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## ***Arkansas Democrat Project***

Interview with:

John Mobbs  
Little Rock, Arkansas  
2 June 2006

Interviewer: Jerry McConnell

Jerry McConnell: This is Jerry McConnell. This is June 2, 2006. I'm sitting here in the [*Arkansas*] *Democrat-Gazette* building with John Mobbs doing an interview for the oral history of the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* for the Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History at the University of Arkansas [Fayetteville]. The first thing I need to do, John, is to ask you if we have your permission to make this tape and to turn it over to the University of Arkansas.

John Mobbs: You do.

JMc: Okay. You are the advertising director at the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*. Is that correct?

JM: I am.

JMc: Okay. And you have been with the paper since . . .

JM: Since May of 1978.

JMc: Okay. We will start out first with how you got here. First, where were you born and when?

JM: Well, actually, I was born in 1946 in Detroit, Michigan. My dad at the time had taken a position with General Motors. We were there for a couple of years and then moved back to Arkansas. Both my mom and dad were from Arkansas.

JMc: Were they? Okay.

JM: I grew up both in Drew County and, obviously, in Little Rock, and went to school in Little Rock.

JMc: Okay, Drew County. Is that Monticello?

JM: Monticello.

JMc: Okay.

JM: I attended [Little Rock] Central High School. I graduated in 1964 and then went to, at the time, Little Rock University [now known as the University of Arkansas at Little Rock]. I attended there for a couple of years. I went to work for M. M. Cohn when the Phillips and the Pfeifer families owned it and were running the stores. That was in 1964, I suppose, because I was going to school at the same time. I stayed there until 1977. I started out in sales—worked my way up to being a buyer and actually a merchandise manager. I left there in 1977. I started with the *Arkansas Democrat* in May of 1978.

JMc: Okay, John. You started at the *Democrat* in May of 1978. Tell me what you did here and how that progressed.

JM: Well, Paul Smith hired me as our TV magazine salesman. My primary responsibility was to go out and sell the TV magazine—sell advertising in it. I did that for I guess about a year and a half, then Paul promoted me to the retail advertising

manager. In 1983, he promoted me to the advertising director.

JMc: And replacing him?

JM: Replacing him. He was promoted to general manager and I took his position.

JMc: Okay. What was the situation when you first came here at the *Democrat* in May of 1978 of selling advertising?

JM: Well, it was pretty bleak [laughs], to be honest. Working for M. M. Cohn, Jerry—M. M. Cohn at the time catered to the upper forty percent of the market. The only paper that they used for advertising was the *Arkansas Gazette*. I grew up reading the *Gazette* and read their sports section probably before I read anything else. Anyway, coming to work for the *Democrat*—first of all, I thought I had lost my mind because it was an afternoon paper, and I read the *Gazette*. But, nevertheless, I really felt led to be here. It was pretty difficult selling advertising against the *Gazette*. We would work very hard and we might sell a few small ads and be very proud of it. The *Gazette* would have a *lot* more ads than we would and a lot *larger* ads than we would.

JMc: What do you think was responsible for that situation? Obviously, there were a lot of factors, but why did the *Gazette* at that time have such a lead?

JM: Oh, I think over the years—it was a quality newspaper. It was a *very* good newspaper. The *Democrat* didn't seem to be very aggressive. It was an afternoon newspaper, and morning papers were becoming the papers to read throughout the country. So I think that had a lot to do with it, and the fact that the *Democrat* had not kept up, say, with the times, I suppose, in terms of quality and news and such.

JMc: And then you stayed in that job about a year and a half selling . . . ?

JM: Well, about a year and a half selling the TV magazine.

JMc: Okay. And in that time, then, the *Democrat* sort of entered the contest and switched to the morning.

JM: Well, we started first with free want ads in 1978.

JMc: Okay.

JM: December of 1978, I believe—started with free want ads, and then after the first of the year of 1979, I believe, we converted to morning to go head to head with the *Gazette*.

JMc: Okay. How much of an impact was free want ads?

JM: It was huge. It was huge. And I'm not sure I remember specifically, but I believe at the time you could run a seven-line ad for seven days. It was such a huge success. It was kind of like the tail wagging the dog. We had a *ton* of ads that ran in the paper, almost to the point that we couldn't handle everything. But it created a marketplace for commercial advertisers. That was the huge benefit of it because of the readership that it provided.

JMc: Okay. So the free want ads brought a lot of free want ads, and a lot of *readers*.

JM: And it brought a lot of readers.

JMc: And that meant that a lot of other people started advertising because they knew they had readers. Is that correct? Commercial advertisers who didn't get it free. Is that right? They had to pay for it?

JM: Correct. Right.

JMc: Do you recall how big a jump there was in the pages in the classifieds?

JM: No, I don't know off hand. I sure don't.

JMc: Yes.

JM: When we started that, I was—well, I had been here less of a year.

JMc: Yes.

JM: So I really wasn't involved with it directly.

JMc: I guess Paul would probably know, but also Dave Reddoch.

JM: Yes.

JMc: I'll try to interview Dave Reddoch later. So then in about a year and a half—sort of towards the end of 1980—would that have been . . . ?

JM: Probably pretty close.

JMc: . . . in retail advertising.

JM: You know, I don't remember the dates specifically, but probably a year and a half. So I guess that would have been close to 1980.

JMc: Yes, and 1979 or the start of 1980.

JM: Yes.

JMc: What did you handle in retail advertising? Explain to me, briefly, what retail is.

JM: Well, basically, what I did is I managed the staff of salespeople. I don't recall specifically how many we had at the time, but probably somewhere in the area of nine or ten sales reps [representatives]. They reported directly to me, so my job, obviously, was to direct them and to motivate them to sell advertising.

JMc: What kind of advertising is included in retail advertising?

JM: Well, the advertising, such as display advertising for small shops or storefronts in Little Rock, North Little Rock, et cetera, or services that may be available to readers.

JMc: Does this include the big department stores?

JM: Well, you know, I didn't really have any responsibility for the big department stores per se. Paul and Walter [Hussman, Jr.] handled those, particularly around

that time. Most of my responsibility was everything else.

JMc: Yes. Okay. Paul was still the advertising director at that point.

JM: He was still the ad director.

JMc: Okay. What was your situation, then, in retail ad sales when you first started?  
How were you being received at that time?

JM: Well, readers as well as advertisers realized that we were being more aggressive and that we had an audience to reach, and that was helpful. One of the biggest things that we've tried to do is to develop relationships with all these advertisers. We did a very good job of that, and actually still do. That was extremely important for us. But advertising began to grow because of—the free ads helped. People recognized that there were a lot more readers in the paper, so it didn't necessarily make it a lot easier, but it was easier. We were able to sell people that we hadn't been able to get before, but the *Gazette* was still the dominant paper.

JMc: Okay. You don't recall how much your ad sales might have increased during that period?

JM: No, I really don't.

JMc: Yes. Okay. Do you recall any major breakthroughs you made at that time in particular?

JM: You know, Jerry, it was like a day-to-day.

JMc: Okay.

JM: We went out and we tried to sell as much as we could every day. We looked not only at the *Gazette* every day to see who they had, but we also looked at any other products that were in the market to try to get prospects to sell into our paper.

JMc: Did you have any kind of special promotions that you were using to try to attract

advertisers who might have otherwise been in the *Gazette*?

JM: Sweat. [Laughter] It was a lot of shoe leather and sweat, more than anything else. I don't recall any specific promotions that we had for advertisers at the time. A lot of it was just going out and making the calls and presenting our case.

JMc: I was wondering if you had started cutting your rates at that time—cutting back on your rates to try to attract . . .

JM: You know, our advertisers that we dealt with back then—basically, the rate card was what they paid. I don't recall any rates being adjusted or cut to sell advertising back then.

JMc: What was the *Gazette* doing at that time? Anything in particular that stands out?

JM: Not that I recall. Nothing specifically. Obviously, their sales reps were beginning to sell against us, but you would expect that in competition.

JMc: Okay. And then when did you become the advertising director?

JM: 1983.

JMc: 1983. And Paul became the general manager. What was the situation then?

JM: Well, he actually became the general manager before 1983—in 1981 maybe or 1982.

JMc: Oh, okay. But he named you as the advertising director?

JM: In 1983.

JMc: Oh, in 1983. Okay. What was the situation then as far as the overall sales were going?

JM: Well, sales were improving. We were doing better. Our circulation was growing. We had a really good story to tell with our circulation growth and with the free ads that we were doing. Our classified section was doing well. We were getting

some automotive advertising, and that helped other advertisers to see that we were a viable product and that there was beginning to be two markets out there. There was the *Gazette* and there was the *Democrat*, and to reach the whole audience, you might need to use both newspapers.

JMc: Were you the advertising director or had this happened under Paul's watch when they started offering, say, I believe, with the major department stores—run the same ad and you can get the same ad in the *Democrat* for a dollar?

JM: That was Paul.

JMc: Was that Paul?

JM: Paul and Walter. Yes.

JMc: Yes. Okay. And that was before 1983, then?

JM: As I recall. Yes.

JMc: Yes. Do you recall what impact that had or whether it really attracted many . . . ?

JM: Well, obviously, to have advertisers in the paper like that—like Dillard's or Montgomery Ward's—some of those guys—it has an impact on your reader because it gives you credibility.

JMc: Yes.

JM: So it had a favorable impact. To say how much? No, I can't do that.

JMc: Yes. Okay. But the *Gazette*, up until some time in the 1980s, had been far dominant as far as carrying the big department stores and everything. Isn't that correct? They had Dillard's, they had M. M. Cohn, J. C. Penney. I guess Blass was before.

JM: Yes.

JMc: So they had had the big bulk?



JM: Yes.

JMc: Yes. Okay. So I guess it was about the time that you came on—it had been heating up, but I guess the [newspaper] war [between the *Democrat* and the *Gazette*] was really heating up at that time in 1983 when you came in as ad director, wasn't it?

JM: Well, yes. It had been going on. Yes. The war continued because we continued to grow circulation and our advertising was growing, so we were becoming more of a factor in the market.

JMc: What were the main factors that you felt were helping your advertising continue to grow?

JM: Oh, I think it was two or three things, Jerry. I think, first of all—obviously, it helps when your circulation is growing. I think that had a big impact because we could show people that we were growing. I think it has an impact when you develop relationships with advertisers, that they get to know you and you get to know them as a sales rep. A lot of our reps—their association with advertisers—they would call on our people to help them make radio and TV buys because they trusted them and they felt like they were getting good information. I think the other part of it is that I think we were just very aggressive. We looked for a lot of new prospects that could run in our newspaper that we wanted to go try to sell.

JMc: Did you increase your staff?

JM: Yes, we did. I don't recall specifically how much, but as you increase advertising, you have to increase the staff. So I'm sure we were growing some at that point.

JMc: Do you have any opinion about why the circulation was increasing all that time? What do you think was responsible . . . ?

JM: I think we were being more aggressive on that front as well . . .

JMc: Okay.

JM: . . . trying to sell more than we were. As we had a larger voice in the market, then more people wanted to read us to see what we were all about.

JMc: And I'm sure this was in the heat of the battle. What kind of situation did you run into as—what kind of feedback did you get on what the *Gazette* was doing in their advertising sales?

JM: Not much, to be honest. You know, we really tried to take care of our own ship and to do the things that we thought were the right things to do. We really didn't know too much about what was going on internally over there—or I didn't, anyway.

JMc: They apparently, from a lot of accounts I get, did not respond very quickly to the challenge from the *Democrat*.

JM: I don't think they did at all.

JMc: Okay. So you didn't perceive any big change in their advertising sales or anything?

JM: No. No. I think we probably made them more aggressive after a while, just so they could protect their turf, so to speak. Their salespeople probably started making more calls than they did before. I don't know what else they did.

JMc: I've also heard reports that—of course, as I say, they'd been the dominant paper for a long time, but the *Gazette's* advertising department was also kind of—I don't know what the word is—they were kind of tough to deal with—that they maybe weren't as friendly towards their advertisers. They were pretty strict with them.

JM: Yes, we had heard that they would sometimes chastise an advertiser for using the

*Democrat*. I don't think that's a good thing to do, but, certainly, if they want to do that, they can do it. [Laughs]

JMc: Yes. Did you find that the advertisers were . . . ?

JM: Typically, they were offended, if that is where you're going.

JMc: Yes, because they being more friendly towards the *Democrat*?

JM: Well, that's what I said earlier. We really tried hard to get our story out there, and we really tried hard to develop a one-on-one relationship with our advertisers. I think that helped us an awful lot, and it helped us a lot, particularly if the *Gazette*—if any of their people *did* say anything negative towards the *Democrat*, I think that put the advertiser in a position that, to some degree, they defended us for what we were doing.

JMc: Along this time, did you put any new promotions or anything in particular that you did trying to sell more ads?

JM: Jerry, I don't remember anything specifically, to be honest. I don't recall any specific promotions. We just basically kept trying to be as aggressive as we possibly could.

JMc: Yes. Okay. How about rate cuts? Was there any of that going on?

JM: I don't recall any specific rate cuts at all.

JMc: You don't?

JM: No.

JMc: So this was about 1983? Along about that time, what was the outlook here as far as how the war was going?

JM: Well, we were kind of like the soldiers on the front line. We just basically tried to keep doing our job. We were obviously encouraged just because of the advertis-

ers that we *were* getting in the paper. We were selling new advertisers. Obviously, you have to, to grow. But circulation was continuing to do well, so we were encouraged. We didn't know where it was going to end, but we certainly were encouraged.

JMc: Yes. What was the reaction when the *Gazette* filed suit against the *Democrat*?

JM: Well, I think it scared us to *death*.

JMc: Did it?

JM: Oh, yes!

JMc: Yes.

JM: You know, I hadn't been in the business for *very* long, and really wasn't sure exactly what to think about it in the beginning. But, yes, I think it was a scary time.

JMc: When the *Democrat* won the verdict sometime in I guess early 1986 . . .

JM: Yes.

JMc: . . . what was the reaction here?

JM: Well, everyone was pretty excited.

JMc: Yes.

JM: Obviously, we had won, and we were completely exonerated, and we should've been.

JMc: Yes.

JM: Everyone was excited. Obviously, it was kind of like a new day, to be honest. That year and a half or so that the lawsuit was going on, we were preoccupied with that, and it was always in your mind. So it affected the things that we thought and the way that we did business—not that we would do things differently, but you've got something back there that basically keeps you from focusing

on what you need to do and completely what your job is.

JMc: Did you see any perceptible change in the reaction of the advertisers after that suit came down? Did it make it any easier for you to sell?

JM: I don't know that it made it any easier. I think it kind of put us on a level field with the *Gazette* because people would look at us and say, "Well, you're a viable newspaper. The *Gazette* is a viable newspaper. So I've got to buy both of you guys to reach my market." I think from that standpoint that it helped. Yes.

JMc: I wonder if there was any reaction, like maybe some readers and advertisers—"Whoops, the *Gazette* must really think they're in trouble if they filed suit against these people, and then they lost." [Laughs]

JM: Well, I'm sure to some degree there probably was out there. But, you know, I don't necessarily think that it hurt or helped the *Gazette*, necessarily. I think that it probably just helped overall the newspaper reader to realize there were two newspapers in the market.

JMc: And that was, I believe, in March of 1986, and then I think in about December, the *Gazette* sold out to Gannett.

JM: Yes.

JMc: What was the reaction here to that?

JM: It absolutely scared us to death because it's the largest newspaper company in the world at the time, and Al Neuharth was coming to Little Rock, saying that they were going to support the *Gazette* in the war, and to make sure that the *Gazette* was going to win.

JMc: They had deep pockets, as I remember.

JM: And we believed him.

JMc: Yes.

JM: It scared us to death.

JMc: And I guess they *did* try.

JM: They *did* try. They're a good company.

JMc: So what was your response to your selling advertising after Gannett took over?

JM: Well, gosh—one thing we did, Jerry, is that Paul Smith and Larry Graham and I and others—we made trips to other newspaper markets where there were competitive situations. We went to Dallas [Texas]. There were two papers in Dallas. We went to Houston [Texas]. We went to Detroit [Michigan], Orange County [California], Denver [Colorado], and talked to those papers about how they competed against each other, just looking for ideas and thoughts about how we could compete against the *Gazette* and Gannett at the time. I don't recall anything specifically today that we did, but I know that it helped us in terms of, I guess, learning how to compete differently than we had been, since we were going to compete against Gannett.

JMc: Yes. Was the Chattanooga [Tennessee] paper—did you also—? I know the circulation people went to Chattanooga to see how they had . . .

JM: I didn't go to Chattanooga.

JMc: You didn't go to Chattanooga? Of course, there, they had been in a situation where their afternoon paper won the war against the morning paper.

JM: Yes.

JMc: You don't recall any specific changes that you made because of the things that you had learned at those other papers?

JM: Not specifically. I really don't. You know, when you visit that many papers and

you get a lot of information, at some point it becomes overwhelming.

JMc: Yes.

JM: And I just don't recall specifically what we used of that information at the time.

I'm sure that we did. I just don't recall specifically.

JMc: What was Gannett's reaction on the advertising front? Do you remember any particular moves that they made after they took over?

JM: I think they became more aggressive than they had been at the *Gazette*. I think they felt like they had a renewed life and that there was no way that the *Democrat* was going to win the war. So I think they felt a lot of confidence after Gannett purchased them.

JMc: Can you remember anything in particular that they did for advertisers—how they tried to sell . . . ?

JM: No, I don't remember anything specifically for what they did in terms of their advertisers. They didn't seem to be as married to their rate card as they had in previous and earlier years.

JMc: What do you mean by that?

JM: Well, they seemed to be able to come up with creative pricing.

JMc: They could cut rates if . . .

JM: Well, creative pricing, I think is a good way to say it.

JMc: Okay. What sort of creative pricing?

JM: I don't remember.

JMc: Do you remember any examples?

JM: No, I don't.

JMc: How did the *Democrat* operate as far as their rate card? I've heard that you'd had

some flexibility on it all along.

JM: Well, we really tried to use the rate card because the rates for both papers were pretty good, particularly in comparison to other papers across the country. So you could buy either paper on the rate card, and you got a pretty dadgum good deal.

JMc: Yes.

JM: I don't recall any specific pricing models that we used at that time.

JMc: When did Gannett lose the Dillard's account? Do you remember when that happened?

JM: You know, Jerry, I really don't. I don't remember. It seems like it may have been in 1989 or 1990—somewhere in there. But I don't recall.

JMc: Okay. Did you ever hear of why they lost the Dillard's account?

JM: I heard that there was an issue regarding pricing their ads—that the price that Dillard's paid for their ads was possibly not the lowest price that the *Gazette* had offered, and they were the largest advertiser.

JMc: They were the largest advertiser, but yet some others say the department stores maybe had even been getting lower rates, that . . .

JM: Well, I don't know who it was.

JMc: But somebody else had been getting better rates?

JM: Evidently.

JMc: Yes. Okay. And they got mad at that. Well, I've heard about two or three different stories, but I've never known for sure. Who was in charge of Dillard's advertising at the time—do you remember—placing their ads?

JM: I believe Ken Eaton was.

JMc: Ken Eaton?



JM: Yes.

JMc: Is he still around?

JM: Ken retired last year.

JMc: Did he? Okay.

JM: Yes. He's living in Fayetteville now.

JMc: Oh, is he?

JM: Yes.

JMc: Okay. All right. I may need to run him down.

JM: Yes.

JMc: At any rate, what did that mean to the *Democrat* after the . . . ?

JM: Well, it meant that if you shopped at Dillard's and you wanted to see their ad, you had to read the *Democrat*.

JMc: So did you get a lot more advertising from them?

JM: From Dillard's?

JMc: Yes.

JM: I don't recall if we got a lot more advertising. That was just the only place that you could see their ads.

JMc: Yes. So it should [have] perhaps helped your circulation, then, too.

JM: I'm sure that it did.

JMc: For people, say, who want to shop Dillard's, and a lot of people *did* want to shop Dillard's because they were, I guess, the number one department store around.

JM: Yes.

JMc: Anything else that you remember in particular about your competition with Gannett over those years?

JM: Jerry, I don't remember anything else specifically. You know, I think that over those years that we wanted to and did continue to get to know our advertisers and keep that relationship in the forefront. I think that helped us against Gannett. Advertisers were familiar with Gannett that are in other markets, and realized that if Gannett won the war, they probably would change the *Gazette* dramatically in terms of rates and possibly circulation. So I think that helped us to sell advertising just because people wanted—they felt like they needed the *Democrat* to maybe keep the *Gazette* honest, and the *Gazette* to keep the *Democrat* honest.

JMc: They were afraid that if the *Democrat* went out of business, what situation they might run into from Gannett being in charge.

JM: That's exactly right.

JMc: Were there any big battles as far as cutting prices for ads as you got closer to the . . .?

JM: No, I don't think so. I don't recall any big, specific battles that we had on pricing. I don't.

JMc: So what was happening with the paper along that time, though, as far as circulation and everything? Is there anything that you remember that happened that sort of enhanced the paper, that maybe helped your job?

JM: Oh, I think one of the things that helped us was that Gannett came in and changed the *Gazette* dramatically. They would run more features—more soft news. The *Gazette* was always the “gray old lady” and always was known for their hard news.

JMc: John, you were talking about the changes that Gannett made that you think might have helped—do you want to elaborate on that a little bit more?

JM: Yes. Jerry, they changed the *Gazette* from what I think everybody had known and thought so much of, and that upset people. It upset the readers. I think that helped us. Even though it was still the *Gazette*, and even though it still was a very good newspaper—running more soft news and more features than they had run in the past—what their reader was accustomed to, I think, probably upset people, just because newspapers are so personal to people.

JMc: I would assume that somewhere in the last few years before the war ended, though, that you had made some inroads in the—or maybe even before the *Gazette* lost Dillard's—that you had made inroads, though, as far as the big department stores and the boutiques and stuff like that.

JM: Yes. We were doing well with the department stores. We were doing well with a lot of the retailers that were in Little Rock/North Little Rock metro. The *Gazette* continued to do well with the higher-end retailers, particularly in west Little Rock. We were beginning to get that business, but the *Gazette* got quite a bit more of it than we did. The *Gazette* did a good job with the real estate people. We'd done a very good job with the automotive, and they for a while had the dominance in real estate. But all of that was beginning to change.

JMc: Okay. How much of an impact was "High Profile" on helping you crack the higher end?

JM: Oh, gee, "High Profile" is a great section, and I think it helped an awful lot. It was really a first-class section. People love to read about people.

JMc: Yes.

JM: It just came along at the right time and had the right attitude, if you will, and I think it made a big difference. People could see that the *Democrat* could reach

that upper-end audience as well as the *Gazette*.

JMc: This was along, I think, in about 1987.

JM: Yes, somewhere in there.

JMc: In the summer that they started that and everything. But prior to that, you really did have a lot of trouble selling the high-end market.

JM: We did.

JMc: The expensive clothing stores and the department stores and everything.

JM: We did.

JMc: Okay. Anything else that Gannett did that you think might have helped you?

JM: Oh, I think as far as the advertising side of it, those were the main things—the changing so dramatically of the newspaper.

JMc: And this is going back a little bit, but you were an old *Gazette* reader and everything—before Gannett bought the paper—say, just the last few years—had you detected any changes in the *Gazette* as a newspaper in that period of time? Do you think it had stayed up to its usual quality?

JM: Jerry, I don't remember any changes specifically. I don't recall anything specifically that had changed until Gannett bought it.

JMc: Yes.

JM: And that's when the dramatic changes began to take place.

JMc: Okay.

JMc: John, how surprised were you when the war ended and the *Democrat*, soon to become the *Democrat-Gazette*, bought out the *Gazette* assets?

JM: You know, Jerry, I was surprised, and I think probably most people were. I didn't expect that, and I don't think anybody did, just simply because of Gannett being

the largest company as it is. So I don't think anybody expected them to close the *Gazette*.

JMc: How did the change over there impact your operations? Was it as hectic for advertising, say, as it was for circulation? I know they had . . .

JM: Do you mean after they closed?

JMc: Yes, after the . . .

JM: [Laughs] Yes. It was pretty hectic. When they closed, we wanted to make sure that we took care of all of our advertisers and *their* advertisers as well. So we went over there and we tried to find as many ads that were scheduled to run as we could to make sure that we got them in the newspaper.

JMc: So you went over there to find the ads scheduled for that next day?

JM: For the next day. Well, actually, I think they closed on a Friday, so to find ads for Saturday and Sunday to get them in our paper.

JMc: Were you able to get most of them?

JM: As far as we know, we did.

JMc: Yes.

JM: I don't recall any specific complaints, but that was a big job to try to locate all those.

JMc: Did you have any complaints from people who said, "Hey, I don't want my ad in your paper, I want—"? [Laughs]

JM: No, we didn't. We didn't have any complaints from anybody.

JMc: Yes. Okay. So how big of a crew did you have to have, going over there and . . .  
.?

JM: You know, I don't remember how many people went over there. It wasn't that

many, actually. I think probably from the ad department, maybe three or four people. Not very many.

JMc: What kind of cooperation did you have from the *Gazette*?

JM: They had left.

JMc: They were gone?

JM: Yes. This was—gee, it was after hours, so they had left.

JMc: So they just cleaned out, just like everybody else did, apparently.

JM: Yes.

JMc: So you didn't have any dealings with them?

JM: No.

JMc: Later on, did you hire any of the *Gazette* ad salesmen?

JM: Actually, we have several people on staff right now that we hired from the *Gazette*. Katie Nikpour is our inside classified commercial supervisor. Dutch Price, who I think handled furniture for the *Gazette*, and he handles furniture for us. Andy Fierro was a real estate person. Andy had come over before the *Gazette* closed, though. At any rate, he worked for us and just retired last month.

JMc: Okay, spell that name.

JM: Fierro is F-I-E-R-R-O.

JMc: And the woman's name that you mentioned before?

JM: Katy Nikpour. N-I-K-P-O-U-R.

JMc: Nikpour. Okay.

JM: And Larry Claus, who worked in the *Gazette*'s classified department, and he handled automotive.

JMc: How do you spell that?

JM: C-L-A-U-S.

JMc: Okay.

JM: He came over. Henry Naugher, which is N-A-U-G-H-E-R.

JMc: Okay.

JM: Henry had worked for both papers. He worked for the *Democrat* and left during the war, so to speak, and went to the *Gazette*. And then when the *Gazette* closed, he came back to work for us.

JMc: Okay. How soon after the *Gazette* closed did you go over there to try to hire some of those people?

JM: Well, we offered positions. I'm not sure of the sequence of all of it, Jerry. I know that we offered several positions to people that they had. I don't really recall how many. I want to say—it seems like there was [about] twenty or twenty-two, but I really don't remember.

JMc: Okay. Was this just the next day or two, or several days down the line before you got . . . ?

JM: I think it was fairly soon after that.

JMc: Okay. What has been your perception of what has happened since the paper—since the *Democrat* became the only paper? Over the next few years, how did that impact your ad sales?

JM: Well, it impacted, I think, positively. [Laughs] Obviously, people who had been running in the *Gazette* would consider running in the *Democrat*. We produce today as we produced then. We produce a very good newspaper, and I think people *saw* that it was going to be a very good newspaper. So our ads sales have increased. They are continuing to increase. I think that after the *Gazette* closed, we

weren't really sure how a one-newspaper market actually works.

JMc: Yes.

JM: So it took us a while to sort of get our feet on the ground. But we do very well today. We still emphasize relationships with our advertisers. We want to work with them to help them to be successful. Gee, the more results they get, obviously, the better they're going to feel about us. I know—that Larry may have mentioned it yesterday—we have the highest city zone penetration in the United States, and have had for two years. So all of the work that we did and the readers that got accustomed to reading our paper has paid off.

JMc: Are you beginning to see any kind of competition—and I don't know how it would impact advertising, but it might—say, from all the other multiple sources out there now—the Internet and all that stuff. And, of course, you've still got—you had it then, but TV, radio, and everything.

JM: Sure. Well, there's a lot of publications out there, and some of them are very good. Anything that's out there and sells advertising is a competitor. The Internet probably has affected us more in classified than anywhere else, and it probably will continue to be a major influence in the future and become more and more of a competitor. Our advertising is still growing. We're doing well. So I guess right now we're still in the fight, so to speak.

JMc: Yes. Okay. Did you perceive anything that you can do as far as to combat that classified competition with [the Internet]?

JM: Yes. We've done several things. One thing that we're in the process of doing is making our [Web]site more attractive and to offer more to the visitor, to provide more information and more features. In classified, we put pretty much everything



online. Classifieds are extremely popular for an Internet user to go and to search, whether you're searching for a car or a home or whatever it may be. All of our recruitment advertisers—the ads that they run, we try to get them online, and that helps them to get more response. We're running—I don't know if you've seen it—a feature called "Click and Buy" in our classified section. That's where an advertiser can purchase a "Click and Buy" ad—it's their line ad, but they can also go online and put pictures of that item that they have for sale, be it a home or a car or a litter of puppies or whatever it may be. So we're doing a lot of things like that that I think help the reader to find the things that they're looking for.

JMc: Now, I'm not sure that I understood this. They can put in a picture? Does that go in the ad that's in the paper or . . . ?

JM: Not in the paper.

JMc: Oh, okay.

JM: The ad in the paper is still a line ad.

JMc: Okay.

JM: But it'll be tagged. You'll see a header on the ad that says "Click and Buy."

JMc: Yes, I see.

JM: There will be—you go to our Website, and you put in a number, and it'll bring up that specific ad. That ad that they have online—they can expand the amount of copy that they want to describe the car or the boat or the home or whatever it may be. But they can also put pictures up there showing that item or different rooms in the home or the outside of the home and different things like that, that they can't run in the newspaper.

JMc: Okay. But the person buying the newspaper sees the ad in the newspaper . . .

JM: Yes.

JMc: And then they go to the Web and call it up and get more information.

JM: Absolutely. Absolutely.

JMc: Okay. Is there any extra charge for that service?

JM: Yes, it's a minimal charge. I believe it's \$10, which is not very much.

JMc: Okay.

JM: Gosh, it sure provides a great feature for an ad.

JMc: Yes. Okay. You don't still give free classifieds, do you?

JM: Sure.

JMc: Do you?

JM: Absolutely. Every day.

JMc: Oh, okay.

JM: We have fifteen people that take free ads.

JMc: Okay.

JM: We do them a little bit differently than we used to do them. Now we do three lines for three days, and we . . .

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

JMc: Okay, John. This is Jerry McConnell here again with John Mobbs, advertising director of the *Democrat-Gazette*. You were talking about the free classifieds and saying that you do them a little bit different than you used to do them.

JM: We do. We operate it a lot like an airline reservation system, where if there's space available, you can travel. That kind of thing. We have allotted a certain number or certain amount of space that we will run each day by each classifica-

tion that will run free ads. If when we take all those ads that fills up that allotment for that day, then it pushes out the first day that you can run a free ad. So you basically have a choice. If you want to place an automobile ad to sell your car, you call in and we might say, "Sure, we can get your ad in the day after tomorrow." Or we might say, "I don't have any free ad space left that day. My next free ad day available might be next Tuesday." Well, then you have a choice. You can say, "Gee, that's fine. I'll do that. I'll wait until next Tuesday to run my ad," or you can purchase the ad, and it will start the next available day. So that's a little bit different, but we still run an awful lot of free ads, and we'll continue to do that. That's extremely important.

JMc: Do you have any idea of what the amount of space is that you dedicate to free ads?

JM: We average almost three full pages a day of free ads.

JMc: Oh, do you?

JM: Yes.

JMc: Okay. So that's three lines . . . ?

JM: For three days.

JMc: . . . for three days. Okay.

JM: Yes.

JMc: What was it when they began? Do you remember?

JM: When it started, as I recall, Jerry, it was seven lines for seven days.

JMc: Okay.

JM: I'm not sure how accurate that is, but that's what I remember.

JMc: Okay.

JM: And then because the ads would get smaller and then the days would get shorter in terms of frequency . . .

JMc: Yes.

JM: . . . just so that you have a little bit better control over it.

JMc: Okay. Let me retract here—back up just a little bit. I don't know how privy you would've been to the financial situations in both papers and everything, but it has been an increasing interest to me as we move along here—say, in 1984 or 1985—in there, when the war was really heating up and the *Gazette* went the route of filing a lawsuit and then selling the paper—do you think they could've survived if they'd been willing to make some significant changes—if they'd stayed with it, rather than selling out to Gannett? Do you think the *Gazette* . . .?

JM: Jerry, I don't have any idea. I have no idea what the financial situation of the *Gazette* was.

JMc: Yes.

JM: I have no idea.

JMc: I've had some people say that they think if they had been willing to make some changes, they probably could have still survived as a paper. Did you ever have the feeling, say, before the end and before he [Hussman] bought out the assets, that you were winning the war? Did you have a feeling that you were . . .?

JM: I never had the feeling that we were winning the war. I felt like we were making progress more than anything.

JMc: Okay.

JM: The objective to win the war was never out there, that I recall. The objective to be a viable, number-two newspaper was the predominant issue at the time.

JMc: Okay. What kind of support did you get from Walter and Paul on your ads? Was there ever a problem if you needed to add salesmen and everything?

JM: No. You know, Walter Hussman and Paul Smith are two of the best guys in the world, and they're great guys to work for. They were involved in what we did every day. They would help make sales calls if you needed them. They were very providing of the things that we needed to do business.

JMc: I've been told that Walter has never had staff cuts, as such—you know, some businesses, you're losing money, "Okay, we're going to lop off x-number of employees."

JM: I'll give you an example. To my knowledge, we haven't had any staff cuts, either, but we operate very lean. Back quite a few years ago, particular during the competition with the *Gazette*, my secretary handled Dillard's. I didn't have a sales rep that handled Dillard's, my secretary handled Dillard's. She would write the tickets and she would turn the ads in. That was part of her job. So we used every available person that we could to do what we needed to get done. We didn't go out and hire extra people, and I think that makes a huge difference. And we still do things like that today. We operate very smart and we operate very lean.

JMc: Did she approach them, too, as far as making the sales?

JM: No. She obviously had contact as far as communicating with them as to when the ads [ran].

JMc: Yes. Okay.

JM: But her job was really the clerical side of it more so than anything else.

JMc: Okay. So you didn't say the last three or four months—say, "Well, it's pretty obvious that we've got this thing under control or—"?

JM: No. [Laughs] I can answer that very quickly.

JMc: Yes. [Laughs]

JM: No, I've never had that thought.

JMc: Yes. Did you have any inkling—how far ahead of time from the day did you learn that you were buying the paper?

JM: It wasn't very far in advance. They told me, my classified manager and my retail manager. And the only reason that they did is because we had to develop a plan for when the *Gazette* did close. We spent days putting together packages for advertisers to send out to explain to them what was happening, what was going to change, and what their options were. We had to have all that ready. We had no idea when it was going to happen, we just had to be ready.

JMc: Yes.

JM: But that wasn't very far in advance.

JMc: So you had to do a lot of planning? [Laughs]

JM: Well, we had to do—yes—a lot of copying and planning. Sure.

JMc: What are the *Democrat-Gazette* ad rates now in comparison with other markets? Is there any way you can give me an assessment of that?

JM: Sure. Absolutely. In fact, we analyze that every year. We started when the *Gazette* closed to kind of see where our rates were [in relation to] other papers, and we continued to do it here fifteen years later. We typically will do it every August or September. We measure it on a cost-per-thousand basis. What we do is we measure the *Democrat-Gazette* against about twenty-three or twenty-four other papers that are similar in size or similar in markets. We get their rate cards, and we take different levels of rates for us and try to match that with different lev-

els of rates that the other papers have. Then we convert everything to a cost-per-thousand. Then we rank—from highest to lowest—where all these papers are based on a certain size ad and those rates. Typically, we're almost at the lowest level in every rate category. Sometimes we might be a little bit higher than the lowest, but never are we above the middle. So our rate structure, compared to the other papers, is excellent. It's very low compared to other papers. And that's not only just in the retail side, but the classified side as well as the national advertising.

JMc: I suspect that the paper, as you say, has pretty good penetration for its market—maybe even in other areas besides just the central part of the [state?].

JM: Yes, we do. We have good penetration in a lot of areas, but most businesses that advertise are in the Little Rock/North Little Rock Metro.

JMc: Yes.

JM: So it's important that we have good penetration, obviously, in the city.

JMc: One other area—as a reader of newspapers and everything—but, say, after you joined the *Democrat* and through the next ten, twelve, thirteen years—what was your perception of what was happening to the paper as far as the quality of the paper itself? I'm talking about the news side of the paper.

JM: The *Gazette* or the *Democrat*?

JMc: No, the *Democrat*.

JM: The *Democrat*? Oh, it was a *lot* better. We had more reporters. We ran more news. Sometimes in the afternoon you might have an advertiser after you've laid out the paper for the next day—at least where the ads are going to be in the paper—sometimes an advertiser might kill their ad. We had a policy that we never

filled an ad space that had been killed with another ad. We filled it with editorials so we could run more news in our newspaper. We still do that today. That gives the reader, obviously, more for their money by giving them more news. I think the *Democrat* did a great job of increasing the quality of the news and the amount of news that they ran—certainly on par with the *Gazette*. And we actually *ran* more news than the *Gazette* did, most days.

JMc: Was this after Gannett or both?

JM: That was both.

JMc: Both? Okay.

JM: Yes.

JMc: In the early years when battling with the *Gazette*, you were running more news.

JM: Sure.

JMc: I remember that they had made a particular effort in sports to always run more.

JM: Yes.

JMc: But you were running more everywhere, basically.

JM: Yes. Basically. Sure.

JMc: Okay. Any particular changes or developments, though, in the news that you perceived made any impact on the situation?

JM: Not that I recall.

JMc: I was thinking [for instance], like hiring Orville Henry or . . .

JM: Well, that was certainly a good thing because he was certainly very well respected.

JMc: Okay.

JM: Paul Greenberg was certainly a good hire.



JMc: Yes. There wasn't anything that you perceived that had a big impact, though, as far as—I guess it *all* had an impact, but . . .

JM: I think you're right. I think it *all* had an impact.

JMc: Okay.

JM: It was just kind of putting pieces of a puzzle together, I suppose.

JMc: Okay. All right, John. I think maybe we've covered quite a bit of ground here. Is there anything else that you can think of that touches on the newspaper and the newspaper war, or the kind of paper the newspaper has become that we haven't covered? Is there anything you can think of that we might touch on?

JM: No. The only thing I can think of, Jerry, is that I think we're all very proud of the newspaper that the *Democrat-Gazette* is today. It's an excellent newspaper. You probably travel, as I travel, and I see other products around the country. I'm always very proud to say that I'm with the *Democrat-Gazette*. I have people—advertisers, as well as friends and associates, that travel and see other products from around the country, and they *always* say that they're proud of the *Democrat-Gazette* and the paper that it has become.

JMc: Okay, John. Anything else?

JM: That's all.

JMc: Okay. Well, thank you very much. I appreciate your time and your recollections.

JM: You're welcome.

[End of Interview]

[Transcribed by Cheri Pearce]