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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with

Ron Robinson
Little Rock, Arkansas
22 September 2005

Interviewer: Jerry McConnell

Jerry McConnell: [This is] Jerry McConnell. I'm sitting here with Ron Robinson; we're doing an interview for the Pryor Center for [Arkansas] Oral and Visual History. This project is on the *Arkansas Democrat* and *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, but it is also bound to be on the *Arkansas Gazette* because Ron Robinson has a sort of unique perspective on the war between the two newspapers. First, Ron, would you start out and give me your full name?

Ron Robinson: My name is Ron. R-O-N. Robinson. R-O-B-I-N-S-O-N. I'm sixty-two years old, and I live in Little Rock, Arkansas.

JM: Very good. And next, Ron, I need to ask you if we have your permission to make this interview and to turn the tape over to the University of Arkansas?

RR: I am happy to do that, Jerry.

JM: All right. Now, you worked for Cranford & Johnson and that's where you got your unique perspective—that Cranford & Johnson represented the *Arkansas Ga-*

zette for a number of years, is that correct?

RR: That's correct.

JM: And you were the account exec[utive] on that.

RR: I was for a number of years. I had gone to work for Cranford Johnson in 1970. And I did some public relations work for the *Gazette*, working with Sam Harris in the early 1970s. But then in 1978, I became the main account executive when the *Democrat Gazette* competition began and things got a little bit more heated. Before that it was pretty much of an institutional account, and we'd done institutional things.

JM: Okay. Now then, you later—or at some point along there, and we can make that clear later on, too—you became president of Cranford Johnson and then Robinson & Woods—is that . . .

RR: That's right. I became president in 1984, and it became Cranford Johnson Robinson, and then in 1990 it became Cranford Johnson Robinson Woods, when the Woods Brothers Agency merged into the company. The company had been started in 1961 by Wayne Cranford and Jim Johnson. By 1970 when I joined the firm, it had become the largest agency in Little Rock, and still does, in fact—is the largest agency in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi.

[Tape Stopped]

JM: Okay, now Ron, let's start back at the beginning, and we'll work our way forward a little bit. Where and when were you born?

RR: Oh, goodness. I was born April 3, 1943, in a place you know fairly well, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

JM: Yes.

RR: And I—my parents were actually from Arkansas, but my dad worked in Oklahoma City, and then we moved to Baytown, Texas, in 1950, and then to Little Rock in 1955. I then attended high school and graduated from high school here in 1961.

JM: What were your parents' names?

RR: My parents' names were Edgar F. Robinson and Martha Reid Robinson.

JM: That's R-E-E-D?

RR: R-E-I-D.

JM: Oh. R-E-I-D. Martha Reid Robinson. Okay. And where did you go to school?

RR: Well, after graduating from Hall High in 1961, I went to the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville from 1961 to 1965 and got my Bachelor of Arts with a major in journalism in 1965. Then I attended—then I was an air force officer from 1965 to 1970, and during that time I attended the Graduate School of Public Communications at Boston University in Boston.

JM: Okay, very good. Now then, tell me how you got interested in the journalism, and how you got into journalism.

RR: Oh, goodness. Jerry, that's a long story, but I'll make it as short as possible. I became very interested in—my first exposure to journalism was in the mid-1950s at Westside Junior High School when I worked on the newspaper as a seventh grader for the junior high school, and it was really a lot of fun. In the eighth grade I went to Forest Heights Junior High School; I became editor of the Forest Heights *Eagle*, and that's when I began covering a few junior high sports for the *Arkansas Gazette* and met you and Orville Henry for the first time because there was lots of Big Nine basketball that was played at Forest Heights Junior High,

and I covered the team. I continued that interest through high school, but the big significant thing to me was that in September of 1960, I became a Friday night rewrite man at the *Arkansas Gazette* in the sports department, making \$1 an hour. I began the same night as two other guys who have remained in journalism and they were Harry King and Bill Simmons.

JM: Yes. Pretty good crew.

RR: So—but I was going to go to the University of Missouri to major in journalism and, as you know, because you were a senior executive in the sports department at the *Gazette*, the stringer who covered the Arkansas Razorbacks at the university, Jim Standard, did not go back to the university, and in the summer of 1961, Orville Henry asked me if I would be interested in going to the University of Arkansas instead of the University of Missouri. After thinking about it for several days, I decided that practical experience could not be beat. I'll never forget the August day in 1961 when Orville Henry came by my house. I had never been to Fayetteville in my life; he put my suitcase in his trunk; four hours later we were in Fayetteville. As an eighteen-year-old I was having lunch with Orville Henry and Frank Broyles. And that was a big deal.

JM: So you attended the University of Arkansas, and you were the stringer on their sports and on the Razorbacks for the *Gazette*.

RR: Correct. And I also was spending my summers working for the *Gazette*.

JM: Were you working in sports?

RR: In sports.

JM: Okay.

RR: No, I was working in sports and then after my freshman and sophomore years, I

had decided that I would seek to become editor of the University of Arkansas newspaper and left the employ of the *Gazette* in 1963. I was sports editor of the *Arkansas Traveler*, the student newspaper at the university, in the 1963-1964 year, and of the yearbook. Then in 1964-1965, I was editor of the *Traveler*.

JM: Well great. Very good. And then when you finished you went into the service, right?

RR: I went into the service—when I graduated from college—because I had been in an advanced Air Force ROTC [Reserve Officers Training Corps], I got a commission the same day that I graduated, which was June 5, 1965. I was in the service then from August of 1965—on active duty—till February of 1970. I was stationed at Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama; at Da Nang, South Vietnam; and at a facility that's now run by the Defense Intelligence Agency, but then by the air force in downtown St. Louis, Missouri.

JM: How long were you in Da Nang?

RR: I was in Da Nang from April of 1968 till April of 1969. I was an information officer there and my job was—I was chief of combat news for I Corps, and I had fifteen information specialists with me that were cameramen, motion picture guys, radio guys, and writers. Wherever the air force was doing something of real significance from the DMZ [Demilitarized Zone] down two hundred miles to Cam Ranh Bay, we covered it. We also took network correspondents with us and print journalists, and it was quite a year.

JM: I also had a brother who was in Da Nang in 1968, but we'll discuss that later.

RR: Very good.

JM: Okay. At any rate, okay so then—and how did you get to Boston University to do

your advanced study?

RR: Well, at one time, the air force had a program with Boston University where it sent information officers for special projects, and at that particular time we were part of a group that was going to Boston U but also at Harvard [University in Cambridge, Massachusetts]. At one time we were going to be an advance corps to go to Australia—to build an air force base in Australia—where we could have bombing strikes from Australia. But that program was called off because the Australians wouldn't allow us to proceed.

JM: And then what did you do when you got out of the air force in 1970?

RR: I left the air force on a Friday afternoon, and on Monday morning, February 2, 1970, I joined Cranford Johnson and started in the public relations department.

JM: Okay. So you went straight from the air force to Cranford Johnson.

RR: Right.

JM: Okay. What was your—you'd been around Little Rock quite a bit at that time—what was your view on the two newspapers then?

RR: Well, the two newspapers were just a part of the fabric of the community. The *Arkansas Gazette* was obviously the oldest and largest, and was the morning newspaper, and was the dominant newspaper leader. But certainly the *Arkansas Democrat*, being an afternoon newspaper—I even was a carrier for the *Arkansas Democrat* for a period of time—didn't have as big a circulation as the *Gazette*, but certainly it was a competitive and a fairly friendly competitive situation.

JM: And when did you become the—well, when did Cranford Johnson start representing the *Gazette*?

RR: The agency started representing the *Gazette* on an active basis—we did special

projects for them before then—but on an active basis, as I remember, it began in about 1972, and that’s when—Sam Harris was director of promotion then—and there was . . .

JM: For whom?

RR: For the *Arkansas Gazette*.

JM: Oh, for the *Gazette*. Okay.

RR: And basically what we did was projects that had to do with historical subjects. We did some things that you would consider to be just community service projects that the *Gazette* had, and they needed agency help primarily in the area of television and radio advertising. And that’s what we did. As you well know, even though they were very capable of doing their own advertising, the hardest advertising often to do is your own.

JM: Yes.

RR: So we were glad to work on it. And we worked on several special projects, including the production of a book that’s called *Arkansas Gazette Photography From 1950 to 1975*, that you still see a lot of copies of. We produced that book in 1975.

JM: And you became the account exec[utive] when?

RR: I became the active account executive on a day-to-day basis in 1978.

JM: Okay, and that was getting to about the time of the start of the newspaper war—would you say that? Or had it already started or . . .

RR: Well, I think that it’s hard to define when the war was declared. I mean, I can remember—when Walter Hussman came to town, I think it was in 1974.

JM: Correct.

RR: From Texarkana. He always set a very high standard and had very high aspirations. I think, though, that by 1978 it was obvious that he was interested in really putting some money into the newspaper, and really trying to build a footprint for the newspaper, and was beginning to show that there was going to be some competitive pressure between the newspapers, and not just on the advertising sales front but also on the circulation front. And when that began, then I guess the cold war [between the papers] at least heated up.

JM: Okay. Then what—as far as your recollection of it goes—what were the significant moves on the part, say, of the *Democrat* to really start getting competitive with the *Gazette*?

RR: When they started giving away free classified ads; when they started giving—virtually giving the newspaper away—and when they began trying to get more and more advertising accounts away from the *Gazette* through sweetheart deals. And that generated its own momentum, which the real competition then began when the newspapers became head-to-head in the morning in 1979 or so.

JM: So they were all out after that—I assume, I was not here at that time.

RR: Right.

JM: But was the *Gazette* at that time—how were they utilizing you? Were you more involved in working with the *Gazette* at that time?

RR: Yes. The *Gazette* was one of the accounts that I worked with, but for the *Gazette* we were not only working with them on a regular basis as far as television advertising, but also as far as their own print and mailer campaigns were concerned, and we also did outdoor billboards for them. But they were primarily to posture the *Gazette* and not be defensive moves against the *Democrat*.

- JM: When this all happened, what was the reaction of the *Gazette* hierarchy to all these moves by Walter?
- RR: By the *Gazette* senior management, I think, there was a feeling that the *Gazette* was the *Gazette*, and how dare they think that they were number one? I mean, and why shouldn't they feel that way to a certain degree after being around for so long? After having such a stranglehold on being the leading newspaper, and the oldest newspaper, in the state. I always felt like management thought that the Hussmans would just eventually run out of money.
- JM: Yes.
- RR: Of course, they were wrong about that.
- JM: Yes, I think they did think that. They didn't seem too concerned at first, then, in other words, by the challenge from the *Democrat*.
- RR: Not at all. Really. They were—it was more of a situation where they were most concerned—not with the public perception, not with the competitive pressure, but with the claims that were being made about the *Democrat* and about circulation figures, and about how the Audit Bureau of Circulation [ABC] was going to treat throwing the newspaper with other community newspapers in Arkansas, and going in to areas and throwing the newspaper even if no one took it, and whether those could be claimed by the ABC as validated numbers for advertising credibility.
- JM: I think they wrapped it or paired it with the *Hot Springs Sentinel Record* at one time.
- RR: Oh, absolutely. Very early.
- JM: What were your thoughts when the *Democrat* really began to make some inroads?

What did they do to really make some inroads? What were the key points?

RR: As I mentioned, from an advertising standpoint, they really began to offer regular *Gazette* advertisers better deals. I mean, the *Gazette*'s advertising rates were certainly fair, but what many considered to be a little bit high-end—the *Gazette* was the higher-priced spread. And you were constantly trying to demonstrate that it was an investment worth making. But from an advertiser's standpoint, when they began to get more and more of the advertising lineage away from the *Gazette*, that wasn't an argument with the ABC circulation figures at that point, that became a question of the bottom-line.

JM: What kind of deals—do you remember any details on what kind of deals were they making or offering?

RR: The *Democrat* was offering?

JM: Yes.

RR: I don't remember all of the specifics of it. I know that one of the things that they sought to do was to certainly provide a much lower rate if they became a mutually exclusive advertiser of just the *Democrat*. I don't know all of the details of some of the major retail contracts, like with Dillard's and all of that kind of thing, but you were always hearing that—the street talk was that they were offering those *Gazette* advertisers the same deal for a dollar an inch.

JM: I think I had heard that. That they would—for a dollar more maybe, or something like that. If they would take—see if this sounds correct—as I remember one time, they said, “Okay, this ad that you place in the *Gazette* maybe for eight dollars an inch or something, if you will run the same ad in the *Democrat*, we will only charge you an extra dollar. A dollar. We'll just charge you one dollar per inch to

run it.”

RR: Right. That’s about—yes, it was that kind of thing.

JM: Yes, that’s what I thought.

RR: It was that kind of thing, and it was a situation where the *Gazette* certainly had a right to protest things from an ABC standpoint. But in the end, that didn’t make any difference. What made the difference was if the public and the advertiser were believing the claims. And more and more and more, they were.

JM: How much impact—do you have any feel for it or information on—did the free classifieds help?

RR: The free classifieds for the first few years didn’t have much of an impact except from a public perception. It looked like you were getting something for free. You were getting the newspaper free. You were getting the classified ads free. You were getting on everybody’s doorstep. This was a good deal. This was a good deal. And it was finally answered by the *Gazette*, I remember, with the 3-3-3 program. And that was three lines for three days for three dollars.

JM: Okay. So that’s the closest they ever came to free advertising.

RR: That’s right. But that was two or three years, at least, after the free classified ads.

JM: That was a lot cheaper than they’d been charging . . .

RR: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

JM: So they were responding at least in that . . .

RR: And as far as I know, that is the only public advertising package that was ever offered by the *Gazette* during the so-called newspaper war.

JM: Now at some point in time there didn’t the *Democrat* also begin to run more news, let out its news holes, and hire more reporters and increase their coverage?

RR: Oh yes. They had to make this claim that they were Arkansas's largest newspaper by being—by having that kind of volume. Or the *Arkansas Democrat*—the old afternoon newspaper *Arkansas Democrat*, in my recollection of the 1950s and the 1960s, was pretty thin. But eventually, because of the larger news holes, because of the free classifieds, and all of that, they were head-to-head at least with each other. In addition to that, one of the big things was that they began to really concentrate on sports. And sports, of course, was always one of the great strengths of the *Gazette* and one of the great interests of the public. They really increased sports coverage to the point where it may have not been qualitatively as good, but on a quantitative basis it was. They were dumping everything in there that they possibly could.

JM: Yes. It got to the point—I've heard that it got to the point that each side was bragging "how many people we sent to cover this event."

RR: Oh yes. Of course, from a personality standpoint, the *Gazette* had always had a lot of wonderful personalities. As columnists, as editors. The Orville Henrys and the *Arkansas Traveler* and the "Our Town" column, et cetera. And they began to promote their personalities more from a *Democratic* standpoint. Of course, when a few of those *Gazette* personalities went to the *Democrat*, that also helped to validate their claim.

JM: When were you aware—do you recall when you were aware that the *Gazette* started getting worried about the *Democrat*'s competition? When did it really begin to heat up?

RR: Well, obviously, one of the great watershed events was the loss of the Dillard's account.

JM: When did that happen? Was that before or after Gannett came in?

RR: Oh, that was before.

JM: How did—do you know how they lost the Dillard's account?

RR: I've certainly heard lots of stories, but I don't know the real, honest-to-God reason. But the street talk was always that Mr. Dillard decided that he was going to move his advertising after an *Arkansas Gazette* business story ran that he didn't care much for.

JM: Was that the one about his office, his headquarter building, or something...

RR: I'd have to go back and look at it. I would say to you, that that's a very simple answer to a very complex question. Because there were lots of things that came before it, during it, and after it from a business and a financial and a person-to-person standpoint.

JM: Are you aware of any of those?

RR: Tom Kemp was the advertising director of Dillard's for years, but at this particular point, he was advertising director for the *Arkansas Gazette*. So, you know, there was some tie there between the Dillards and the *Gazette*. Of course, the vice chairman of Dillard's then was Ray Kemp, Tom's brother. He was vice chairman of Dillard's, and there had always been a very close relationship.

JM: Between the *Gazette* and Dillard's?

RR: And Dillard's, yes. Absolutely.

JM: You don't know at what time, at what point the relationship between the Dillards and the *Gazette* began to break down.

RR: I really don't. I really wasn't privy to that.

JM: Okay. I'd also heard one story that I don't know whether this played into it or

not, I think this was after—did they ever go back to the *Gazette* after he quit it?
Did they go back for a while and then quit Gannett after Gannett came in?

RR: My memory doesn't serve me correctly on that.

JM: I'd heard one story that—maybe when Gannett had it—there were some kids out in the Pulaski Heights horsing around in cars and [they] drove through some yards and tore it up a little bit and got arrested. One of them was Mr. Dillard's grandson, and Gannett chose to play it on the front page, which he and other people thought was a little bit overplaying it. But I never knew whether that was a fact or not. Okay, now the *Democrat* at some point hired Tom Kemp away from the *Gazette*, is that correct?

RR: Yes.

JM: And so—you don't remember whether or not this was before Dillard's had cancelled their account or after it?

RR: I think it was—the Dillard's advertising was at the *Democrat* when Tom Kemp went over there.

JM: Oh, it was?

RR: Yes.

JM: It had already gone to the *Democrat*.

RR: Yes.

JM: So they hired him.

RR: Yes.

JM: Okay.

RR: The early 1980s was a time period of change at the *Gazette* not just because of the *Democrat*. I think that there was a need for the *Gazette* to try to update its format

a little bit and to add sections, and I think that Bob Douglas and Carrick Patterson certainly had a lot to do with that. I think that some of it was in answer to the *Democrat*, but some of it was just an answer to some of the trends that were taking place across the country, like “Weekend” sections and “Home” sections and those kinds of things. Some of those were tried at the *Gazette* and lived on, and some of them were tried and they didn’t ever put enough muscle into them promotionally or staff-wise to make them go. There was also—if you’ll remember, there was quite a bit in the early 1980s—there was also a period of time when a new editor came into the *Gazette* from *Newsday*, Bill McIlwaine. I remember—I think was in 1981, 1982.

JM: I heard about that.

RR: And I knew Bill fairly well. He was trying to do some things, but it was tough to get the *Gazette* to change sometimes.

JM: That’s sort of what I’ve heard from some other people whom I’ve interviewed, and I know of one, I think—Bob McCord—thought that Bill McIlwaine was a heck of a newspaper man and had some really good ideas, but they just turned down a bunch of his ideas. And I think maybe Hugh [Patterson] had something to do with—that he just didn’t want to do what McIlwaine was recommending.

RR: That’s right.

JM: Is that correct?

RR: That’s right. And those things happen.

JM: Oh yes. Did the *Gazette*—as the war heated up—and I’m sure some of the advertising heated up—did they utilize Cranford Johnson to do some of their ads to—as far as use in the competition with the *Democrat*?

RR: Yes and no. Yes, from the standpoint that the *Gazette* had a larger advertising budget and—but the management of the *Gazette* simply did not want to go in a head-to-head defensive posture. I constantly was trying to get the *Gazette* to debunk the *Democrat*'s claims. The publisher and I disagreed about that, and he won. But the publisher should win if that was his newspaper. But, you know, it was very hard to get him into a posture of really using all the weapons we could to debunk those claims because he just couldn't believe that—he just didn't think the *Gazette* should lower itself to get into a newspaper fight like that.

JM: I've heard some of the *Gazette* people say that they felt like the *Gazette* was not aggressive enough in their advertising and everything. And they said they recollect that they put out one ad that was really pretty effective, and they ran it about two or three times, and then pulled it back. Do you remember what ad that might have been?

RR: There were many different kinds of ads that were very effective. I was also very close to lots of people on the staff of the *Gazette* as well, being a former staff member myself, and I can assure you that as the competition heated up, the staff was thinking one way, but management was thinking another. "They'll eventually run out of money, they'll eventually give up, they'll eventually run its course, and we've been here since 1821."

JM: Or 1819.

RR: 1819, excuse me.

JM: Yes, okay. But were you—at this time were you—you said you were trying to get the *Gazette* to make some moves to counter some of the things that the *Democrat* was doing, correct?

RR: Right.

JM: Was this basically advertising things or did you . . .

RR: It was advertising things. We were doing quite a bit of marketing research at that particular point.

JM: I see.

RR: The marketing research was important at several levels. One was to balance the branding issues about where the *Gazette* and *Democrat* were losing or winning perceptions. Also from the standpoint of trying to provide advertisers with information on a statistical basis about how the public was feeling about certain products, trends, et cetera. During this particular period, the *Democrat* was sponsoring virtually anybody who wanted to do something in this town from a community service standpoint. The *Democrat* wanted to sign on to do it. Well, it was hard to get the *Gazette* to do it unless *Gazette* management had a personal interest in it. There was also a reluctance of the *Gazette*, unlike the *Democrat*, to be a co-media sponsor with anybody. They didn't want to be in there with some—those television guys, those radio people. You know? Please! And there was no reluctance whatsoever as far as the *Democrat* was concerned. "We'll do anything with [Channels] 7, 11 and 4 and KRAY and KARN, or anybody else who wants to ride." One of the things that finally made a difference, I think, was that the *Democrat* was able to convince people in Little Rock, at least, that the *Democrat* was the community newspaper of Little Rock. And that the *Gazette* had more of an Arkansas outlook—was more of an Arkansas newspaper than a Little Rock—an Arkansas newspaper with its offices in Little Rock.

JM: I see.

RR: We haven't even mentioned all of the fights that came over all of the editions that were done as far as Fayetteville, my goodness. I remember when the *Democrat* started publishing and having a Northwest Arkansas edition. And, goodness, the *Gazette* considered that to be the AO region—the “All Other” region. You know, they weren't going to deliver—home delivery of the *Gazette* two hundred miles from Little Rock? But the *Democrat* was prepared to do that. And so, you know, it was an all-front war. It was all or nothing.

JM: And the *Gazette* was reluctant to join it.

RR: The *Gazette* was reluctant to join it, and it paid the price.

JM: What other special editions—when you're talking about special sections . . .

RR: Sure. In my mind—and I've always told her this—Phyllis Brandon was one of the reasons why the *Democrat* won the newspaper war. When she started publishing “High Profile” in 1986. It really was a very highly personal—it was a very highly professionally done publication. It took society news off just the weddings and the country club and made it more of a community activity—more of an arts in the community, charities in the community, personalities in the community kind of thing. And obviously those people and things that they covered certainly were not selected because they also could be or were very high-volume advertisers in this community, but just because of the natural inherent of the being they were. So to be on the cover of “High Profile” was a big deal. And Phyllis certainly deserves a lot of credit for personalizing that and providing a counterbalance to the kind of wide-eyed editorship of John Robert Starr, In providing some class and legitimacy, and it all wasn't dog-eat-dog journalism.

JM: As I understand it, one reason they started the “High Profile” section was that

they wanted to appeal to the people in West Little Rock. That they always felt that the people in West Little Rock sort of looked down their nose at the *Democrat*, that they were pro-*Gazette* and everything. And so they wanted to do something that said, “Hey, you know, we can appeal to both sides too.”

RR: Absolutely. Well, and the “High Profile”—the “High Profile” section had been initially pioneered in larger metropolitan areas like in Dallas. There had been a “High Profile” in Dallas previously, and it had proven its worth. And as evidenced by the fact that Arkansas is kind of a big community, an “everybody knows everybody” kind of thing, people thought that that kind of society coverage was kind of a must-read. For men and women.

JM: Okay. And did it also—did it influence the advertisers? Do you think?

RR: No question. No question. Because that particular section became a must-read. You wanted to see who was on the cover; you wanted to see whose picture was in there, da da da da da.

JM: Yes. I understand.

RR: Connecting the dots.

JM: Okay. Were you—were you along—at this time, you were making recommendations to the *Gazette*, I assume, and everything. Were you making those—were any of those written or were those mostly verbal?

RR: No, they were written. Absolutely.

JM: Do you have any of those around?

RR: No, I . . .

[Tape of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

JM: ...Side two of this tape, and go on, Ron, with what you were saying.

RR: Well, you were asking me about whether I had any of those plans and recommendations and things. No, I don't, but I can tell you a quick story that will illustrate what that would have been like.

JM: Okay.

RR: In 1985, when the *Gazette v. Democrat* anti-trust suit came down, the records of the *Gazette* at Cranford Johnson were subpoenaed, okay? I remember that Annabelle Clinton Imber, who's now a judge, was one of the attorneys who was in charge of this particular aspect at the Wright Lindsey & Jennings firm. She and her people came over one day, served that subpoena, and made eight thousand copies of the records—of the *Gazette* proposals and everything out of our records. Mostly my files.

JM: Okay. Those would have been the things that you proposed.

RR: Right. Right. They were ads, and they were proposals, and they were marketing research studies, and they were every marketing plan—every recommendation that had ever been done, every memo I'd ever written. And...

JM: Annabelle Clinton was representing the . . . ?

RR: *Democrat*.

JM: . . . the *Democrat*, right. Because Phil Anderson was the lead attorney, right?

RR: Correct.

JM: Was he still with Wright Lindsey & Jennings at that time?

RR: As I remember, yes.

JM: Yes, I think . . .

RR: And, um, and then I went through a three-day deposition. Based upon that. And

one of the things I particularly will never forget is that some of those memorandum—memoranda—that I wrote were internal staff memos that basically had to apologize to the creative staff over and over again to the fact that they'd done fabulous work as far as trying to create proposals for the *Gazette* to run, but the publisher had decided that he didn't want to. So it was not as if—we certainly provided the ammunition, there was just a reluctance to fire the gun.

JM: Okay. So that—those things are probably still on record somewhere. They subpoenaed the records, maybe that the law firm had representing . . .

RR: I would imagine that they are.

JM: They're probably still in somebody's file.

RR: I can tell you this: that I have never discussed it with him directly, but I have had people tell me that Mr. Hussman read every one of them.

JM: Is that right?

RR: And had expressed the fact that he was glad the *Gazette* management decided not to do what we proposed.

JM: Yes, okay. [Laughs] That was what I was going to ask about. I'd heard that somewhere along the way. Okay. Did you ever actually testify in the trial? Were you on the stand?

RR: No, I was not.

JM: Okay. You were not on the stand. What was your reaction to the suit?

RR: Well, it was—it was really where hardball was finally going to be played. And there was—you know, by 1985, I think that there was a full recognition that this was probably going to be a game to the death.

JM: Okay.

RR: And, you know, I, too, have read about—and it's always interesting to read about some of these things that have taken place where there was discussion about joint ownership and this, that, and whatever. But it was a situation where someone was going to win and someone was going to lose.

[Tape Stopped]

JM: Ron, what was your view on the appropriateness of the suit? Did you think the *Gazette* made a mistake in filing suit against the *Democrat* on a Sherman Anti-trust charge?

RR: You know, I'm not qualified enough as far as the Sherman Antitrust Act to weigh that. It did not surprise me that the suit was filed because obviously some promotional practices had been done—some circulation practices had been employed that were either going to have to be stopped or were going to eat the *Gazette* alive.

JM: Do you remember any of those specifically, and what they were?

RR: I really don't.

JM: Okay. Let me go back. Backtrack a little bit. Your marketing research you were doing—what was your marketing research showing you when you were pretty heavy into the marketing research? Were they showing anything significant about the *Gazette* and the *Democrat* at that time?

RR: You know, I think that from a public perception standpoint the public was enjoying it. They were enjoying the full benefit of the quality of the *Gazette* and the fun that the *Democrat* was bringing to the situation. But the circulation figures still remained high. And up until the—until 1983 or 1984 or so, the advertising was really not that substantially hurt. But then that was beginning to tell. The marketing research, though, always demonstrated that people had great confi-

dence in the *Gazette*. There was a love-hate relationship with the *Gazette* by many people, and that it was considered to be Arkansas' newspaper of record right up until the end. Because of the people who were involved with the newspaper—the Bob Douglasses and Bill Sheltons and Orville Henrys and all of that—were Arkansas icons.

JM: Then in 1986—was it 1986 that the *Gazette* sold out to Gannett after the lawsuit ended?

RR: Yes. Right.

JM: And did—I don't suppose—Cranford Johnson did not continue to represent the *Gazette* after that time, did they? Or did you?

RR: We did continue to work with Bill Malone.

JM: Oh, did you?

RR: As publisher. For about two years.

JM: Oh, okay.

RR: And that was a good relationship. It was on a much more reduced advertising basis, but I always found that the Gannett people were fair, and Bill Malone and George Van Wagner, who was the managing—basically the team operating officer, with the publisher as the chief executive officer, certainly knew their business and had come to try to turn the situation around.

JM: But from viewing the paper itself, were you aware of the changes that Gannett was making in the paper and . . .

RR: Sure.

JM: And what was your view of those changes?

RR: Gannett was going to run this as a pretty bottom-line organization, and didn't par-

ticularly mind being out-spent by the *Democrat*. So some of the changes that they made from an editorial standpoint—and I mean from an editorial standpoint—from a standpoint of more sections, more zoning, et cetera—was just smart business practice. But the momentum—just like in sports and in politics—the momentum was rolling toward the *Democrat*. After the suit was over, one of the smartest things that the *Democrat* did was stay on a roll. I mean, continue to win. And continue to perceive to win. That was—that is probably one of the biggest things about the whole *Democrat Gazette* situation, and that is it's not what the numbers showed. It's what people *think* they showed. It's what people thought—who was winning and who was losing. And by the time Gannett came to town, the *Gazette* was on the run. And it was losing some of its steam. Of course, the steam ran out [in] October of 1991.

JM: That's when . . .

RR: They ceased publication.

JM: Yes. They ceased publication, right. The *Gazette* . . .

RR: The *Gazette* ceased publication.

JM: . . . threw in the towel. Yes.

RR: That's right.

JM: Did the *Gazette* go down in the quality of its coverage after Gannett took it over some? I guess I'm talking more about the—the more flamboyant stuff and everything. Did that alienate readers? Or do you remember?

RR: What I remember is that as a result of the—of that whole period—that the public was enjoying the competition tremendously. Because they were reading more political coverage than they had ever read before. More sports than they had ever

read before. More entertainment news than they had ever read before. More society news than they had ever read before. Seeing more advertising than they had ever seen before. Clipping more coupons than they had ever done before. And so, what's not to like?

JM: Yes. I'm told at some point in time—and I don't know who the publisher was or the editor at that point—but at some point, someone in Gannett came in though and said, "Y'all [you all] [have] just do too damn much political coverage. You just cover the state capital too damn much. You know we're going to cut back on that stuff. We're going to start doing more features." Did you ever notice that change?

RR: Yes. Of course, a lot of the old-timers left. Orville left. And Bob Douglas left. Gannett was in its days of the growing popularity of *USA Today*, and they were publishing other newspapers in the region like the *Clarion Ledger* and the *Monroe Star World*, et cetera. And they were—they kind of had a formula for the way that a Gannett newspaper was to be published. And that was more of a view of Al Neuharth than it was of somebody who would be an editor in Little Rock.

JM: Yes. Okay. But not all Arkansas readers responded positively.

RR: Oh, absolutely. They were used to—the fact that politics is just as important as football.

JM: Yes. Very straightforward coverage of the important stories—what they considered the important stories.

RR: No question about it.

JM: And then what was on the front page, they figured—what was on the front page ought to be the most important thing happening.

RR: Well, I mean, my goodness, this is Arkansas' newspaper of record.

JM: Yes.

RR: It would be like taking the *New York Times* and making it look like *National Enquirer*.

JM: Yes, okay. So did it come as a big surprise to you when Gannett bowed out of the market?

RR: I was shocked. I was shocked.

JM: Were you?

RR: I was shocked and saddened and still am.

JM: Yes. That they folded the *Gazette*.

RR: It was almost one of the most unthinkable things that I can imagine in Arkansas history. That the *Arkansas Gazette* would stop publication. That would be like telling me that water was not going to be wet.

JM: [Laughs] I understand.

RR: And that had nothing to do with Walter Hussman [Jr.]. That just simply had to do with an institution and a newspaper that we'd grown up with and that was always one of the nicest things and best things about Little Rock. And Arkansas.

JM: Do you have any feeling—or did you have any at the time—about what the major mistakes that Gannett might have made in operating the *Gazette*?

RR: You know, I was so tied up with running my own company at that particular point in time that I'm just not as qualified to speak to Gannett's ownership as I was during the period from 1978 to 1985 or so, because when I became president of the company—of Cranford Johnson in 1984—I had to give up being the account executive, and so, just frankly, [I] don't want to guess or try to say something that I

really don't know.

JM: In your view, up until that time—I know you know the *Gazette* backwards and forwards—how had the *Gazette* stood up as a newspaper over the years? Had you discerned any difference in the quality of the newspaper as time progressed? Do you think its quality had stayed just as high as ever? Or did it begin to go down a little bit?

RR: You know, I would say that the *Gazette* of the 1950s and 1960s and 1970s and early 1980s was as good of a newspaper [as any] in all of America. Because of the people who were there. Just extraordinary—as you know, Jerry, there were just extraordinary people on that staff. People who had been on that staff their entire lives. I mean, my gosh, there was Orville Henry who had become sports editor in 1943, [when he] was eighteen years old, and was still sports editor forty-five years later. There was Bob Douglas, who had been there since 1951. There was Jim Bailey, who'd been there covering sports since 1956. There was Bill Shelton, who had been there since the early 1950s and had been city editor since 1954. There were the Jimmy Joneses. And then there were people who came along. I always thought that Carrick and Ralph Patterson added much to the staff. I always thought that the Richard Allins and the Charlie Allbrights and the Ernie Dumases just could not be beat. So as long as those individuals were there and they had the news hole to be able to be covered, it was great. When the news hole shrank, the *Gazette* lost some of its luster.

JM: Do you remember about what time that was? [What] period that was when the news hole shrank?

RR: That would be in the mid-1980s.

JM: Okay. Why did the *Gazette* lose the war?

RR: You know—did the *Democrat* win the war, or did the *Gazette* lose the war?

JM: I don't know, it's a good question. What do you think?

RR: That is a good question. I would say the *Democrat* won the war. I think that they—Walter Hussman demonstrated that with a clear enough vision, with an almost tireless energy, and almost—the deepest pockets I've ever seen to invest in something where the prize was going to be that great—that he won the newspaper war—that the *Gazette* did not lose it.

JM: Okay. Then do you think that at—and I don't know whether this is a reflection of—in later years, did the *Gazette* become a little arrogant?

RR: Oh, the *Gazette* always had an arrogance about them. And I would say for good reason. These were real newspaper people. These were people who lived and breathed this job, and who counted on each other to do a good job and always came through. And always—there's two ways to play golf. You can play the man, or you can play the course. The *Gazette* always played the course, and always wanted to be at the top of the game. The difference with Walter Hussman was he played the man and beat the man. I'm not sure if he beat the course.

JM: When you say “the man,” are you talking about Hugh Patterson?

RR: I mean that he played the competition; he didn't play being—winning every journalistic award and having a kind of Pulitzer Prize intent. Like the *Gazette* did.

JM: Okay. That's a good assessment. Let me switch gears here for just a minute.

RR: Please.

JM: Because one thing that's come up in all these interviews—and of course, obviously, the war is going to be very significant in this, as it would be in the *Ga-*

zette's history, too. But over the years, the way the *Democrat*—before Walter Hussman—had operated has come up for some attention. We never saw—I don't think anybody ever saw them try to make that kind of effort like Walter Hussman made.

RR: No, that's right.

JM: Okay. And of course, [?], Mr. [K. August] Engel ran the—Mr. Engel ran the *Democrat* for years and years and years, and he also established a television station, Channel 11, in Little Rock, and was owner—and may have been one of the owners—and operated it for a lot of years. But were you aware of how he operated the television station? I've had some people tell me how he operated the *Democrat*, too, and everything. But at one time—you don't mind talking about how he operated the television station.

RR: The stories are legend about Channel 11—the fact that they were always very bottom-line operated, so that you just simply had to save every piece of string and eke out every dollar and penny and nickel and everything. I mean, it was Mr. Pickwick. I never met Mr. Engel. To my memory—I was in advertising in this town, or the journalism business here, for forty years—never even saw him as far as I know. But people who worked at Channel 11 back in the 1950s and 1960s and 1970s that I knew—I know one news director very well who—they had to save just—almost typewriter ribbons. And I will never forget one time that—this was back in the early days of videotape, okay? And I thought that people who recorded things on videotape at these TV stations, especially when you did new productions, didn't use old tape. I'll tell you a quick story.

JM: Okay.

RR: In the 1974 United States Senate race, when Dale Bumpers and Bill [William J.] Fulbright competed in the Democratic primary, we represented Senator Fulbright. It looked like we weren't going to be successful. And I do remember—this was during a period of time when politicians still made television programs. They would make fifteen- or thirty-minute television programs. They would buy time, and they would run on the air. And so the night before the election, we bought a fifteen-minute program with Senator Fulbright, and Senator Bumpers was going to add his fifteen minutes. We recorded it at Channel 11 that morning. And that night, both programs were on from 6:30 to 7:00 [p.m.]. I've forgotten who was on first; I think Senator Fulbright was. Well, Mr. Engel made the people in the production room—in the production studio—use old videotape that sometimes they didn't erase as well as they should have. And so, the night the television program ran with Senator Fulbright—I'll never forget this for as long as I ever live, and it made me paranoid about television productions from then on. The Senator came on and began speaking, and in the background you could hear—just faintly, but distinctly enough to know what it was—you could hear an old Lawrence Welk television show in the background. And the Senator would be talking about “This is the most important election in America,” and behind him you'd hear him [Lawrence Welk] going, “And now the Champagne Lady will sing *Tiny Bubbles in the Wine*.” I mean, I think at that moment my heart stopped. I thought my career had ended at that particular point in time. And I do remember that because of this—it was faint retribution, but they didn't charge us for the television program because of that.

JM: [Laughs] Now, he ran the television station—how did the television station—if

you're aware, how did they rank in the Little Rock market as far as viewership and profits?

RR: I would say that they were considered to be the number three station in the market, but were probably number one in bottom line profitability.

JM: Okay. And is it true that as far as you're aware that they used—a lot of times their own air personalities were also people who worked in their advertising department?

RR: Oh sure. But that wasn't unusual back in those days.

JM: It wasn't.

RR: No.

JM: Oh, okay.

RR: Their on-air personalities that I'm remembering were never the news anchors, but they could certainly be a weatherman or a sports reporter and still sell advertising.

JM: Yes, I see. Okay. I asked you that question because I've had more than one person I've interviewed in this say—in fact, I had one tell me that Mr. Engel told them one time, “You know, I'm not as concerned about being number one as I am the profit margin.” He said, “I always want to make a decent profit.” So I think that was apparently the way he ran the newspaper and the television station, too. But nevertheless . . .

RR: And, by the way, from my knowledge of the salaries that he paid, had to have been in the lowest quartile of America.

JM: They might have—Don Reynolds might have been lower, but he might have been the only one [laughter]. This has been very informative, Ron. Is there anything else about—that you feel like—can you think of anything that you haven't men-

tioned that you think might pertain to this project? This discussion?

RR: Jerry, I can't, but I appreciate you asking me. And if I can expand or elaborate anymore once you've looked at the transcript, I'd be happy to talk to you.

JM: Please do so. It might be that I might want to call you back and say, "Let me ask you this." Or it might be that if you think of something—and I even did this myself on the *Gazette* interview—that I just wrote up something, something I'd completely forgotten that I wanted to tell them about some way that Orville operated. And so I just typed it up and sent it in, and they just stuck it on the end. But nevertheless, we could do it either way. I'll ask you one other question.

RR: Please.

JM: How surprised were you when Orville Henry switched to the *Democrat*?

RR: You know, I never blamed Orville for that. He and the publisher went round and round and round. And I'm sure that the day that Orville went to work for the *Democrat* didn't surprise the publisher because Orville had always been very plain spoken and had always tried to deliver a fairly high-quality product. But trying to convince the front office that, even with the finest intent and the finest writers, you can't fight people who are willing to spend "champagne budgets." You can't fight them with "beer news holes." As far as I was concerned, Orville Henry could do no wrong.

JM: Yes, I understand. Okay. All right, Ron, very good. I appreciate your cooperation on this, and I think it has been very informative. And as I said, for a unique perspective on this, and thanks very much.

RR: Thank you, Jerry.

[Tape Stopped]

[End of Interview]

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