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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with:

Nancy Miller
19 June 2006
St. Louis, Missouri

Interviewer: Elisa Crouch

[Editor's note: Nancy Miller, 59, was murdered in her home in Chesterfield, Missouri on January 31, 2008. She had retired from the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* in June, 2007, about a year after she did this interview. She was working with journalism students at St. Louis Community College and serving as advisor to the student newspaper.]

Elisa Crouch: I am Elisa Crouch interviewing Nancy Miller for the Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History's project on the *Arkansas Democrat*. This interview is being held in St. Louis [Missouri] on June 19, 2006. We will transcribe this interview [and] give you the opportunity to view the transcript. Right now I need you to state your name and indicate that you are willing to give the Center permission to use the tape and make the transcription available to others.

Nancy Miller: I'm Nancy Nix Miller, and I'm absolutely willing to take part in this.

EC: Okay, Nancy. Now, we'll start with the biographical [information].

NM: Okay.

EC: Tell me when you were born and where you're from.

NM: I was born November 6, 1948, in El Dorado, Arkansas. I was the eldest of five children of Benjamin Edison Nix, Jr. and Vivian Lucille Garrett Nix. And I spent my whole—first seventeen years in El Dorado.

EC: Were either of your parents writers or journalists?

NM: No. Daddy was an office worker. He was in charge of lease rentals for Murphy Oil Corporation, and Mother was a homemaker until I started school. And one salary wasn't enough with five kids who had to be educated, so she went back to work. She also worked at Murphy.

EC: You say you were born in El Dorado. Where did you go to high school and then college?

NM: Well, I went to the only high school I could, which was El Dorado High School. I took a journalism course there in my senior year that—we had a journalism teacher named Mrs. Ruth Jenkins, and she was in charge of the yearbook, too. I loved that course. I had no knowledge of journalism at all, but I just really loved the *mechanics* of how you put together a story. And I remember the turning point for me [was] one day she was telling us, like, a few facts, and each of us was supposed to come up with a *lead* using these facts. And the person she was telling us about had been blind since birth, and everybody's lead said, "This person has been blind since birth," and mine said that they had been *congenitally* blind, and she praised that. Now, you know, we would probably say, "Blind since birth," because it sounds conversational, but at that time, I thought, "Whoa! I like this."
[Laughter]

EC: What year of school were you?

NM: I was a senior. I graduated at seventeen because we started to school younger back then, and I have a late birthday [so] that's just the way it worked out.

EC: Mmm hmm. And so you knew at—did you know at that point you wanted to be a journalist?

NM: Well, I liked that better than anything else. I knew I liked to write. And I liked to read. So, you know, we needed—I needed to find a school to go to, and I kind of thought—I wanted a smaller school. I like that concept. But then my best friend was going to the University of Arkansas, and I didn't want to be left behind, so I ended up going to—signing up for Fayetteville, where a lot of my classmates went.

EC: And so what year did you graduate high school?

NM: I graduated in [1966].

EC: So did you start college in the fall of [1966]?

NM: Yes.

EC: Okay. Okay. And tell me—tell me about that. How did—how was—how was your experience there?

NM: Oh, I hated it! [Laughs] I—I was used to studying really hard and doing relatively well in school. I used to get up at, like, 4:30 in the morning to study. Well, we had all these kids, you know, in our home, and it was noisy, and, you know, I shared a room with two sisters. And so I would—we didn't have central heat or central air or anything like that, and the house was chilly. So in the winter, I would sit on the bathroom floor by a space heater and write compositions or read, but I was used to getting some results from that. And then I got to college, and it was just a different kind of studying; it was more conceptualizing than, you know,

memorizing facts. And I didn't exactly take to that too well. It took me a couple of years to feel comfortable with it. But I guess—probably the third year—[in] the second or third year, I started taking journalism [4:58.1] courses. I had a—had a double major in English and journalism. So I got started on that and then got in- to some—you know, some specialization with journalism in particular.

EC: So you declared your major. Would that have been your sophomore year? And then the following year you take journalism classes or. . . ?

NM: I can't remember what year I declared the major. I—I mean, I *knew* what I was going to do because I just wasn't interested, really, in anything else.

EC: Do you remember what kind of courses you took when you were taking your journalism classes?

NM: Well, there was a news writing course, editing courses, photography—I liked photography a lot, so I—one summer I convinced my father that I could make some extra money if he would buy me an enlarger—a developing outfit from Montgomery Ward. I think it was probably \$59 or something. Oh, it just did a terrible—either it or I did a terrible job [laughs]. But anyway, I learned something about developing pictures, and I did cover a swim meet or two. You know, where my—my sister swam competitively—one of them—and so I sold pictures at fifteen cents a piece of people diving [laughs] into the water.

EC: How did you spend your summers in college?

NM: Well, after my sophomore year, I knew I needed to get a job. My father had been, you know, pressuring me to because I needed to—I needed to pitch in. So I decided to go downtown and apply at the newspaper. And I get in the car, and I'm driving downtown, and I get halfway there, and the steering wheel comes off in

my hands. And I end up in someone's front yard instead. Well, that's a terrible sign [laughs], terrible sign. So I got—walked back home, and my parents took care of the car. And then I went back down a day or so later, and I'm walking up the street to the newspaper in my hometown: the *El Dorado News and Evening Times*. We actually had a morning and an evening newspaper owned by the same outfit. And as I'm walking up the sidewalk, I see my friend Faune Cook coming down the street, too, and I know that Faune is after a job, too. So normally I would have stopped to chat, but I started to feel a little bit competitive, so I kind of sped up and went in. And I got the job. There was only one job, and I got it. I'm convinced to this day that if I'd walked any slower, Faune Cook would have had that job instead of me [laughter].

EC: Tell me what—what was that job?

NM: Oh, it was—it was a combination job. I was a proofreader and the assistant to the society editor, Frances Cordell. She was like a legend in El Dorado, and she was really terrific. She was very much the Southern lady, but very good at what she did and very strong-headed. And *no one* was allowed to change her copy without checking with her. I remember one of the first stories I proofread. We described everything in those days, you know, with the—at some sort of a function, the bride wore black patent shoes, or white patent shoes. And *patent* in this copy had two *ts*, like P-A-T-T-E-N-T, and I knew that was wrong, so I—I was actually cowering, but I went up to her and got permission to take the extraneous [laughter] *t* out. But that part of the job was wonderful. When they hired me, I was—I didn't know what *covering*—you know, writing [about] weddings *meant*. I had no idea. I had envisioned sitting in the back of the church with a stenographer's notebook,

and the bride's coming down the aisle, and I'm going, "Wait! Wait! Is that a Lisbon Lace or Chantilly Lace? I can't tell!" [Laughter] You know, tugging on her gown. [9:16.2] But it's not like that. You know, they—the brides would have to turn in these forms several—a couple of weeks ahead of time and—with all the details, and I would just write—it was kind of really formulaic writing, but it was kind of fun. And Frances Cordell adhered to deadlines, and if you're a bride and you didn't have your information and your picture in by a certain day, you're not getting in the paper—period. And she had some real run-ins with people, but she taught me how to be tough if you need to be. And she was fair. Every afternoon—every morning, she would make us a cup of instant coffee. She had a little Moss Rose electric teapot, and she would plug it in in the floor. The newsroom had an electrical socket sticking out of the middle of the floor—that was safe—but anyway, she'd boil water, and we would take a little break and have that. And in the afternoon, she'd give me money and send me across the street to the service station to buy a—buy us Cokes in bottles. But I learned a lot from her; she was just terrific. But the other part of the job that summer was being a proofreader. And, like a lot of small-town newspapers, we had some pretty lackadaisical proofreaders. My father would get the paper and read an obit[uary] and find a typo in there, and he would just—he said, "*You* didn't proofread this, did you?" And thank goodness I hadn't because [laughs] he's the one who taught me how important, you know, obits are to families. I never forgot that lesson. Anyway, I went back to school, then the next summer after my junior year they hired me back. I was more of a reporter then, covering grass fires and [laughs] that sort of thing.

EC: So during that time they were allowing women to do that.

NM: Actually, in the smaller towns—I think we had a lot more women reporting in El Dorado, Arkansas, than we did at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* when I came here in [1977]. Most of the reporters *were* women back then. [They're cheap]—they were—you know, they'd been reporters for *years*.

EC: Mmm hmm. So you did some breaking news stories that summer.

NM: Well, I wouldn't say a lot of that; I did—I covered the summer musical and things like that. It was softball stuff. If there was news happening, we weren't finding it. Believe me. [Laughter] We covered a lot of drivel and city meetings. And I was a regular at these civic club meetings, eating liver and onions, and, you know, recording whatever the speaker said. It really was softball stuff.

EC: Were there any hard lessons you learned there that maybe prepared you for your, you know, next job?

NM: Ah, I can't think of hard lessons in El Dorado. *Good* lessons because Frances Cordell was so terrific, but we were just pretty much on our own there. You know, the editors were busy. There weren't very many reporters. There wasn't a lot going on.

EC: Mmm hmm.

NM: I think it's different now. I think when you pick up the El Dorado paper now, there's more news in it, certainly, than there was back in—back in the olden [laughs] days.

EC: Mmm hmm. [13:06.9] Mmm hmm. So you went back to school.

NM: I went back to school.

EC: And how much longer—did you graduate in four years?

NM: I *did* graduate in four years. And I had fallen deeply in love with an architecture

student named Wayne Miller. And we fell in love, I guess, March of my senior year. And he was on a five-year program, and he was going to have to hang around for another year, and there was no way I was going to leave him. So I had to get a *job*. And, you know, we were in Fayetteville, Arkansas, of course, and there was one little newspaper there: the *Northwest Arkansas Times*. And I knew I could try to get a job there. And the other part of my game plan was the chicken processing plant [laughter] because—I know—but they paid—they paid a lot of money. And I'm thinking, "If I can't get a job in journalism"—and this was a small paper—"that's Plan B." And I was serious about it. But I went in and applied. I still remember the little A-line cream [laughs] short-sleeved dress I wore. And I got the job. So I became the county reporter there, which included the administrative county court and also the circuit and chancery court; I got to do the murder trials and all. They weren't getting a big bargain because I didn't have much training, anyway, and also, I didn't have a car. [Laughter] So anytime I needed a car, I had to borrow my boyfriend's yellow [Volkswagen] Beetle. And I lived, like, a mile from the office on Olive Street. I had a garage apartment. It was just wretched. It was \$75 a month, and I was getting paid \$75 a week at the paper, and—I was poor. It was—it was just scary. I used to cook dinner for Wayne every night, and I was really proud that I could feed both of us on \$10 a week, and a lot of that was Kraft macaroni and cheese. But, you know, it was just this two-room—ugh—apartment, and I had a dog and then I later acquired two cats, and they were *forever* getting pregnant. Well, you can just imagine what a—what a situation [laughter] it was there.

EC: How long did you work there?

NM: Well, I was there two or two-and-a-half years, I think. I did cover a lot of murder trials, which was great training for me. I could—I got so fast taking notes that I really had a transcription [laughs] of everything that was said. And then I would have to phone in a story, you know, for the deadline, so that was a lot of fun. The county judge was very nice, and I even got him to marry Wayne and me when the time came [laughter]. He lived in Springdale, which was—what, eight miles up the road? Eight or ten miles up the road?

EC: About. Yeah. Do you remember his name?

NM: Vol Lester. V-O-L. L-E-S-T-E-R. And we—Wayne and I and our best friends, Diann and Craig Smith, drove up there one Friday evening, and Judge Lester offered us a belt of bourbon and then he performed the ceremony. And we were so poor, we didn't—we didn't take a honeymoon; that was, you know—in retrospect, I wish we had at least gone to Springdale and rented a motel [room], but we didn't. Diann and Craig fixed us a steak dinner, and we just went on back to the apartment. I shouldn't have gone anywhere dressed like I was. It was a—I chose a polyester wedding gown; it was like a beige print, and I had an orange plush shoulder bag and purple heels. I don't know what I was thinking [laughs]. It was the [1970s], but there was no excuse for dressing like that! [Laughter]

EC: Do you remember at that time how large the newsroom was at that paper?

[17:37.9]

NM: Well, I'm thinking—there was Doris [Hendrickson?], who did obits and rewrites. There was Pat Donat, who covered education. And we had a—we had a society editor. They changed through the years. I can't remember who was there when I left. And we had a male reporter. I'm thinking that's about it except for a couple

of sports reporters. There was the city editor and his assistant, the news editor. Then we had a copy editor, proofreader or two. That was it. It wasn't— you know, as small a newspaper as it was, I was lucky to get hired. And I never did have a car the whole time. [Laughs] I can just imagine what they were thinking. [Laughter]

EC: Well, it was a small town at that time, too.

NM: It *was* a small town, and I could walk to my beat. But, you know, after a while, we—Wayne was working for a city planner, and I had gradually worked myself up to \$100 a week, and we just weren't making a killing financially. We moved into a nicer apartment, which we could afford barely. But I think we had about \$115 in savings, and we really—it was getting to the point where we weren't going to be able to make our bills. We just had to have more money coming in, so I talked Wayne into moving to Little Rock [laughs].

EC: So that's how it happened.

NM: That's how it happened. Yeah. He was from Pine Bluff, Arkansas, and I was from El Dorado, and it was—my family was down there. That's the biggest town in the state. So anyway, he went down, and he got a job at Wittenberg, Delony and Davidson [architectural firm], and I thought we were going to be on easy street. He had to start early, and he took the car, so I [had] to walk to work. And we were at the Colonial Arms Apartments, which was back north of the University of Arkansas. It was probably a couple of miles. One of the days he was gone, there was, like, an ice storm, and the entire town was covered in a sheet of ice. It was like a Saturday morning because we worked five-and-a-half days [a week] there. And I had to get to work, so I just had to start out at 6:00 [a.m.], you know,

just sliding as if I were on snowshoes for these two miles to work. And just before I got there, the police chief—who was missing a thumb; I don't know how that happened. He was a very nice man. But he picked me up and took me the rest [laughs] of the way. So anyway, we moved to—Wayne comes back up, we load up the dog—the cats are no longer with us—we load up the dog and our two little pieces of furniture and head to Little Rock. And he had already rented an apartment for us at Sherwood Manor down off Baseline Road. It wasn't a really nice neighborhood at the time, and it's much less nice now [laughs]. But anyway, we came in through the back, and I walked in, and I looked through the living room and then I realized that I had not only walked through the living room but also the dining room; it was that small [laughter]. So I—I was so happy to be there, though, because he had this nice job. And I wasn't planning to work. My game plan all along had been, seriously, to get married and have babies. I was in that last wave of women, some of whom actually thought that. You know, women's lib was just beginning to come in when I was in college. It was just a different—a different time. And after—it took me three weeks to save enough household money so we could go out to dinner. This was a hamburger restaurant, and we got there one Friday night, and our waiter had dirty fingernails. And it just—I'd had enough of being poor. And I'd been talking to my friend, Larry Mougeot. We had been in journalism—some journalism classes together. We always sat next to each other and cut up. And he was working for—in advertising in Little Rock at the time, I think. And I would call him and talk with him, and he said, "You have got to get off your butt and go get a job!" [Laughs] And I thought, "Well, thank you for that!" [Laughs]

EC: Did Larry work at the *Democrat* or [Arkansas] *Gazette*?

NM: No, he was—he actually worked for M. M. Cohn [department store] at that time.

EC: Okay.

NM: I don't think he—he never worked for either of those papers. He did other things. But I thought, "You know, he's right. One salary just isn't *enough*." We'd been poor for so long, and I still didn't have a car. So anyway, I decided to strike out and find a job. And I did—I did drop by the *Gazette*. I was totally unprepared for an interview. I didn't have—I didn't have anything with me, but I just chatted with them for a few minutes, but they—you know, it just wasn't comfortable at all. And then I went to the *Democrat*. I was going to try both of them anyway. And my timing was impeccable. I walked in, and I go in to see Jerry McConnell, who was the managing editor, and it was like a—one of these—you know, I was just a drop-in; there was no appointment. And he was so nice, but it just wasn't a great time for an interview because Winthrop [A.] Rockefeller, who had been the governor of Arkansas, had just died [on February 22, 1973], and they'd been a little bit busy that morning [laughs]. So anyway, he filled out—he had me fill out an application and references and asked me to come back—you know, check back with him next week. [24:00.3]

EC: Do you remember how old you were at that time?

NM: I would have been—let's see, I was twenty-three when I got married, and this would have been—I would have been twenty-four.

EC: Okay. What year was that? Do you remember?

NM: Yeah, I do remember. It was [1973]. It was February [of] [1973].

EC: Mmm hmm. So you walked in [and] you spoke with Jerry O'Connell. I take it

was. . .

NM: McConnell.

EC: McConnell. I take it was a pretty brief conversation?

NM: Yeah, but he was real nice. He was *always* very nice.

EC: And then what happened?

NM: Well, I gave him these references, and we talked, and we set up an appointment for the next week, you know, for more of an interview. So I go into the news-room, and I'm a nervous wreck, of course, and I see what I'm afraid is the city desk—this long bank of desks and then a man sitting at the very end of it. And he had, like, gray hair and glasses and a heart-shaped face and a goatee. And he wasn't smiling. He just looked scary to me. I was terrified. I'm thinking, "Please don't let him be the city editor. Please don't let him be the city editor." [Laughs] So Jerry calls me into this office, and this guy comes in [laughs]. Oh, no! So he introduces me, and it's Ralph Patrick and so we start talking, and, you know, they ask a few questions and all, and Jerry said, "Well, we checked your records, and we got a real good recommendation on you." And I said, "Oh, really?" Sitting up a little bit straighter. And he said, "Yeah." And he named a name. It was one of my professors at the University of Arkansas. And Jerry said, "Yeah. He said that he didn't remember much about you, but you stood up in his class one day and told him how awful it was." Which was true [laughs]; it was—I—it was a terrible thing to do, but that class was *ridiculous*. You know, this was—this was the biggest school in the state, and we were using a textbook with this fantasy town in it; I think it was called Middletown, USA. And I just stood up, and I said, "We're not learning anything we need! We've never seen a police report. We don't know

how to make a deadline. We need practical experience." And I went on and on. Well, who knew that would come back to haunt me? [Laughs] I thought it was just one little ugly chapter in my life [laughs] and the professor's life. But anyway, that did it for them because they knew the situation in some of the classes. And that's not to say that they were all bad. There were Ernie Deane was *fabulous*, in particular. I think he'd covered the Nuremburg Trials, and he was a living, breathing journalist, and it was wonderful. But that's—that's what set me apart from the other applicants [laughs].

EC: And it *helped* you.

NM: It got me in.

EC: Mmm hmm.

NM: It got me in.

EC: When did you start? How many days later?

NM: Not too many days later. I had enough time to go to Sears and buy a wardrobe in polyester. I was all over polyester. I think my first day I had a pink—pale pink polyester suit with a straight skirt. And I went in that first day and sat at Ralph's left hand. And he handed me a book, and he said, "Read this book because you've got an interview with this guy in two hours." And it was a guy from Memphis who had written a book on the high cost of employee theft—like pencils and notebooks and things like that.

EC: What was your job?

NM: I was a general assignment reporter, but I ended up doing a lot of entertainment-type news. We had a lot of minor celebrities who came through town, and one was Buford Pusser, [28:07.8] who—he was the sheriff in the *Walking Tall* mov-

ies. I can't remember all the circumstances, but it was Buford against the criminal element in some Southern state [Buford was sheriff of McNairy County, Tennessee, from 1964 to 1970]. And they—they beat him up really bad. The night I interviewed him, we were in one of those high-rise buildings downtown that had one of these nice restaurants on the top of it. And he ordered a steak, and I was sitting across from him. And his face looked like it was Silly Putty; it had been rearranged wrong. It was bad. And he—probably two months after the interview, he was killed [on August 21, 1974] in what was, I think, a suspicious car wreck. I don't know whatever came of that, but—but he was a very nice man. And so something after that as cocktail party information or something, I happened to mention to Ralph Patrick that Buford Pusser used to go out in the garden every day after school and dig up a raw onion and eat it, and Ralph said, "Why didn't you put that in your story? People are *dying* to read things like that!" And I'm thinking, "Why didn't I? What was I thinking?" It was, like, such a slap in the face that I never let a good anecdote go again. [Laughter] It was a good lesson, and I really—I really was glad he called my hand. [laughter].

EC: Were you ever in any uncomfortable situations [while you were] reporting?

NM: I was in an uncomfortable situation on the way to work one day. I was—I had—Wayne and I separated, and it was—it was like the first week, and I had—I didn't have any money again. Once again, I'm poor. I had a car because I finally saved up enough to make a down payment on an orange MGB. But I really couldn't afford to pay parking fees, so I was parking, like, two or three blocks away from the *Democrat*. And at that time I was an assistant city editor. And I was on the 6:30 [a.m.] shift. It was about 6:20. It was still pretty dark, and I was walking down

the street, and this guy comes and hooks me around the neck and drags me off into this alley and throws me down. And nothing happened. I got out of it. Some people who lived in an apartment right above this heard what was going on shouted at him, and he ran away. And they took me in, and I called the police and went through hysterics and all of the things that you would do. And then I went—they dropped me off at the office [laughs]. And I go in. And Larry Gordon was the city editor at that time, and he was—he was a character. So I sit down. I'm, like, all dusty and perspiring. And I had, like, a rip in the sleeve of my *favorite* polyester dress, and he hands me this stack of copy and says, "Here. Read this. We're on the state edition deadline!" [Laughter] So—I wasn't very good at it, but I read it. We had to be tough, and that was fine.

EC: Was downtown dangerous [during] those days?

NM: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Anybody with any sense wouldn't have been parking where I was. I just—nothing bad had ever happened to me before, and I just felt invincible, which people do, but I changed dramatically right after that.

EC: Mmm hmm. Did the *Democrat* have security guards who would walk people to their cars?

NM: No. No. We did have paid parking nearby, and most people parked there.

EC: Going back to your days as a reporter, talk about some other stories that you wrote about or [that] you really enjoyed.

NM: Well, one terrible story [laughs]—this is the kind of stories I was getting because I was on the Friday night shift: they send me to cover a tractor pull. First, I had no idea what a tractor pull was. Second, I had no idea what a *filthy* job it would be, and I had—my one good coat was this orange suede coat. So I go to this trac-

tor pull at—what was it—some sort of an arena on Roosevelt Road [Barton Coliseum]. I'm blanking on the name, but it was real big, and they had—it was just all dust and roaring tractors. I was just coated [in dust]. The coat was never the same. [Laughter] But I—one story I really liked was [about] streakers because that was the era of illegal streakers. And it was kind of a daring decision on Ralph's part whether to send a man reporter or a woman reporter to cover the streakers, but he sent me one Friday night. I think they were at UALR [University of Arkansas at Little Rock]. And I'm standing around beforehand just wondering where they are, and someone says, "There they are!" And I turn, and there are two naked men. So I'm standing there like, you know, interviewing them. And when I got back to the office [that] night, whoever the photographer was on duty had taken a picture of this interview. I'm just like all business there in my hip-huggers and long hair and just [laughter]—they'd written a caption like, "Now, how to you spell your last name?" [Laughter] I still have that, but it's real—it's real faded now. But I did—you know, being the Friday night reporter, I had to cover a lot of meetings—a lot of dinner meetings with the governor, not really exciting stuff. I had to do reviews of plays. I had to—I did a little entertainment column that was that was stripped across the front of the Saturday paper on things to do that weekend. The Yellville Turkey Drop and your armadillo festivals.

EC: Mmm hmm. [34:15.3] Did they have the Gillett Coon Festival at that time? Raccoon Festival?

NM: Oh, you betcha! You betcha!

EC: Yeah. [Laughter]

NM: You can't beat tradition! [Laughter] You can't beat tradition.

EC: So you worked Friday nights.

NM: Mmm hmm.

EC: And then did you work nights the rest of the week, or. . . ?

NM: No, I think I was on days the rest of the week. I'm trying to—I guess—I was off Saturday and Sunday, but my punishment for having weekends, at least during that time, was to have to work Friday night.

EC: What were the ages of the other reporters? Were a lot of the reporters your age or mostly older?

NM: There were a lot of reporters my age, but there were some old-timers there and some middle-timers, too. We had a—we had a reputation as a revolving door paper. It was kind of unusual for people to be [there] for two full years, and I was there, like, I guess nearly five years—four-and-a-half or five years. And some people were longer than that, but a lot of people were just in and out. It was—we really felt like we were a training ground.

EC: Mmm hmm. What was the culture like?

NM: Oh, it was fun! It was fun. We—we had a lot of parties, for one thing, and there was a lot of commingling of the staff and some marriages and that sort of thing. It—let's see, what can I tell you about it? Larry Gordon, for instance, married Carol Stogsdin. I think they were—they may have been married before they started at the *Democrat*. Bill Husted and Amanda Singleton got married. And Larry and Carol later divorced, and he married Connie Hoxie, also on the staff. But I'm sure there were others. But it was kind of a—just a fun atmosphere because the *Gazette* was so serious, and we were, like, rip-roaring—you know, lots of ideas—we would take chances. I—we—there was—you know, I was only a

reporter there for a year-and-a-half before I got promoted, but Ralph would send me out to cover a noon luncheon, and I would have to call the speaker up ahead of time and ask him what he was going to say, and then I'd have to go to the lunch and make sure he said what he said [he was going to say] and call Ralph instantly to let him know if he needed to make any changes in the story, which was, you know, going on the press very, very shortly. And at that time, we still—we had Linotype operators. It was very—it was very old. We had all of the old typewriters, the Royals and whatever. And when it would come time for the deadline, you know, there's, like, this cacophony of typewriters going all around. It's just this crescendo; there's nothing else like it, except maybe the sound of the press starting up. One day [37:32.9] I wrote a story, and my friend Larry Mougeot called me up that afternoon, and he said, "Well, I read your story, or at least I *tried* to." And he said, "What's the *problem*?" And it's like the Linotype operator, who took the story after I had typed it and retyped it—it's like he'd been drinking or had his fingers on the wrong keys; this story was *incoherent*. They fixed it for the next edition. I'm a bad typist, but I was never that bad [laughter].

EC: Tell me how the process worked. You would type your story and then [how did?] it make its way down the line?

NM: Yeah. Well, we had copy papers—sheets of this flimsy sheet copy paper—and carbons. We would make a carbon copy of everything. So you'd put this three-pack in the typewriter and type a page and then you'd type another page. And then you had a glue pot, so you'd make a stripe of glue and glue the whole thing together and run it up to Ralph. And I remember when they started doing employee evaluations, he said, "You know, everything's fine, but one thing: could

you please not use so much glue? You're getting it all over my shirt!" [Laughs]

So anyway, he would edit it and then it would go to the copy desk, and they would write a headline on it. And then it would go upstairs, and the Linotype operators would do their thing with it and—I don't know, it was the hot type time. And people would, you know, put the little rows of type in trays and then print it somehow. It's been so long, I've forgotten how that—how all that came about. They eventually modernized while I was still there.

EC: But it was a lot of work.

NM: It was a *lot* of work.

EC: Involved a lot of people.

NM: It did, and there was a great capacity for error.

EC: Mmm hmm.

NM: Absolutely.

EC: Did you ever make any bad mistakes?

NM: No. Well, there was the whale mistake. I could not get great white sharks and great white whales straight. [Laughter] I remember in that little entertaining strip on the front page, there was—I was writing about *Jaws*, and I called him a great white whale. And, sure enough, up here, one of my reporters made the same mistake probably a year-and-a-half ago—made the same mistake in her copy—and I didn't catch it.

EC: [Laughs]

NM: Then we had to run a correction. [Laughter]

EC: Now, I'm going to go ahead and turn this—oh, I guess we have a little more time.

I'm very paranoid about this tape recorder because it doesn't make a lot of sound

when it's out of tape, so I'm always looking at it.

NM: Okay.

EC: You spent a year-and-a-half as a reporter. How did you—did you apply to become an assistant city editor, or were you asked?

NM: I was asked. It was election time, and Ralph put me in charge of tabulating local election results. I had another reporter and then I had a clerk with an adding machine. We did this in the middle of the night. We finished at about 2:30 [a.m.], and I was so paranoid that I made everybody do it again to make sure [laughs] it was right. I'm sure they were ready to throttle me. But anyway, James Scudder was—was the assistant city editor then, and he got a Nieman Scholarship—a Nieman Fellowship to Harvard [University, Cambridge, Massachusetts]. He was an *incredible* writer. He's passed away now, I understand. But they needed someone to fill in, so Ralph promoted me to be the second assistant city editor. And then I trained, and when James left I became the city editor—the assistant city editor—and just kept that job until I left.

EC: Okay. And tell me what was the—you spoke a little bit about the *Gazette*. What was the—did you feel much competition?

NM: Yeah. And a little resentment, too, because they were so well thought of. But—and they *were*. I mean, it was a—it was a good paper, but it wasn't a lot of fun to read. And I just felt like we were more fun to read. And, believe me, we were far from perfect. We were very young and—but we were lively.

EC: Mmm hmm.

NM: I think we—we felt like we had more spirit. [42:14.9]

EC: When you say that, do you mean—was the writing *style* easier to read, or was it

the subject matter or how you chose to report on things? Is that what made it more interesting?

NM: I can't say that was uniform across the *Democrat*, but it was a lot easier to get a conversational style in the *Democrat* than I think it would have been at the *Gazette*. The *Gazette* was definitely—definitely had a stodgier feel to it.

EC: Mmm hmm. How did people in town regard the two papers?

NM: Well, I think all of Arkansas thought the *Gazette* was a better paper. [It] certainly had a reputation. But *we* had readers—you know, my father—my father *always* read the *Democrat*. *We always* had that at home. And he was so happy when I started to work there. We didn't have their circulation, but look what *happened*.

EC: Mmm hmm.

NM: You know, the *Gazette*—we ended up *absorbing* the *Gazette*. It's—*we* meaning the *Democrat*.

EC: Mmm hmm.

NM: It's—no one ever could have foreseen that, I don't think, but it happened.

EC: Now, [was] the *Democrat* located where it is now?

NM: Mmm hmm.

EC: On East Capitol?

NM: Mmm hmm.

EC: Where was the newsroom?

NM: I think it's where it's always been. I'm thinking it was on the second floor.

EC: It's on the third floor now.

NM: Okay. Well, maybe it was on the third floor.

EC: Okay.

NM: Yeah. It was—I remember there were these steps going up, and—yeah, it was on the third floor.

EC: Was it on the third floor?

NM: I think so because there was a mezzanine—there was a mezzanine, and—well, whatever floor it was on—it had wooden floors.

EC: Okay.

NM: And many of us smoked. And we would, like, grind our cigarettes out on these wooden floors, just almost *maliciously*. [Laughter] It's like working in a giant *ashtray*! What were we thinking? We could have burned the building down [laughter]. And it was gross. But they decided to carpet it, and I remember feeling so deeply resentful because we had to use ashtrays then. It just took some of [laughs]—some of the character out of the newsroom.

EC: And people smoked at their desks?

NM: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

EC: Did anyone drink at the newspaper, or was that forbidden?

NM: I can't think that we drank in the newsroom, but I do remember one time somebody sent us a fifth of something—or sent it to Ralph or the city desk. And Ralph was going to share it with us. Maybe it was Irish whiskey. So we all went back into the library. And it was so strange; Ralph sat in a chair, and we all sat in a semi-circle of straight chairs around him, and we all had a little tiny drink of whiskey or whatever it was [laughter]. It was a little bizarre. We needed [balloons?] or something—a little nip. But I remember—I don't remember drinking in the newsroom at all.

EC: Talk about some of the people you worked with. Do you have any favorites?

NM: Oh, yeah. I loved—I loved a lot of people there. Bill—Bill Husted. Larry Gordon. First of all, Ralph Patrick was the city editor and then Larry Gordon became the city editor. And Larry was like an old-timey newsman. And he was good. He used to say he could edit better drunk than most people could sober, and that may have been true, you know, but he was—he was good. But he and Connie Hoxie—I guess they were married at the time—they got mad about something and quit simultaneously, rather suddenly. I was—I was in Mexico at the time. And they needed to name a new city editor. And I wanted it. I felt like I *should* have it, although, I really *shouldn't* have. [Laughter] But they ended up naming Bill Husted as the city editor. And he's great. He was just great. We became great friends, and he really—he was a big gun. He had a lot of experience reporting. And at one time, we had all our big. . . [Tape Stopped at 46:44.6]

EC: Oh. Okay. [Continue?]

NM: It was late afternoon one Saturday, and the phone rings at my grandmother's [house]. And it was Bill. He said, "Do not ask for whom the bell tolls." And I thought, "Oh, boy." [Laughs] So he said that the Rolling Stones had been busted in Fordyce, Arkansas. Fordyce was about equal distance between Little Rock and El Dorado, but they were probably short-staffed because it was Saturday, so he asked me to run up there. Well, my brother was with me at my grandmother's, and I was inappropriately dressed to be reporting. I was wearing, like, hip-huggers and like a crop top, and so my brother—we jumped in the convertible, and my brother drove, and we got up there, and they had—it was Keith Richards and Ron Wood and a couple other guys who were musicians. And they had rented a car. They were on tour, but they had rented a car. They just wanted to

see some of the area. And they'd gone to this little restaurant called The Fordyce Restaurant, and [they] left there. Keith Richards, I think, was driving this rental car, and he was driving kind of recklessly and got picked up. So anyway, I get—they're in jail, and I got there and there were, like, a couple hundred people outside milling around because they heard the Rolling Stones were in jail. This was so *bizarre*, such a bizarre thing to happen. And I went in. I got herded into this little room; it was probably the municipal courtroom. And then I kept wandering around. I was just desperate to get something. And I saw this guy, this attorney named Bill Carter, and I had met him years before in El Dorado when I was covering a judicial conference. And we chatted a bit, and he said, "Well, we're going to go out to [?] Lake and drink beer. Why don't you come on out with us?" I was thinking, "This is probably going to be hard to explain to my editor. Maybe I should just go back to work." It was like 1:30 in the afternoon. But anyway, I did remember [?] I had read that he had represented—represented Tanya Tucker. He did—you know—was the local lawyer for entertainers—local attorney for entertainers when they needed one. But anyway, I went up to him, and I said, "Well, Tanya Tucker never acted like this, did she?" And that caught his attention, and so I thought he was going to help me *see* them, or get some sort of an interview. And this creepy radio guy came up and said, "Don't talk to her! We've been here waiting longer than she has!" On and on and on and just interrupted. And I'd get on the phone and try to phone stuff in, and I was just being bedeviled by radio reporters. And I ended up not getting too much at all. They did better by phone because I was [?] down there, but it was an interesting experience. So my brother and I went home in the middle of the night in the chill.

EC: We talked a little bit about the *Gazette*, but what other—what kind of presence did other media have at that time?

NM: Well, just the TV stations. And I guess there was some kind of—some kind of competition with them.

EC: Mmm hmm.

NM: But it was mainly the *Gazette*.

EC: So it was mostly waking up the next day. . .

NM: Mmm hmm.

EC: Now, the *Gazette*—was that a morning paper?

NM: They were a morning paper, and we were an afternoon paper.

EC: Okay. So I guess you had to wait until the next morning to see what the *Gazette* had.

NM: Yeah.

EC: And then as an editor, did you compare stories?

NM: Well, yes. But one thing we did was compare *obits*. We knew how important obits were. And every Friday night, one of us would have to drive over on the other side of the interstate and pick up a stack of papers—of *Gazettes* from the loading dock and go and see what obits we had and which ones we needed to call funeral homes and, you know, verify. We had to get everything that we could in our paper the next day.

EC: Why were obits so important?

NM: Well, the worst thing you can do is to disrespect a dead person by either not having their obit or having errors in it—putting errors in it. And a mark of a good newspaper is being able to capably handle obits. And we knew, we knew. We

wanted to be *timely*. We didn't want readers to have to wait another day so we could follow the *Gazette*. So we did everything we could. . .

EC: Mmm hmm.

NM: . . .to pull that together.

EC: Now, as an assistant city editor, did you have the [?] to work for you?

NM: Um. I don't remember that there was a group assigned, like the *Post Dispatch*. I think it was just like they were out there, and we would edit whatever came in.

EC: Okay.

NM: That's how I remember it.

EC: Mmm hmm. Mmm hmm. So you didn't have a particular group of [?] I think, which is now at the *Democrat-Gazette*.

NM: Yeah. No, we weren't that organized [laughter]. We were just—had to keep our heads above water [laughter].

EC: Did you have much interaction with the society page? Was there a society page at the *Democrat*?

NM: There was, but I really didn't have anything to do with it. The society editor, as I recall, was on the other side of the room with the sports department. So it was just news and entertainment and that sort of thing. We had an "Answer Please" column that we did on the news side; Julie Baldrige was our "Answer Please" lady. [Laughs]

EC: Tell me about the "Answer Please".

NM: Well, people would just write in with a problem—consumer issues, that sort of thing, and she would answer it. It was very popular.

EC: Mmm hmm.

NM: We did—you know, we did environmental news. Susan Kleihaven was our environmental reporter for a while. We did a lot of political news because the, you know, State Capitol was there. And Bob Lancaster who's, you know, one of the best writers in the state, was with us for a time. And at one point, he wrote kind of a tongue-in-cheek bio first of all the senators—state senators—and then on all the state reps. I guess they ran on successive Sundays. That was *so funny*. He's just a brilliant humorist. I came into the newsroom one time at that time—I guess about the time they carpeted the newsroom, they gave us IBM Selectric typewriters. And I came in one day from behind, and he was, like, right face—head down on his keyboard of his typewriter. And I was thinking, "Oh, my God! He looks like he's been shot in the back!" But he was just thinking. [laughs] But we did have some good writers, and Bill Husted was one of them.

EC: Mmm hmm.

NM: I stayed—after I moved up here, I would stay with Bill and Amanda when I'd go to Little Rock sometimes. They were the only journalists I knew of who had a swimming pool in their backyard. And it was like party central, so that was a lot of fun. [54:18.2]

EC: What did the editors do to encourage good writing? Was there much emphasis placed on writing at that time?

NM: Oh, gosh. It's not like we had seminars or anything. I'm—I'm having trouble thinking of anything in particular. Ralph or whoever was the editor—would certainly praise any kind of [?] in writing—anything, you know, that was conversational or different.

EC: Mmm hmm.

NM: Stuff that would be fun to read.

EC: Mmm hmm. Did people mostly get along at the *Democrat*?

NM: I think so. I don't remember—I don't remember squabbles and a lot of flare-ups.

EC: Mmm hmm.

NM: I do remember—and I'm not going to name names—but Al May, one of the reporters, and I had what we called a nose pickers hotline. We just couldn't stand nose picking [laughter], so when we'd see someone, we'd get on the phone and call the other across the room. And it was—we saw one couple doing it simultaneously [laughs]. That was our entertainment. Times were hard.

EC: Now, did you each have your own—your own extension to a separate line?

NM: I think probably not. At least on the city desk, I think we probably had one of those push-button phones.

EC: Mmm hmm.

NM: And, you know, at—right before deadline, reporters would be calling in to dictate their stories probably about 12:00, about noon. We had a head clerk named Mabel Berry. Oh, she was tough! And usually a couple of co-clerks. And the reporters would call in, and they would—you know, like put the phone on your shoulder and just start typing ninety to nothing. And I loved to do that. I loved it when they were busy. And I could end up doing that because it was just such a—such a rush, and you'd hear the reporters say—they'd dictate a sentence, and they'd say, "Period." And a new paragraph, you know, Et cetera, and CQ—"That's a CQ"—and it was just cool because you had to do it so fast. You had to type so well so fast. But I remember Bob Sallee was, I think, our police reporter. He and Mabel Berry went back years and years, and they were great friends. And

he would call in—he called in one time in this low, husky voice and said, "I need a broad." [Laughter] I knew he just wanted dictation, so I gave him to Mabel.

[Laughter] But there were some characters.

EC: Mmm hmm. Um, as far as the makeup of the newsroom, was it mostly whites? Were there many African-Americans?

NM: Not many. I—there was a guy—I think he was a sportswriter named Gerald Jordan—for a time. He was not in the reporting staff, I don't think. We did have a reporter named Dorothy Palmer and we—who was white—and a clerk named Dorothy Thrower, who was Black. And we always called them Miss Dorothy Palmer and Miss Dorothy Thrower. [Laughs] But it was—I think it was a largely white newsroom, as I recall. They—we had a lot of women, and the women were tough, too. I remember Linda Zimmer covered—I guess she covered city hall. And Ralph said, "I never worry about Linda." Because she was—she could manage herself just fine. All the women were tough in the newsroom, especially the ones who'd been there thirty years. And there were—but I wouldn't say it was diverse.

EC: Mmm hmm. How did—did the [Little Rock] Central High [School Integration] Crisis of 1957—did that—at that time, did you feel like the environment in Little Rock was charged any? Racially? I mean, were people still talking about that? Was it. . .?

NM: I don't know that anybody was talking about Central High, but it was a very segregated town, no doubt about it. Just no doubt about it. It was your typical southern town. I think things are probably a little better now, but they weren't very good then.

EC: Mmm hmm. Did you enjoy it mostly?

NM: I loved it; I really did. And the reason—well, the reason I left—Gail Pennington, the TV critic up here—she grew up like two blocks from me in El Dorado, and we had both taken Mrs. Jenkins in journalism class at El Dorado High School. We had both gone into journalism. Well, she had come up here, and she had worked—been working up here for a few years, I think, as a copy editor. And I'd gone up on the train one time to see her, and she said, "You know, you really ought to try out here. They're hiring women." And I thought, "Well, they do *pay* for try-outs." I think the pay was like \$423 a week then, which was *unheard of*.

EC: You said say *try-outs*, did you have to come in for a trial?

NM: I did. I called Bill Husted and said, "Do you mind if I take one more week vacation?" I think we had like two weeks, and that took care of it. [1:00:15.1] He said, "Sure. Go ahead." So I came in at 4:30 in the morning for like five days. And I was trying out as a copy editor. And I was not their first choice, which is not surprising because I'd never been a copy editor in my *life*. [Laughter] I had no idea what I was doing. I wasn't their first choice. It was a guy, and he declined the job, and they called me next. I said, "Can I think about this overnight?" Because I wasn't sure I wanted to move from Little Rock. I loved it. But then I knew how much more money I was going to be making up here, and I did—I think I nearly doubled my salary coming up here. And it just seemed indulgent to stay.

EC: Mmm hmm.

NM: So I . . .

EC: So you tried out.

NM: Mmm hmm. And they—I was like trying to decide overnight what to do. So I asked Bill Husted if I could talk with him, and he said, "Do you want to take a walk around the block?" And I said, "Yeah." And I told him the deal, and he said, "You'd be crazy not to take that job." He said, "*I* would." So I did.

EC: Mmm hmm.

NM: And that was that.

EC: Yeah? You were sad to leave?

NM: I was really sad to leave.

EC: Mmm hmm.

NM: It was—it was a great time. And it's sad that things had to change, but they did. And, you know, then other people that I'd worked so long with left, you know, kind of in succession.

EC: Mmm hmm.

NM: But I worked with great people. You know, Jerry McConnell was wonderful. He was—he was tough, but in a very gentle way. And Bob McCord, who was like the top editor during most of that time—he was—he was, I think, the president—the national president of the Society of Professional Journalists. And he was like the model of integrity. You know, he wasn't a huge man, but he had this deep voice, and he was just brilliant. He's still brilliant. And he—he would have—he would write a column, I guess each week, and he would have us edit it. And he would say, "No one is too good to be edited." Here's like this esteemed journalist, and I always thought that was terrific. That was terrific.

EC: And he was the executive editor?

NM: I guess that's—yeah, I think that was the title then, but he was like at the top of it

below the publisher.

EC: Mmm hmm.

NM: When he—when he got named president—national president of the SPJ, they had a reception for him at Trapnall Hall, and if I'm not mistaken, they actually served caviar [laughs]. I really think they did. I hope I didn't just dream that up [laughs].

EC: How did you cover elections?

NM: Oh, gosh. It's been so long, I really can't remember. I just remember the tabulations. . .

EC: Mmm hmm.

NM: . . .at night. I'd have to stay up all night.

EC: Mmm hmm. Okay. Um. The managing editor at that point was?

NM: That was Jerry McConnell.

EC: Jerry McConnell. Did he interact much with reporters?

NM: Well, I don't know that there was that much interaction in the newsroom. Not that I remember. I remember his office. He had an office like that faced—what was that street that ran in front of the *Democrat*? Was that Capitol?

EC: Capitol. Mmm hmm.

NM: Yeah. He had an office that faced Capitol. And I—you know, he would just like deal with managing editor-type things. You know, he looked beleaguered sometimes, and I'm sure he was because it was a—it was a paper where he was constantly hiring new people, and we were constantly training new people. And it's exhausting. You know people who come through the door—I mean, we—we had some people who might have left in like six months. Generally they were there at least a year or two, but that's—that's a lot of work. And then there was the money

situation. Because we—the *Democrat* didn't pay a great deal of money. I always felt like I was treated very well there, but the truth is it wasn't—I felt—I felt appreciated, but it wasn't a lot of money. And I had run up a \$300 Visa bill, and I had no idea how I was going to pay that off, and that was another factor in deciding to move.

EC: Mmm hmm. Hmm. Let's see. What else could we talk about? Is there anything else you'd like to talk about that we have not talked about?

NM: I can't think of anything right now. There were lots of personalities at the paper, but I'm [laughs]—I can't think of anything—any good anecdotes right now.

EC: Okay. Well, thank you for participating in the Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History ['s project on the *Arkansas Democrat*], and you will have a chance to review and edit the transcript later.

NM: Thank you so much, Elisa. [1:05:51.8]

EC: Nancy, what have you done since you arrived at the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*?

NM: Well, I started out as a copy editor and then I became the slot for St. Charles. And then I went to St. Charles as the bureau chief for a couple of years, then I came back into town to be assistant suburban editor and then suburban editor for a few years. And then I went to what was then called the city desk, and I was an assistant city editor for a few years. And then we reorganized, and I went to features as the lifestyle section editor. And now I'm the lifestyle editor, which includes the lifestyle department and the lifestyle section we put out each week as well as "Let's Eat" and "Healthy and Fit" and the travel sections. And we have section editors who do the actual putting out of the travel, food, and health and fitness sections, but they're all part of lifestyle. And that's where we are.

EC: And what is your title here?

NM: Lifestyle Editor.

EC: Lifestyle Editor.

NM: I put out the, you know, little weekly tabloid called "Lifestyle," and I also write a weekly readers' notes/column. It's part of our attempt to become more real to readers and just—exactly what we were trying to do with the *Arkansas Democrat*.

EC: How many years have you been at the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*?

NM: It'll be thirty years in October.

EC: Okay. All right. Thank you.

NM: Thank you very much. [1:07:31.1]

[Transcribed by Rebecca Willhite]