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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with:

Sonny Rhodes
Little Rock, Arkansas
26 August and 9 September 2005

Interviewer: Mara Leveritt

Mara Leveritt: I'm Mara Leveritt. I'm with Sonny Rhodes in Little Rock on August 26, 2005. Let me ask you, first of all—your full name is . . . ?

Sonny Rhodes: Carlton Maurice Rhodes, Jr.

ML: But you usually . . .

SR: I've always gone by Sonny.

[Tape Stopped]

ML: You began your newspaper career at what age?

SR: I think I was nineteen. I was a sophomore at what was then State College of Arkansas, now the University of Central Arkansas at Conway.

[Tape Stopped]

ML: Let's start even further back. You were born where, Sonny?

SR: I was born in Davis Hospital in Pine Bluff, Arkansas.

ML: What year?

SR: 1952.

ML: 1952. That would have been an interesting time to begin life in Pine Bluff. Do you . . . ?

SR: I think one month after I was born, [Dwight David] Eisenhower was elected president [of the United States]. [Laughs]

ML: And the rest is history. [Laughs]

SR: Yes.

ML: What was your early childhood like? What were your parents like? What did they do for a living?

SR: My dad was a Greyhound bus driver and my mother worked, although it was a variety of jobs. Shortly after I was born, she went to work as a secretary at the Pine Bluff Arsenal. She did a variety of things—nothing like a full-time career. She would have a child and not work for a while and then find some other job.

ML: How many siblings do you have?

SR: There are three of us. I have two younger brothers.

ML: Was your father home a lot—not home, or what?

SR: Yes, he wasn't home a lot. In the bus driving business, they have what they call the extra board. Basically, the extra board—when you'd come in from a run, you got [about] eight hours' rest, then you'd just have to be ready to go whenever they called you—whenever they needed somebody to drive a bus to Memphis [Tennessee] or Dallas [Texas] or whatever. It wasn't until I was older that he got what they called—this is really technical, now—a regular run. So his job was a little bit more stable then. But, yes, he was gone a lot.

ML: So in terms of you and your brother—I know I read some of things that you've

written about your own childhood . . .

SR: Yes.

ML: It sounds like you have a lot of nice memories.

SR: Yes. In some ways, I kind of have compared part of it to a Huck Finn-type thing. When I was really young we lived in community of Watson Chapel, just about two blocks from the Watson Chapel schools. That was more of sort of a community/rural neighborhood-type of existence. When I was ten, I moved to a less-developed area. My parents had bought twenty acres, and Bayou Bartholomew ran through it, so that's when I really started getting out more. Of course, I was getting older and could roam more.

ML: It sounds very nice.

SR: Yes. We built a lot of tree houses and a lot of rafts that never floated. [Laughter]

ML: I'm always interested in how newspaper people think that their own childhoods may have affected their decision to go into this kind of work or the way they have pursued it.

SR: Yes.

ML: I know you write about nature.

SR: Yes.

ML: Are there other ways that you think that that early part of your childhood may have influenced your decision, or your route into newspaper work, or what you've done once you got into it?

SR: Yes. Gee, that's a really good question, and it's hard for me to really pinpoint it, but I've always liked to read. My mother has said I could read when I was two. I don't really think I could. I think probably what it was—she read some of those

Golden Books [reference to children's literature publisher] to me so many times that I just kind of had them memorized and flipped [to] a page and could recite the words that were on the page.

ML: Yes.

SR: But pretty early on, I started reading newspapers. First, it was the comics and Dear Abby [reference to the syndicated advice columnist].

ML: The deep stuff.

SR: Yes. Right. Then I think I started getting a little bit more active. I started reading sports and that sort of stuff.

ML: Did they hook you? Did you feel that somehow newspapers were becoming important to you?

SR: Yes. I even collected newspapers. I've also always had a passion for history. Long before I heard about newspapers being the first rough draft of history, or however that saying goes, I was kind of interested from a historical aspect.

ML: You appreciated that this was history in the making?

SR: Yes. When I was probably nine years old—like I said, I started collecting newspapers. We found some old newspapers from World War II.

ML: *Pine Bluff Commercial*?

SR: *Pine Bluff Commercial*—I think the *Pine Bluff Graphic* may still have been in operation then. I'm not sure. I think they were all either the *Pine Bluff Commercial* or the *Pine Bluff Graphic*. There was an old trunk in my grandmother's attic that I found a newspaper from World War I in. I know that was the *Pine Bluff Graphic*. I still have that newspaper.

ML: So even she valued the newspapers in some way.

SR: Well, yes. I think it was a keepsake because it was—the big banner head said, "Armistice Signed."

ML: Yes.

SR: Yes, I'd go up in my grandmother's attic and find stuff like that. It would be just like I had stepped back in time. I'd stay up there for hours and read old newspapers or whatever, then when I'd come down out of the attic, I'd feel like I'd stepped out of a time machine. It was a strange experience.

ML: [Laughs]

SR: Like I said, it was like going through some time warp.

ML: That's interesting. What kind of schooling did you have, then? Where did you go to elementary and high school?

SR: I went all the way through the Watson Chapel schools.

ML: Were they small?

SR: Yes, it was relatively small. I think there were about 130 in my senior class.

ML: Yes.

SR: Do you mind if I kind of digress for just a second?

ML: You talk however you want. I want you to be comfortable.

SR: Pardon me?

ML: Be comfortable.

SR: Okay, thanks. In sort of preparing this interview—I said I'd read that interview with Gene Herrington. I had no idea of the similarities in our early lives because, for a time, he lived in the same neighborhood that my mother lived in there on the western end of Pine Bluff. It's called Marsh/Fox. There's a Marsh Street and a Fox Street [laughs], and they just call that area Marsh/Fox. Again, both of them

lived there when they were young. He—of course, this was thirty years before I came along, roughly—maybe twenty-five. But he started to school in the first grade at Watson Chapel. I don't know why they had half-day sessions when he was young, but I was reading that he was in an afternoon session. Again, maybe it was just because the school was so—they had so little physical facilities that they had to divide the grades in half. But I know when I came along, it was just the height of the [post-WWII] Baby Boom, and they couldn't build elementary schools fast enough. There were thirty-five kids in my first grade class, and we all went for half a day. I was in the afternoon session. The poor teacher had thirty-five more hellions in the morning. [Laughs]

ML: Not small at all.

SR: Right. So after first grade, they built [Edgewood] Elementary School and about half the kids went to a new elementary school. By the time I was in the fourth grade, they built yet another elementary school, [L. L. Owen]. But getting back to Gene, he started in the first grade at Watson Chapel, as did I. I think he later moved away, but came back. But now we live two blocks from each other over in North Little Rock.

ML: That's something.

SR: Yes. I've met Gene on a number of occasions, but I need to get to know him better. [Laughter]

ML: Yes, obviously. [Laughter] You've been following him his whole life. [Laughs]

SR: Right. Yes. So I went all the way—there was no kindergarten then. I went all the way from the first grade through the twelfth at Watson Chapel and then went to what was then the State College of Arkansas.

ML: And finished there?

SR: Yes.

ML: In what—with a degree in what?

SR: It was a bachelor of science in education.

ML: Were you planning to teach?

SR: Well, Dean Duncan was my mentor. I guess probably when I was a sophomore, we were talking about my future and whether I should go for a BA [bachelor of arts], which would have required some hours in foreign language. I kind of wish now that I'd done that, in some ways—or a BS, just a bachelor of science, which would have required more science. He suggested that I go for a BSE because he said, "If you get into journalism and decide you don't like it, you've got something else you could do."

ML: So you *were* thinking of journalism at the same time?

SR: Right. Yes.

ML: Did you minor in it?

SR: No. I've got about thirty hours, at least, in journalism. The major was journalism, but the degree was called a bachelor of science in education.

ML: Oh, I get it. Did you work on the paper there?

SR: Yes.

ML: It was a requirement, I guess?

SR: It wasn't a requirement, but, you know, it was encouraged. I think anybody who was serious about it did. Yes, I started midway [through] my sophomore year and worked on it in my junior year. That fall of my senior year, I was the editor of *The Echo*. And in the spring, I did my practice teaching at Little Rock Central

High School.

ML: What was your plan when you graduated and went to Central? Were you expecting that you were going to be a classroom teacher or just . . . ?

SR: Well, to tell you the truth, my experience at Central almost made me think I didn't want to be a teacher. [Laughs]

ML: What year was this, now?

SR: That was in 1974. And it really wasn't a bad experience; it was just that I realized how little I knew about journalism. [Laughter] I had already been offered an assistantship at Ole Miss [University of Mississippi, Oxford, Mississippi]. I went to Ole Miss in the fall of 1974 to get my master's degree.

ML: In?

SR: Journalism. I got an MA [master of arts] in journalism.

ML: Did you have a particular focus, by that point, in working on your thesis?

SR: Well, my thesis—I did a content analysis of *Chicago Tribune* editorials from the fifties [1950s] through the mid-seventies [1970s], and it compared and contrasted the editorials over that period. Certainly, we had pretty fascinating history there for I forget how many years now—thirty or forty years. The publisher was Colonel Robert McCormick.

ML: That was the paper I cut my teeth on.

SR: Oh, is that right?

ML: Yes, it was.

SR: He died in 1955 and basically left behind this triumvirate to continue his policies. I think they did for a number of years. One of the things that drove English teachers crazy was the simplified spellings that he came up with. He developed a

list of, I think, about 300 words that had—they were spelled the way he thought they should be spelled, like *freight*. Instead of F-R-E-I-G-H-T, he spelled it F-R-A-T-E.

ML: I didn't know that.

SR: *Though* was—instead of T-H-O-U-G-H, it was T-H-O. He said, "The way English words are spelled doesn't make any sense."

ML: He thought he had the power to change that.

SR: Yes.

ML: Not quite. [Laughs]

SR: Well, in nineteen . . .

ML: As powerful as he was.

SR: Right. In 1976—this was one of the things that I noted—they went to the more conventional spellings again. They had a headline announcing that T-H-R-U is T-H-R-O-U-G-H, [and so] is tho—T-H-O. "Thru is through and so is tho."

ML: Very interesting. I never knew that. But it may have come from my spelling problem. [Laughter] So, was that when you—through Ole Miss, now—where did you go next?

SR: Well, while I was at SCA [State College of Arkansas], I did two internships at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*. I worked there in the summer of 1973 and then in the summer of 1974. When I left Ole Miss in the spring of 1976, I applied for jobs at the [Arkansas] *Democrat* and the [Arkansas] *Gazette*. I even got a two-day try-out on the *Gazette* copy desk, but didn't do well on that one, so I contacted the *Pine Bluff Commercial*. They said, "Sure. We'll be happy to have you back."

[Laughs]

ML: So this was 1974 that you went to the *Commercial*?

SR: Actually, I finished up my course work at Ole Miss in the spring of 1976 and shortly thereafter went to work for the *Pine Bluff Commercial* full-time. Carol Matlack was the city hall reporter, and I became assistant city hall reporter. Something I haven't mentioned was that politics at that time was a real passion of mine. I dreamed of someday maybe being the state capitol reporter for the *Gazette*.

ML: What were the politics of city hall like at that point in Pine Bluff?

SR: Well, you know, I think—in terms of the relation with the paper?

ML: What was the biggest news? What were the big issues you were covering?

SR: That was still kind of the early days of the CDBG grants—you know, the community development block grants—federal.

ML: Oh, yes. Yes.

SR: It was part of [President Richard Milhouse] Nixon's effort to return more money to the local level. How the city was using that money was kind of a continuing controversy.

ML: Continuing.

SR: The African-American community didn't trust the mayor and the city council. So, you know, I would say there was quite a bit of friction between city hall and the African-American community.

ML: What was the difference between studying journalism and practicing journalism? Was there any kind of awakening for you about the—of course, you had worked on *The Echo* at [State College].

SR: Yes.

ML: But in terms of—now you're in the thick of things on some controversial issues there in Pine Bluff where you grew up. Any learning experiences that you recall?

SR: Well, yes, there was a good learning experience that I had. The Pine Bluff Convention Center was just about to open. The managing editor told me he wanted me to produce all the copy for a special section on the convention center. So I went through the clip files and did all this research and interviewed a whole lot of people—produced it all. The managing editor wanted to see all the copy before it went to print, and he went through it and marked out every controversial thing in the story. It turned out—I mean, it was just an advertising section is what they wanted it for. The paper just wanted copy to go around the ads, not an analysis of how the city financed a white elephant.

ML: Who was that managing editor? Do you remember?

SR: Tom Parsons, who now works for the Associated Press [AP]. See, I had a misconception, I guess, about what I was doing. I really wasn't familiar at that time with what basically was an advertising section. I thought they had wanted a true history of the . . .

ML: Project.

SR: . . . project. They just wanted nice, fluffy stuff. [Laughter]

ML: So, did you avoid being a copy editor altogether, then?

SR: No, I didn't. Actually, I got my first taste of being a copy editor when I first went to work at the *Commercial* in 1973. I think the first thing they did was put me on the copy desk to help me learn the *Commercial* style and maybe see what kind of job I could do. But they gave me a little taste of everything. I worked on the copy desk for about a month, then I worked on the crap desk for a while. Are you

familiar with the crap desk?

ML: Yes. Tell me about the crap desk.

SR: Okay. The crap desk is just kind of the catch-all. It was just basically the crap that nobody else wanted to do, such as obituaries. [Laughs]

ML: Maybe such a thing exists in every profession. I don't know. [Laughs] But it's certainly part of *this* one.

SR: Right. I'm trying to think—the woman who did that was Kay Young, and I think she still works at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*.

ML: I think she does.

SR: I really admire her ability to do that kind of work for all these years. Now, at the *Democrat-Gazette*, they call them news clerks. But they basically do the same thing.

ML: Well, let's get on to your transition to what this project is about, the *Democrat*. I have been told that you got there in 1978. Is that right?

SR: That's right. Yes.

ML: How did that transition happen?

SR: Okay. I was working at the *Log Cabin Democrat*.

ML: Oh, you'd gone from Pine Bluff to Conway?

SR: Yes. I didn't stay very long.

ML: Oh. Why did you leave there?

SR: You know, I think—I don't want to sound evasive, but I think I'm just like a lot of journalists, particularly when I was younger—I was kind of a restless soul.

ML: Yes.

SR: So part of it [was] I just didn't want to work in my hometown anymore. I felt

there were better opportunities elsewhere. And, truly, there was more money [laughs] at the *Log Cabin Democrat*, even though it was a smaller paper. I think the Freemans were notorious for paying people just a pittance.

ML: The Freemans, being the owners . . .

SR: The owners of the *Pine Bluff Commercial*. If I could just tell you a little story really quick here. When I went to talk to Tom Parsons about this job at the *Pine Bluff Commercial* in 1976, he said, "Normally, we start people out at \$110 a week, but considering you almost have your master's degree and your previous internships here—I think I can get you \$5 more a week."

ML: [Laughs]

SR: So I started, I think, in June of 1976 for \$115 a week at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*. [I] stayed there about four months, and an old friend of mine at the *Log Cabin* I knew was going to grad[uate] school at Ole Miss. I knew there was an opening, so I jumped at the opportunity to move back to Conway.

ML: As a reporter?

SR: Right. Yes. I went there as a courthouse reporter at the *Log Cabin Democrat*. In that role, I did a little bit of everything. I went to the circuit clerk's office a couple of mornings a week and looked through all the lawsuits that had been filed. I compiled a list who had filed for a divorce and who had been divorced, as well as—I covered murder trials. It was during a murder trial—you may remember John Elliot Gruzen . . .?

ML: Yes.

SR: I was covering that trial in Danville.

ML: Yes.

SR: It had been moved to Danville on a—what do they call that? Change of . . . ?

ML: Venue.

SR: Yes. Change of venue. I was covering that trial for the *Log Cabin Democrat*, and in the course of covering it I got acquainted with Garry Hoffmann from the [*Arkansas*] *Democrat*, who was covering it for the *Democrat*. That would have been in early 1978—probably January or February. Later on, the [*Arkansas*] *Democrat* was talking about beefing up its staff and setting up bureaus, and Garry said, "You know what? I met this guy at the *Log Cabin*. You might want to consider him to be our Conway bureau person." So George Arnold, who was the state editor at the [*Arkansas*] *Democrat*—he called me, so I started to work at the *Democrat* in December of 1978.

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

SR: I liked to refer to myself as the Conway bureau chief, but I was just a one-person bureau.

ML: This would be in—the year would be 1978.

SR: Yes.

ML: Okay.

SR: I probably left the *Log Cabin* right around the first of December. I want to say that I started at the *Democrat* on [the] twelfth or thirteenth [of] December.

ML: Now, who was at the *Democrat* when you got there? What was the hierarchy?

SR: John Robert Starr was the managing editor. George Arnold was the state editor. [He was], of course, the person I reported to. I think Bill Husted may have been the city editor.

ML: He was the city editor when I was there.

SR: Garry Hoffmann—I'm not sure what his role was. He might have been assistant city editor.

ML: Was Paul Greenberg there yet?

SR: No, Paul was still at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*. Paul . . .

ML: So you had worked with him there?

SR: Yes. I had first gotten to know Paul when I was an intern at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*.

ML: What was it like, reporting for the *Arkansas Democrat*? Was it different from reporting for the *Log Cabin Democrat*?

SR: Yes, it was quite a bit different.

ML: In what way?

SR: Well, there was a lot more travel involved. I had—I think it was a ten-county area that I covered. It was Perry County, Pope County, Van Buren County, Conway County, of course, Faulkner County, Yell County. I can't remember all of them, but it was ten or twelve counties that I covered, so I was on the road a lot. I got all the daily and weekly newspapers from this area—my little office there in my home was just stacked to the ceiling with all these [laughs] newspapers. Talk about collecting newspapers! [Laughs]

ML: Were you single?

SR: No, I got married in September of 1977. My first wife's maiden name was Diane Binz. We were divorced in 1985. We had two children, Jeremy and Katie. In 1989, I married Julie Johnson of Conway. We have one child, Abby. Diane and I have a good relationship—we've been able to raise two very fine young adults. I

was at the *Log Cabin Democrat* when I got married. So when I started at the *Democrat*, I had been married a little over a year.

ML: What was your salary at this point? I'm sure it was exorbitant.

SR: Well, yes, it was probably about \$200 a week.

ML: Kind of funny when we think about it.

SR: Yes. Right.

ML: It was not that long ago, actually—the thought of how small those salaries actually were.

SR: Yes.

ML: Of course, everything was different economically as well.

SR: Yes. I've tried to figure out what that would be in today's dollars, but I'm not sure what it would be.

ML: No.

SR: But it seemed like a pretty fair amount.

ML: Did you like the travel? Did you like all of that—covering such a big area and pretty much being your own editor?

SR: There were certainly aspects of it that I liked, but I missed the newsroom camaraderie. I like being around people. So often the people I'd see every day were mostly just people I was reporting on—frequently, in sort of adversarial relationships. [Laughs] Yes, sort of being my own boss was nice. I largely set my own hours, and that kind of stuff was nice. Again, I think I kind of missed the newsroom.

ML: How did this work technologically? How did you get your stories in?

SR: I started out phoning them in. In fact, two people who are still there, Rhonda

Owen and Alyson Hoge, were clerks. I called in an awful lot of stories to them and they would take my dictation.

ML: How did you do that? Did you write out the stories in longhand? Did you spout them off the top of your head? What did you do?

SR: Most of them I just composed while looking at my reporter's notebook.

ML: That's impressive. [Laughs]

SR: Well, you know, it wasn't really high-quality journalism. [Laughter] After I had been there a while, they did get me a very primitive word processor, but I never did learn how to work it very well. I mean, the thing weighed probably forty pounds, and it had this thing that was probably three feet tall, which was basically the hard drive, and a little bitty keyboard that kind of flipped down. I had it set up in my office, but it was cheap and not very reliable.

ML: Could you transmit stories to the newsroom from that?

SR: Yes. They had these little cups in the top of it . . .

ML: [Laughs]

SR: . . . that you'd set the phone [handset] down [into].

ML: Oh, yes.

SR: And you'd nestle the phone into those cups.

ML: Yes, I do remember that. Yes.

SR: And it would send an electronic signal over the phone.

ML: Yes, that was a moment in time.

SR: Yes.

ML: And not long-lasting, thankfully.

SR: Yes.

ML: Yes. Any major stories that you covered during that period?

SR: The biggest was when the Allied Telephone Company headquarters—the building in Harrison—exploded.

ML: Oh.

SR: That was probably January or February of 1979. What had happened—they had this, I think it was a two- or three-story office building in downtown Harrison, right on the square. It had a basement, and there was a gas leak. Gas [fumes] built up in the basement, and in the early morning hours, probably 5:00 or 6:00 a.m., the thermostat kicked on, and there was a spark. The explosion leveled that building and knocked out windows all around the Harrison Square and cracked the foundation of city hall. It was truly amazing that nobody was killed.

ML: Yes.

SR: But it looked like somebody had just dropped a bomb on the town square in Harrison. And I think it was Garry Hoffmann who called me at about 6:00 a.m. and said, "You're the nearest reporter. You need to get up there." I had a Volkswagen, and I drove up Highway 7, which at points was covered in ice. Luckily, I think there probably weren't too many vehicles other than the old Volkswagen Bug that could've gotten over that ice. Anyway, I got up there pretty quickly—about 9:00 or 10:00 [a.m.].

ML: And did what?

SR: Just [ran] all over the place—went to the sheriff's office [and the] local police. That was the first time I had ever met Tommy Robinson. He was Bill Clinton's director of public safety, I think it was.

ML: Oh, and he was already there?

SR: Yes.

ML: Yes.

SR: And just trying to get quotes from people and assess the damage. This is another interesting little testament to the technological differences, and it's kind of funny: there were no phones working in Harrison [laughs] because the phone company had blown up.

ML: [Laughs]

SR: I had to drive about twenty miles outside of Harrison before I could find a pay phone that would work so I could phone in my story. I took some pictures. Somebody at the *Democrat* had contacted somebody at Allied [Telephone Company], which is now Alltel. I met them at the airport. They had been up there in their corporate plane to assess the damage and were about to come back to Little Rock, so I handed them a roll of film that I had shot, and they brought it back to Little Rock.

ML: So you were doing the photography, too?

SR: Yes.

ML: Did you commonly do your own photography?

SR: Yes. I took an awful lot of pictures during those times. Yes, I would take pictures for feature stories and sometimes news stories.

ML: How did you like the treatment of the work you were handing in? Did you find that it was, in general, well-edited? Did you have any problems—anything like what you were describing with the convention center story in Pine Bluff? Anything you found objectionable, or were you pleased with what was done with your reporting?

SR: Yes. They didn't do anything to change anything. I think if I had any complaints, it was maybe that the *Democrat* wasn't edited well enough. [Laughter] Again, like I said, I called in an awful lot of stories and just composed them off the top of my head. It's hard for me to remember now, but I don't recall that there were any big boobos. Another big story that I did was at about that same time. There had been a couple of people arrested and charged with abusing their clients at the Conway Development Center.

ML: Yes.

SR: So I covered several trials at the Faulkner County Circuit Court. Also, as part of that, I did a series of stories on the conditions there. I was spending a lot of time at the Human Development Center. Also, down here in Little Rock at DHS [Department of Human Services].

ML: Yes.

SR: At that time, I met somebody who had been kind of an early idol of mine, Howard Watson, who was better known as [Len Day].

ML: Oh. [Laughs]

SR: But he was my parents' age and had grown up in Pine Bluff.

ML: Explain to me who he is.

SR: Okay. Howard Watson [was a] longtime disc jockey, among other things. He started out, if I remember correctly, in Pine Bluff at what was the radio station called KPBA. He was the first person I ever saw who was a beatnik. Of course, I don't think he really truly was a beatnik, but he was the only person I'd ever seen who had a beard in Pine Bluff in the 1950s.

ML: [Laughs]

SR: Anyway, he worked for KPBA. I'm pretty sure he started out with KAAV, which went on the air in 1962. He went from being Howard Watson to Ken Knight, and worked for KAAV during its heyday. But then he left and became [Len Day?], and I think that's how he's been best known. He had a talk show for a time on, I think, KTHV. I'm not sure.

ML: And he was a hero?

SR: Well, hero might not be the right word, but he was a celebrity in Pine Bluff.

ML: Okay.

SR: So anyway, I'd first become aware of him in the fifties [1950s], and in the late seventies [1970s] I finally met him when he was working as a spokesperson for the Department of Human Services. So, I interviewed him a time or two while reporting on the Conway Human Development Center situation.

ML: Basically, you start off in Watson Chapel and the world of Arkansas opens up for you.

SR: It's amazing. It's amazing.

ML: It's not a very big place, when you get right down to it.

SR: Yes.

ML: If I'm right, you didn't stay at the *Democrat* for very long at that [stint]. Why was that? Was it a year or so?

SR: Yes, it wasn't even a year. I was covering the Ward Bus Company bankruptcy.

ML: The Ward Bus Company in Conway?

SR: Right.

ML: Okay.

SR: There was some kind of press conference at Ward's one morning. I ran into John

Brummett there. Brummett and I had first worked together at the *Log Cabin*. I was the county courthouse reporter and he was the city hall reporter. At some point, he went on to work for the *Gazette*. Anyway, he and I both were covering this press conference, he for the *Gazette* and I for the *Democrat*, and he said, "Have you ever thought about coming over to the *Gazette*?" I said, "I imagine [it]." I didn't say it in these words, but, to me, working for the *Gazette* was the pinnacle of Arkansas journalism.

ML: And why was that?

SR: From the time I—well, very early in my days at State College of Arkansas, I started reading the *Gazette*. I hadn't really read it that much before I went to college. So I started reading the *Gazette* and realized it was this wonderful newspaper, and it started, to me, to represent the hopes and dreams of progressive Arkansans. And that's it. Of course, it had won these Pulitzers [reference to the Pulitzer Prize] back during the [1957 Little Rock] Central High [integration] crisis. Also, Dean Duncan, who was the principal journalism teacher at SCA, had worked for the *Gazette* at that time and still had a lot of buddies there. I know [that] Bill Rutherford came and talked to our classes a few times.

ML: What was your view of the *Democrat*, say, when you were in college and even when you went to work for it?

SR: Yes. Well, when I was in college I didn't really pay much attention to it. I think it was really struggling—a pretty bad newspaper.

ML: That would have been in the early seventies [1970s]?

SR: Early seventies [1970s].

ML: Yes.

SR: My view changed somewhat when I started working there. I thought it had some potential to be a great paper.

ML: Well, it had gone through some pretty big changes.

SR: Yes. Walter Hussman [Jr.] had bought it in 1974.

ML: That's right.

SR: But he bought it about the time I went to school at Ole Miss, so it was changing and getting better.

ML: He was making efforts . . .

SR: But, still, the *Gazette*, to me, represented, like I said, just the pinnacle of Arkansas journalism and the hopes and dreams of progressive Arkansans. I considered myself a progressive Arkansan. [Laughs]

ML: Was that because of your family? Would you classify them as progressive?

SR: Well, I would say they're pretty conservative. I could digress a little bit if you want to and tell you about that.

ML: Go ahead.

SR: When I was in high school I started reading Paul Greenberg's editorials—of course, Greenberg won a Pulitzer, I guess, in about 1969, for his editorials. But my parents were pretty conservative. My dad was on the Watson Chapel School Board, which did everything it could do to resist integration. There were a handful of African-Americans who came to the school. They had to have been some very brave souls to want to go to Watson Chapel. It's hard for me to decide exactly what it was that made my views different than my parents; I still can't put my finger on it. I think part of it was the *Pine Bluff Commercial* and reading Paul Greenberg's editorials. My parents thought Greenberg was a demon, and they de-

spised him and the *Pine Bluff Commercial* both.

ML: Did they subscribe?

SR: Most of the time they didn't. I know one time there was a really pathetic-looking newspaper boy who came to our door selling subscriptions. [Laughs] I felt sorry for him. I said, "Mom, we really need to subscribe," so we subscribed there for a while. They would get mad about something Greenberg had written, or over some news account about the Watson Chapel School Board, and they'd cancel their subscription.

ML: What about your brothers? []

SR: No.

ML: How did they turn out, in terms of their views? Have they grown to be those of your parents?

SR: Yes, I would say so. Yes. My youngest brother—it's still hard to tell where he's coming from. Harvey is ten years younger than I am. Harold, the one who is closest to me in age, is about three-and-a-half years younger than I am. I guess it's fair to say that he has conservative views. [Laughs]

ML: It's always interesting to see a newspaper's influence—or lack of it.

SR: Yes.

ML: Paul Greenberg was writing in the time you were growing up, and yet, in your own family, you were the one who seemed to hearken to what he said.

SR: Right. Yes.

ML: And I guess, in terms the larger sense of what newspapers do, and the limits of what they do, that your family is kind of one little case study right there.

SR: Yes.

ML: Do you think that the fact that you would describe yourself as a progressive . . . ?

SR: Yes.

ML: . . . did that have any effect on how you covered stories, or not?

SR: No, not “how” I covered them. I'm sure we'll talk about John Robert Starr here eventually, but one of the things he said was you should leave your opinions in the car when go to work. So, I tried very hard to be that impartial observer. Another thing he said was he thinks a lot of people get into journalism because they want to change the world. That resonated with me

ML: Positively or negatively?

SR: Positively.

ML: Okay.

SR: He said, if you're a social worker, you might change a few lives. But if you're a reporter and are reporting on social conditions, you can do the work of twenty social workers.

[End of Tape 1, Side 2]

[Beginning of Tape 2, Side 1]

SR: I guess the essence of it is that some people—and I even include myself in this—to some degree, journalism is kind of like social work. But one reporter can have a lot more effect than a whole lot of social workers, if that person is a really good writer. So part of why I got into journalism was to change the world. I think that's why a lot of people get into journalism.

ML: How do you think journalists can change the world?

SR: Well, I think part of it gets back to sort of like the Muckrakers, writing about the wrongdoings in the world.

ML: But how does just writing about them affect any change?

SR: I think it sort of can help inform public opinion.

ML: Then you expect the public will do something about it?

SR: Right. Exactly.

ML: And you found that to be generally true?

SR: That's a good question. The older I get the more I think that people just read what they want to read and believe what they want to believe.

ML: But you felt that by laying out the situation, by presenting what was happening as impartially as you could . . .

SR: Right.

ML: . . . that that was your contribution to changing the world.

SR: Exactly. Yes. It's kind of related to some of the things that we teach now in that you should lay out the facts, try to present as many opinions, that is quote different sides of an issue, and let the readers decide for themselves. If they consume this information, then they can make better decisions about their daily lives. Be informed voters, and that sort of stuff.

ML: So you . . .

SR: Does that sound too naïve? [Laughs]

ML: [Laughs] I've kind of operated on that belief, but I'm at a similar stage in life to yours wondering about the relationships between having the information and knowing what to do with it.

SR: Yes.

ML: Okay. So, you did go to work at the *Gazette* and were there for two years. Right?

SR: Yes.

ML: And, if I'm right, you spent four more years at the *Log Cabin Democrat*?

SR: Exactly.

ML: Then five more years at the *Gazette*?

SR: Right.

ML: Then ten years at the *Democrat*.

SR: Yes, the *Democrat*. I started working there about—the second time—it was about April or May of 1990, and in October of 1991 the *Democrat* bought the *Gazette*, and it became the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*. So from 1990 to 2000, it was the *Democrat* first and then the *Democrat-Gazette*.

ML: So, Sonny, can we say that you have probably worked in more newsrooms than almost anyone else who is being interviewed for this project?

SR: Well, probably not too many more people have gone back and forth or changed jobs [laughs] as many times as I have. I think John Brummett probably might have changed jobs more than anybody.

ML: [Laughs] You said that those moves were because you were kind of restless.

SR: Yes.

ML: Did you just stay restless? How do you explain so much moving?

SR: Well, restlessness might be part of it. Again, [I was] young and immature, I think the older I got the . . .

ML: The longer you stayed.

SR: Yes. Exactly. Exactly. But part of it has to do, I think, with maturity. Part of it has to do with just responsibilities and getting older. While I was at the *Log Cabin* the second time, my wife and I had two children. So that's been—part of the reason I started staying longer was I had a lot more responsibility.

ML: Well, then, if I may—since this is a project about the *Democrat* . . .

SR: Yes.

ML: Let me ask you in the—let's say it's roughly eleven years between your first job at the *Democrat*, 1978-1979, to your return in 1990, just slightly before the end of the newspaper war . . .

SR: Yes.

ML: . . . in those years, when you were at the *Gazette* and the *Log Cabin Democrat* again and then the *Gazette*—can you talk about anything that was significant for you in that period of time—just in the development of your own career—how you grew and changed, what you learned, or more importantly, what you saw happening in the newspaper situation in this state?

SR: It's really interesting for me to go back and look at old newspapers and remind myself of what all has gone on. The eighties [1980s] were just really tumultuous.

ML: In what way?

SR: With what was going on in journalism in Arkansas. I think pretty much throughout the industry—it was about the time that I left the *Democrat* that it went to morning circulation. It had been an afternoon paper.

ML: Yes.

SR: So the competition was heating up between the two papers. I have to say—you know, I had mentioned earlier that I felt like the *Gazette* represented the hopes and dreams of progressive Arkansans, but I did sort of find that the *Gazette* was like the emperor with not clothes. When I went to back to work at the *Gazette* in 1985—no, I take it back. When I went there in 1979, I think there were four African-Americans in the entire news operation—Wadie Moore, Aris Jackson, James

Meriweather, who I had gone to school with at SCA, and Jennifer Hopkins, who worked on the state desk. And that was it.

ML: That was a surprise?

SR: Yes, that was a surprise.

ML: Had you, for instance, at the *Log Cabin* or at the *Democrat*—had you seen much that was different?

SR: No. I really hadn't. In fact, there were no African-Americans working at the *Log Cabin*—other than in custodial positions. I can't remember at the *Democrat*.

ML: But you expected the *Gazette* to be different?

SR: Yes. Right. So I was a little disillusioned.

ML: What about in your general courses you had been taking, though, in school? Had there been many African-American students coming through the pipeline?

SR: Well, that's a good thing to bring up. I can only think of two that were at SCA. One was James Meriweather, and the other was Glen Mahone. I think he ended up working in the Clinton Administration. But, yes, you're right, there were not a whole lot in the pipeline—at least not around here, anyway. I just felt like the *Gazette* could have been a little more proactive. [Laughs] In some ways it's a little bit cathartic and in some ways it's kind of tough to talk about some of this stuff because of the disillusionment. Every newspaper had kind of sacred cow and that bothered me.

ML: What were they?

SR: Well, at the *Log Cabin Democrat*, for instance, the publisher was on the board of the Conway courts, the city-owned utility, and was also on the board of one of the banks, so any story that had to do with either of those institutions had to go by

him. Right now I'm drawing a blank. Maybe I shouldn't say sacred cows, but I just didn't feel like they were completely honest or didn't have the highest of journalistic ideals.

ML: No. You would expect more. But I understand you have a faculty meeting that you have to get to.

SR: Right.

ML: Shall we stop for now?

SR: Yes.

ML: Okay.

[Tape Stopped]

ML: Today is September 9. This is Mara Leveritt interviewing Sonny Rhodes for the second part of an interview for the oral history on his experience, primarily with the *Arkansas Democrat* [and the] *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, but also with his career in journalism in Arkansas in general. Sonny, glad to see you again.

SR: Thank you. It's good to be back.

ML: As we left our conversation, we were talking about some of the expectations you had about journalism versus what you actually encountered.

SR: Yes.

ML: For instance, you were mentioning publishers being on boards of institutions the paper was covering.

SR: Right.

ML: And you mentioned [that] the *Arkansas Gazette* did not have as many African-American reporters on the editorial staff, certainly, as you would have expected after their award-winning coverage of the Central High crisis.

SR: Yes.

ML: Do you want to carry on from there? Was there an impact for you in terms of how you then pursued your career? Or what was the consequence of that discovery?

SR: Yes, that's a good question. I don't want to digress too much, but I guess one way to kind of summarize some of what I was talking about—I've always been pretty idealistic, and still am, I think, to an extent, and also naïve. I had all these journalistic principles that I had learned in college, so it was interesting when I got out into the professional world to see that, actually, when you get right down to it, the publishers are all businessmen. You know, I'm sure that they have some journalistic ideals, but there's still the fact that they're living in a capitalistic society. They want to make money to keep the business going—that sort of thing.

ML: And, of course, your paycheck depends on it.

SR: Exactly. Exactly. So there were some occasional disillusionments, but I just tried to stay true to my own ideals the best I could.

ML: In terms of working with editors—and, of course, I'm thinking primarily at the *Democrat* and the *Democrat-Gazette*—have you had any trouble doing that: staying true to your own sense of journalism and also doing the daily work, or the work that was expected?

SR: You know, I don't know, frankly, that I had as much disillusionment with the *Democrat* and the *Democrat-Gazette* as I might have had some other places. I can't think of any great conflicts that I had. Now, I will say in trying to be, I guess, honest and at the same time balanced, that I've had some disappointments. And maybe that's just because of my own expectations, but—for instance, there's not

another paper in the state that's anywhere near the size of the *Democrat-Gazette* in terms of circulation or staff size. I just kind of felt that it was unfair, for instance, for the *Democrat-Gazette* to be in these competitions sponsored by the Associated Press Managing Editors or the Arkansas Press Association or the SBJ [Society of Professional Journalists]. The *Democrat-Gazette* is like the 800-pound gorilla.

ML: You're talking about, not commercial competitions, but contests.

SR: Exactly. Contests. Yes. And when you've got a staff of—you know, I once counted, like, 200 people in the newsroom at the *Democrat-Gazette*—editors, photographers, clerks, reporters. There's not another paper in the state with that size staff. When they're competing against the *Pine Bluff Commercial* or the *Texarkana Gazette* or—I forget now who all is in their category. But it's not a real competition. I felt the *Democrat-Gazette* should just be sponsoring these competitions rather than competing in them.

[Tape Stopped]

ML: Well, in terms, though, of the work that you were asked to do or that you were taught to do—did you usually come up with your own story ideas and assignments, or were you given assignments? How did that work?

SR: Okay. Yes. That's a good question, and I think I should probably clarify here that when I worked as a reporter, it was back in the early days of the newspaper war. It was around 1978 or 1979. I think I might have mentioned that I was the first Conway bureau.

ML: Yes.

SR: So, yes, I was somewhat on my own. The editor would pass along some ideas of some things that he'd seen in the news that he thought I should pursue, but it was

largely like having a big beat. I'd cover all these counties in north central Arkansas, and it was up to me to check in every day at the police and sheriff's departments—the mayors in the various cities, and that sort of stuff. So I was largely on my own then. I did the same thing later with the *Gazette*. When I came back to the *Democrat* in 1990, I came back as a features copy editor. I did that for a couple of years and eventually there was the acquisition of the *Gazette* and the change in managing editors. There was a lot of upheaval and change. I was eventually in charge of the features copy desk.

ML: Okay. Let's talk about that period.

SR: Okay.

ML: You came back to the *Democrat* in 1990.

SR: Yes.

ML: If you would, describe the operation at that time in the newsroom.

SR: Yes. Let's preface that by saying that I had, at that point, toiled for Gannett for four years.

ML: At the *Gazette*.

SR: At the *Gazette*. They did some things that I thought were good—they *were* very proactive about hiring minorities. But the longer I stayed there, the clearer it became that I just didn't think they had the best interest of Arkansans at heart. I also felt kind of trapped, like I was going nowhere. At the *Democrat*, I felt I didn't know if it would be open from day to day. I talked to people who said they felt that some day when they came to work they were going to find the doors locked at the *Democrat*. I felt like . . .

ML: Well, it was the *Democrat* that people felt was more precarious at that point. Is

that right?

SR: Exactly. Oh, yes. Sure.

ML: May I just back up and say that—when you mentioned you didn't feel that Gannett had the best interest of Arkansans at heart—can you give an example of what gave you that feeling?

SR: Well, I started looking around at what Gannett was doing elsewhere.

ML: Right.

SR: They would go into a town and defeat the competition, or they'd buy the only paper in town. The news hole, which is how much space you have devoted to news—the news hole would dry up, you know? I've seen Gannett papers where they had more pages in a section than stories.

ML: Yes.

SR: So I felt that was what was going to happen to the *Gazette*, that eventually they'd run the *Democrat* out of business and the *Gazette* would just be full of ads [advertisements] and very little editorial material. Again, there was a whole lot of stuff going on. At that time, Bill Rutherford had announced that he was retiring from the *Gazette* to teach full-time at UALR [University of Arkansas, Little Rock]—just all kinds of things happening at the *Gazette*. I thought, "Well, I'm going to get out of here, too." The day I left to go to the *Democrat*, Bill Rutherford announced he wasn't retiring, and he was going to be managing editor. Anyway, I just felt being owned by somebody in Arkansas would be—that the *Democrat* would probably have the best interest of Arkansans at heart, or have more interest in serving . . .

ML: Even though you felt that—did you feel that the *Gazette* maybe had a better

chance of being the survivor of the war?

SR: Yes. Yes. I don't want to make this sound too trivial, but [there are] at least three things that I never thought I'd see happen—that the [Arkansas] Razorbacks would leave the Southwest Conference, that the *Democrat* would win the newspaper war, and that Frank Broyles would retire. Clearly, two of these things have happened. I seriously thought that the *Gazette* had all the marbles because Gannett was the largest newspaper conglomerate in the United States and maybe the world. I think you might know this—Gannett bought the paper in 1996 for \$54 million. They lost \$20 million for 5 years, then they sold. I think it's pretty well established [that] they sold to the *Democrat* for \$54 million. Basically, that \$54 million was the value of the high-tech presses over there next to where the Clinton [Presidential] Library is now.

ML: Yes. It was a bloody, bloody battle with a lot of financial loss.

SR: I don't want to paint too pretty of a picture of myself, but I truly felt that even though the future was murky, I just felt, to be true to my ideals, that I'd be better off working for the *Democrat* than the *Gazette*.

ML: What atmosphere did you encounter when you went to the *Democrat* in 1990?

SR: Yes, it was May of 1990. It was almost like stepping into a newspaper in a third-world country, to tell you the truth. The computers that the people were using were held together with paper clips and baling wire. The computers at the *Gazette* had been virtually brand new. The newsroom—I don't think *tawdry* would be quite the right word, but it was almost depressing. I mean, it was almost like stepping back in time twenty years or so as far as newsroom decor.

ML: [Laughs]

SR: You know, I actually worked in a newer part of the building that they'd added. They had me working in features, and I'd gone from working nights on the news copy desk at the *Gazette* to working days on the features copy desk at the *Democrat*. So you had to walk through the newsroom and then through the composing room and the camera room, and finally get back to the features way back at the back. It was a little bit nicer than the rest of the second floor.

ML: Yes. That's where editorial has always been—on the second floor, right?

SR: Right. You could tell they were just barely getting by, for the most part. You know, we might get to this pretty soon, but while I'm thinking about it—again, to be fair. You know, I was talking about the news hole—my fear of the news hole drying up at the *Gazette*, if it won. That's one of the things I have been very happy about, as far as the *Democrat-Gazette* goes, is that they still have a fairly good-size news hole. You can open the paper up and it's not just wall-to-wall advertising.

ML: I had the same sense of relief.

[End of Tape 2, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 2, Side 2]

ML: So when you went to the *Democrat*, it was tawdry. Who was in charge?

SR: John Robert Starr.

ML: And what was that like? Did you have much to do with him?

SR: I actually didn't. I worked under Rhonda Owen, which is interesting in that when I had first worked there as a reporter, Rhonda had just started there. She hadn't been out of high school long. She was working toward her degree at UALR, and she was a clerk. I think I mentioned last time that I'd go out and cover something

in Morrilton or Russellville and then I'd have to call the story in and dictate a story over the phone. Rhonda frequently was the person I would speak to. In an earlier life, I had been a reporter and she had been a clerk, and when I came back there, she was my boss. But we've always had a good relationship. She's a good person to work for. We lived fairly close to each other over in Park Hill. So she was just fine.

ML: She was the features editor?

SR: Yes. She, I think, to put it euphemistically, respected Mr. Starr. [Laughs]

ML: What do you mean by that?

SR: I think she, like a lot of people, was intimidated by him.

ML: Why do you think people were intimidated by him?

SR: Well, he did have this ruthless reputation. It's interesting because—you know, I was talking to somebody recently, and I'd just as soon not tell you her name, but she's a high-placed editor at the *Democrat-Gazette*. We were talking about Starr, and the first words out of her mouth were, "There's a special place in hell for John Robert Starr." I can't say that Starr ever really treated me unfairly. But some of the things I saw him do were just—they troubled me.

ML: We knew, when it came to the *Gazette*, he was in it for the fight.

SR: Yes.

ML: But even among his own employees, the perception was that he was kind of a bruising guy to get up against?

SR: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. And I can't remember now what the mistake was that we made, but I and another copy editor let some mistake get in the paper. Starr called Rhonda into his office and when she came out she was really upset. She said,

"Here, y'all [you all] have to sign this." It was a formal reprimand that said, basically, if anything happened like this again, we would be facing termination. And this other poor guy—he had a young child and his wife was pregnant with their second child. Shortly after this he made another mistake, and Starr fired him on New Year's Eve. And that just struck me as so cold. Starr could have waited a few days no matter how bad the mistake was.

ML: Do you think that John Robert Starr ended up being the facilitator of the *Democrat's* ultimate victory over the *Gazette*?

SR: He certainly had a role. They had some very crafty business people. It wasn't just the news coverage.

ML: Let me put it this way. How much do you credit John Robert Starr with the outcome?

SR: It would be hard to quantify that. I would certainly think he had a big role, but it certainly wasn't the only thing. He was perceived as a tyrant among many of his employees, and they were very aggressive about getting the news. Again, I don't want to get too far off track, but I could think of a few examples of some anecdotal-type stuff.

ML: Go ahead.

SR: During my first stint at the *Gazette*, I worked doing the same thing as a reporter as I had done for the *Democrat*.

ML: Yes.

SR: I covered an eight- to ten-county area. I had a competitor at the *Democrat* doing the same thing. His name was Jeff Waggoner. I scooped Jeff (meaning I was first to get a story) a couple of times. I saw him one time—he said, "Man, I tell you,

every day now, when I get up, I've got to call every—I've got to check in with every police department, every sheriff's department, every mayor's office, every county judge in my area before I do anything else because you scooped me. And John Robert Starr says I've got to do these things or I'm going to get fired."

Again, later, it was a Saturday evening and this time I was working as a copy editor at the *Gazette*. I was just kind of strolling around inside the building on my dinner break.

ML: At the *Gazette*?

SR: Yes.

ML: Okay.

SR: This is just an illustration of how I think the *Democrat* became more aggressive in getting news.

ML: Okay. Okay.

SR: I was just kind of taking a stroll around, and I heard a crash down at Third and Louisiana [Streets]. I went over to one of these windows and looked down, and there had just been a wreck there. It looked like a pretty bad wreck. So I walked around to the newsroom. I said, "There's been a wreck just right out here. We probably ought to go take pictures of it." The *Gazette's* police reporter said, "Okay. Yes. We'll take care of it." So I walked back around there just to look, and pretty soon, here came Noel Oman, the police reporter, for the *Democrat*, whipping out his reporter's notebook and taking notes. Here was something right at the *Gazette's* doorstep, and they never even bothered to go out and check it out.

ML: [Laughs] That's a good one.

SR: Yes. Part of it was youthfulness and part of it, I think, was Starr's ruthlessness

that made those reporters far more aggressive than those people at the *Gazette*.

ML: What about the feature side? How did the competition play out, in terms of feature reporting?

SR: Okay. You know, at the time there really wasn't that much space devoted to features at the *Democrat*. It was almost like an afterthought.

ML: What were you doing most of that time, then, if you were the copy editor for features?

SR: Yes. We had a pretty small staff. There were only two or three of us as copy editors. We were editing a lot of wire copy, "Dear Abby" and "Heloise." All that stuff. But there wasn't a really big—and they also had something else. They had a school section where it had all school news in it. They did away with that after the newspaper war. It was like the stuff you see in small town papers, you know, posed pictures of classrooms and class pictures and that kind of stuff.

ML: Yes.

SR: Just a whole lot of school news—school lunches, honor roll, and . . .

ML: My recollection is that Walter Hussman was putting into the paper everything he thought anybody might want to read [laughs].

SR: One I forgot about was the food section. We did have a food section.

ML: Yes.

SR: And, again, those pages were just wide open. They didn't have much advertising in them, so there was plenty of copy to edit. Also, we did more than just copy edit. Part of our job was sort of supervising the make-up—I mean, we were there while the compositors put together the pages. If the story came up short, then we'd have to find something to put in there. It has really changed dramatically in

the last ten or fifteen years as to what copy editors do.

ML: What happened—how did things change, or did they, up to the point where suddenly the *Gazette* was taken over by the *Democrat*? Can you describe the lead-up to the realization that that was going to happen—how quickly it came? And what the atmosphere was like at the *Democrat* as it became evident that this was the way history was going to work out?

SR: Yes. I think most people were surprised [laughs] that it did happen.

ML: How did you become aware that it was not Gannett that had won?

SR: I guess in late summer—what was it, October 18, 1981? Something like that. Mid-October.

ML: Ninety-one.

SR: Ninety-one. Thank you. [It was] Mid-October 1991 that the sale was announced. But, you know, we did start hearing rumors in kind of late summer. I well remember—yes, I mentioned one of these African-American sports reporters, Aris Jackson. He was one of only—like I said, when I went to work at the *Gazette* as a reporter in 1979, he was one of only four African-Americans on the staff. He and Wadie Moore worked in sports. Anyway, I ran into Aris Jackson shortly before the sale was announced. He was still working at the *Gazette* and I was working at the *Democrat*. My kids and I were playing miniature golf out here in southwest Little Rock, and he said, "Hey, I hear y'all are going to buy us." I said, "Not that I've heard." And, I mean, that was news to me. So I think the rumors were probably more rampant at the *Gazette* than they were at the *Democrat*.

ML: Yes.

SR: But, anyway, I started hearing things . . .

ML: That they were throwing in the towel?

SR: Yes. Started hearing things. Then it became really—it looked like it was going to be—really obvious. You remember, I'm sure, there was this announcement that, I think, the employees were going to try to buy the *Gazette*.

ML: Oh, yes.

SR: And there was a rally out on Louisiana [Street]. Max Brantley came out and made a talk to the supporters outside, saying, "We're going to try it, but it's not looking good." And people were passing out "Save the *Gazette*" buttons, or something like that. Other people, Rhonda Owen included, kind of walked over to watch the rally. Somebody I had known from the *Gazette* came up to me and gave me a button. You know, I felt kind of like a hypocrite—I'm a little embarrassed to say this—but I started to put it on, but then I looked at Rhonda, and she shook head and said, "That wouldn't be a good idea." [Laughs] She was still my boss. [Laughs]

ML: So it was a very strong stirring of emotions, I imagine.

SR: Yes. Again, I guess I'll always be naïve, but I just had this hope that the competition could continue, because I think competition is good in the news business. I *know* it's good in the news business. It's kind of like what we've just seen with Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. You just see something that's almost beyond comprehension, slowly dying. That's kind of how I felt there when it looked like—things were becoming public. There was this pending sale.

ML: Of an institution as long-lasting as the *Gazette* had been in Arkansas.

SR: Yes. The *Gazette* had been in operation since Arkansas was a territory—I think seventeen years before Arkansas became a state.

ML: Once that occurred and Hussman bought the *Gazette*—what about the incorporation of the *Gazette* name into the name of the *Arkansas Democrat*?

How did you feel about that? Did you feel that this was truly a blending of the papers?

SR: No. No, I didn't feel like it was any kind of blending. That's a hard question to answer. I just feel it was in name only, that there wasn't anything that had changed about the political philosophy of the *Democrat*. I think it might represent more resources, maybe, you know?

ML: What do you mean?

SR: Well, the incorporation of the name might represent all these new resources that the *Democrat* had. They got the press, they got a couple of well-known and liked columnists in Richard Allin and Charles Allbright. The changeover was effective on a Friday, and it was just crazy. It was chaos. You know, a newsroom on election night is pretty crazy, but this was probably two or three times crazier than election night because, certainly, we had the same amount of workers to largely incorporate two papers. Overnight, we went from having just "Dear Abby" to having "Dear Abby" and "Ann Landers."

ML: [Laughs]

SR: So they wanted to . . .

ML: So there really was an effort to . . .

SR: Initially, there was, to try to let these loyal *Gazette* readers still have a lot of what they'd had in terms of features. I don't mean feature stories; I mean components of the paper. I shouldn't be talking without being able to remember precisely, but what was that—the "Family Weekly" or something?

ML: Oh, yes.

SR: Which had always been sort of like a poor imitation of "Parade," and "Parade"—that was the *Gazette's* supplement. Maybe for a while they had both, but eventually they just offered "Parade," which the *Gazette* had offered. But, you know, we suddenly had all this stuff that we had to try to incorporate, and I can well remember Eric Harrison—boy, he was really exasperated. I can remember him standing there talking to Starr, saying, "You know, we just can't do all this." And Starr said, "Well, you need to decide whether you want to keep your job or not."

ML: Yes.

SR: So Eric went on [laughs] and we all shoveled more coal that night, you know? As fast as we could. [Laughs]

ML: And the paper got out.

SR: Yes, the paper got out. Suddenly it was like two papers in one. Again, over time that wasn't the case. I think eventually they dropped "Dear Abby," I believe, and kept "Ann Landers," and these syndicated features were eventually—when the contracts expired, they didn't renew them anymore. I don't want to belabor this, but there were all kinds of strong emotions. There was a photographer for the *Democrat* who went over to take pictures of the *Gazette* employees leaving, and I believe somebody hit him. I forget now who it was.

ML: Of course, yes, there were emotions—a lot of friendships between the two papers, and sympathy even in victory.

SR: Yes. They had a thing going every Wednesday night—the copy editors at the *Gazette* [and] the copy editors at the *Democrat* would get together at Slick Willy's, and they'd drink beer until they closed the place and ran them off. Things like

that just seemed to cease to exist.

ML: So those reporters and copy editors who weren't absorbed by the *Arkansas Democrat* . . . ?

SR: Very few news people from the *Gazette* had jobs anymore. There were friends of ours who had couldn't find work here in town, and they ended up having to leave town, but Gannett took care of some of them. Poor, old Jerry Jones, who just died a week or two ago, was out of work for a while and then they eventually hired him at the *Democrat* as a copy editor. I think there were a lot of production people—you know, people who actually put the paper together or run presses who got jobs. It seems to be like Allin and Albright were the only people in the news operation who went to work at the *Democrat-Gazette* right away.

ML: As things settled down after that tumultuous period of absorption—I guess, in the sense that the *Gazette* was absorbed—what changes, if any, did you begin to see in the paper that was now the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*?

SR: Again, editorially and in terms of political philosophy, none. Eventually, they got in a position to hire Paul Greenberg. I shouldn't speak for people, but Greenberg had been working for Donrey in Pine Bluff, and that's something else. During the eighties [1980s], every family-owned newspaper that I had worked for was bought by a chain. The *Pine Bluff Commercial* was bought by Donrey. I can't remember who bought the *Log Cabin Democrat*. The *Gazette* was bought by Gannett. The only family-owned paper that's still around is the *Democrat-Gazette*. But, anyway, I'm sorry to get off track there. But in terms of editorial positions, I don't think it's changed. Certainly, with now being able to redirect their resources and having acquired the *Gazette*'s resources—they got this won-

derful state-of-the-art press. The actual quality of the physical paper changed. It looked much more attractive. And, again, they had all these new features.

ML: When you mentioned bringing in Greenberg, were you starting to say anything about that?

SR: No, I was just going to say that a lot of things were able to change there now that there was no longer a newspaper war. They started raising salaries. It wasn't too long before Starr retired. And Griffin Smith was named executive editor. And Bob Lutgen [pronounced Lutken], who had been assistant managing editor, was named managing editor. Just a whole lot happened there pretty quickly, I would say, from about 1992 to 1995. The third floor had just been a dusty, old storage area. At one time, I think that was the press room.

ML: Yes, I know that.

SR: And they remodeled it and it had nice carpet. Another thing that happened was that they brought over all these new computers from the *Gazette*, and this is—oh, I think this is kind of interesting.

[End of Tape 2, Side 2]

[Beginning of Tape 3, Side 1]

SR: When I was at the *Gazette* working on this computer system, we each had our own little—I guess you would call it a file. It was on your computer. It's what you worked out of. We called them “baskets” at the *Gazette*. It wasn't a physical basket, it was just . . .

ML: A cyber basket.

SR: Yes, it was a cyber basket. You would have stories that you'd be working on, and when you'd finish working on them in your basket, then you'd move them over to

the Bill Rutherford basket. Well, they asked us what names we wanted to have for our particular basket. Some people would say the "Austin basket" or the "Koonce basket." Being a smart-aleck, I said, "I want you to call mine the 'burger basket.'" Then somebody said, "Oh, well, I'll call mine 'get real.'" I never have understood that one. But that went on for a little while, and Bill Rutherford couldn't keep straight who was "burger" and who was "get real," and got exasperated and said, "I want you just [to] call them the "Rhodes basket" and the "Beeber basket."

ML: [Laughs]

SR: One of the computer techs thought the burger basket was clever, so that became his basket. But, anyway, here a couple years later, the *Democrat* bought the *Gazette*—they actually went over there and got those computers and brought them back. I said, "I'm going to see if that "burger basket" is still around. And, sure enough, it was. It had stuff that I had put there and had worked on three or four years before. It was just the strangest kind of deal. You know, that's something else. After the *Democrat* bought the *Gazette*, and basically shut the building down, they went over there and got all this stuff. There'd be people going over there each day bringing back computers, bringing back notebooks, pencils . . .

ML: What about the *Gazette* [clippings] library? Did you know how it was transferred, and did you use it? I imagine people in this history project will be talking about that, but as a member of the editorial staff, did you use "the morgue"? Did it come over from the *Gazette*?

SR: Oh, yes. Occasionally, I'd need a record.

ML: Was it physical or electronic?

SR: It was physical. If I'm remembering correctly—I think I am—but I think it was all these files with envelopes in them—you know, month by month.

ML: Okay.

SR: With all these clippings going back thirty or forty years.

ML: I remember "the morgue" at both papers.

SR: Yes.

ML: And what a labor that was, and then how it transformed so—that was a *huge* transformation when it all went electronic—both of them.

SR: Yes.

ML: I never had a good grasp on how the morgues from both papers were merged, but I sensed that the *Democrat* did absorb everything that had been in the *Gazette*'s.

SR: Yes. If I'm remembering correctly, I think I had checked stuff on Lexis-Nexis now and found the *Gazette* articles going back into the eighties [1980s], at least. That's basically, in effect, those archives.

ML: Okay, so we went through the big transition. What was next for you?

SR: I think I did pretty well. We moved upstairs and had a—kind of a copy desk. I mean, they actually moved an old-style copy desk from the *Gazette* to the newsroom at the *Democrat-Gazette*. It was the old-style, horseshoe-shaped copy desk.

ML: Yes.

SR: Again, there was a lot going on, and it's hard to keep track of who all was doing what, but, there for a while, Ed Gray—I think his title was news editor or something like that—he told me we were going to go to a more formalized copy desk structure. As things played out, we hired more copy editors and I was appointed news editor for features. So I ended up with a staff of six or seven copy editors.

And they expanded sections and added sections. We ended up with, I think, thirteen different sections to put out each week. There was "Style" every day of the week—the features section, where you find the comics and that kind of stuff. Then there'd also be food, travel, and "High-Pro[file]." Then they started that weekend section. I can't remember now all the different sections, but the number thirteen sticks in my mind. We'd put out at least two or sometimes three sections a day. But that was all after—by this time, Starr was gone and Griffin Smith had become executive editor. Again, I think he had wanted to offer more things that people were interested in.

ML: And the editorial offices were all spiffed up. Isn't that right?

SR: Oh, yes. You know, Starr had had this cramped, old office over in one corner of the second floor.

ML: Of the northeast corner.

SR: Northeast corner. Yes.

ML: Across from the church.

SR: Right. Exactly. I think Meredith had a desk right outside his office. And I'm not sure anybody else had any offices; it was just kind of a wide-open newsroom there.

ML: Yes.

SR: But they moved up to the third floor. It was brand spanking new. Griffin had—*has* a nice office in the same corner. Next to him is Frank Fellone's office, and next to him, David Bailey. Frank is deputy editor and David Bailey is managing editor. Meredith has her own office and Greenberg has his own office. Anyway, it is really palatial compared to how it used to be. Suddenly, the newsroom went

from the sixties [1960s] or seventies [1970s] to an up-to-date room.

ML: Yes, I had always thought it was the difference between trench warfare and the aftermath, which was, “We can put money into painting the walls now.” [Laughs]

SR: Right. Exactly. Exactly.

ML: Okay, Sonny. How long did you stay working at the *Democrat* after it [took over the *Gazette*]?

SR: It was right at nine years. I went back in May of 1990. The *Democrat* bought the *Gazette* in October of 1991, and I left to go into teaching full-time in July of 2000. So it was pretty close to nine years when I worked for the *Democrat-Gazette*.

ML: What do you teach at UALR?

SR: I actually teach a little bit of everything. I teach journalism, but this semester, for instance, I'm teaching feature writing, I'm teaching magazine journalism, I'm teaching news editing. In the spring I'll teach editing and production, which is sort of an extension of news editing, but instead of just editing stories, the students will be editing them and also putting them on pages—that sort of stuff. I'll also teach public affairs reporting, and, I think, reporting principles, which is the next step up after the beginning reporting class. So this particular year, it's a lot of—all skills courses. Very labor intensive, but it's basically writing and editing courses. Last year I taught, in addition to some that I've mentioned, international communications, which was a graduate level course. I also taught journalism history. So it's just a little bit of everything.

ML: Speaking of journalism history, . . .

SR: Yes.

ML: Do you find that your students are aware of events that we've been talking about

today: the newspaper war and the absorption of the *Gazette* by the *Democrat*?

Are students aware of that history?

SR: They don't have much of an awareness of it at all. You know, UALR is kind of an unusual place in that we have students from eighteen to eighty.

ML: Yes.

SR: A few of the older students know some of the background, but most students are just freshmen out of high school. They've never known anything but the *Democrat-Gazette*. But that's always something I try to bring to each class—whether it's news editing or journalism history or beginning reporting, I try to provide them with a sense of the background about why things are the way they are today.

ML: So, basically, it kind of comes full circle. You were talking about your own childhood and reading newspapers and finding them at an early age for yourself and becoming very interested in newspapers, and your own family's involvement in the events of the day, and now you're teaching other young people.

SR: Yes.

ML: In reflecting on your own experiences—your parents, the background that you came from and what you see today, do you have any thoughts on how it was when you were growing up versus how it is for your students today, who are also looking at journalism?

SR: Well, I have a hard time knowing where to begin with that. [Laughs] I guess I'm troubled that I still see segregation, to some extent, in today's society and in education. I think African-Americans are aware of it, but, to me, the white students I know—they think everything's just rosy. They are just not aware. I taught mass media in society, and we kind of talked about some things. I remember one stu-

dent saying, “I thought everything was okay,” and an African-American student said, “No, it’s not okay.”

ML: You expected more of a change?

SR: Yes. I grew up in a very segregated society. My parents were products of an even more segregated society. My parents were both very humane, kindhearted people, but I feel if they had been given some of the opportunities that I've had, I'd like to think that they'd have been different in their attitudes towards race.

ML: Yet the three Pulitzers in this history—the one for Paul Greenberg and the two for the *Gazette*—all related to the era of desegregation in the fifties [1950s], in one way or another.

SR: Yes.

ML: But you're saying now that what you see with your students is that some students think everything is hunky-dory, while the African-American students that you encounter, by and large, do not share that perception.

SR: Exactly. Yes.

ML: Is there any role that you think the newspapers—this medium—could have played or should be playing now with regard to that topic that is so central to Arkansas's history that could be making a difference or should have along the way?

SR: Again, if I were in charge of the *Democrat-Gazette*, I'd be far more proactive than what I see. Maybe I should just write this up in a proposal and give it to Walter Hussman. I would be setting up—I can't think of the word I'm trying to think of—I know Hussman, for instance, has been a big supporter of this PARK, Keith Jackson's organization named Positive Atmosphere Reaches Kids. I know Hussman had been very active in supporting that, so I think that's a good example.

But, again, if I were in such a position, I'd be having reporters go into Central High School, Parkview High School and McClellan High School every week, working with and mentoring students. I'd be offering them incentives to go to college right here in their own hometown—trying to cultivate interest in becoming journalists. In short, mentoring African-Americans and helping them go to school and then maybe coming to work for my newspaper.

ML: If I'm hearing you right, you're talking more about social involvement than a shift in editorial perspective.

SR: Exactly. Yes.

ML: Okay.

SR: But, you know, I don't know about agenda-setting or that kind of stuff. It could be that in terms of news coverage, they just ought to be doing more than talking about the plight of the poor.

ML: It's much harder to cover perceptions or the more subtle assumptions of a community. Events, like that car crash in front of the *Gazette*, are easier. It's much harder to get a handle on the sense some people feel that things are more equal than others.

SR: Yes.

ML: That's always been pretty elusive for reporters and newspapers, I think. Now you write occasionally for the *Democrat-Gazette*?

SR: [Laughs] I may not after this interview. [Laughter]

ML: Well, let's presume you'll continue. To wrap up, how does that work? You write how often and what?

SR: Well, I write periodically. The shirt-tail—the little thing that goes on the end of a

story that explains who has written it—reads "Sonny Rhodes, assistant professor of journalism at the University of Arkansas, Little Rock, writes periodically about plants and wildlife in the Natural State."

ML: You call yourself . . .

SR: Mr. Natural. As in the "Natural State." Yes, I just kind of thought that was a quirky approach. Originally, I was writing just about—you know, I'd just choose a plant or an animal and try to find some interesting things to write about it. But I remember something that Griffin Smith said. He wants readers to feel like they know the columnists and stuff, and they sit down at the paper and say, "Oh, let's see what so-and-so's doing today—what they're thinking about today." So that's partly how it evolved—how the Mr. Natural angle evolved. It actually came pretty easy. I'd just started writing about things I was doing [laughs] and seeing—kind of presenting the information that way. Yes, I try to produce one a month. It's been a little bit hard lately with the start of school—just to sit down and find the time to do that—three or four hours just to sit there and collect my thoughts and listen to my muse.

ML: I think people don't fully appreciate the time that can go into, say, maybe 400 words of writing, or even more time that might go into 200 words. [Laughs]

SR: Yes.

ML: Is there anything that you'd like to add to this that we have not touched on?

SR: I heard Bill Rutherford say this. When I was still at the *Democrat-Gazette* and Bill was teaching at UALR, I went out to visit him one morning. He said, "You know, it's a hard thing to admit, but I really think the *Democrat-Gazette* is a better paper than the *Gazette* would have been if it had won the newspaper war." So

there are a lot of people—some probably can't admit it to themselves—but I think they'd probably agree that the *Democrat-Gazette* is better than the *Gazette* would have been if they had won. I've looked at Gannett papers elsewhere, and they're largely just advertising. They've got stories on the front page and then jump inside and there'll be just a few inches of type, maybe, across the top of the page.

ML: Yes. I think that when many of us who worked there say “the *Gazette*,” we're not thinking of the Gannett *Gazette*.

SR: Yes.

ML: We are thinking of all that the *Gazette* represented for a *long* history prior to that.

SR: Yes.

ML: And have no real sense or even memory at this point that that was going to be—that the *Gazette* had already been taken over.

SR: Yes. Even then—a little bit further back—I think they were thinking of the J. N. Heiskell *Gazette*.

ML: Yes.

SR: But he died, I think, in 1973. I'm sorry about being really harsh here or sounding really harsh, but it took his heirs thirteen years to kind of fritter away what he spent seventy-five years building up.

ML: Yes.

SR: Heiskell's heirs, the Pattersons, basically had all their eggs in one basket. Again, that's why they were unable, I think, to respond to what Mr. Hussman was doing in that he was more diversified. He had other newspapers, he had cable TV . . .

ML: And, in effect, we ended up with one newspaper and it being owned by an Arkansan who, as you say, has more of the interests of this state in mind than Gannett

would have had.

SR: Exactly. Again, while I disagree with his politics, I think that's just a person's opinion.

ML: Well, then, I guess this would be a good place to end. Right?

SR: Yes.

ML: All right. Thank you, Sonny.

SR: You're welcome. I'm happy to be a part of this.

[End of Interview]

[Transcribed by Cheri Pearce]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]