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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with:

Brenda Tirey
Little Rock, Arkansas
5 May 2005

Interviewer: Mara Leveritt

Mara Leveritt: It is May 5, 2005. I'm Mara Leveritt, and I'm here with Brenda Tirey in her house in Little Rock. Brenda, I'm going to ask you to sign this form. I've got a pen right here. Then we'll stop and check, while you're reading, to see if this picked up.

[Tape Stopped]

ML: You read the form and you've signed it. Does everything look okay?

Brenda Tirey: Yes, it does.

ML: I want to say, first of all, that I'm really glad I got this assignment. It's going to be nice because I've never known you at all . . .

BT: Well, great.

ML: . . . in all the years. It's going to be a pleasure [laughs].

BT: Well, we'll see. [Laughs]

ML: Okay. Would you tell me, just for frame of reference, where you were born,

when, and how you got to the *Democrat*?

BT: I was born in Oklahoma City on July 7, 1939. I lived in various places in Oklahoma—Sayre, Ada, and Okmulgee—and moved to Fort Smith, Arkansas, when I was seven. I went through school there from the second grade through junior college. I was interested in journalism in high school. I took classes in journalism and wrote for the high school newspaper.

ML: Okay. Was it public school?

BT: I went to Fort Smith public schools.

ML: Okay.

BT: And the junior college in Fort Smith, which was then called Fort Smith Junior College. It's now part of the University of Arkansas system.

ML: Did you study journalism in college?

BT: I did some. I went from the junior college to American University in Washington, DC. The degree I ended up getting was in international relations and journalism. I took some journalism courses in college. I came back from college and worked for the Fort Smith newspaper.

ML: That was the . . . ?

BT: Fort Smith had two newspapers then. I worked for the afternoon newspaper. The *Fort Smith Times-Record*. The *Southwest American* was the morning paper. Now there is one newspaper there, the *Southwest Times-Record*. I also worked for the *Times-Record* when I was in high school, taking scores and occasionally writing stories of high school football games.

ML: Yes.

BT: I worked for the *Times-Record* as a reporter after college.

ML: What year was this, now?

BT: I left college in 1961. I actually got my degree in 1962, and came back to Fort Smith and worked for the paper. Then I went back to Washington in 1962. I worked briefly for the government, then for a public relations man there, but didn't enjoy the work as much as I had enjoyed journalism. I had a friend who worked at the Fort Smith paper, Bob Gisler, who had gone to the *Pine Bluff Commercial*, which had a reputation as an excellent newspaper. So I called him to see if they had any openings on the *Pine Bluff Commercial*. I had never been to Pine Bluff. He said, AWell, go ahead and send your application.@ I sent in an application. Then several weeks later he called and said, AYou better send in another application because they've changed managing editors.@ They had fired one, and they hired a man who came down there to work during a newspaper strike at *The New York Times*. He had come down to work at Pine Bluff waiting for the strike to end.

ML: Yes.

BT: His name was Gene Foreman, and he had worked at the *Arkansas Gazette*. He had been, I believe, the state editor there. I got a job. They didn't need a reporter, but they needed a copy editor, which always seemed to be in real demand. So I went to *Pine Bluff Commercial* as a copy editor, and eventually got a reporting job. They had a city editor who didn't think that women should be reporters. I came to work there in August of 1963. I had to go through some trials, and by sheer luck, I got to be a reporter.

ML: Did you interview for the job with Gene Foreman?

BT: It was all done by letter and telephone.

ML: Gene [Foreman]Cwas he there?

BT: Yes, he was the one who hired me.

ML: Who was the city editor who [didn=t think women should be reporters]?

BT: The city editor at the time was Bill Miles.

ML: M-I-L-E-S?

BT: Yes. But he eventually left, and the city editor that I worked for later, who was very good, was John Thompson. He was later the editor of the *North Little Rock Times* and still lives here in Pulaski County. He had been at the *Miami Herald*. Then I wanted to go on to something else. I got mad at Bob Lancaster once for something that he did to one of my stories, which was perfectly justified.

ML: He was editing?

BT: Well, yes, he was editing. He was the fill-in city editor one day. He was a sports writer when I first went there. But he was editing when I finally left. I got mad and I wanted to quit. And John Thompson said, ANow, Brenda, you shouldn=t quit before you have another job.@ That did make sense [laughs], especially since I was making about \$65 a week or something like that. [Laughter] You could not exist for very long if you did not have a job.

ML: Well, wait. But you started off at the copy desk?

BT: Yes.

ML: And then you became a reporter under Thompson?

BT: No, under Bill Miles. He eventually let me be a reporter.

ML: Oh, okay.

BT: He gave me some tasks. I had to learn to be a photographer. We had these old [Graflex] Speed Graphic Cameras where you have to put in all these slides and push all these things. The staff photographer was Gerald Congleton. He showed me how to use the camera. Then an old man called and said his tree blew up. No one else was there. Bill said, ASee if you can take a picture. Go out and get a picture of this man with his blown-up tree.@ [Laughs] I got there and could not remember how to work that camera. I started putting in stuff, and I punched everything on the camera as this old man was standing by his tree. I got back to the office, and one frame came out. [Laughs] It was a beautiful picture with the old man standing there with his blown-up tree. [Laughter]

ML: Were you the first woman reporter there?

BT: I don=t know. They certainly had plenty after I left. There were women reporters when I came, but they were in the women=s section [of the paper].

ML: Yes.

BT: I think there were correspondents from smaller communities who were women. I was certainly not the first woman on the copy desk.

ML: How long were you on the copy desk? Did you enjoy the copy desk aspect?

BT: I wanted to be out where stuff was happening. I thought it was kind of a lesser job. I don=t have that attitude now, but then it seemed like the reporters had all the fun. I was looking for something that was . . .

ML: Fun and exciting?

BT: . . . interesting.

ML: And did you find reporting fun?

BT: For much of the time, yes, it was fun. Yes. I enjoyed going out and being where things were going on, where things were happening, and things to report on, and things that seemed important at the time. But there were a lot of things that weren't, either. I had to sit through a lot of dull meetings of school boards and city councils and things like that.

ML: Yes.

BT: Pine Bluff was in the throes of a civil rights movement. I got there sort of at the end of some of the demonstrations that they were having in Pine Bluff—to stand in line at McDonald's. Stuff like that. They wouldn't serve black people at McDonald's restaurants, even though they didn't have inside seating. People just stood in line at windows and ordered. The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was there organizing. They integrated a swimming pool when I was there. I covered that and that was interesting. And the SNCC people were interesting. A white guy from Cincinnati and a local, young, black minister were the leaders.

ML: Do you remember their names?

BT: Bill Hansen was the white guy, and Ben Grinage the black man.

ML: Grinage?

BT: G-R-I-N-A-G-E. Grinage.

ML: What kinds of things were you reporting on?

BT: I was reporting on everything. Pine Bluff didn't have that big a staff. I had certain beats. Bill Miles let me start reporting full-time after he sent me to check a report that the Democratic Party chairman had been involved in some sort of ille-

gal things in one of the last elections. Bill said, ANow, he won=t talk to you. He won=t say anything. But go and ask him. Just see what you can do. See if you can do this.@ So I went to this guyChe was an insurance agent. I went to his insurance office. I said, AWell, we=ve heard that this, that and this.@ I can=t even remember now what it was that they were supposed to be doing. And he said, AWell, yes, that=s right.@ [Laughter] He kind of admitted all this stuff. And Bill Miles was totally shocked that he said anything. I mean, he said whatever he was doing was justified. AWe had to do that because...@ He had his own justification. So then I got to be a reporter. Also, I had to take pictures. One other time they sent me out to cover the Miss Pine Bluff pageant, and I never could get the hang of that camera. Here, again, I took a whole roll of film on that old camera, and one picture turned out. It turned out to be a pretty nice one. I was always coming back, taking whole slews of shots and only one would turn out.

ML: So how long did you work as a reporter there?

BT: I worked at Pine Bluff altogether for three years. I worked there from 1963 to 1966. Then I went to the *Louisville Courier Journal*, again, first as a copy editor. They needed copy editors. You could get jobs as a copy editor. I=d heard that it was a good newspaper. I had never been to Kentucky or Louisville, and did not enjoy it because I didn=t know anyone there. The hours on a morning paper were very different from the afternoon papers. I had worked for afternoon papers, always. Pine Bluff and Fort Smith were afternoon papers. On the morning paper copy desk, you=d work from 4:00 p.m. until midnight or 5:00 p.m. to 1:00 a.m. Finally, I said, AWell, I kind of think I liked being a reporter a lot better.@ So I

got to be a reporter in the Southern Indiana News Bureau, which was across the river from Louisville, just kind of like North Little Rock [is to Little Rock]. I did that for two and a half years and was a copy editor for a year and a half. Then I wanted to come back to Arkansas, and Gene Foreman then was the editor of the *Arkansas Democrat*.

ML: And why had you left the *Pine Bluff Commercial* in the first place?

BT: Well, first I got mad, but after I got over that I had just decided it was time to leave. I started looking for another job, and wrote to the *Courier Journal*, and John Thompson wrote me a letter of recommendation for it. And I got the job. I didn't go interview, it was all just done by letter and telephone.

ML: Oh, was this when you got mad over the Lancaster editing?

BT: Yes. But I didn't quit then. Oh, yes, it was a story that I was afraid to do anything with. I had to cover the funeral of the first southeast Arkansas soldier killed in Vietnam. I was afraid to talk to the family. All these military people were there, and they wouldn't tell anything about his death. I should have just gone up and talked to family. So I just wrote a bunch of blather about the service and Memorial Day. It was pretty schmaltzy. Bob Lancaster just took out all that stuff, which he should have. I just kind of made up stuff—not about the event but just taking off into kind of patriotic sentiment and things like that.

ML: It's like something Bill Husted said one time to me, when I said something about not being able to report a story. He said, ADo a writin= job of it.@ [Laughter]

BT: Yes. I just wrote about war and patriotism and defending the country. I don't know. It was really just stuff. And Bob Lancaster toned it down. I was afraid to

talk to the family. I had never dealt with people with that kind of grief before, and I just didn't know what to do. So he did the right thing. I didn't quit then, but I was ready to. John Thompson advised, ADon't quit until you get another job.@ So then I started looking for another job. I thought, AWhere would I like to go?@ I'd heard that Louisville was a good newspaper, so I went.

ML: There's a point I should probably come back to, when you were talking about approaching the family at a service like that.

BT: Yes.

ML: I think people should know about your own family upbringing in Fort Smith, and before that, in Oklahoma. What were your parents doing? What kind of background did you have?

BT: My mother was an English teacher.

ML: So she was teaching in the Fort Smith public schools when you were going through?

BT: Yes. She taught high school English. My father wasCwell, he had a bunch of different jobs. When we came to Fort Smith, I think he was a drug salesmanCa pharmaceutical company salesman. He also later worked as a pharmacist, but he wasn't college trained. In those days, you could be a pharmacist by doing on-the-job training, but that can no longer be done. But that=s what he was. And he just did different kinds of jobs. And then my parents separated, and he moved to Oklahoma when I was in junior high.

ML: Do you have brothers and sisters?

BT: No, I'm an only child.

ML: And were you raised in a church?

BT: No. Well, I became a member of a church as an adolescent, but I don't remember going to church as a really young child. But I later went to the Methodist church near where we lived.

ML: When you think about growing up in Fort Smith, what do you think were the greatest influences on you before you went to college?

BT: Well, I did become active in the church, and I ended up gettingCwhen I went to college, I got a national Methodist scholarship to the American University, which is a Methodist-affiliated school. There were teachers and neighbors who helped me, but I never felt like I was part of Fort Smith. A neighbor was a newspaper reporter and seemed to always be doing interesting things, so in junior high I decided that would be a good job.

ML: I always think of it as right there, literally on the border of the South and the West.

BT: Yes.

ML: I was just wondering if what you experienced was a cultural reluctance beyond what anyone would normally feel in approaching a family at a time of grief.

BT: No, I think it was my own not knowing what to ask them or what to say to them because I hadn't had much experience with death. Now I would feel much differently. Then, I thought it would be intrusive to talk to the grieving family, but I think now people like to talk about their loss. It would be a chance to get their story in the newspaper, to tell people what kind of person their loved one was. But it seemed to me at the time that they wouldn't have wanted to do that.

ML: Sense of propriety.

BT: Yes, my own sense of propriety. Yes. Which probably made me not a great reporter.

ML: Okay. Thank you for that trip back. Okay, then John Thompson wrote you a letter of recommendation to Louisville.

BT: Yes. I worked on the copy desk first then as a reporter in southern Indiana. I learned that Gene Foreman was the managing editor for the *Arkansas Democrat*.

ML: Yes.

BT: And I called to see if he had any jobs. I was in Louisville four years.

ML: So what year are we in now?

BT: I was in Louisville from 1966 until 1970. I was in Pine Bluff from 1963 to 1966.

ML: So you came to the *Democrat* in about 1970. Can you explain the relationship between the *Pine Bluff Commercial* and the *Arkansas Democrat*?

BT: Gene Foreman was the editor of the *Arkansas Democrat* and he also hired me at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*. I loved working for him. I called to see if he had any jobs, and he said that he had a job for a city hall reporter. So I came to work for the *Arkansas Democrat* because I knew Gene. Again, I never had a job interview. Newspapers were just kind of informal. I think they're probably more formal now. At the Louisville paper, they said, AWell, everyone we've had that comes here from Arkansas has always gone back to Arkansas.@ I said, ANo, not me. I don't think I will.@ [Laughs] But I did want to come back and go to work for the *Democrat* as Little Rock City Hall reporter. It was then an afternoon newspaper.

ML: And when had Gene made that move himself? How recently was that?

BT: I am not sure. I am not sure. I don't know if he even went back to the *New York*

Times when he left Pine Bluff. I can't remember right now what happened to him in the four years that I was in Louisville.

ML: Now, who owns the *Pine Bluff Commercial*?

BT: The Freeman family.

ML: The Freeman family. And who owned the *Democrat* when you went there?

BT: The nephews of K. August Engel, who was deceased and had been a longtime owner. His nephews were Marcus George and Stanley Berry.

ML: And they brought in Gene Foreman in the position of . . . ?

BT: He was managing editor.

ML: I don't think I ever met Gene Foreman. I don't think that I was ever fortunate enough to have that experience, but he was legendary.

BT: Yes.

ML: Everybody I've ever heard speak of him spoke . . .

BT: He was an excellent, excellent newspaperman. He must have been born that way. He was from Elaine, Arkansas—you know, a little town where they had violent race riots in the early part of the century.

ML: And how old was he at the time when you started at the *Democrat*?

BT: I have no idea.

ML: You have no idea.

BT: He is not a lot older than I am—maybe I don't know. I was in my twenties at the *Commercial*, so he was in his early thirties, I would say.

ML: Would you say he was just a natural-born newspaperman?

BT: Yes.

ML: What qualities did he have?

BT: He knew just what was right about a story—what would make a good story. He knew how to edit a story to make it just right. He was very precise about words and accurate. He was just an excellent teacher and a nice person to work for.

ML: And a nice guy, too?

BT: He was rather distant and aloof. He was a little hard to get to know on a first-name basis. But, certainly, he was not unpleasant in any way. He was not someone I was a close friend with.

ML: But if you did something very well, did he come in [and] say, "Great job, Brenda," or . . . ?

BT: Yes, he usually would. He had a funny sense of humor, which was kind of ironic. Yes, he would.

ML: And if you made a mistake or did something . . . ?

BT: He would tell you what you ought to do. He wasn't really harsh, but he expected you to do well—to do right—to do what he wanted. I mean, he didn't tell you how to write the story, but he just expected you to make it a good story, and do everything right.

ML: So what was the city hall beat like?

BT: It was fun. Jack Meriwether, who was a funny guy, was the city manager. Little Rock city government was going through some changes. One of the first stories I did was about the decline of the city bus company—now called Central Arkansas Transit. The bus company was about to go out of business because of a decrease in ridership. Most everyone had a car, and no one rode the bus except the people

who had to. I thought city government was really interesting because it was close to the people. They were dealing with things that directly affect people—water and sewer, and land usage—the things that really directly affect your life.

ML: So from your previous reporting work, did you feel you had a pretty good grasp of those types of issues? Or was there a pretty steep learning curve?

BT: I had to learn a lot. Every job that I had, I had to learn quite a bit. I didn't come in with much knowledge of how city government worked—or state government or federal courthouses—the various beats that I had. And it's good because many readers don't know, either; so I had to ask questions because people wanted to know.

ML: What do you remember about the newsroom at that time?

BT: Well, when I went to work at the *Democrat*, there were three reporters to one telephone at the desk. [Laughter] I shared a telephone with two other reporters, Lynda Zimmer [now Straw] and Martin Kirby. Martin, it seemed, was always on the phone because he was dealing with some kind of personal thing, like his electricity was about to be cut off because he forgot to pay the bill. And Martin did a lot of investigative pieces that required long telephone conversations. He was a good reporter. He started his own newspaper—Che and Wade Rathke, who worked for ACORN (Arkansas Community Organizations for Reform Now), because he wanted to report on “the good, the true, and the beautiful.” I forget now what it was called. I think I still have some copies of it.

ML: Was it the *Arkansas Advocate*?

BT: I'm not sure. Martin always wanted me to write a story for him about the good

old days and high old times at the *Pine Bluff Commercial* because the staff there was a close little group and the paper was good then, but many people hated it. [laughs] We were not popular in the town, partly because of the times and the strong stance the paper took on civil rights. People would get mad at stuff. Someone got mad that we ran photographs of the black and white high schools side by side. It was the time of the march on Washington D.C. Reporters were not held in high regard because we wrote about things people didn't like. So we were always feeling a little like outcasts. People did not approve of us.

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

ML: [This is side] two of tape one with Brenda Tirey. Did you ever feel like you were in any physical danger?

BT: Not really. No. Some people at the paper got some threats. I answered the telephone in the newsroom one night, and a man made some kind of threat to the building.

ML: We=re talking about Pine Bluff now.

BT: Pine Bluff. Yes.

ML: Okay, and we were talking about Martin and . . .

BT: Oh yes, at the *Democrat*. We had three reporters to one telephone. The *Democrat* was, and still is, in a former YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association] building, I think. It had drain holes in the floors [laughs], and things like that. We had old typewritersCold-fashioned typewriters. We cut and pasted stories. We progressed to having scanned copies. They went through scanners, but we did not have computers. We wrote on typewriters, and it was cut and paste to

change anything.

ML: And it was an afternoon paper at that time.

BT: It was an afternoon paper, yes, which put us at quite a disadvantage with the *Gazette* at times—or I thought it did—because so many things occur on *Gazette* deadlines. We had a 10:00 a.m. deadline for the state edition and noon for city, or something like that. So much seemed to happen in the afternoon and evening. But I still enjoyed it. I enjoyed the people I was working with.

ML: Let's talk about some of that.

BT: Well, the city editor [I worked for] was Ralph Patrick. Tucker Steinmetz was the assistant [city editor]. Barlow Herget was an assistant city editor.

ML: The managing editor was Foreman.

BT: Yes, the managing editor was Foreman. And then Bob McCord came as the editor.

ML: I think so.

BT: Van Tyson and Bob were writing editorials. Marcus George also may have been writing some, but I think Van Tyson and Bob McCord did most of the editorials. George Douthit had been there, but left soon after I got there. He was a crusty, old-style newspaperman.

ML: And whatChe was the . . . ?

BT: He was the state capitol reporter.

ML: And who was state editor? Do you remember?

BT: No, I don't remember. It may have been Bill Terry, but I think he was wire editor.

ML: How long did you [cover] city hall, then?

BT: I guess for a couple of years. And I wanted to be CI decided it was kind of an apex to cover state government and politics. I thought that was what anyone should aspire to do, so I just lobbied a lot to get to do that. I did get to cover Dale Bumpers= second-term gubernatorial campaign.

ML: Does that mean you were assigned pretty much full-time to his campaign?

BT: Yes, during his campaign. Yes. Then I covered that legislative session after his inauguration for his second term, and other things at the capitol during his second term. I stayed at the capitol bureau until I left to go to the *Arkansas Gazette*. I was at the *Democrat* from 1970 to 1976.

ML: Starting with city hall and then going through the state government, what was the situation regarding women reporters at that time? Were you one of a few?

BT: I was one of a few. Lynda [Zimmer] Straw was the North Little Rock reporter. I actually went from city hall in Little Rock to city hall in North Little Rock. They decided at one time Cone of those management things Cthat it would be good to switch beat reporters around so that we would get to [be] familiar with different things, and we wouldn=t get burned out on sources or get too close to sources. It was just one of those ideas that management thought would be good, so we all switched jobs. I switched over to the North Little Rock City Hall beat, and I covered the last days of [W. F.] Casey Laman, the longtime mayor and political boss of North Little Rock, and the election of his successor Bob Rosamond. During that campaign to succeed Casey Laman in North Little Rock was when I started covering the Bumpers campaign. I went to state government from North Little Rock City Hall.

ML: Did you get a lot more money for . . . ?

BT: No. [Laughter] It was just the glory, because I thought that=s where the action was. And it was interesting to learn about state government, about government on a bigger scale. The legislature was always fun because they were kind of outrageous and interesting. You get more familiar with the state and all the regions of the state, and how government works.

ML: That would be a nice introductionCfollowing a candidate for governor around the state and seeing it through.

BT: And having to travel around the state for different things and different issuesCeducation and prisons, and different things like that. It was always interesting.

ML: What would you consider your strongestCyour forte?

BT: I don=t know. On good days I could explain complicated things well, like Public-Service Commission issues. I could sometimes interview people well. I think I was not tough enough sometimes or not good enough at cultivating sources. But I always thought my job was being an observer and a reporter. I didn=t cultivate sources well, but I could describe them well.

ML: And the problem with cultivating sources?

BT: Well, in state governmentCI mean, in politics, you really have toCand I had people who would talk to me and give me tips, but I wasn't as good at doing that as some of the men were.

ML: Was part of it a Agood ol= boys@ kind of . . .

BT: Yes, and it was harder for me I thought at the time.

ML: And didn't you feel, once you were doing that, that this was the apex of reporting? [Laughs]

BT: No, it was a good thing in that it was kind of a top job in reporting at the paper. But there were always at least two or three reporters for each newspaper out at the capitol. There was not a bureau chief. Now I think it probably wasn't as important as I thought then. But, of course, I was younger and innocent. I was impressed by public service.

ML: Okay. I remember being pretty impressed myself just to see that press room at the capitol. Although I certainly never worked in it, I thought it looked pretty cool. What was it like to work there?

BT: Well, it was a little bit too easy. People would bring stuff in. They would like to stop and hang out, and some of the politicians would like to stop and tell you stuff. It was hard to work independently because there *were* so many people using the press room. You'd just come in and do your stories on a deadline, so it's hard to sneak around and avoid other reporters.

ML: Did you have a little desk to call your own and a phone to call your own there?

BT: Yes.

ML: But it was crammed with . . .

BT: Well, there were other reporters, tooCfrom the wire services and the *Arkansas Gazette* and smaller papers.

ML: They had their reporters and their desks and their phones.

BT: Yes.

ML: So how *would* you be phoning in something that you didn't want everybody else

to be getting in their paper? If you got news, how did you . . . ?

BT: Well, you=d have to just go back to the office and write—or something like that—unless there was some deadline, which sometime things were like press conferences and stuff like that. And eventually they got the technology to Cand, of course, now I=m sure everyone does it on computer notebooks and things like that.

ML: Right. In terms of other reporters, your competition out thereCwho were they?

BT: Very good reporters from the *Gazette*, Ernie Dumas and Doug Smith. Carol Griffee was there after I went to the *Gazette*. She had come to work at the capitol for the Palmer papers and she had worked newspapers since high school in Fort Smith. The Palmer papers in the southwestern part of the stateCHot Springs, Camden, El Dorado, Magnolia, and Texarkana—owned by the family of Walter Hussman, Jr. who bought the *Democrat*. I worked for the *Democrat* at the capitol with Tom Jordan, who went on to the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, and Larry O'Dell, who became the editor of the *Batesville Guard*. A.L. May was a reporter then. He went on to a newspaper in North Carolina and Washington, DC.

ML: Did Walter Hussman, Jr. buy the *Democrat* while you were there?

BT: Yes.

ML: And what was that changeover like?

BT: Well, everyone was kind of apprehensive about it. In fact, I was working with one of the reporters who had worked for the Hot Springs paper. He said that the owners were penny-pinching, had limited the news staff and were conservative. He thought that they might try influence reporters on how to write stories. I don=t

know. The Fort Smith paper was pretty much like that, too, when I had worked. So there was a lot of apprehension. When I was at the *Democrat*, we tried to start a union at one point. It was funny. It was at a time when I think the *Arkansas Gazette* newsroom was also trying to form a union with the Newspaper Guild.

ML: Yes.

BT: At the *Democrat* we were trying to affiliate with the International Typographical Union, which also represented the printers at the newspaper.

ML: And were you active in that?

BT: Yes, I was. Well, I was working for affiliating with the union. We hired Phil Kaplan as our lawyer. I told the staff to come to my house for a meeting with Phil. I learned the importance of keeping communications channels open. We were supposed to keep up in groups of three or something like that—keep communicating, to keep the effort going and get the vote for the union. But I didn't really talk all the time to my three people. One of them was Van Tyson, who I thought was pro-union. Then at the election, Van was an observer for the management. We came in and there was [laughter] Ernie and Van. I was dismayed because he was one of the people I was supposed to be keeping with. But it was a failed effort. The union was defeated.

ML: Who were you dealing with in management at that point at the *Democrat*?

BT: At the *Democrat*? Well, Bob McCord was the editor. I think Gene had moved on to *Newsday*. Gene was not there for a really long time after I came, actually. He went on to work with *Newsday* and then the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

ML: Was Jerry McConnell there at that time?

BT: Jerry McConnell became the managing editor after Gene.

ML: What were you wanting out of the union effort?

BT: We didn't have a retirement plan. We had hardly any sick leave. We got just two weeks of vacation. And salaries were not high.

ML: Do you remember what your salary was at any point along that way?

BT: I think when I came from Louisville, I think I got \$150 a week. And when I went to Louisville, I started out at \$110 a week. I had been making about \$95 a week in Pine Bluff. A friend of mine came to Louisville from Pasadena, California. One of the other copy editors made about \$200 more a week because he was making a lot more in Pasadena than I was in Pine Bluff. They gave each of us a little raise over our previous salary. That was typical. But we wanted salaries and benefits at the *Democrat*. Salaries were probably more important to us because it was a pretty young staff.

ML: And you were having to drive around in your own car and pay your expenses. Were you reimbursed for your expenses, or what?

BT: I don't even remember. I don't remember being reimbursed for expenses. I think on road trips we probably got some mileage. But in the city I don't think we did.

ML: And I think we started making the competition with the *Gazette* . . .

BT: Yes. Well, we had kind of an inferiority complex about the *Gazette*.

ML: Why?

BT: Well, it just seemed that people liked to have their stuff in the *Gazette*.

ML: Reporters?

BT: No.

ML: Oh, the politicians.

BT: The politicians. It was a more statewide newspaper than the *Democrat*, which did not have the statewide circulation that the *Gazette* did. The *Gazette* was considered *the* state newspaper. So people liked to tell stuff to the *Gazette*—they enjoyed being in the *Gazette* because of its larger circulation and reputation.

ML: Despite the *Gazette*'s policy—its editorial page policy?

BT: Yes.

ML: That didn't really matter so much.

BT: Yes, I think it didn't matter so much by the time I was there—I mean, it was pretty far after 1957. Well, there were—probably a lot of liberals feel that way about the *Democrat* now, like a lot of conservative people felt about the *Gazette* [back then]—they just *hated* the editorial page. They'd get mad when they'd read it as liberals do now when they read the *Democrat*. But they still read the news.

ML: And what was your perception of both papers at that time?

BT: Both Gene Foreman and the editorial editor at the *Commercial*, Patrick J. Owens, were former *Gazette* people, and both of them were such good newsmen. I really had an admiration for the *Gazette*. But then when Gene went to the *Democrat*, I knew that it was going to be good, too. And I knew Gene, and I figured that he would hire me. So it was a good opportunity to come to work in Little Rock and to work for people I really liked and enjoyed. I liked the *Democrat*. I enjoyed working for the *Democrat*. But my metabolism actually fits more in an evening paper. [Laughter] I *hated* being at work at 7:00 or 7:30 in the morning [laughter] when we had to get out everything in by noon or 1:00 p.m.—and then sometimes

cover night meetings, and *still* have to get up and be there at 7:00 in the morning. Although I thought journalism was funCwe always had to work really long hours and it was really kind of a consuming job as far as I was concerned.

ML: There was a lot more than just a forty-hour week.

BT: Yes, there was always a lot more than a forty-hour week. Also, I always felt that a reporter shouldn=t really be a participant in community activities because you couldn=t then be an objective observer. You couldn=t be impartial, so you shouldn=t participate in other things. I never did, which limits you a lotCyou just associated with other journalists or others in related kinds of work. Our social lives to some extent was—or mine anyway—mostly coworkers or people in the same kind of field.

ML: That=s interesting, because when I came, I felt that all the reporters knew each other better, and I just didn=t know how you got into that club. [Laughs] It seemed to be so tight. And I=m not saying [this] in a mean way at all, but it was very tightly woven.

BT: It was.

ML: But we were talking about your concerns about the paper when Walter Hussman bought it. . .

BT: I didn=t really know much about the *Democrat* when I came to work there. I knew George Douthit. He had gone to work for [Former Arkansas Governor, Orval] Faubus, I think, shortly after I got there, as his press secretary when he was running against Dale Bumpers. I knew that George had been a longtime capitol reporter and was kind of a curmudgeon, but he knew a lot about state government.

ML: Overall, though. . . ?

BT: I thought it was a more politically conservative paper, but I don=t know that it really was when I was there. I wasn=t there very long after Walter Hussman bought the paper. I heard from two reporters at the *Gazette*, who were sometimes at the capitol, that there was an opening at the *Gazette*, and they said I could have it if I applied for it. So I did. I went to talk to Bob Douglas, the managing editor, and did get a job at the *Gazette*. I was a state capitol reporter then, but the *Gazette* didn=t want to put me at the capitol because that would be confusing to sources. So when I switched newspapers, I went to work at the federal building instead.

ML: And then did you then eventually come back to the capitol from . . . ?

BT: Yes. And then I went eventually back to the capitol.

ML: So you remained at the *Gazette* until . . .

BT: Until it closed.

ML: Was the ride emotional for you in terms of moving between those two papers?

BT: Yes.

ML: So many people went in one direction or another, or sometimes even back and forth.

BT: Yes, a couple times.

ML: Yes, I=m one, having worked at the *Democrat* and the *Gazette*. The competition was naturally intensified at times.

BT: I had never worked in a competitive situation until I got here, either. I mean, the Fort Smith paper had two papers, but they were owned by the same person. Louisville had two papers owned by the same company.

ML: Yes.

BT: The newspaper war between the *Democrat* and the *Gazette* was very fierce. I don't think I would have left journalism if my job had not been torn away from me. After that happened, I realized what a toll that competition had taken, just the stress. The feeling you had to get stuff first and beat the competition at great cost.

ML: Can you cite an example or say what some point when you actually can recall feeling the pressure?

BT: Oh, yes. When I worked at the *Democrat* the competition was tough. Ernie [Dumas] and Doug [Smith] had both been at the state capitol a long time. My competition in the city hall was Jay Huddleston, who was a longtime *Gazette* reporter. He had worked there a lot longer than I had been in Little Rock. In North Little Rock, it was John Woodruff, who had been at the *Gazette* for a long time. Of course, Casey [Laman] was so manipulative that he would just play reporters all the time. So he liked me when I first came in because I wasn't Lynda. [Lynda Zimmer Straw] And then he didn't like me. It always hurt to get beaten on a story when someone had a story and you thought you should have had it. And during the newspaper war, it got much more intense, and the *Democrat*, of course, outlasted the *Gazette*. Hussman was really willing to invest in making it a paper that was going to survive and was actually going to print the news. We would get [a note in our mailbox that said], "Why don't we have this?" if the *Democrat* had anything that the *Gazette* didn't.

ML: From who?

BT: Oh, from the editors. You knew that if one paper had it first, any little story—

then the other had to get it too. At the time the *Gazette* closed, I was back to being a copy editor. I was back where I=d started.

ML: Oh.

BT: I=d been an assistant city editor, called “Metro” editor, form 1986 until shortly before the *Gazette* closed. I was in charge of the city desk at night. Any police story, any kind of tiny, little story or a big story or anything, we wanted to get it first, or there’d be criticism.

ML: Who was the bearer of most of those critical notes?

BT: When Bill Shelton was city editor, if we got beaten by the *Democrat* we’d get a note saying, AWhy we not have?@ You=d get a little note with the *Democrat* article attached. [Laughter] And then after Gannett bought the paper there were reprimands and memos. You knew that you had to have anything that was news. It was just the whole pervasive system. It wasn=t one person.

ML: Yes.

BT: But we had to do better than the *Democrat* would do.

ML: And what did you feel was riding on this, your own personal job and income, or more than that even?

BT: I think more than that. There was this pervasive pressure, and you knew it was the survival of the newspaper. I mean, after the *Gazette* lost an antitrust suit, and you knew it was just a fight to the end of one of those papers.

ML: And you were saying that it was inconceivable that . . .

BT: Well, for a long time it was just hard to believe that the *Gazette* would lose. But then with Gannett=s arrival, and their being such a big corporation and being re-

sponsible to stockholders, they were not going to put up with the kind of losses that the *Gazette* was having.

ML: How was it for you, then, afterCwhat, now? You=ve been in the business for almost thirty years?

BT: I guess I had started full-time in about 1961 and ended in 1991. Yes, that=s thirty years, except for just a little less than a year in Washington.

ML: Maybe I=d better back up. In terms of coverage of the beats that you=ve covered—particularly the state capitol, for instance, and politics in general—was there any difference in the way that you covered them at one paper or the other?

BT: The *Democrat* was still an afternoon newspaper when I made the switch. I felt the *Gazette* did carry some more weight at the capitol somehow. More prestige. And I think it was partly because of the quality of the reporters that they had thereCErnie Dumas and Doug Smith were always very good reporters and tough competition.

ML: But your own workCyour own approach to your own stories and what you felt was expected of you. Was there any difference in how it was explained to you by the editor?

BT: It changedCthe *Democrat* was much more basic at the time I was there with Gene. We were expected to do features and things like that in addition to beat reporting, and occasionally columns. When I got to the *Gazette*, we would have to do columns and features Gannett wanted—little tidbit kinds of things, little gossipy kinds of things. They were always trying something different, especially after Gannett bought the *Gazette*

ML: What was the biggest story that comes to mind from your *Democrat* days?

BT: Oh, I'm trying to think. I can't single out one story that I wrote at the *Democrat* that is that memorable. I think just the whole coverage of the Dale Bumpers era that was very exciting because the state had some money. He had very good ideas on what to do with it. I mean, things that I think really helped the state. We hadn't had free textbooks in the school before. We hadn't had kindergarten before. He started a Medicaid program for working families who had catastrophic illnesses. The kind of leadership [laughs] we have now, and the kinds of things that they will do with the money, it's just not nearly as exciting. I remember one story I wrote at the *Democrat* about Jack Meriwether, the city manager, who wanted the bus company in operation because it meant less traffic on the streets and transportation for people without cars. But he never rode the bus, which is kind of typical of everyone else. No one wants to ride the bus if they have their own car to go where they want to. When I wrote that, people would come up and say, "Well, this isn't the kind of story we usually read in the *Democrat*." I don't know what. It was just kind of a different kind of story. It wasn't just a straight lead kind of story.

ML: And what about, then, your time at the *Gazette*? Does one [particular story] come to mind?

BT: Oh, there was one that caused a lot of stir. It was the SAWER Project.

ML: Which?

BT: During Clinton's first term as governor. It was called SAWER. S-A-W-E-R. It was an anti-poverty and energy conservation project that was supposed to help

poor people by buying chain saws for them to cut wood.

ML: Okay. Explain something . . .

BT: They bought chainsaws for people in need of work to go cut wood to sell to people for heating purposes. They were supposed to make money from selling the wood. But they didn't have any place for them to cut the wood. They hadn't thought of that. They had all these chainsaws, and it was just a total flop. It was an idea that sounded good, but no one had any idea how to accomplish it. They had spent quite a bit of money on these chainsaws and setting up the program. And there was no wood to cut. So that was a memorable one.

ML: And then you were out there at the capitol for most of Clinton's years in office, or all of them?

BT: No, his first term. I was not there in his second term.

ML: You were not there in his second term. What about thereafter?

BT: I was there in his first term and Frank White's term. Frank White defeated him.

ML: Yes. So you covered the creation science story?

BT: Yes, I did. I wrote the story, in fact, when it passed the senate. I didn't think it was a serious deal. I did not think it would go far. I didn't miss the story, but I didn't make a big deal of it. I was covering the senate. They passed it saying, "AOh, let's do this as a favor to Jim Holstead," the senator who sponsored it. And Cliff Hoofman, who was Jim Holstead's state representative counterpart, got it passed in the house. It became a very big story, which I missed as significant when it came up in the senate.

ML: Why?

BT: I just thought that it was frivolous, and that it wasn't going to go anywhere. I didn't think it would pass. And, of course, it did. And Frank White signed it into law.

ML: Frank White's term in office. But then weren't you back after Clinton was re-elected?

BT: No.

ML: Where were you then?

BT: I was an assistant city editor.

ML: Oh, okay. You were assistant city editor then.

BT: And I worked the night desk.

ML: Okay.

BT: At the *Gazette*.

ML: Okay. So you were not reporting anymore after that point.

BT: No, I didn't report anymore. I was just an editor.

ML: Okay. And then you ended up going . . .

BT: To the copy desk.

ML: To the copy desk.

BT: Yes. I did restaurant reviews.

ML: Okay. And that gets around to how you felt, finally, when the *Arkansas Democrat* won the war, and the *Gazette* was going to be closed and become the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*.

BT: Well, I was just almost numb by the time it happened. And I was really tired from just all the stress of that last year of the newspaper war. It was just very,

very intense. The career that I thought I=d always wanted had ended in a newspaper that I had admired from since it won the Pulitzer Prize in 1957. When I went to work for it, I thought it was a good place to work. It dealt with things that were important. The *Democrat* I thought was good when I worked for it, too. I was just at a loss for quite a while. I had worked at temporary jobs, and I did some freelance editing jobs after the closing.

ML: Have you ever entertained the thought of going to the *Democrat-Gazette*?

BT: No, I never did. I couldn=t picture myself working there again. I thought of it, but the feelings were so intense about that war, it just seemed like it would be kind of a betrayal. I decided that I just wanted to try something else. It took almost a year to figure outCto find another job that I thought I=d enjoy.

ML: What do you do now?

BT: I work for the circuit court. I=m called an intake officer. I work on cases for involuntary treatment for mental illness and drug and alcohol addiction. People that file petitions for those commitments come to me to prepare them. Judge Mary McGowan hired me and was the only judge for those cases at the time. Now seven different judges hear these cases. I do all the files and the dockets, answer the telephone. I=m a one person office.

ML: Do you like it?

BT: Yes. I=ve been doing that now for twelve years. It=s interesting, too. Every day is different, kind of like newspapers. The interesting thing about newspapers is that every day was something to look forward to, and something different. You learned a lot. You had access to information about stuff that as just a citizen

maybe you couldn't get. I don't know that that's true—it shouldn't be. The job I have now is kind of like that. Every day is kind of different, and every person has a different story.

ML: And dealing with people constantly.

BT: And dealing with people. Yes.

ML: And their lives.

BT: Yes.

ML: When you look at the newspapers now, particularly with the *Democrat-Gazette* do you see changes that you like or regret in terms of?

BT: The editorial policy I don't like it. It seems mean-spirited. It may be that I'm the liberal getting angry at the conservative views. I'm just offended by a lot of their editorials. They do have a big news hole. They have not slashed the news hole like Gannett probably would have done to the *Gazette* if it had won. Gannett had reduced the space for news when it bought the *Gazette*.

ML: Yes.

BT: The *Democrat-Gazette* reports a lot of news, and I appreciate their national and international coverage. It's not a bad newspaper.

ML: Not at all. Well, have I left out anything? Is there any big part of your journalism career, particularly the time at the *Arkansas Democrat*, that comes to mind that you can't believe I haven't asked you about?

BT: No.

ML: Or you want to be sure to get in for posterity?

BT: When I worked at the *Democrat*, I always felt that we were kind of the underdog

to the *Gazette*. It was also a lot of fun to get a story that they didn't have sometimes, and to do them differently than they did, because they did expect to beat you. I always get the stories first and always get the big stories.

ML: Yes.

BT: It was always fun to beat the *Gazette*.

BT: One of the first stories I did for Gene Foreman at the *Democrat*—he always had good ideas for stories—was on Hank DeNoble, who had been a longtime traffic engineer for the city of Little Rock. He had just a big influence on the way the city was shaped. He was the person who decided that University Avenue would be the main corridor it is now. He was hit by a car and killed working one night on the Interstate 30 bridge. He was working at night on some kind of highway project as a consultant after he left the city job. I had not lived in Little Rock before, so I had to call people and find out all he had done, talking to different people who knew him, even his political foes. He had been at odds with a lot of the developers at the time, like Billy Rector, a prominent real estate man. I enjoyed the city beat in a lot of ways. I enjoyed most of my newspaper career except at the end, when it just got so crazy and stressful.

ML: Yes. Well, going around town, isn't it nice to know so much? You know people, you know stories, you know a lot of history. For instance, you were talking about University Avenue. How things got the way they are. So much more probably than most people do.

BT: Yes, it also makes me feel pretty old. [Laughter]

ML: Yes, I agree.

BT: Well, University Avenue was University Avenue by the time I got here, but a lot of people still do remember when it was Hays Street.

ML: And who was Hays

BT: Who knows?

ML: [Laughter] If you don't know, then nobody does. Okay. If that's good enough for you, then I think we'll end at that. Thank you very much.

BT: Thank you.

[End of Interview]

[Transcribed by Cheri Pearce]