would get up there and he would just—and it was kind of something out of—I don't know—*To Kill a Mockingbird* or something, you know? It was kind of like—you know, Gibson would get up there and—I learned how to—I literally learned how legislators worked. You know—how the politics works, and it was a great experience.

[Laughs]

JM: Yes. Okay. And during this three years there, do you remember—was the *Democrat* fairly competitive with the *Gazette*?

AM: No. I mean, I think we were competitive in the niche. I think when I was there we were—the paper was—losing circulation terrifically. I mean, you could—I want to say that it in the three years I was there, it was, like, going down 10,000 a year in circulation. This was before they turned into an A.M. I left at its nadir, I guess. There was no—I mean, I don't think we were filling jobs, you know? And we were—the staff had shrunk a little bit and . . .

JM: Yes, it got pretty tight.

AM: And Hussman was trying things like throwing the paper free on . . .

[Blank from 45:45 to 46:09]

JM: Okay, now, Al. We're going to side two of this tape. Just as we finished the other side you were talking about how things were getting tight at the *Democrat*, and you didn't think we were filling jobs and so—go on from there.

AM: Well, as I said, clearly there was this—you know, efforts to try to experiment, and that was when Hussman actually started this free delivery on Wednesdays, which, interestingly enough, you've got now all these niche papers coming along like this—the Examiner Group—which are—who are trying that—trying throw-away substantive papers—not just shoppers—substantive papers to try to compete in—they're actually aiming at upscale neighborhoods with the free distribution so they get the demographics up. So anyway, it was interesting that Hussman was trying—experimenting with this then. But, yes, we were real—I mean, the staff was pretty small. You had a real high-quality staff, and you still had people like Lancaster and Scudder and—I mean the *Gazette* was the dominant paper. I mean, it was—it was the paper that covered the news more than we did.

JM: Yes. So how—when—when did you leave the *Democrat*?

AM: March of 1978.

JM: March of 1978. Okay. You went to—and I left in August of 1978, but—so you left—you left before I did. You went to—from there to—to Charlotte—I mean, Raleigh.

AM: Raleigh. Right.

JM: Yes.

AM: I went to the *News and Observer*.

JM: How did you get there?

AM: I—actually, Ernie Dumas—I had started looking for jobs and looking for opportunities, and I wanted to go—I was interested in trying to stay in the South, so I wanted to move up to a bigger paper. And Ernie knew Claude Sitton. He had written . . .

JM: That's S-I-T-T-O-N.

AM: S-I-T-T-O-N. Right.

JM: Yes.

AM: He had written a letter to Claude about me. They flew me in for an interview. And they hired me. They actually hired me in part because they didn't—they weren't happy with their lead political reporter. And the *N and O* [*News and Observer*] was at that time much like the *Gazette*. Except that it had—it—it was certainly completely dominant in its readership area. At that time the paper was the dominant—and I think it still is the dominant—certainly, the dominant political newspaper in North Carolina. Of course, North Carolina is a much bigger state. Much bigger population. The *Charlotte Observer* was quite competitive. The Greensboro paper was pretty good—it's—it's a great newspaper state. With a lot of high-quality dailies.

JM: Okay, now, was Claude Sitton the editor there?

AM: He was the editor. He has been at *The New York Times*, of course—he covered the—this great heroic figure covering the South.

JM: South. Yes.

AM: Then he'd been national editor at the *Times* in New York, and he had come to the *News and Observer*. The Daniels family had hired him. Claude was a real—still

is you know—inspirational editor of the old school. Claude—you know, they had—had a managing editor there named Bob Brooks, who's now dead who was also kind of this classic hard-charging, aggressive newspaperman. Former Marine. [Laughs] And Brooks—we always said about Brooks is that he'd had every job in the newsroom, and he never gave one of them up. [Laughs]

JM: Yes. [Laughs] He kept them all. [Laughter]

AM: He kept them all. The combination of Sitton, who literally was the—wrote editorials and was the boss. Then my managing editor, Brooks. I mean, they were—they took me up another level.

JM: Yes.

AM: And really did develop—I covered—I covered politics. I went there initially as the state house reporter covering the governor's office and then in about a year they named me the head—chief capitol correspondent, which essentially was a non-administrative job. It was kind of a title in which—and I coordinated a coverage of elections and . . .

JM: Yes. If my memory is correct, Raleigh is the state capitol, isn't it?

AM: Oh, yes.

JM: Yes. Okay.

AM: Oh, yes. It was very—it was very much a state capitol-oriented paper. More than both the—even more than maybe the *Gazette* was at the time.

JM: Hmm. Okay.

AM: The state government was such a—disproportionate in importance. But there were a lot of similarities then between the *Gazette* and its notion of covering everything. Fairly large staff. Liberal reputation that—you know, made—made it a

lot like the *Gazette*. Less like the *Democrat* and certainly wasn't—it had a lot more resources. I can't remember what the circulation was then. It was a couple hundred thousand—something like that.

JM: I wouldn't know, but that sounds reasonable. Yes. Whereas the *Democrat* had probably been—was maybe—by the time you left was probably around 55,000 or so.

AM: Yes. Yes, something like that—60,000 or 70,000 maybe, at the most. It had been—it had really gone down, too. I mean, it was like that period of time when it really had gone down. I went there [Raleigh, North Carolina] and stayed there covering politics and government—the legislature and whenever we had campaigns—had some great campaigns because that was Jesse Helms. There was this great, you know, battle between kind of the "Old South" versus the "New South." Jim Hunt, then the governor, was a quite progressive "New South"-type governor, and I covered him. I stayed—and then 1984 campaign—I'm getting a little ahead of myself. I essentially covered for—I was there about five years covering state politics, state legislature—all of that. In 1983 they sent me to Washington.

JM: Okay.

AM: I was in the bureau in Washington, which was a one-person bureau. I covered [Senator Jesse] Helms. I went back for the 1984 [North Carolina senatorial] campaign, which was this—to this day is—for me, it was the greatest campaign I ever covered. It was huge, and the paper pulled out the stops on the resources to cover it, and we just had a hell of a time.

JM: That was Helms against whom?

AM: [Governor Jim] Hunt. Yes, the Hunt/Helms campaign.

JM: Yes. Okay.

AM: In 1974—I mean, 1984. And, of course, the [Walter] Mondale [presidential] campaign wasn't amounting [in 1984] to anything because, you know, I covered a little of the Mondale campaign, but not much. I covered a little bit of the [Jimmy] Carter [presidential] campaign in 1980, but because—the *N&O* essentially would cover politics and they had a budget for it, but it wouldn't go national. It was still small enough. It was a very regional paper. You still covered it in the area. We could do that, but we still weren't getting—you know, we weren't going along—you know, to nationals. When they moved me to Washington, there was my—strangely enough, it had taken me almost ten—well, not ten years but eight years or so—to get back to Washington where I had left as a grad student and I always wanted to go back. I mean, I had worked my time in Little Rock, and then I worked my time in Raleigh, and I finally got back and really enjoyed it. I mean, the Congress and had a—at the time, the *News and Observer* had a bureau—rented space from the *Boston* [Massachusetts] *Globe*. The *Globe* bureau, which ironically is in the building—one building away from me—is owned by George Washington University. This was 1983. My suite mate—so you had the main bureau for the *Globe*—the *Boston Globe*. Then you had a corridor that came out and you had two offices, and one of them was Art Buchwald's, who recently died.

JM: Hmm. Yes.

AM: Then there was me. [Laughs]

JM: Yes. I'll be darned.

AM: I learned—I got to know Buchwald a little bit. I did the regional reporting stuff, largely. And covered politics. The coverage of the Helms campaign actually—

strangely enough, it helped me win the Nieman Fellowship.

JM: Oh, okay.

AM: Interestingly enough, another guy—a guy named Chuck Alston, who worked for the Greensboro newspaper who'd also covered the Helms campaign—he also won a Nieman in the same year. We both won that based on our coverage in the Hunt/Helms campaign.

JM: Hmm. Okay.

AM: It was one of those kind of examples where you cover a really big story and you did well on it. It'll take you places.

JM: Yes.

AM: I won the Nieman Fellowship and went to the Nieman in 1986—the fall of 1986—while I was still a Washington correspondent, and it was 1986 and 1987. When I came back from the Nieman, which was a great year, Howie—Howard Simons, the former managing editor of the *Washington Post* was the curator.

JM: Yes.

AM: He was another one of these people that I met in my life that really made a difference to me. He was very inspirational and funny and—and took some time with me. Claude Sitton said he'd recommended me for the Nieman, fully knowing that it was time for me to move on. And essentially told me that. You know, "You can come back if you want to. You'll have a job here. But it's time for you to move your career." That's how Claude was.

JM: Yes.

AM: I came back, and for about six months I chased presidential candidates for the *N&O*, which is really unusual for the *N&O* to do. This was 1988. But this was

1987—the summer before. I chased presidential candidates and did great stories. I did a series of just traveling with them and then writing profiles. And I remember covering Jesse Jackson, though. And I remember when Jackson went to meet with Wallace in the famous meeting of Wallace and Jackson, it just ironically happened that I was traveling with Jackson working on a longer piece about him, and literally—and he and a guy—a guy from the *Chicago Tribune* was riding with him, too. And we both got—we both were brought into the actual meeting while the press was out there. It was one of the more . . . [laughs]

JM: Yes.

AM: They rolled Wallace out in his—in his wheelchair and they formed a prayer circle [laughs] and Jesse went and got the black maid and had her get in the prayer circle, and they all prayed. I was standing there watching him, and it was a very interesting thing. I was also looking for work. And I got—I had one of the hard choices in my career, and I got two offers at the same time. One, Bill Kovach had gone down to take over the *Atlanta Constitution* about a year earlier. It was kind of a hot place in American journalism, if you remember. He was going to turn the Atlanta papers into the next *New York Times*.

JM: Yes.

AM: I also got an offer from *U.S. News and World Report*—and I had—and Ralph, then, was the city editor [in Atlanta]. This is how things in this business, of course, work. Ralph was the city editor.

JM: When you're saying Ralph, you mean Ralph Patrick?

AM: Right. Yes. Ralph had—Ralph had moved on to Atlanta.

JM: Yes.

AM: I met Kovach when he came up to visit the Nieman.

JM: Spell his last name.

AM: K-O-V-A-C-H. Kovach. [Pronounced KAW-vatch]

JM: Okay. Okay. Okay.

AM: Kovach, who had been, of course, the Washington bureau chief for *The New York Times* and he—he was a lot like Sitton in a way. Eastern Tennessee, actually. He had gone down and he—and I had met him on a visit when he had been up while I was on my Nieman Fellowship. And, of course, it was the hot newspaper in America then.

JM: Yes.

AM: And, of course, it was South, which I kind of was interested in. I had applied. I had sent a letter. Then I discovered—and then Ralph had been made city editor. They brought me down and, of course, you know, Ralph was instrumental in bringing me down. Kovach wanted to hire me as the bureau chief—state capitol bureau chief. I also got a job offer from *U.S. News and World Report* to cover the Congress.

JM: Yes.

AM: I had to decide whether I wanted to leave Washington. Kovach at the time did not—we never did—it was one of the problems with him. He never did control the Washington bureau for Cox [Cox Enterprises, Inc.]. I couldn't have a job with them in Washington where I wanted to stay. Then I got this offer from the news magazine. I essentially went down, and Kovach basically talked me into coming to Atlanta. So I moved to Atlanta. [Laughs] And I was there—oh, almost ten years.

JM: Yes. Okay.

AM: I was chief capitol [correspondent]—I had a bureau—I was the bureau chief. And this was my first really administrative job. I had five reporters and we covered all state politics and the legislature. Did that through—I want to say—and, of course, we had the 1988 convention, which was quite a hoot. We were the home paper for the National Democratic Convention in which we threw everything into it—I've never seen a newspaper just empty its bench [laughs] like that. I mean, everybody was—and it was a really intense thing.

JM: Yes.

AM: That was fun. I covered—then they—I was covering the 1988—they had put me on the road a little bit when the 1988 campaign, which I wanted to do. I was actually traveling with [Dan] Quayle and kind of a—when they were sending Quayle [laughs] to the South, because it was safe and he couldn't do any damage [laughter].

JM: You're talking about Dan Quayle, right?

AM: That's right. I was traveling with Quayle through most of the end of the—or a good chunk of the election. I don't want to over-emphasize it, but one of my more interesting experiences was going and being with Quayle, you know? Of course, you couldn't get much of a story in the paper about Quayle because. . .

JM: Yes. He was the Republican vice-presidential nominee.

AM: Right. He was later vice-president. [Laughs] They won. The day before the election—but I was actually with Quayle—I think someplace in the—I think it was, like, Savannah [Georgia] or something. I remember calling in to the desk to see if I could sell them on a story about Dan Quayle. That was when the news

broke that Kovach had been fired or quit depending on how you interpret what happened. It was devastating to us because we had all—you know, a number of us had moved and given up other jobs and come there with him. And then, of course, he had had this unfortunate relationship with Cox management and then—and Bill Kovach was really pretty determined to—he wasn't going to compromise, and he was going to take the paper in his direction. I think Cox just kind of starting asking themselves whether they wanted to—could afford it or whatever. I don't know the answer to that, but I do know that he was—and then he was suddenly out.

JM: Okay. Do we want to discuss what—? I'm not sure what relationship we're talking about.

AM: Well, he had a meeting with the—with the editor—with the publishers. There was a—you know, who controlled the Washington bureau . . .

JM: Yes

AM: There was friction between the publisher then and Bill, and I think a lot of it was over Bill's ambition for the paper versus money. I don't really know the answers, but Bill finally quit. Or was—depending—or if any—it's unclear whether he got fired, but he left. It was sudden. Literally, the day before the elections. It was a stunning thing—a big blow. I mean, it was a blow to my career and a blow to a lot of us who had gone down there with Bill and really admired him. I still do admire him. I see him occasionally. He would later go on and then become the curator of the Nieman Fellowships. I mean, I don't know how much detail you want me to go into.

JM: Oh, that's fine. Okay—well, just hit some high points from here on and we'll

maybe come back to the *Democrat* a little later on. You stayed at the *Journal* for several more years and . . .

AM: I stayed until 1996. As it turned out, they—I got some great opportunities—I became the national political writer and covered [President Bill] Clinton. That's when I went back to Little Rock was during the 1992 [presidential] campaign. They made me our national person to go cover the Democratic side, while the Washington bureau was covering the [President George Herbert Walker] Bush Administration—he was the incumbent. Because I knew Clinton and I had met Clinton when I had—I had met Clinton when I was in Hot Springs with the *Democrat*. When he was a failed congressional candidate. And then knew—and covered him a little bit when he was attorney general, for the *Democrat*. I met him—so I covered Clinton. Of course, who would know that Clinton would end up emerging. But I had covered all the Democrats. I really had a great time. Covered Clinton throughout the whole election. But early on—I started as early as, like, April of 1991 with Clinton, and I stayed pretty much with him all the way through the inaugural. It was a great experience—great campaign.

JM: Yes.

AM: And then after that . . .

JM: Well, you want to—you want to give us any of your impressions of Clinton and the campaign?

AM: Well, what was interesting about—to me about Clinton was—first of all, it was Arkansas. It was kind of like I went back and was suddenly in the middle of all this. And I'm running into McCord, [laughs] and I'm running into Dumas, and I'm running in—and at this time—of course, the *Democrat*—oh, I have to tell you

this—yes—the *Democrat* had won [the newspaper war against the *Gazette*].

[Laughs]

JM: Yes, yes.

AM: I can't remember. When did the—when did the *Democrat* take over the *Gazette*?

JM: In 1991.

AM: Yes.

JM: I think October of 1991.

AM: One of the things I did was help write a story about that newspaper war. It was an ironic kind of twist. I was actually out in Little Rock covering Clinton.

JM: Yes.

AM: They said—and there was a media writer in Atlanta who decided to work on a story about the newspaper war and how it had come out.

JM: Yes.

AM: And—hadn't the Clinton campaign actually moved into the old *Gazette* . . . ?

JM: Yes, they did at one time.

AM: Yes.

JM: Yes, the old *Gazette* building.

AM: That was in the fall of the next year.

JM: Yes.

AM: It was in this year—anyway, so I ended up doing a story—helping out on this story about the *Democrat* and the *Gazette* and the war, and I interviewed several editors. I think I—who was the editor at the *Democrat*? Gosh, I can't remember—the old AP [Associated Press] guy. John Robert Starr.

JM: Yes. Yes.

AM: I interviewed him. I ended up sharing a byline on the story, but it was kind of an interesting twist back to your career. Because, you know, who would've thought . . . ?

JM: Yes, that's what I was going to ask you. Would you have ever thought . . .

AM: No!

JM: . . . while you were there or your later association—would you have ever thought that the *Democrat* would win the war and that the *Gazette* would fold?

AM: No. No.

JM: Yes.

AM: I never would've. It was really eerie. At best I could tell was that the Gannett had really not—well, first of all, Hussman had been willing to spend the money and resources to take them on toe to toe.

JM: Yes.

AM: Gannett had not, and not kept a good connection to the community.

JM: Yes.

AM: And I think it—I mean, I don't—I'm certainly not an expert on the reasons why that happened.

JM: Yes.

AM: It was an ironic thing for me to suddenly find myself back there, and there was my old paper, and it was now became—becoming the *Arkansas Gazette*.

JM: *Democrat-Gazette*.

AM: The *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*.

JM: Yes. Right.

AM: If you'd have told me that twenty years earlier, I would've thought you were nuts.

JM: Yes.

AM: But it was interesting. At the time, because Clinton was a president from Arkansas, the *Democrat* was really covering it. I mean, and they were—they were really—you know, I can't remember that the coverage was particularly—I mean, I don't remember any big stories that they broke, particularly, but I do remember it was pretty thorough. They had—they were spending the money and spending the resources to cover him. Covering Clinton was a real experience.

JM: Yes. In what sense?

AM: Well, [laughs] if you remember the campaign—it had its ups and downs.
[Laughs]

JM: Yes. Oh, yes, I remember.

AM: It seemed like every time you turned around there was another new story—you know, the Gennifer Flowers story. I'm actually one of the first reporters to actually ask Clinton about all this—I mean, other reporters had asked him about it in the past, but during the election I was one of the first reporters that actually—and wrote a little of it about, you know, all these rumors about his women. I also did some fairly—I think—pretty good work on the draft story. It was really interesting. I thought Clinton's origins were interesting. It kind of drew me back to that part of the country that I had grown up in, too. I remember one story that I did. I went down and did a piece in Texarkana and Hope, Arkansas. One about how [H. Ross] Perot was from there. And Clinton. In that hardscrabble South that—that I had—you know, that I had really started my career in, knowing—you know . . .

JM: Yes.

AM: It was an interesting kind of a return. I went back to Hot Springs for the first time

in years and years. It was kind of like I was going back to where I had started.

JM: Yes. I bet that was a heck of a campaign to cover.

AM: Oh, it was, really.

JM: Yes. And were you surprised when he won the nomination?

AM: Yes. Well, I was more surprised when he won the election. But that became clear early on. What happened was—the most surprising part of it was the—as soon as you thought—what the amazing thing was—of course, we went into the convention in the summer, and Clinton—by this time, I was full-time with Clinton.

JM: Yes.

AM: Of course, Perot was doing so well. He was running ahead of either Bush or Clinton in all the polls. Then Perot got out in the—you know, on the eve of the Democratic National Convention. Suddenly Clinton was—when Perot did that, it just supercharged Clinton. Of course, then Perot got back in. It was just an amazing story, and then Clinton did these bus trips and from there on—I mean, the bus trips were just a fascinating example of a politician connecting to people and the outpouring of people on the roads and all these things. I had, you know, really hadn't ever seen. You kind of knew going into the fall that Clinton was going to win. I guess if you'd asked me back in March during the draft thing, I would've never thought Clinton would end up being president. Now, he looked like a pretty strong—that he'd win the nomination. But how was he going to beat Bush?

JM: Yes, yes. Okay. So you stayed with then—you went ahead and stayed with the *Journal and Constitution* until 1996.

AM: They made me an editor after the election. One of the things that had happened

during the election was I had met my current wife, Carol Darr, who is from Memphis [Tennessee].

JM: D-A-R-R?

AM: Yes.

JM: Yes. Okay.

AM: She was—and she was at the time the general counsel of the Democratic National Committee. I had met her when I was covering the campaign, and I had known her earlier when I had been in Washington, and I had gotten a divorce. Carol and I met and fell in love and all of that and got married right after the 1992 election. She was general counsel—she went into the Clinton Administration. And was—for a good while, she was general counsel, Department of Commerce for a long time, which caused a bit of a conflict for me. I went back to Atlanta and they made me an editor. I was the—a metropolitan—it was what they called—this was when they were experimenting with structure. I was essentially a mid-level metropolitan desk editor in charge of our governmental coverage. I had about twenty-two reporters and three assistant metropolitan editors. I had never been a manager really before. I had been a bureau chief and that sort of thing, [but] this was the first time I really had line authority as an editor. It was very interesting. I did that for—that would've been 1993. I started in 1993—through the 1996 election. We were doing a commuting marriage. Carol was still in Washington, and we were back and forth. That just became wearisome, and I didn't feel like I was going anywhere in Atlanta. I just quit at the end of the 1996 campaign and came up here.

JM: Yes. [You] went to work for George Washington University.

AM: I'm sorry.

JM: [You] soon went to work for George Washington University.

AM: Yes. I got up here and took about six months off and didn't know what I wanted to do. I had always wanted to go back—I had always been interested in teaching from back in those days when I was in political science. I literally got a call from a friend. I was interviewing at news organizations for editing jobs, and at the same time I was talking to American University. I didn't even know what kind of journalism program George Washington had, and a friend of mine called and said that he'd heard—they had an opening for a professor at GW. As usual with me—I mean, this is—I never planned my career. It had always kind of just happened. I had heard that they had had—actually, as it turned out, somebody had died. This was the summer of 1997. I walked in and they needed somebody immediately to take over his classes, which were advanced reporting and introductory news writing.

JM: Yes.

AM: Three a semesters. I can't believe—you know. And I took the job as a visiting professor for a year and found it very challenging. [Laughs]

JM: Yes.

AM: Then the next—that year they actually searched the job and I applied for it. And they made me an associate professor, and then I became the journalism program director and ran the journalism department. I've been there ten years.

JM: Yes.

AM: [I] ran the journalism department for eight years until we reorganized the department, and I thought—I got tired of it. In the last two years of that, I was actually

director of the entire school. Kind of like a sub-dean. [I] ran the school for a couple years. Then I went on sabbatical and came back. I've been on faculty since.

JM: Okay. When you say the entire school, you mean the entire . . .

AM: Not the entire university—the school of media and public affairs, which has a journalism program as its component. It's a mass-comm, communication-type school.

JM: Okay. You've also been involved in research projects and seminars and special projects and everything.

AM: Right. Well, I spent my first few years as—trying to learn to teach, trying to learn how to be an administrator and run the journalism program. Then I won the university's teaching award in 2001. I didn't do much writing. I kind of got out of it and really concentrated on teaching. Then I did get more active that way in 2002, starting with a major research project that we did with a grant from the Pew Foundation on looking at how the Internet had changed the way political journalists cover campaigns. We published that in the fall of 2002. That was when I became director of the school—and kind of put things aside. After I finished my two years as director of the school, I went on sabbatical and did some research, and I did a case study of the Swift boats and the press—how they covered them. Then last year, my most recent work—I got hired for the Aspen Institute to do a report on the lessons—the communications lessons of [Hurricane] Katrina.

JM: Yes. That was an interesting one, too. [Laughs]

AM: I've got a fairly eclectic and kind of done different things, which is one of the nice benefits of being an academic.

JM: Yes. Now you are—you are still teaching.

AM: Yes.

JM: Yes. Okay. Okay.

AM: Yes, I don't have any administrative responsibilities now.

JM: Yes. Okay. Okay, Al, that's a pretty good resume and pretty impressive resume.

Let's go back one minute—back to the *Democrat*. Is there anything else that you can think of about your time at the *Democrat* that you remember specifically—how it operated—the newsroom—just anything that you can . . . ?

AM: Well, I remember we were—I remember it was the beginning of the technological revolution. I remember when the only people that had a cathode ray tubes [CRTs] [laughs] were the copy editors. We were writing on the IBM [International Business Machines] typewriters.

JM: Selectrics.

AM: Selectrics.

JM: Yes.

AM: That was the only time I ever wrote on a typewriter in my career. [Laughs]

JM: Oh, really?

AM: Yes. See, very quickly after that things all went to computers.

JM: To computers.

AM: Yes. I remember that. You know, I remember it being just this friendly place. I remember some of the characters.

JM: Like whom?

AM: Like Bob Sallee.

JM: Yes.

AM: I'm trying to think—somebody else and I can't get his name. But in a way, Scudder was kind of a character. You know, and . . .

JM: Yes.

AM: And just—oh, what was his—? He became editor—Gordon.

JM: Larry Gordon.

AM: Larry Gordon, yes.

JM: Yes.

AM: He died, right?

JM: Yes, he did. Yes.

AM: I do remember a lot of really smart people. I would work in newsrooms—you know, I never saw—I mean, for their—for its size, pound for pound there was a lot of talent there. How many of these people actually—what they did with it because I know that a number of people—because I would run into Amanda and Bill Husted in Atlanta.

JM: Yes. Yes, a lot of them—a lot of them really went on and did really well.

[Laughs] On the copy desk, for example, Carol Stogsdill, who married Larry Gordon . . .

AM: Right.

JM: She went on. She was assistant managing editor of the *Los Angeles Times*.

AM: Right. Right.

JM: There were—there were quite a few of those that went on and did well. Nancy Miller is now an editor at the *St. Louis [Missouri] Globe and Democrat* and . . .

AM: Right.

JM: Or *Post-Dispatch*.

AM: Yes, *Post-Dispatch*. Right.

JM: *Post-Dispatch*, I mean.

AM: Right.

JM: So a lot of those people did go on and do very well. Of course, Terrell went on to Washington for a while—and I don't know whether you still see him any or . . .

AM: No, I've lost touch with him. I mean—maybe . . .

JM: He's—he's living in . . .

AM: . . . ten years or something like that.

JM: Yes. He's living in Pennsylvania now. He's still with the Interior Department in the map-making department. At any rate, did you ever run across his wife? She was a—a . . .

AM: I met her briefly.

JM: She was a reporter in Washington for a while for the *Democrat*.

AM: Right.

JM: At any rate—and then, of course, Ralph Patrick you ran . . .

AM: I keep in touch with Ralph.

JM: Yes. Okay.

AM: Since he gave me—he helped hire me for two jobs. [Laughs]

JM: Yes. Okay. What kind of editor was he?

AM: Oh, he was a great editor.

JM: Yes. Okay.

AM: He was a great editor. He was a sourpuss, but he was a great editor.

JM: Yes. Okay. [Laughs]

AM: And McCord was a great—great inspirational leader.

JM: Yes.

AM: I mean, I always thought Bob had that just that—you know, real core integrity that, you know, just the—and then you could feel it in that little newsroom.

JM: Yes.

AM: He was at the time president of the Sigma Delta Chi.

JM: Right.

AM: Yes. You know, and there was just kind of a real presence about him—you know
...

JM: Yes.

AM: I think it was just good journalism.

JM: Yes.

AM: I mean, I think it was the kind of good, ethical journalism—particularly, if it's your, literally, first job.

JM: Yes. Yes.

AM: You know, it—it shaped me about what my news values were and my ethical values and how you do it and all of that.

JM: Yes.

AM: I mean, I do think of it—and I look back on the years of the *Democrat*. There's a great way to have begun a career.

JM: Yes. Well, it wasn't a big paper, but they tried hard to do it. They tried hard to do it the right way. That's what you're saying, I think.

AM: Right.

JM: Okay. Okay. Al, anything else you can think of?

AM: I'm sorry? No.

JM: No? Yes? You . . .

AM: We've been on it for an hour and a half. I probably told you a lot more than you needed.

JM: No, I wanted that. That's great. That's great. The pay wasn't good and the fringe benefits weren't great [laughs], but they tried hard.

AM: Oh, it was fun, too.

JM: Yes, yes, yes.

AM: It was just a lot of fun.

JM: Yes. Okay. Al, I really appreciate it.

AM: Okay.

JM: If you can't think of anything else to say, well, I'll say thank you very much for this interview. I've enjoyed it, and you'll be getting a transcript here one of these days and . . .

[End of Interview]

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