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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with

Larry Rea

28 June 2007

Memphis, Tennessee

Interviewer: Clay Bailey

Clay Bailey: I am Clay Bailey interviewing Larry Rea for the Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History Project on the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*. This interview is being held in Memphis, Tennessee, on June 28, 2007. We will transcribe this interview and make it available for those interested in Arkansas history. We will give you the opportunity to review the transcript, at which point you will sign a release. All I need you to do now is state your name and indicate that you are willing to give the Center permission to use this tape and make the transcription available to others. [00:00:33.14] Larry, tell me about your career and how you got to the *Arkansas Democrat*.

Larry Rea: Well, Clay, I started at the *Arkansas Democrat* in 1962. In the summer of 1962 I answered an ad for a reporter for the *Democrat*. I'd had my freshman year at the University of Arkansas [Fayetteville], which was a disaster. Had a lot of fun, more than anything else. Marched in the band.

Played in the bowl game. Had all sorts of things, and came back home and decided I was gonna sit out a year of school. And so I said, "Well, I'll just do something I've always liked." So I went and applied for the ad. Jack Keady was the sports editor. I'd never written anything. I'd made all A's in journalism in high school at North Little Rock High School for selling ads. I was a great ad salesman. Never written a story in my life, and Jack Keady saw something in me, I guess, because I came so cheap, and I became the crack junior high reporter for the *Arkansas Democrat* in around August or something of 1962. So when I stayed there from that time until July of 1967. So I was there five years at the *Arkansas Democrat*—a graduate of North Little Rock High School over there, so I knew the *Democrat*. But I knew nothing—nothing at all about writing.

[00:01:54.14] CB: So what'd you make when you walked in the door?

LR: Man, I can't tell you what I made when I walked in the door. It didn't really matter. I had applied at another job in Lonoke. It said, "Working around water." It was killing snakes in one of those fish lakes, and so I was really opting for anything in particular. So I don't remember what I made. I do know that when I left the *Democrat* in July of 1967—Mr. Keady said that was gonna be a mistake because he said I shouldn't leave, but I was the assistant sports editor, and I was making \$99 a week. And sometimes if I had overtime I would get over \$100. And, of course, in those days you were paid once a week in an envelope—downstairs—you'd go down and then would pick your cash up. They would line up, and they would pay you in cash in a little brown envelope. And so when I

came to the—to the—to the [*Memphis*] *Commercial Appeal* [Tennessee] in July of 1967, I made \$144 a week. So I had, like, a \$50-a-week raise. But I don't know what I made at the *Democrat*, but at that age—nineteen years old, one year of college, and it was great because I'm from that area. But just to be in sports. I always wanted to be in the NBA [National Basketball Association]. That was my goal in life. But, you know, I'm a short guy, like Wally Hall, and so I never had a chance at that. So this was an opportunity to write. My first assignment was covering Westside Junior High playing somebody. I can't remember who that was, and—and just went from there. And covered everything there was. [00:03:27.23] Ended up assistant sports editor. Laid the paper out—the copy. Did everything that you hired for Mr. Keady. Mr. Keady—Jack Keady was a tremendous man. A very deeply religious man. A very solid, if I'm not mistaken, Church of Christ. And really molded my career at that time. I had a great relationship with Mr. Keady, and I never could call him Jack. You know, it just was something about it. There's some people you can't call [by] their first names, and he was Mr. Keady all the way up. And you're talking about somebody that was just thrown to the wolves—that was me.

[00:04:05.11] CB: When you walked in and you covered that first game story, what—what was it like?

LR: Well, just to go in that building was an experience. In those days, you know, when you went into the—and—and you got your assignments—we were back in the—I can't—I think it was on the third floor [second floor] there, just a block from Main Street there on Capitol there—Capitol and Franklin, I think [actually

Scott]. I'm not for sure. But Mr. Keady would make the assignments in those days, but I had a—I had some people, like Andy Morris, who went on to be at Arkansas State [University, Jonesboro] as SID [sports information director], was there at that time, Jimmy Wilder, who was there at that time, who's now retired and went on to be SIDs at Murray State and places like that. They would make the assignments. I was just—I was just glad to be able to find and go to Quigley Stadium and cover a game. My uncle was the manager on the Little Rock Central [High School]—unbelievable football teams that they had in the 1950s. And I was—I got to go—he would babysit me and take me out there, and I would get to sit on the sidelines and watch some of those great football players—Bruce Fullerton and some of those players like that from Central—and so it was—just to go cover a game—even if it was Westside playing at Quigley Stadium, I thought that was pretty cool. But I—I'm—you know, I've always loved sports, and the opportunity to do that. [00:05:32.03] I can tell you, in my career at the *Democrat*, man, I covered some—you name it, I covered it—whether it was boxing at the North Little Rock Boys Club, whether it was junior high sports. I always had to write those little things. And, you know, we would work—we'd go to work at 6:00 in the morning and we'd get off at noon. It was an afternoon paper. That's Monday through Friday. Saturday we would go in at 6:00, get off at noon and come back at 3:00 and put out the Sunday paper. We'd get a three-hour nap in between [laughs] and did—so I worked six days a week, you know, and do those kind of things. But never, never thought anything about it because I was having a chance to cover things that were sports.

[00:06:13.11] CB: When you walked in covering that, though, did—you obviously knew sports, but, I mean, how did you learn to write? Did that come from reading sports throughout your youth or something?

LR: I think a lot of that came from just reading. I'm a—I've always been an avid reader and a sports fan, so there was kind of like a form, it felt like. [Laughs] You know, you would give the score, where it was played, who, what, when and where, and those kind of things. You know, we didn't do a lot of quoting and [laughs] you know, it was just a—it was—man, write it and it ran. There was no—I can't remember any instructions I got, other than I was on a three-month trial, and after three months I was still there, you know? So I guess I was gonna be okay. But I don't ever remember—like I say, I never wrote anything in—in high school for—for—in those days. I went with Harry King to high school, who's still writing. And Harry and I went to North Little Rock for the same—Katy Russell, who taught journalism at North Little Rock High School. And my English teacher always said I should write. I went to Arkansas and—University of Arkansas—and never did that. But I did find out that by doing that, I had a chance. [00:07:32.11] After a while, Mr. Keady saw enough in me. And he said, "Son, you need to go back to school." So I went back to the University of Arkansas, and I was—for two years I went back and—and got my education and was the *Democrat Razorback* correspondent up there. So I was the man in Fayetteville that would put the stories on the bus and ship them to Little Rock. And I got to cover the national championship team at Arkansas in 1964—Freddy Marshall and all those guys like that. So I—you know, I—I learned—it was a

learning experience. I didn't—I didn't really have a—I had my *New York Times* book, you know, and your AP [Associated Press] book, and—and I had those—but I had so many people around me that actually took me under their wings, including a lot of people that I used as references when I came to the *Commercial Appeal* in July of 1967, including the infamous John Robert Starr, who was the Associated Press bureau chief in Little Rock when I went to work at the *Democrat*. [00:08:48.03] And John Robert took a liking to me for some strange reason, you know, but he nurtured me. Mr. Keady did that. You know, I never saw Mr. [K. August] Engel, who owned the paper. He was the one that was there that gave us the money when we got our cash checks. He was always down there—the man himself. [00:09:07.25] And it was—[laughs] it was just the experience that I—I just can't imagine. We didn't have air-conditioning. We would go in with the windows open and we would swat bugs and things like that. It was hot, as you know, in July in Little Rock with no air-conditioning with the windows open. I was working all these long shifts. [00:09:29.14] I tried to go to school some at LRU [Little Rock University, now known as University of Arkansas, Little Rock]. I was doing these different kind of things—had just—just gotten married and—but to have the chance to do all those things—man, I can think of all the things—I was the one that tore it off the wire when [President] John F. Kennedy was shot. I always wished I would've kept that. I was in the wire room—and people don't know what a wire room is—but it was there, and I tore it off and rushed in there to the city desk and gave them that sheet. And I always wish I would've—you know, not done that. I wish I would've kept it, you know? But . .

[00:10:03.14] CB: How big was the staff when you—the sports staff?

RL: The sports staff—we came and go—it changed so much because—I knew we hired one man who was working at Kroger's sacking groceries, and he became our AIC writer. And Bobby Joe Howell—I don't know where Bobby Joe is right now, but he became our writer for AIC. That's Arkansas Intercollegiate Conference—was in those days, State Teachers [College] and [Arkansas] Tech and [some] of them like that. And he also covered the [Arkansas] Travelers [baseball team]. So I always borrowed his car when he'd go to Florida to cover [laughs] the Travelers. But we had him. We would have about five people—some [of the] most unusual characters that I've ever seen that—it was quite a sight to—it was an experience, particularly on Saturday. Once you had worked a [high school] prep football game on Friday night and come back in on Saturday morning and write your story, and hoping that—you know, try to make a different angle from the *Gazette*, and then go home and take a nap and come back—we had some guys that weren't in very good shape on Saturday night [laughs], trying to come back and do that, you know, and everything. [00:11:14.10] But characters were—you know, I can still remember laying the paper out and these different kind of things that we had. But we had a lot of double-part people. I can't [remember]—I could not even tell you to this day, other than Andy Morris and Jimmy Wilder and Fred Neusch, who covered the AIC for us, and people like that—John Moore, who went on to work for the *Times-Picayune* [New Orleans, Louisiana] from Batesville, Arkansas, and things like that. We had people that would come through the

Democrat and very few of them stayed.

[00:11:46.27] CB: Was it mainly at the time a stepping stone-type of newspaper in the journalism business?

LR: Well, at that pay scale. You know, we were the—we fought the [*Arkansas*] *Gazette*. We knew the *Gazette* had all the money. Mr. Engel was extremely tight with his money. You know, we didn't have too many—when a light bulb would flicker, it would flicker for a pretty good while up there, you know? At least it would cut down on the mosquitoes and the bugs and things. You know, you never—you never knew if anything was gonna go out, whether it would be replaced or anything. [00:12:20.05] So the *Gazette* was always that thing—and we had great relationships with the *Gazette*. I mean, when I covered the high schools or whatever it might be, you know, we had great relationships with Jerry McConnell and Jim Bailey and all those great guys at the *Gazette*. There was no animosity. It was just expected that we were the little guys trying to fight them, you know, because we didn't have the money and it was—just been in the family for so long.

[00:12:49.09] CB: So when—when you're out there in that competitive nature, is it—is it a goal to beat them as bad as the others or just try to find something different?

RL: I think it was try to find to find something different to—to make stories happen. I—I was—you know, in my tenure there, one of the hottest things was that I wrote a story related to North Little Rock, which at that time was the only high school over there, and they had a great football team. A young man named Ricky Thoreau, who went on to play at Memphis State [University] as a quarterback,

was the quarterback at North Little Rock, and I wrote and coached—Ken Stephens was over at North Little Rock. And Ken had spoken that no one from Arkansas was expressing any interest in Ricky Thoreau. And so I wrote that, and the next thing I know, I get a very—you know, pretty upset Frank Broyles on the phone trying to explain to me that Arkansas did recruit North Little Rock and that I didn't know what I was saying. And Coach Broyles—and later became one of my mentors in school—but he was upset, but I was—I was a young pup, and here I am trying to fight Frank Broyles, but I will say that Jack Keady and Ken Stephens stood behind the quote I had. It was a quote. I had it actually right. I was stunned that he would say that. It's one of those things like, "Did you really mean to say that?" you know. And he said he did say it, but Coach Broyles did not like it, and it took some—you know, he thought he was inferior to that. But, no, I covered them, and that was a—a time that I thought that I made the—and, man, it was all over the state, you know, that thing.

[00:14:34.19] CB: Growing up in that area, how intimidating was it to deal with somebody like Frank Broyles, being a young pup in the business? Did you shudder a bit?

LR: Well, Frank Broyles had come in 1957, you know, and I think he started 0 and six [zero wins, six losses] at [Arkansas]—1958—he started 0 and six at Arkansas. So by going to school up there and being around athletes and being around a lot of them that I knew in school and things like that—and particularly since I was a reporter up there—on-campus reporter. I mean, those days—me and Norville Plowman—Norville worked for the *Gazette* and he was an Arkansas—and he got

a lot better-looking paper to write on. His notebooks even looked better than mine, I thought. But, you know, we would be at the bus station at 2:00 a.m. taking our stories to send, you know, our Western Union, if the guy was still awake, you know, that you would ticker-tape it back to the paper. But I never was really intimidated because I had some real great friendships with Ken Hatfield and some of the other guys that I went to school with up there that were really great.

[00:15:36.02] But I always felt like that we were the underdogs battling the big guys, and particularly when they would think that—that I was just a young pup with no experience or anything like that. I would not trade my five years at the *Democrat* for anything because it made me appreciate money. [Laughs] It made me appreciate hard work. It enabled me to get along with people that were out in left field most of their life and a different zip code, but, you know, you had to fluctuate because you never knew whether these guys were gonna show up for work. I mean, they'd been out all night. And this was real newspapering in those days, you know, and things happened in the newsroom. You know, it was pretty wild, but at the same time, I think that I was able to grow as a reporter.

[00:16:30.05] CB: What was that 2:00 [a.m.] bus thing like? I mean, in this day and time where people press a button and they send mail to other people and how easy stories go across the country, what was that like?

RL: Well, I—you know, I've still got my typewriter that I typed my first story on at the *Commercial Appeal* in 1967, so you can imagine what we were using in 1962. You knew when the buses would run, and it would get to Little Rock at a certain time—in time to go to the paper the next morning. That was the only other way,

you know—to type your story up on your typewriter and put it in a package and send it down to Little Rock. It was just the bus express, you know? And in those days and times, I wasn't worried about anything, you know? You were gonna be up and you had to go. It was pretty hard on those classes the next day, because I was going to school. I wasn't just covering the Razorbacks, you know? I was going to school. So the part about that was that it missed the bus several times. There would be certain things happen, and I would get a call, and I'd just gotten married and we were living in a little duplex—me and my wife, Miriam—up there. And I would get a call saying, "It didn't make it. The story's not here." Well, you know that. The next thing you have to do is dictation, and that takes forever, you know, and I'm still trying to do that now. But I will say one thing: I was—and I will say this to the day I die—I was the fastest male typist in the history of the University of Arkansas. I was the only male in advanced typing. I could type fast. I marched fast. The band marched 180 steps a minute. We were a fast marching band and I was a fast typist, so I could crank 'em out.

[00:18:14.09] CB: When—when you were working for the *Democrat*, what was the geographic area of central Arkansas like—Little Rock and North Little Rock?

LR: We didn't have any demographics, you know? We were a state paper, man. We—there was no—hey, I have covered games on top of school buses, sitting on top of—that was the press box. I don't know if that was Gurdon or Dardanelle. It was someplace that—they stuck us up on top of the school bus. I have covered games where it was fogged out. I've covered so many—we were a statewide newspaper and we tried to be, and to get those trucks rolling. 'Course, we were a

morning—an afternoon paper in those days. People don't believe that there was such things. You know . . .

CB: Uh-huh.

[00:19:01.17] LR: But we were a—so we had—we would get there so early—get the paper out by 9:30 [a.m.]. We'd have a one star and a two star. [Note: please explain the meaning of the previous sentence] We would eat breakfast at the corner of Main Street—whatever that little place was. We'd go down there and eat. Nobody ate—I had peanuts and Cokes. That was my . . .

CB: [Laughs]

LR: That was breakfast forever for me. And so then we would go eat breakfast, and we'd come back and proof the paper, and it was shipped out. It wasn't a very big paper, but, you know, it was one of those papers that—and Sunday was our pride paper. You know, we would try to really match the *Gazette* on Sunday, because it was our only time that we really—you know, you went one-on-one with them. And so I think the Sunday *Democrat* in those days, of course, had nothing like the space—you know, we would fight for space and things along that line.

[00:19:49.18] CB: Geographically, though, how big was Little Rock? Where were the boundaries at the time? And, you know . . .

LR: [Laughs] Oh, we didn't have any. Like I say, you know, in those days and time, you know, Jacksonville was the air base. You know, we—we didn't—Conway and Pine Bluff and that probably seventy-five-mile radius. But we would—we were still the state paper for Texarkana, El Dorado—I would cover games at El Dorado. I've been to a lot of football games at El Dorado—Russellville. You

know, the northwest part of the state was a different world—Jonesboro. I can't—I don't know—I knew every nickname in every city and everything there was. And not only that, but then after I became assistant sports editor and I was raised to \$99 a week, then I got to cover the big events. You know, like Golden Gloves boxing and the [Harlem] Globetrotters [professional exhibitionist basketball team]. And I almost got to get on a plane once. We were going to cover a Razor-back game. I think it—man, I think it was the bowl game in Dallas [Texas]. I can't remember. But all I know was there were three of us on that Piper Cub [airplane] and I wasn't really looking forward to riding in it to begin with. Mr. Keady and the main writers had gone down on the commercial flight and we were chartering a plane. And we didn't—something happened—fog or something—we didn't get to go, and I was never so happy in my whole life. I was sitting there in that little plane. I said, "I don't want to go down there." So . . .

[00:21:15.29] CB: I would imagine at the time, places like Sherwood and Jacksonville were a long way—and Conway were a long way away compared to today, when they're part of the whole metropolitan area.

LR: We didn't have as many schools. You would think—you know, Sylvan Hills was considered the suburbs because I dated a girl out there. It was a suburb, you know? But in those days also, Clay, you've got to remember that I grew up in the controversial part, you know? I was in the ninth grade in 1957, so I was in that era of change and, you know, and the black/white era. And I think that the *Democrat* in those days was not as involved as maybe the *Gazette* was in the coverage of—of the fair play of both communities. But I covered Scipio Jones and

Horace Mann and those—I think that really helped me when I came to Memphis and became the prep writer for twenty-one years here and covered places that no other reporter had ever been before, you know? But at those times in the—1962 to 1967—we didn't—the bulk of our coverage was central Arkansas, you know? We would have an early edition that would take off and go. But we could get some stories in on that morning that the *Gazette*—you know, it was before CNN [Cable News Network] and all these things—if something happened at 9:00 in the morning, we could get it in.

CB: Uh-huh.

LR: You know? And the—and that was our real—boy, we loved those kind of things.

[00:22:47.22] CB: When you look at your career, I mean, did you do anything outside of sports when you were at the *Democrat*?

LR: No, I was—I was strictly sports all the way, you know? If certain things would happen, they—I might've helped on the desk or something. But I've been sports all my career. I just—it was just something about the love of it and being able to—I remember I interviewed Vince Lombardi, and I told my dad that at the—and my dad said, "Well, [I] already know him. He sells cars in Cabot, Arkansas." My dad—that's a different Lombardi, you know? But I had a chance at the *Democrat*—even though I was a cub reporter—Lou Groza [professional football place-kicker for the Cleveland Browns] came through—I got a picture of me and Lou Groza. The *Democrat* was the stepchild, but at the same time, we covered the same events as the *Gazette*. And so I got to go in some places I never would've gotten a chance to go in just because it was the *Arkansas Democrat*. But Jack

Keady was an amazing man. He and Orville Henry had some great [laughs], you know, one-on-ones together—you know, they were so different. But you know something? To this day, not only did Jack Keady mold my career, but Orville Henry had such a great influence on me. I meshed with Mr. Henry, and he helped me out a lot in those days. So we kind of interacted. I never thought of the *Gazette* as an adversary. I just thought of the *Gazette* as another news outlet.

[00:24:21.09] CB: What did—what were the things that you took away from your career there that you brought to Memphis when you came to work at the *Commercial Appeal*?

LR: Well, when I decided to leave the *Democrat-Gazette*, and it was a major decision to leave, because I was young and married and I was looking for more challenges. You know, I knew that I never was gonna make a lot of money, so I came to Blytheville, Arkansas. The opening was there. The guy that had been there for 100 years had finally retired, and I almost took that job. I always wanted to go to Dallas. That's where I always wanted to work. So I came back and then I got a call that there was an opening. Andy Morris told me about an opening in Memphis for the prep writer. And so I came to Memphis and came over here to Memphis and applied and got the job and came back. And the hardest thing was to tell Mr. Keady that I was gonna leave him. And he said that it wouldn't work. He said, "It won't work. You're not gonna like it over there. This is where you need to be." Of course, I spent thirty-four years at the *Commercial Appeal*, so it must've worked. [00:25:35.23] But I think that my time at the *Democrat* was one of those shaping experiences that I can still remember. I've got more stories I

could tell about the *Democrat* than I could ever do in—for my thirty-four years at the *Commercial Appeal*, because it's—it was like the front page, you know? It was like that. You had characters. You had people that you were scared of, you know? There were old-time writers [like] George Douthit, Fred Petrucelli, [and] Bob Sallee. Some of these guys were just legendary people. Mr. McCord—Robert McCord, you know. I knew him from the *North Little Rock Times*. And then John Robert Starr storming out of the AP room back there and—so—but I always—I wore a tie, and I think that impressed them because I only had two of them, you know, but I would change them—wear one way and wear another tie the next day. But they'd never seen a sportswriter with a tie on before, I don't think.

[00:26:35.04] CB: How come you wore one?

LR: I just thought it added class and it would make me feel older. It would make me look older. I never did—I never have looked old, you know, so to speak. But Mr. Keady wore a tie. He looked neat. He didn't cuss. He didn't use anything like that. He was—he could look at you, and he always said—he always said, "You're looking at me, aren't you?" And he would—and I didn't think I was looking at him, but I was looking at him. You know, he had a way about him, just to look in your eye and say, "You're not doing what you're supposed to be doing," you know? [00:27:07.21] But Saturday nights at the *Democrat* could be a hoot, man. It was after—you worked twelve-hour shifts and some guys would go to supper and we'd never see them, you know, back again. So . . .

[00:27:18.11] CB: So when you're writing for a paper like the *Democrat* at the time—

you know, today's world, a reporter may write one, two stories a day.

LR: [Laughs]

CB: How many were you all writing on any given night?

LR: Oh, man, there's no telling. I wrote—I rewrote—you know, you would get a *Gazette* story and rewrite it. That was part of it, you know? So try to make it a different angle, particularly rewrites from football games or whatever it might be. Because when we got to work on Saturday morning at 6:00 to put out the Saturday paper, everything had already been in the *Gazette*, you know? So we knew if they made a mistake, we would—we could really [take] advantage [of] that, you know. So I would write, and I've always been prolific. That's just the way I am. I bet I would write fifteen stories on Friday night [and] Saturday morning, you know, and do that and cover those kind of things. And so I—there's no telling how many I wrote.

[00:28:16.04] CB: You now, you talked about the shifts and everything, and I think that a lot of people don't now understand what it was like for an afternoon newspaper.

LR: Hmm.

CB: I mean, you'd come in at 6:00 [a.m.]?

LR: Come in at 6:00—usually be there about a quarter 'til 6:00, and we would stay 'til 11:30 sometimes—depends on what's going on in the daytime. And like I said, that would cut down on your social life, so to speak—particularly if you covered something the night before and those kind of things. So my schedule was unpredictable and yet it was predictable in a way, because I knew that I would work six

days a week and—and not get—that would help you get overtime. I always liked that. That'd get you over the \$100 bill so when you get your little paycheck, it would be all full of money.

[00:29:03.18] CB: What's the most memorable experience you remember from working at the *Democrat*?

LR: I think the most memorable experience—boy, that's a—that's a tough one because I had so many. There was—probably that day when I was in the wire room when that news broke on President Kennedy, and I was able to tear it off. And from that day on, I just stayed in the wire room. I was always there and they had to chase me out, you know, and everything, so . . .

CB: Great. This is Clay Bailey. I've been interviewing Larry Rea for the Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History Project on the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*.

LR: That is it, man.

[End of Interview]

[Transcribed by Cheri Pearce Riggs]