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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with:

David Terrell
Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania
24 March 2007

Interviewer: Pam Terrell

Pam Terrell: Today is March 24, 2007 on a Saturday. My name is Pam Terrell. I am interviewing David Terrell. I am going to ask him about his childhood, his education, how he got into journalism, his journalism career, and what has happened since then, specifically looking toward the [*Arkansas*] *Democrat* and the [*Arkansas*] *Gazette* in Little Rock. David, when were you born and where?

David Terrell: I was born on the sixth of April—I'm told—in 1952 in Camden, Arkansas. My family lived on a farm outside Camden in Ouachita County, Arkansas.

PT: Tell us about your schooling.

DT: By the time I was ready for school, we had moved to Pine Bluff [*Arkansas*]. Because Arkansas in those days didn't have kindergarten, and we went half days through second grade. But anyway, I went to public schools in Pine Bluff and Conway, [*Arkansas*] graduating from Conway High School and then on to Hendrix College in Conway where I endured four years and took a degree in Philoso-

phy.

PT: How is it that you got started in journalism?

DT: Well, I had taken a course, actually, in high school. We had a journalism teacher there for a year or two—a woman named Beth [Danoff?] of Bearden, Arkansas. [She] had been to Arkansas State University over in Jonesboro. She taught at Conway High School. I took a course in journalism. [I] wound up editing our old little high school newspaper. [I] considered myself ready to go to work in professional journalism, so I asked for a job at the *Log Cabin Democrat* in Conway. Frank Robins, who owned the paper, was kind enough to hire me and kind enough to put up with me for the next five years or so. [I] did a little bit of everything on the editorial side that there was to do—I guess—at the *Log Cabin*.

PT: And from there you went to the *Democrat*, as I remember?

DT: Yes, you recall correctly. When Hendrix graduated me, it was time to move on the bright lights and the big city. Actually, I wanted to go to the [*Arkansas*] *Gazette*, but I was not offered a job there that I wanted. I had thought that the *Democrat*, as the afternoon paper, apparently less stable of the two papers, and the less prestigious of the two by far, would be not much of a place to work. I was encouraged, I think, probably by John Ward, who had for a while been managing editor of the *Log Cabin* in Conway, to apply there. He said he thought it would be a good fit. I think it was he who in all events persuaded me to go have a talk with them, so I did. I met with Jerry McConnell, who was managing editor at the time, and Bob McCord whose title, I believe, was executive editor—two perfectly fine gentlemen who ran a pretty darn good journalistic operation there. After a conversation or two with one or both of them, they agreed to hire me, so I wound

up at the *Democrat* for a period of a couple of years. That would have been in 1974.

PT: That you left or that you started?

DT: That I started at the *Democrat*, yes.

PT: What did you do when you were there? And tell us about who else was there that you remember.

DT: I was a reporter. I think I must have spent some sort of period of time as a general assignment reporter. I think I did. I must have. I think that almost everybody started that way. In short order, I was given a beat. I went over to the federal building to cover the federal courts. [I] did that for—I think for a year or so. Ostensibly the beat had to do with all of the federal agencies, but most people knew it as the federal courts beat because that's what generated most of the news in that old set of buildings in Downtown Little Rock. So I covered the federal courts, [and] then moved on to the [Arkansas] State Capitol to cover state government and politics. In the Fall of 1974, I had been sent up to Northwest Arkansas to the Third Congressional District to cover the campaign between the incumbent Republican John Paul Hammerschmidt and a rather interesting upstart on the Democratic side named Bill Clinton. I had some credentials between my work in Conway and that one race in politics, so I moved over to cover the legislature and state politics. My partners out there at the Capitol—my partner was Brenda Tirey, and later—I guess—I must have had another for a short period of time. It was mostly—mostly I worked out there with Brenda, who later was also my partner in the same beat at the *Gazette*—good reporter [and] wonderful woman, Brenda Tirey T-I- R-E-Y.

PT: Was that the beat that you had before you left the *Democrat*?

DT: Right.

PT: How long were you on that beat, do you think?

DT: Oh, at least a year, I suppose. It was the last year of David Pryor's administration when he was governor. I believe it was. Yes, that's the way I remember it.

PT: Didn't you also write columns in addition to this?

DT: Well, yes. We had—each of the major beat reporters had the opportunity to write a little weekly column. I did split time with Brenda on the political one called—I think—"At the Capitol." Not an opinion piece, but a kind of bright political analysis piece or some wryly observant piece about the shenanigans of the legislature. It was always a very entertaining place, you know.

PT: Who else was at the paper at the time that you remember? Other reporters?

DT: Oh, we had—it was such a quick revolving door through there, but a lot of very fine and talented people and some monumental crazy ones as well. I'll talk about the fine and talented ones. Aside from—we also had Jerry Dean—who also went to the *Gazette* by the way—pretty good feature writer. Bill Husted was [a] terrific guy—big personality, very fine writer, and Husted—I don't remember who had the idea to do it, but Husted was often teamed up with a guy named Gary Rice, who was a very, very good reporter but not exactly a distinguished writer. The two of them turned out some pretty good pieces between them—Gary doing the spade work, and Bill applying his talents with the language. We had Bob Sallee, a wonderful fellow, who covered—split his time, as I recall, between general assignment work and police work. Old Mel White was there. [He] came somewhat after I did. [He] was another Conway boy [and] another Hendrix boy, in fact.

Robert Ike Thomas and “Father” Moon—Glen Moon, who was shell-shocked from World War I—were a couple of the photographers. Robert Ike was particularly talented, I thought—most people did. Before I left, one of the people who came along and has remained my friend for many years, [was] a guy named Bill Dawson from Memphis [Tennessee]. I later worked with him over at the *Commercial Appeal* in Memphis.

PT: Did you mention Jim Allen? Oh, I’m sorry.

DT: I haven’t mentioned Allen yet. I’m trying to cut a—trying to make a visual tour of the newsroom. The newsroom was an interesting place in those days. We had these old gigantic leather belts that ran together and carried copy up to production on the third floor. We were on second floor of the old building down there on Fifth and Scott. Things were noisy, and the old belts rattled all the time. People yelled at each other. It was a smoky, foggy place.

PT: So you could still smoke there?

DT: Oh, yes, sure.

PT: It had the old wire service tapping away.

DT: Oh, my goodness, yes. There was a lot of noise. There was a lot of cussing and a lot of boisterous life. I’ll put it that way. But now that you bring up Jim Allen—I roomed with Allen for—oh, my goodness—for two or three years. He was a wonderfully talented reporter and a very sophisticated chap by my likes in those days. He taught me how to dress a little bit—that kind of thing. He worked in a men’s store, you know. We stayed in touch over the years. He’s up in New York now as head of PR [Public Relations] for Hess Oil company. Allen specialized in Public Service Commission regulated agencies, energy reporting, energy and

utilities, and just did a hell of a job. [He] later went to AP [Associated Press] and went out to California. And, as I say, wound up in New York.

PT: Are there any other highs, lows, good, bad, ugly stories from the *Democrat*—before we move on to the *Gazette*?

DT: Oh, there are a lot of stories—my goodness. About the time we were going to [leave?], Allen and I were sent by the *Democrat* out to Virginia. I was to cover the Southern Governor’s Conference at Colonial Williamsburg. Jim Allen was going to a conference on energy reporting at Washington and Lee University down in Lexington, Virginia. This was the same week. So we took our two weeks of vacation. We took the money that would have covered plane fare to go to these things and set out for three weeks. We went up to—drove to New York and then down to Washington, where we visited you, too and then on down to our conferences where we—well, actually we arrived in Williamsburg a day early. We lost track of time quite entirely and got more than moderately drunk that evening. I went to get my room, and tell the woman at the desk there—I said, “I’m David Terrell, and I have a reservation in my room.” She looked at me and said, “You don’t have a reservation.” “Well, I do. I’m with the Southern Governor’s Conference.” “Mr. Terrell, the conference starts tomorrow.” “Oh.” I said, “Well, look at us. We can’t go anywhere. I’ve got to have a room.” “Well” she said, “the only rooms that we have are the suites that the governors are going to be in tomorrow night. We could put you in one of those, but it’s”—I don’t know, \$300 or \$400 a night in 1975. I said, “Yes, give us one of those. Bill it to the *Democrat*.” We took this three-acre room, and we ordered a very elaborate dinner, had a lot of whiskey, and called everybody we knew. Long story short—we got back

home and quit the *Democrat* before the bills arrived. I went to the *Gazette*, and he went to AP. I never heard anything about it, but I never suffered any pangs of conscience over it, either. They underpaid us rather miserably.

PT: Was that one of the reasons that you left the *Democrat*?

DT: Well sure. You made a little more money at the *Gazette*, sure, but there were lots of other reasons. As I say, the *Gazette* was a much more prestigious paper. The *Gazette* was the bigger paper. It was a hell of a lot easier to get news when you worked for the *Gazette* because people came to the *Gazette* rather than the *Democrat*—because it was the bigger paper. It was the morning paper. When you are the p.m. paper in a two-paper town, you are at a distinct disadvantage in terms of the daily window of news happenings. You get the jump on everything that happens between about 6:00 in the morning and 11:00 in the morning. Not a heck of a lot of news happens in those hours, so you have to scramble all of the time—more than you do at the a.m. paper. I want to say about the *Democrat* that I think we did great. I think Bob and Jerry ran a superb news operation under circumstances that were very trying. They didn't have the budget to pay people, and people were leaving all of the time. We had this problem with the news cycle and the short hours. Under those arduous conditions, I think all of us were darn well proud of what were able to do. Newspapers are always called a daily miracle. The *Democrat* was more of a miracle than most—I thought.

PT: Did you leave during the time when the war had begun? Or had the newspaper war really started between [the] *Gazette* and the *Democrat* at that point?

DT: Well, Walter Hussman [Jr.] by that time owned the *Democrat*, and he had declared war—but I don't think that anybody took it seriously yet. He hadn't started

some of the tactics—some very smart and some nefarious, I thought—that he later used. He hadn't yet switched, of course, to a morning paper, had not—started giving away classified ads—hadn't started any of the predatory pricing that he did in ads. So it was—I guess the war was underway, but in the opening skirmish, most of us didn't realize what it would become. We assumed that eventually the *Democrat* would die.

PT: Well, we'll get back to that. Let's follow you to the *Gazette*. What did you do at the *Gazette*?

DT: Well, pretty much the same path over there. I stayed there for about five years, I guess, but I . . . ?

PT: You went there in what year?

DT: Nineteen seventy-six and left in 1980. I started on general assignments, then I went over to the—not the federal courthouse this time, but the county courthouse where the state courts are located and operate. I covered county politics, and I had a [laughs] really fun time. [I] had a grand time over there with my partner who had been there for many years, George Bentley—a terrific fellow. I just loved George Bentley. Our competition there for a period of time was old Bob Sallee from the *Democrat*. So that was a friendly competition—serious, but friendly. After—I don't know—a year or two there, I was sent again back out to the state capitol to cover the legislature, state politics, the administration, and write, again, a little weekly column that I shared with my partners. My partners were Brenda Tirey, Carol Griffiee for a while, and Steele Hays. Steele also—by the way—had been at the *Democrat*. I shouldn't have left his name out.

PT: Did you also follow the campaign trails at that point?

DT: Well, yes. That's part of covering politics. Yes, I did some of that.

PT: So you covered the Clinton race?

DT: Yes, I covered his first—he had—I came out there about the time that he was assuming or running for governor. I had not covered his race for attorney general. He served a couple of years in that office. He almost waltzed into the governor's office that first term. I covered that race to the extent that he did have a race.

PT: Who was at the *Gazette* when you were there? What stands out in your mind for reporters, editors, and so forth?

DT: Well, my gosh, I—you know, I'll leave people out who are important and important personally even to me, because I'm not sitting here with a list—but I'll tell you I'll just run through some names. And I'll tell you first that the two who were truly important to me besides George [Bentley] were Bill Shelton—the day managing editor, as he was officially known; he was really city editor—and Ernie Dumas, who preceded me out at the capitol and became an editorial writer and stayed there until the *Gazette* folded. But Brenda was there; Mike Trimble was there—just a legendary personality [and] terrific gifted writer.

PT: Had he ever been at the *Democrat*?

DT: I don't think that Trimble ever had, no. We had John Woodruff, who preceded me at the federal courts. Lamar James was at the police department. Orville Henry, [who] seemed to have been around forever, was sports editor. Kim Brazzel was back there in sports—and Jim Bailey. Jim was another remarkably fine writer, by the way. James Scudder had come over from the *Democrat*—interesting guy. [He] was a good writer—good feature writer. He was at the *Gazette* in those years. Steele was there. Carol . . .

PT: Was Doug Smith there?

DT: Doug Smith was also out at the capitol, and he also went into writing editorials eventually. Then we had—Doug is a beautiful writer. I always thought that perhaps the two best writers at the *Gazette* were Doug and Mike Trimble. Mike wrote a beautiful sentence, and Doug wrote a beautiful story. You never needed to change a word, and anything that Doug wrote flowed liked a brook from one word to the next [and] one paragraph to the next. Trimble could come up with these incredible sentences. Carol Matlack, a terribly gifted individual who was a superb investigative reporter as well as a very fine writer, had been at Oberlin College in Ohio along with some others that we had there—Chuck Heinbockel . .

PT: Tom?

DT: Yes, Tom Hamburger and Eric Black. Those were the Oberlin crowd, and they were all real good.

PT: What about Bob Lancaster? Was he at either paper when you were there?

DT: No—well, yes, Bob and I overlapped a little bit at the *Democrat*. I knew Lancaster, but I knew him—he had been at the *Gazette* before he went out to—I think—*Newsday* on Long Island and followed Gene Foreman down to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. [He] came back to Little Rock, but didn't go to the *Gazette*. He went to the *Democrat* not long before I left. I then knew him—I knew him mostly when I was at the *Gazette*, actually.

PT: What about management at the *Gazette*? Was the Patterson family there when you were there?

DT: Well, yes, Hugh Patterson was publisher. Mr. Heiskell—John N. Heiskell—who

had been the editor for seventy-five years, was still alive for part of that time. [He] died while I was there. His son-in-law, Hugh Patterson, was the publisher. Two of his sons, Carrick and, anyway, two of his sons worked at the paper. Ralph! Of course—Ralph Patterson—Carrick and Ralph Patterson worked there while I was there. They were—Hugh’s management didn’t extend to a heavy touch on the newsroom itself. Bob Douglas was the boss. He was the managing editor. My immediate supervisor was Shelton. Shelton was [laughs] a great pencil editor. People called him “the great stone face.” He was kind of a grim guy, to look at him. He had a withering way about him, if you ever made a mistake. It was Shelton—I think—more than anybody else who maintained the fact of high standards at the *Gazette*. He just didn’t tolerate screw-ups.

PT: Getting back to the newspaper war, you were at the *Gazette* when it heated up. How were people reacting to some of the tactics that you mentioned before—including Shelton and the Pattersons? Did they . . . ?

DT: I honestly couldn’t see it. So far as I ever knew—this is to the enduring credit of the publishers at both places—the news coverage was unaffected by all those business wrangles. I worked for editors. I didn’t work directly for publishers, and I didn’t feel any of that.

PT: What about when it [*Democrat*] changed to a morning publication, and it went head-to-head? Was there any difference in covering the news?

DT: I think that happened after I left. Perhaps it did. I can’t recall.

PT: I think it happened—it happened when I was at the *Gazette*—I mean—I’m sorry—at the *Democrat* after you left.

DT: All right then, well—I don’t want to—for the very longest time, and certainly for

some period of time even after I left, people at the *Gazette* just did not take the *Democrat* seriously as a threat. We didn't believe that they were going to overtake the *Gazette*. In fact, the *Gazette* was still the dominant newspaper in circulation and, I think, even in ad lineage when it died. It was just that both papers were losing money, and Hussman was willing to lose more.

PT: So you were among the people who never thought that the *Democrat* would win the war?

DT: I didn't see how they could. I didn't see how they could. What they had going for them was a conservative editorial policy. Arkansas was and practically always had been a fairly conservative state politically. The fact that a lot of progressives got elected from there had a lot to do with the *Gazette* as an institution, but a lot of people were periodically mad as hell at the *Gazette*. The *Democrat* support among readers and to some extent among advertisers over the years had something to do with the fact of its politics.

PT: Well . . .

DT: This was before as well as after Hussman took it over.

PT: Looking back now, what do you think are some of the causes of the *Gazette*'s demise—besides maybe the editorial policy—that got them into trouble sometimes?

DT: I think—as I say—I think that some of Hussmann's tactics—undercutting ad prices and so on—were predatory, but there was a lawsuit over that and turned out—the *Gazette*, of course, lost that. The bottom line was that he [Walter Hussman] was willing to lose more money. The Pattersons were a rich family, but they had—the *Gazette* was their only significant property, whereas Hussman

owned a chain of media properties and could lose money for a significant period of time. After Gannett bought the *Gazette* quite some time after I was gone, I think that people assumed that Hussman had met his match. But it was not simply a matter of who had the deepest pockets. It was a question of who was willing to empty them.

PT: Do you have any—why is it that Hussman was willing to do that? Were there any stories about that?

DT: Well, there were a lot of rumors about it. My acquaintance with Walter Hussman was very casual, and I never had a conversation with him about it. The word among everybody was that he was filled with a hatred for the *Gazette*. His behavior over the years would tend to support that idea.

PT: I wonder why he hated the *Gazette*. Was it the editorial policies?

DT: I . . . ?

PT: Who knows? That's beyond your knowledge?

DT: It is. That could be a lot of things. I assume that was one of them. But see, he's a serious political player. [He] wanted to be for a long time [and] became one.

When you are serious about your politics, you tend to resent somebody who's influential and making money at your expense and at the other pole from you.

PT: Do you think, on the other hand, that there might have been something the *Gazette* did or didn't do that could have saved them—other than they were not willing to lose that much money?

DT: I did think so. I don't now. Well, yes—I mean . . . ?

PT: Did arrogance play a role?

DT: Did arrogance play a role?

PT: On the part of the *Gazette*?

DT: Well, I don't know. Maybe. I really can't say. I do think that—I thought that the *Gazette* could and should have maintained some of its traditions.

PT: Rather than try and copy Hussman sometimes?

DT: Rather than try to copy Hussman, or rather than try to follow the advice of a lot of newspaper consultants. City after city [and] year after year, newspaper consultants tell newspapers what to do, and city after city [and] year after year, newspapers lose circulation or lose money on it. The medium is a news medium. They call it a newspaper. They don't call it an entertainment rag. They don't call it the sports machine. They don't call it television. All this business about adding color, adding light features, writing news stories with nut grass somewhere on the jump page before you get to the protein in the story, adding sections on celebrity coverage, yuppie food, sports and whatnot, is a form of slow and peculiarly undignified suicide. I don't know that newspapers by doing what newspapers do best can actually survive, but at least they can die with their heads up and with professional pride. The *Gazette* had been the "Old Gray Lady," the newspaper of record, a kind of *New York Times*—a rather dense thing that people spent a great deal of time reading. I always thought that they should have stuck with some of that knitting.

PT: I can't remember the year it went under, but it was when Gannett owned it. Isn't that right?

DT: Oh, sure.

PT: Looking beyond that, what have you done in the newspaper business since leaving Arkansas?

DT: I left the only job in Arkansas that I ever wanted, which was the capitol beat at the *Gazette*, to go with you to Washington, DC, which was your home. It was a wrenching decision for me, but while I loved the work—and I loved the *Gazette* and my colleagues—I could tell already that I didn't want to do this for thirty years. So I went to Washington looking for work. [I] never found any in that first sojourn that was satisfactory. [I] never had an offer in journalism that I wanted, so I took a job for a period of several months shoving lumber through big machines making butcher block tables and [then] turned around and came back to Memphis and worked for the *Commercial Appeal* for a couple of years. Again, [I] covered politics. Then back up to Washington [DC]. You had been working for UPI [United Press International] in Memphis, and they wanted to send you to Washington. So I followed you back to Washington. I went to see old Jim Sasser, who, at that time, was a junior United States Senator to Howard Baker. I had got to know Sasser by covering his campaign and got on well with him. I went to see him and asked him for some help in trying to find a job in Washington. He said, "Well, I'd like to hire you." So I left journalism and went into politics. [I] went from one extremely well respected popular line of work into another. [I] wrote all of Sasser's speeches for a couple of years. [I] did a lot of sort of political operative work. [I] traveled around Tennessee—been everywhere in Tennessee three times, I think. [I] left him when our daughter [Christine?] was born in 1984—June 8. I just couldn't handle the travel schedule, the unpredictability, and the incredibly long hours that capital hill work—any more. [I] tried to write a book, [but the] contract fell through when Doubleday came apart. They didn't come apart, but they closed a bunch of imprints. I . . .

PT: That was on Wilbur Mills?

DT: Yes. I was going to write a book about old Wilbur Mills, a longtime congressman from the Second District of Arkansas [and] chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, et cetera. I never finished the book. I never made my mind up about Mills, so I couldn't finish it. Eventually, a political friend helped me find a job in the Department of the Interior in Washington. I've been with Interior for pretty nearly twenty-five years now. I work—I have for the last . . .

PT: You were first downtown with Interior.

DT: Yes, I was in downtown Washington in the main Interior building working for the Bureaus of Reclamations. That lasted about a year. That was fun actually. I worked for a fellow named Carl Garlgagliardi—G-A-R-L-G-A-G-L-I-A-R-D-I—a [President] Reagan political appointee. We got on famously. I liked him and respected him. I think it went both ways. He sent me all over the West. I did a lot of interesting work for Reclamations. Then they wanted me to take a job in Denver [Colorado]. We didn't want to move to Denver, and I didn't want to work for the fellow out there. So—long story short—I wound up at the U.S. Geological Survey in Reston, Virginia, about twenty-five miles out, which was pretty handy. We lived in Reston at the time. I worked in public affairs there for a while, then I became deputy chief and, eventually, chief of publications for the old National Mapping Division. I went from there to the Earth Resources Observation Data Center, the EROS Data Center out in South Dakota. I lived in South Dakota for . . .

PT: Nearly ten years.

DT: Yes, nine years—nine cold years. [Laughter] [I] then moved back East three or

four years ago to central Pennsylvania as the liaison to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania for mapping. So I helped the state mostly in gathering data for map-like coverage of geographic features for scientific purposes.

PT: So here we are now in Pennsylvania. Looking back, is there any other highlight from your newspaper days that I've missed asking you about or any other reflections on the news business?

DT: Oh, there are lots of highlights. Lots of regrets, too, as far as that goes. I wish I hadn't made some mistakes. I wish I'd been more energetic and disciplined about things. All in all, I think, though, that it was the kind of work that I was cut out for. I enjoyed it immensely. It's a wonderful place for a . . .

[Tape Stopped]

PT: Any other reflections on the results of the newspaper wars in Arkansas?

DT: It's a terribly sad thing that the *Gazette* is gone. It was the oldest newspaper west of the Mississippi River and a monumentally important institution. I do not like reading the *Democrat* or the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, as it's known these days. It's still the *Democrat* to me. That said, I have to confess it's a better paper than most cities have. I think even now there is a continuing influence of the competition, but that's bound to wane more over time. Sad as it is, it's simply a reflection of what's gone on in that business nationwide for a long time. We've lost an awful lot of papers—lost an awful lot of good ones as well as bad ones. The business is almost completely dominated now by chains. The very largest ones, I think, are populated with people on the editorial side—the news management who believe themselves dedicated to quality, but have a hard time recognizing what it is. A big corporate chain devoted at its core to profits for stockhold-

ers—really to the exclusion of anything else—it’s not ever going to achieve the levels of excellence and take the courageous stands required of a great news institution. This has all happened at a terrible price for the Republic.

PT: Amen Brother. Thank you very much, David Terrell.

[End of Interview]

[Transcribed by Geoffery L. Stark]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]