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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with:

Bill Simmons
Little Rock, Arkansas
31 July 2007

Interviewer: Jim Bailey

Jim Bailey: This is an interview with Bill Simmons [on] July 31, 2007 for the Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History, Special Collections Department, University of Arkansas Libraries, specifically, the *Arkansas Democrat* and *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* Research Project. Bill, do you grant permission for this interview to become part of the *Democrat-Gazette* research record?

Bill Simmons: Sure.

JB: Let's go back to the beginning. When and where were you born?

BS: I was born September 23, 1941 in a hospital in Little Rock while my parents were living in North Little Rock.

JB: And you attended North Little Rock Old Main or North Little Rock Senior High or whatever the name happened to be at the time?

BS: It was North Little Rock High School at the time. Yeah, that's where I went to school.

JB: When and how did you get interested in journalism?

BS: Well, from the time I was probably about thirteen, I was always interested in writing. In the process of going to school, I was in a journalism class taught by a high school teacher named Katie Lou Russell. And I worked a little bit on the high school paper. My family wasn't very well-to-do; we were really poor. Miss Russell kind of had her eye out for guys that she thought might have a chance at making it in journalism.

JB: As a matter of fact, she was kind of running a farm club for Orville Henry's sports department, in effect.

BS: Yeah, she did that. She also had an arrangement with A.R. Nelson, who was managing editor at the *Gazette*, whereby if he needed a copy boy—had a copy boy vacancy—he would contact Katie Lou, and she would advise him of somebody that might be a candidate. If he seemed interested, then she would talk to the kid and tell him he could go over and see Mr. Nelson and maybe apply for a copy boy job. She asked me one day if I might be interested in doing that for the *Gazette*—becoming a copy boy. I was interested in making any money I could, so I went over and applied for the job, and, sure enough, they hired me. That was in—I guess must have been around 1958, somewhere in there.

JB: Yeah, well, I think Robert Shaw was there a little bit before you or about the same time. Robert came from Miss Russell's class.

BS: Yes.

JB: Harry King eventually—after he was out of high school.

BS: Yes, he was one year behind Robert and me in high school.

JB: And there were those two copy boys, Wayne Glover and Don—I can't think of his

last name—from North—also from North Little Rock.

BS: Yeah.

JB: Legate, Don Legate.

BS: Yeah, yeah, yeah. In fact, I remember on my first day on the job as a copy boy, they took me down to the basement of the *Gazette* where rolls of paper were stored, and it turned out that was kind of the hideout place. When they didn't want anybody bugging them about doing their job, they would go down there and sort of be out of view where nobody could locate them.

JB: Well, shortly before that, they had a copy boy named Jim Standard who became quite a distinguished journalist eventually, but—Mr. Nelson said one day that Standard was the smartest copy boy they'd ever had there. He learned what he was supposed to do in one day, and by the next day he found a way to avoid all of it.

BS: [Laughs] Well, that may have been under the great training of guys like Legate and others.

JB: When did you start working in the sports department? I mean, about how long after you first came there as a copy boy?

BS: I think I came on board as a copy boy in March of 1958, and I think that January of 1959 they moved me into the sports department. I stayed in the sports department about three years—seems like maybe about March of 1962.

JB: I couldn't remember if you went to city side at the *Gazette* before you went to the Associated Press.

BS: I went straight to Associated Press, but it was partly because they wouldn't let me go to city side. I went to Mr. Nelson—I mean, I was grateful for the break. . .

JB: Excuse me. You were going to UALR [University of Arkansas at Little Rock] all this time?

BS: I was going to UALR—trying to get through college while holding down a full-time [laughs] job at the newspaper. [5:23.5] After a year or two of writing sports, although it was enjoyable at the start—I kind of got jaded on it, got a little old and realized I really liked straight news—non-sports news more than I did sports. So I went to Mr. Nelson, and I asked him if there was any chance I could get moved out of sports and onto city side, and he said he would think about it. He didn't seem real interested in it, but he said he would think about it. I waited patiently for two or three weeks, and finally, when I went back to him, I said, "Have you decided yet?" He said, "Decided what?" It's like it had gone totally out of his mind, and so I refreshed his memory on what I had requested, and he said he'd think about it again. A couple weeks later, I went back to him, and I said, "Well, have you made a decision?" He said, "Yeah." And I said, "What is it?" And he said, "No." He wanted me to stay in sports. He liked my sports stuff pretty well.

JB: Well, I did, too. Most people did.

BS: Well, thanks to guys like you and Orville, it turned out to be readable, but Nelson *really* liked it. I remember one time when Orville took me up to Fayetteville to kind of be his gopher—his kid helper—and I got to write a sidebar about the Baylor [University, Waco, Texas] team beating Arkansas—I think it was twenty-eight to fourteen that year.

JB: That must have been 1960.

BS: That's when they [Baylor] had Ronnie [Ronald David] Bull, the big running back.

JB: Yes. 1960.

BS: Yeah. Remember they had the ticker in the sports department? Where the copy from Fayetteville would come in—click, click, click?

JB: Yeah. That's where it was relayed over from the Western Union office.

BS: Right. Well, Nelson stood there and read my sidebar on Baylor when it came in and then he read it the next day in the paper and noticed a lot of differences after it had been edited, and he made them run it again, the way I wrote it, on Monday—just repeat the story, which I thought was kind of astonishing.

JB: Chuck Miller, rest his soul, must have gotten a hold of it.

BS: [Laughs] Well, I don't know. Chuck was a little bit colorless, wasn't he?

JB: As Orville said once, most unkindly, in private—not to Chuck—"You know, Chuck's just got a knack for maladroitness."

BS: [Laughs]

JB: Anyway, I'm sure—I don't know if you've ever sat down and thought about it, but Orville, from the time he started building a sports staff after World War II—because he was only a teenager when he became the sports editor in the middle of World War II.

BS: Yeah.

JB: He'd get promising, or hopefully promising, people still in high school, usually—they'd work quote part-time unquote for him, which was like forty hours a week for just part-time pay.

BS: Mmm hmm.

JB: They would go to—when it was LRJC [Little Rock Junior College], they would go to junior college for two years, and then some of them he would send to

Fayetteville as his correspondent on the Razorbacks. But three guys: you, Robert

Shaw, and a fella who was gone before I was there—Tom Dygard—they all became Associated Press bureau chiefs.

BS: Yeah.

JB: And Dygard, I think, went higher than that, and a couple of others: Harry King, and a guy that came along at the *Gazette* before me named Adrian Cooper—they worked eventually for the Associated Press. Orville ran a great place to learn the basics.

BS: Great learning ground, great place to undergo tutelage. And everybody *loved* it. I mean, you were there, Jim, and you really were helpful, too. You had the great writing touch, great column style—best basketball writer I've ever read, and that includes top sportswriters all over the country.

JB: Basketball's probably my [laughs] least favorite sport.

BS: Well, nevertheless, best basketball writer I have ever read, and that includes the greatest names in sports journalism. And a great boxing writer, too.

JB: Well, Bill, flattery will get you everywhere. But let's get back to you.

BS: Well, you've got a reputation; you've earned it. And we learned from you—or tried to. In fact, I think we all would have stayed there, except the *pay* was a problem.

JB: Yes.

BS: I worked there for a buck an hour; [for a] forty-hour week, I got \$40.

JB: Well, the thing was with the budget, the allotment of positions and so forth—I imagine at the time you were there, we had about five people that were full-time employees. And the part-time younger people were working as much almost every week as the regulars, but there was no place for them to go up on the pay

scale, so they had to bail out.

BS: Right. [10:19.3] Yeah. So I thought I'm not making much money, \$40 a week, and I'm burned out on sports. I don't really enjoy writing about sports anymore. I really did some stupid things writing about sports, too.

JB: So did we all.

BS: I remember one time I was writing about Orville's brother, Bill, who was a golfer. I didn't know golf, and they sent me out to cover a golf tournament. I talked about him hitting a 200-yard *chip* shot. [Laughter] They explained to me later what a chip is; it's not 200 yards. [Laughter]. And you may remember the high school all-star game. I went out to UAMS [University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, Little Rock] where they had the dorms for the athletes and the coaches.

JB: Yeah.

BS: One of the coaches had rather imprudently told me that they were going to beat the other team like a drum.

JB: Oh, I remember—I remember the basics of that story.

BS: Or words to that general effect. And I was naïve enough not to omit that quote [laughs].

JB: Well, of course, coaches don't talk that way. In his own way, he was trying to be sarcastic. He was trying to say, "Yeah, we'll beat 'em like a drum; not likely." That's how he meant it, apparently.

BS: That's not. . . [laughs].

JB: Of course, in the paper, it looks just [like] what it says.

BS: I quoted him exactly what he says, and I think he thought I was supposed to understand I wasn't supposed to quote him at *all*. But they did wind up winning by a

sizeable margin.

JB: What I recall about the incident was they *did* win; they did—you might say—
“beat 'em like a drum,” but he was still mad.

BS: Yeah [laughs]. Yeah. Quite right. Where was I? I was talking about the pay?
So I began to think, “If the pay's only going to be this good, at least let me do
something I think I'll enjoy more. Let me get out on city side news.” That's why I
asked Nelson to let me move out there. Once he said no, then I began to entertain
the idea of finding other kinds of work, and that's when I began to consider the
Associated Press. By the way, you mentioned Robert Shaw and Tom Dygard and
myself all becoming AP chiefs of bureaus. [12:29.3] Robert Shaw and I were
both from North Little Rock. There are only about forty-two AP domestic chiefs
of bureau, and at one time two guys from North Little Rock held *two* of them at
the same time.

JB: That's pretty good.

BS: Kind of phenomenal out of one high school in this state.

JB: I assume Dygard went to school somewhere in Pulaski County. But I never knew
him; he was long gone before I got there.

BS: I knew him; he was my boss, actually, at one point here in Little Rock and almost
fired me, by the way.

JB: [Laughs]

BS: He got real mad one time because I had done some research for a story, and he
rejected the story, and so we didn't move it on the wire. But I gave the informa-
tion to the *Arkansas Democrat*, which—we were working in their building that
day, and I said, “We're not going to run it, but if you all want the info, here it is.”

So the *Democrat* picked up the information and produced their own story based partly on that information. When Dygard saw it in the paper, he thought I had somehow betrayed his instructions not to do this and was about ready to fire me until I explained it to him.

JB: Well, I didn't even realize he was in town with the AP after I was here.

BS: Yeah, he was the Little Rock bureau chief for a while, and he went on and became bureau chief in Chicago. Then he had some executive job in New York for a while, as I recall.

JB: So you broke into AP here in the Little Rock bureau. Where'd you go—about how long were you here?

BS: Well, let me tell you how I came to get the job. I was still in the sports department at the *Gazette*, and one night, in the doorway, this rather aggressive looking fellow appeared, and turned out it was Bob Starr. Better known later as John Robert Starr.

JB: [Laughs]

BS: And he had a piece of news copy in his hands. He kind of looked over there at Eddie Best, who was sitting in the slot there in the sports department, and said, "Who wrote this?" Eddie takes a look at it and looks across the room at me and points and says, "He did it." And the guy who brought it into the sports department looks at me and says, "I'm Bob Starr of the AP. Come see me when you get off." I thought he was mad at something I had done in the story and I was going to get some kind of chewing out, but at about 12:30 when we got high school football wrapped up that night, I walked down to the AP office and it turned out he knew AP was going to have an opening locally, and the staff was going to try

to manipulate the bureau chief at that time into hiring somebody that would write sports sort of the AP way. Starr had seen my copy and thought, "This kid could probably do it if we could just get our bureau chief to hire him." So Starr told me about the opening and gave me the opportunity to apply for it. I applied for it but also told a friend of mine about the opening, and he applied for it and got the job [laughs].

JB: Who was that?

BS: That was George Bartsch.

JB: I remember George.

BS: I continued to apply as further openings developed, and later one did, and I finally got on at the AP. I think that was in March of 1962. You asked how long was I with them. I stayed in the Little Rock Bureau until sometime in 1966, somewhere between June and October of 1966, then I went to Detroit [Michigan] and became the night news editor in Detroit for the AP up there.

JB: How long were you in Detroit?

BS: A couple of years. A couple of very tumultuous years.

JB: Yeah, that was the "burn, baby, burn" period in time.

BS: Yeah. That's when they had the riot in Detroit—killed forty, I think, forty-four people. [Note: The 12th Street Riot in Detroit in 1967 began on July 23 and lasted five days. Forty-three people were killed.] [16:13.6] Had a big UAW [United Auto Workers] Ford Motor Company strike. Had a tanker break up in a blizzard out on Lake Michigan, and twenty-something guys died. [George W.] Romney was governor of Michigan, and he was running for president and was a pretty formidable candidate until he said something stupid about being brain-

washed. . .

JB: [Laughs] Brainwashed about Vietnam or something.

BS: Vietnam, yeah. By the way, even before I left Little Rock, I'd decided, "This is a mistake. I'd committed to go to Detroit, so I've got to do it, but I'll let the AP know at the earliest opportunity I would like to go back to Little Rock, if that's possible." Well, they kind of played me for a while, saying, "We'll give it six months and then let's talk about it." So I gave it six months, and I said, "I'd like to go back to Little Rock still." They said, "Well, you're just homesick. Give it another six [months]." I thought, "All right." This costing them a lot of money to do this, and I gave them another six. I told them at the end of the first year I still wanted to go back to Little Rock. They said, "All right. Look, maybe we can do that, maybe not, but we want you to give it six more months and then we'll see what we can do." I said, "All right, but at the end of *this* six, I'm going back, whether it's with you or somebody else." At the end of that six, I said I still wanted to go, and they said, "All right." So when the first opportunity came for somebody to come back to Little Rock, they let me have the job.

JB: What year was that?

BS: That would have been 1968. I think I got back here in June of 1968. I went back on the staff and eventually within a year or so became the state capitol reporter for the AP and held that job until, I guess, 1990, when they made me the chief of the bureau in Little Rock.

JB: And when you came to the *Democrat-Gazette*, you had reached the point where you had your full AP retirement?

BS: Yeah. Well, in 1996, I reached age fifty-five, which made me eligible for AP re-

tirement, but what really made me want to leave the AP at that point was the Whitewater thing. [18:28.9] [Note: The Whitewater “scandal” involved real estate dealings between the failed Whitewater Development Corporation and Bill and Hillary Clinton and Jim and Susan McDougal.] In all honesty, it was just a—it was like a black hole in space drawing all the energy out of everything. I had reporters from Tokyo who couldn't speak English calling me at 4:00 in the morning—you know, getting me out of bed, wanting to know things about Whitewater and about Clinton and about Hillary. You just cannot imagine the enormous physical strain of trying to accommodate hundreds of reporters from all over the country and all over the world—all of them *thinking* they're on the big story of their life, and this is their time to make or break their career, and many of them not knowing the first thing about what they were talking about.

JB: So you were bureau chief from 1990 until you retired in 1996 from AP? You were their main state, politics, capitol reporter from like 1968 up until 1990?

BS: Yeah. And also in the nineties the state began doing executions again. I started having to go to executions and cover several. That was one of the most unpleasant things I've ever done.

JB: Oh, gosh, I would imagine so. Well, I'm sure you enjoyed your political reporting because—I know you did a good job with it, and you always seemed to be pretty zestful with it.

BS: Flattery will get you everywhere, too, Jim [Laughter].

JB: Tell me the circumstances of you coming to the *Democrat-Gazette*. Is your title political editor?

BS: Yeah. The title is political editor. Well, Bob Lutgen was managing editor of the

Democrat.

JB: And a hell of a nice managing editor.

BS: Yeah, a nice guy. He and I would sometimes play golf together, and he began to talk to me about getting me to go to work for the *Democrat-Gazette*—or *Democrat*—*Democrat-Gazette*.

JB: It became the *Democrat-Gazette* in October of 1991.

BS: Yeah. At first, he was talking about me going to work for the newspaper and running an operation up in Northwest Arkansas. I thought about it, and I thought—you know, that's kind of like getting away from Little Rock again, which I'd already done once by going to Detroit, and I'd rather stay in Little Rock, so I told him—you know, I'd like to go to work for the *Democrat-Gazette*, but I don't want to go to Northwest Arkansas because it's away from my family and things like that. Somewhere along about then, Rex Nelson, who had been the *Democrat-Gazette's* political director, left the job and Lutgen asked me would I be interested in taking *that* job, and I said. . .

JB: That must have been when Rex went to [Arkansas Governor Mike] Huckabee's staff.

BS: I believe that's correct. I said, "Shoot, yeah!" I mean, that's the job I was built for and spent most of my life doing that kind of thing anyway. So it wound up I came on board in December of 1996 as political editor.

JB: I know you've got charge of a staff of reporters. Do you do a lot of writing on your own?

BS: I don't do much writing anymore. I did some at the beginning just to kind of help establish myself as political editor. I had a crew of people I had to train before

they'd be ready to do it my way. But I've got a good crew now, and I can mostly just supplement what they do and contribute information to what they've already gathered and edit their copy and send it back to them for further development because it's not right yet. I do that kind of stuff, but I don't do much hands-on writing anymore.

JB: With the Associated Press or later with the *Democrat-Gazette*, there must have been one or two big, powerful stories you had a hand in that left some kind of an impression on you. [23:03.0] The best story you ever got, or the worst time you ever had trying to get one.

BS: Well, I guess at some point I should have sat down and tried to organize in terms of, you know, worst, best, highest, longest, and all that kind of stuff. I never have done that. Some things that just kind of roll out of memory I can talk about. I remember one time when a state legislative member—it was State Representative Lloyd George of Danville—kind of a country-type fellow. He was really quite intelligent. He'd been to the Naval Academy and had some training in nuclear matters. I remember one time his marriage was on the rocks, and he broke down and cried on my shoulder out at the state capitol in the governor's conference room. It was kind of a telling moment for me because it showed that—how *human* people in government are on things that go on in their personal lives. I remember on another occasion, J. William Fulbright, United States Senator from Arkansas, and at that time, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, was in Little Rock to speak to a civic club out on Roosevelt Road at a place called Magnolia Court. Along about that time, President [Lyndon] Johnson had let the United States planes bomb a harbor in North Vietnam called Haiphong?. And this was a

big escalation of the war at this time, so everybody in the world was wondering, "What does Fulbright say about this?" I got sent out to Magnolia Court to try to catch the senator when he showed up to make his speech. His car drives up, and he gets out, and a crowd of us were around the door to his vehicle saying, "President Johnson's war planes bombed Haiphong Harbor; we need to get your reaction." He said, "Gentlemen, I'll comment in just a minute, but I have *got* to take a leak."

JB: [Laughs]

BS: I thought, "Here's another one of those classic instances of how *human* the leaders of the world really are." On another occasion with Senator Fulbright—this one was less entertaining. This was in 1974 when Dale Bumpers was running against him and was going to beat him. We'd done some research on Fulbright and discovered some things we didn't previously know, which was that Fulbright had made some statements in his past that were not very good things to have said in a 1974 race. He'd said things like, "The Democratic Party must remain a Party of the white man," and. . .

JB: Yeah, Southern candidates had to talk that way in the 1950s.

BS: Yeah. I think he actually said it back in the 1940s.

JB: Certainly in the 1940s.

BS: Homer Adkins was running against him in 1944, and it was kind of a segregationist hothead race. But, nevertheless, he had said the things, and we thought he ought to at least explain why he would say them in the context of the times in which he made the statement. So we tried for *weeks* to get him to sit down and talk about it, and they kept evading us, and finally we let them know that we'd

given them a fair chance to comment and "We're going to write it whether you comment or not." Then they decided they would comment. So they arranged for me to meet him in the Arlington Hotel [in Hot Springs] in the big dining room over there. There's nobody else in the dining room except Senator Fulbright, his wife, Betty—I think maybe Hoyt Purvis, his aide, was there, and me. And in the course of interviewing him about this, he began to accuse me of being in cahoots with some *Washington Post* reporter in a conspiracy to bring him down, and I thought, "This guy has gotten a little bit screwy." That night—it was a real stormy night. I drove back from Hot Springs to Little Rock. The roads weren't nearly as good as they are now, so it took me a while. I listened to the tape of the interview over and over again—two times, maybe—and was just kind of continually astonished at the accusations Fulbright was making about why these quotes would come up and what I supposedly was a part of. I think that in the end we never wrote the story because by then it was clear that Fulbright was going to get the tar beat of him by Bumpers anyway, and why—why bring these things up from thirty years ago? They were going to do nothing but further damage him.

JB: Yeah. Yeah. I remember one time—it was after the U.S. had withdrawn completely from Vietnam, and he was on some kind of a panel. I don't know if it was *Meet the Press*, but it was that kind of a show. Whoever was interviewing him was kind of playing the devil's advocate. He said, "Senator Fulbright, do you mean to tell us that after—you mean to tell the American people that after millions, billions of dollars, thousands of deaths, thousands of casualties, that all our sacrifice—you're going to tell the American public that all our sacrifice in Vietnam has been in vain?" Fulbright said, "Well, what would you have me do? Lie

to them?" [Laughter]

BS: He was a brilliant man.

JB: Okay. So you were working the capitol beat all through the so-called Little Rock newspaper war, which I guess cranked up—I don't know when—it never did have an official declaration, but it was going good before the 1980s were over.

BS: Yeah. Yeah. [29:20.7] And, in fact the war [laughs]—the war—the newspaper war, when I was a capitol reporter, made my job a little harder out there because at one time, back when the Capitol Press Corps consisted of me from the AP, Ernie Dumas and Ernie Valachovic from the *Gazette*, and John Bennett of the Memphis Newspaper, and one person would come out from the United Press—that was about it.

JB: And Meredith Oakley, maybe, from the *Democrat*, or was that later?

BS: Well, actually, George Douthit, I think, was out there for the *Democrat*, and Meredith came later. But you're right; I left out the *Democrat's* representatives. But when the newspaper war got on real good, both those papers beefed up their capitol staffs. And pretty soon the *Gazette* had like ten people out there, and the *Democrat* had ten people out there, and it turned out to be a lot harder to beat twenty other reporters instead of just two other reporters. The longer that went on [laughs], the greater the toll on this AP reporter trying to keep up where he can possibly keep ahead of these newspaper guys.

JB: I imagine so. Well, then Gannett acquired the *Gazette*, and by that time, Mr. [Walter] Hussman was publishing the *Democrat*. It was incredible how. . .

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

JB: Testing for Side 2 of Bill Simmons Interview. Okay, Bill, as the tape was winding down on the other side, we were talking about how many reporters were running around every beat at the height of the [newspaper] war. I know in sports, events that would normally take one person or maybe two all of a sudden loaded up with eight or ten people, photographers, everything. Other than the fact that you had all these extra capitol reporters all over you all of the time, what impression did you get out of the war time period?

BS: Well, for one thing, I thought the AP had to be very careful not to take sides, serve both papers even-handedly, and keep our personal opinions to ourselves. I talked to my staff about us taking that approach, and I think that's what we did. But at the same time, we could see changes taking place in the newspapers, and I thought that over time, the Gannett people ruined the *Gazette*. Just to be blunt about it.

JB: You won't get much argument about that in *this* town.

BS: Yeah. And it kind of became cookie cutter journalism. "This newspaper's the newspaper that will work in San Diego [California] or Austin, Texas, or Kansas City"—it's just kind of a fit-the-mold newspaper rather than something that understands the state, its people, its readers and—although, in terms of advertising—I mean, in terms of *polish*—journalistic polish—the *Gazette* copy *always* had more of that, more quality, grammar, more, you know, good structure, things of that sort. There was a time when the *Democrat* passed the *Gazette* in terms of getting local information, local news, in the paper on a daily basis, and that's when I began to think, "The *Democrat* can win this war." That was partly the doing of Bob Starr—and, by the way, his own column also was a phenomenal aspect

of the *Democrat's* gradual gain in the circulation.

JB: His op-ed page column [came out] seven days a week; he was always full of fury and controversy, and [he] attracted readership.

BS: Yeah, it became, probably, the most-read aspect of the newspaper at different times of the war, some of which—some of his columns were just *outrageous*. He just. . .

JB: Well, he—I think he understood that you had to be outrageous to attract attention. He didn't care whether people liked him or not, just so they paid attention and read the paper.

BS: [Laughs] And they appear to have done that. The *Democrat* began to get items in the paper, and although they were not journalistically smooth—sometimes they had mistakes in them—they were getting the news into the paper on a much more consistent basis than the *Gazette* was. At that point, I began to be convinced that if the *Gazette* didn't right its ship, it could be in trouble eventually. Plus, both papers were spending enormous sums, and I thought the Gannett operation had a liability in that a public company had to answer to stock holders. . .

JB: Absolutely.

BS: . . .who are not going to go on indefinitely letting the money hemorrhage the way it was going to be hemorrhaging. They were losing tens of millions of dollars. Over a period of years, that's exactly what happened; pressure from stock holders to turn that situation in Little Rock around built up. Mr. [Walter] Hussman, with his resources, was willing to absorb the losses for the sake of the greater gain, and in the end, wound up the winner.

JB: Of course, before the Patterson family sold the *Gazette* to Gannett, they had as-

sets—other assets—but not *media* assets. I guess they owned property, and this, that and the other, but the WEHCO company [WEHCO Media, Inc.] had other newspapers, other media outlets. I know of at least one TV station in Shreveport [Louisiana].

BS: Cable operations.

JB: Cable operations. They had some supporting things to sustain them and then when Gannett took over as the incoming publisher, Mr. Bill Malone famously said, when Gannett took over in the fall of 1986, "We've got *deep* pockets." But not deep enough that the stockholders would eventually swallow it.

BS: Yeah. That was just another one of Gannett's classic, gigantic miscalculations.

JB: Whatever good traditions the *Gazette* had—and they had quite a few good ones, but they didn't understand any of them and tried to obliterate all of them.

BS: Yeah. Gannett just botched it.

JB: Their whole concept at that time seemed to be to run the closest thing to a local version of *USA Today* as they could.

BS: Yeah.

JB: I don't despise *USA Today*; it's got its niche, but it's not what a daily, local newspaper should become.

BS: And certainly not what the *Arkansas Gazette* had *been*.

JB: Right.

BS: I mean, it was just an abandoning of the traditions of the *Gazette* and its role in this community of Little Rock and the state of Arkansas. The *Gazette* had been a *force*. It journalistically had been powerful because of its integrity, its competence, its insight—and these were things that Gannett placed no value on, had no

understanding of.

JB: Well, like the thing that the *Gazette* did, and the *Democrat-Gazette* now does with the little news items they strip down the side of page 1—"In the News"—which are not really compelling news items, but bright, unusual things people like to read. Gannett didn't understand that at all when they came in. They wanted to put some stuff out there about Hollywood gossip or something. Then they ran a survey, and about ninety-eight or ninety-seven percent of the readers said, "We want 'In the News.'"

BS: Yeah.

JB: "We want it like it is." They couldn't understand it. They couldn't understand anything. They had this format, and that's what they were going to do, the best they could.

BS: Yeah. We were going to like it, or else.

JB: [Laughs] Yeah.

BS: It turned out to be "or else."

JB: Right [laughs]. Miss Russell—I never did meet her, but it seems like at least six or seven or eight guys of her students—Jim Lynch was one of them. James Thompson was one. David Petty was probably one of them. I don't know if Harry King was or not, because he was. . .

BS: Yeah, he was.

JB: Well, Harry didn't come to the *Gazette* until after he was going to LRJC or UALR, whatever it was at the time. But Orville was smart enough to follow her judgment on people.

BS: Right. Well, a school teacher, you know, gets an opportunity to get to know kids

pretty well—300—probably 280 days a year. . .

JB: Yeah.

BS: . . .seeing the kids—something like that.

JB: Bill, what do you think about newspapers in the current situation—we've long since quit worrying about TV or the Internet and all that sort of stuff. I mean, if you're an insomniac, you can watch cable news all night, every night on the TV and on the Internet certainly and so forth. Do newspapers have a long-range future?

BS: I think it depends on the people running newspapers—what they do with them. I've been in this business now—I started when I was fifteen. I've been in this business fifty years. During that whole time, most of the news in America has actually originated with a newspaper somewhere.

JB: Yeah.

BS: And the way the system has functioned, and to a large extent *still* functions, is this: a newspaper reporter will show up somewhere covering an event, and his story will appear in the newspaper. Then the Associated Press will pick up that news from the newspaper and put it on the Associated Press wire, which will send it out to other newspapers in this state and across the country and on a broadcast wire that serves TV and radio stations. But it all started back somewhere with a newspaper's reporter.

JB: Right.

BS: And to a large extent, that's still what happens today. Watch TV news in the evening, see the stories that they run and realize that's the story that was in our newspaper this morning. Or our newspaper yesterday. So I'm saying to myself, "Do

newspapers have a future?" If they continue to do things newspapers have always done well, I think the answer is yes, particularly when you get to in-depth reporting, insightful analysis, things of that sort. You get that from newspapers that you can't get from many other places.

JB: Well, I watch all three of the Little Rock channels to some extent, but the one I watch most often—I'm not going to embarrass them by mentioning which one it is, but I see something in the *Democrat-Gazette* in the morning that I've never heard about on TV, and that night, by gosh, it's a big item on TV.

BS: That's because the AP has picked it up and put in on the wire, but it originated with the newspaper. If the newspapers go away, the depth of journalism in broadcasting is going to get even thinner that it is now.

JB: That's right.

BS: And also, I think that there's content that the newspapers can provide that television and radio *can't* provide. That may be that the readers of newspapers may get turned off and will not want in-depth coverage or insightful analysis, and newspapers will be a dinosaur, but I don't *think* that will happen.

JB: Well, I think newspapers are going to last. They may not last as we think of them *now*. The time may come that instead of picking a newspaper up off the porch, you'll go in to your computer and read it on the Internet, which a lot of people do anyway.

BS: Yeah. Maybe. Although I've done some of that, I think they're real cumbersome compared to holding a newspaper in my hand and turning the page when I want to, that kind of thing.

JB: Yeah, I'm strictly a print man, myself. I never did worry that much about televi-

sion because a clipping out of a newspaper is something you can have in your hand, you can put it away, you can re-read it. Of course, now, with that TiVo stuff and everything, they're getting to where you can preserve [laughs] almost anything on the screen, too.

BS: Uh huh. Yeah. What else you got?

JB: Well, I just wanted to run through some of this stuff with you, and I've enjoyed the visit in the process. Thank you.

BS: Sure. No problem. [44:18.0]

[End of Interview]

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