

Gazette Project

Interview with

Nate Allen
Fayetteville, Arkansas
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Interviewer: Bob Douglas

Nate Allen: Tape of Nate Allen. October 20, 2000.

Bob Douglas: Okay, I'm just going to let you tell your own story about you and the *Gazette* and I'll ask some questions from time to time. I'll interrupt you from time to time, but not always.

NA: Well, I started in February of 1976. I had been with the *Springdale News* since 1973. I had met Orville Henry covering the [Arkansas] Razorbacks when I was stringing for the *Democrat* in 1974 and 1975 while still working for the *Springdale News*. David Smith, the *Gazette* writer who had been covering the Razorbacks in Fayetteville, got sick, and Orville approached me about covering the Razorbacks after the 1975 season ended. I started in February of 1976 and worked through August of 1990. So I was there 14 years.

BD: Well, let's see — you came from Missouri?

NA: I had gone to school at the University of Missouri. I had moved to Joplin, Missouri, in my senior year in high school, and I had done stringing and intern work for the *Joplin Globe*. I met Larry White, who was working as a news reporter at the *Globe* and was going to be sports editor at the *Springdale News* starting in the fall. He really didn't know that much about sports, but he knew a whole lot about layout. So he hired me out of college to write on the Razorbacks, and I have been based in Fayetteville covering the Razorbacks ever since.

BD: Where are you from originally?

NA: New Jersey, actually. That's where I grew up, but I'm an "Arkie" now. I guess I've been here 27 years.

BD: I'd say so. What was it like working at the *Gazette*?

NA: Well, I never actually worked in the *Gazette* office. I don't think I was in the building more than a half dozen or a dozen times. I was the correspondent in Fayetteville. I covered the Razorbacks from there, and I worked closely with Orville. There were kind of different phases of the *Gazette* during my time there. When I first started, Orville definitely was in charge. Had some really good times during that era. Then things changed, especially once Orville came up here. While I enjoyed working with him here, that's when the paper changed once he left Little Rock

BD: What was it like working for Orville when he was sports editor and he was in Little Rock?

NA: Oh, Orville has some idiosyncrasies that sometimes make things kind of odd, but generally it was great because he pretty well knew what he wanted. He was very good about saying, "Don't worry about repeating what I write covering the same game. We're going to have two different approaches to the story, and it doesn't mean either one of them is wrong." He was generally very good to work for — very helpful.

BD: Professional, wasn't he?

NA: Very professional. Yes. He had his quirks and his idiosyncrasies, and there were times I disagreed with some things he did, but, yes, the guy didn't last that long for nothing. He knew what he was doing and does know what he is doing. I have the utmost respect for him. No writer I knew of ever knew his readers better than Orville. While he certainly

could be critical, just ask Lou Holtz or Ken Hatfield if Orville writes nothing but rosy stuff. Orville knew, despite all the seminar outside consultants and think tanks and smarmy ESPN types to the contrary, that belittling the Razorbacks and the University of Arkansas, like referring to it as UAF, for the sake of being a wise guy — that wasn't what most Arkansas readers wanted. Unfortunately, too many others at the *Gazette* didn't know that. That's a key reason why he left, and ultimately, that kind of thinking on many levels is why the paper died.

BD: Tell me how things changed.

NA: Actually, things started changing when you left as managing editor, because you generally left sports in Orville's hands. Orville was the last *Gazette* sports editor who really managed sports and the sports staff without constant interference. After that, it seemed sports became subject to the whims of the publisher and or managing editor, especially when the paper sold. But things changed even before that and even while Orville was still sports editor. Bill McIlwain, the guy they brought in from New York, I believe, as your one-year replacement as managing editor — like the many outsiders that followed, he apparently felt the need to flex his muscles by making unnecessary changes. One of his changes was that editor would not appear under a byline. Never editor. Orville had been *Gazette* sports editor since World War II and his byline always reflected it. He was embarrassed and felt slighted by the change. Very few Orville Henry — *Gazette* sports writer or *Gazette* staff, or whatever it was — articles appeared before he went over McIlwain's head to Hugh Patterson and got *Gazette* sports editor restored to his byline. James Thompson, who long worked on the desk for Orville, was the first sports editor once Orville went to Fayetteville in 1982, but he got reassigned shortly after

the paper sold. You could see the influences of Orville and Jim Bailey start to wane.

BD: Tell me about people like Jim Bailey and the guys that you did know.

NA: Jim is, without question, the best sportswriter that Arkansas, at least in my lifetime, and I would wager in anybody else's lifetime, ever produced. I think Orville Henry would tell you that. Orville is an institution and forever will be the Razorback authority, but Jim could say more in a paragraph than any of us could say in six. Certainly me, anyway. He didn't have to be cute to write cleverly. He just had that dry sense of humor and wonderful, understated, timing and knack to put the right verb in the right spot and to make it dryly describe more than a thousand adjectives could. He writes so well and knows so much what he's writing about and is 100 percent more interested in conveying the subject to the reader than promoting himself.

BD: How did you divide up the duties and assignments when you covered a game? It was Orville and Jim and you and maybe one or two others.

NA: When I first came to Springdale, the typical Razorback coverage for the *Gazette* was Orville did the game stories, Jim Lassiter did the opposing locker room, and Ish Haley did the Razorback locker room. Ish went to the *Dallas Times-Herald*, and David Smith did the Arkansas sidebar, and then I did it once I joined the *Gazette*. If they were really big games, Jim Bailey would write a story, too, instead of covering the AIC. I always thought Jim was the most underutilized — even in Orville's time. I thought that was an oversight. And later when you had people who should have written their stories in crayons out front and Jim buried in the back — well, that was just appalling.

BD: When Jim covered the AIC he made the AIC, didn't he?

NA: I think he invented the AIC. I don't think anybody would have known about the AIC if

Jim hadn't written about it.

BD: The AIC was the Arkansas Intercollegiate Conference and had most of the small colleges in Arkansas.

NA: Right. Jim knew it backwards and forwards, and he's a wonderful baseball writer. One thing accomplished during James Thompson's sports editor tenure was Jim going up to St. Louis to cover the entire Cardinal home stands. He wrote some great stuff. Whitey Herzog was the Cardinals' manager then and still speaks fondly of Jim. Whitey came through here [Fayetteville] and I interviewed him. All it took upon introducing myself was to mention knowing Jim Bailey, and the interview went great. As a boxing writer, Jim is without peer. You would read the national boxing writers and by comparison what they wrote read like pap. Jim would write after seeing the fight on closed circuit and do a better job than the writers who were there. Eventually Jim got off the AIC, covered the visiting sidebar story at Razorback games or an especially important Razorback sidebar. And Wadie Moore became a regular on road trips, too. How Wadie could keep his eyes open to do it, I'll never know. Because he would have covered a high school game Friday night and then gone into the office and compiled his rankings, wrote a follow column for Sunday's paper on high school sports and then, with only three or four Razorback games in Little Rock, usually be either driving to Fayetteville or catching the early-morning charter plane Orville had scheduled to fly to whatever road game in Texas.

BD: Well, tell me about other or any interesting stories that you remember about the game coverage or about traveling with Orville and Jim and the crews.

NA: There's always a zillion Orville stories. He's decidedly a breed apart. If I had them with me — because I had some written down for a book I was doing on Razorback

anecdotes...

BD: I didn't know that.

NA: But he was a piece of work in a lot of ways. I remember Jim telling the story of annually riding with Orville from Little Rock to the Cotton Bowl in Dallas and back, and Orville driving because Orville always said, "I know where I'm going." Actually, he could have gotten lost in a phone booth. Coming back on January 2, Jim said the same foreman in the same Dallas freight yard would say, "Mr. Henry, Happy New Year! Just take two lefts and a right and you'll be out of here and on your way to Arkansas."

BD: This is when he'd get lost?

NA: Orville would leave the hotel in Dallas and always go, "I take a right here," and so on, only to dead end in the same freight yard, according to Jim. Jim probably embellished it some, but he wouldn't have had to much.

BD: Who were some of the other sports editors?

NA: James Thompson, then Paul Borden with Gannett and one other one before I left.

BD: I'd say Borden was probably the best Gannett had.

NA: The best I experienced there. He had his faults, especially when he first arrived, but he generally came around to so disagreeing with what was going on with the paper that he left the sports editor's job in Little Rock to be a columnist in Fayetteville after Orville left for the *Democrat*.

BD: You never worked in Little Rock?

NA: No. The only time I was in Little Rock was to cover ball games.

BD: Tell me the mechanics of covering a football game and how the *Gazette* did it. I always thought that we had the most complete game coverage of any state in the country.

NA: Well, it was pretty cut and dried. Orville did the game story. I did the Arkansas locker room. Lassiter was gone by the time I got to the *Gazette*, and Jim Bailey began doing the opposing locker room, though he might also do a Razorback sidebar if it was a really big game that Arkansas won. And Wadie Moore started going a lot. I think Wadie has been the one who has never been replaced. While some have done really good jobs covering high schools in Arkansas since then, nobody since had the statewide hold both in football and basketball like Wadie did. There are few more thankless tasks than being the high school sports editor of a statewide paper. No matter what you write or how you rank teams, somebody is going to feel slighted, especially coaches. But there wasn't a coach in the state Wadie couldn't call. They might call him "Waddy" by mistake, a lot of them couldn't pronounce his name. But they sure knew who he was. Wadie worked so hard and commanded such respect that he could call them at any time.

BD: He became the authority on high school football, didn't he?

NA: Absolutely. On all high school sports, really. Wadie in his own right became to high school football what Orville is to the Razorbacks. Of course, now he works for the Arkansas Activities Association.

BD: When he came to the *Gazette*, he actually had to learn to type.

NA: That's what I understand.

BD: We had him just copying stories out of the paper. You know, not doing any writing. That's the way he started and he caught on very quick.

NA: Wadie is a great judge of people and a great handler of people. It's a shame he was never sports editor at the *Gazette*. He was the sports editor at Pine Bluff before he went to work for the Arkansas Activities Association.

BD: What did you think of the newspaper war and when did you know the tide had turned against the *Gazette*?

NA: It reminded me a lot of the Coke and Pepsi deal, when Pepsi just one day said, “We’re number one,” and Coke believed them and changed their own formula. I thought it was the same thing. It was like one day [*Arkansas Democrat* editor] John Robert Starr said, “We’re number one,” and the *Gazette* believed it.

BD: You mean when Coke came out with New Coke?

NA: Yes, New Coke.

BD: Coke lost money, then came out with Classic Coke.

NA: Which was the old Coke.

BD: Then they finally dropped the Classic. When did you realize it was about over?

NA: I remember being brought down to Little Rock and they had a pep talk that we were 2,000 ahead in circulation. I felt like, “This is a pep talk?” Hell, at one time the *Democrat* had said, “Please take us over. Buy us out with a JOA. [Joint Operating Agreement].” And we’re supposed to feel good that we’re leading by 2,000?

BD: We had a two-to-one lead in circulation most of the time I was there.

NA: It almost was like Starr was editing both papers. He got a lot of notoriety taking potshots at Orville, and it seemed some at the *Gazette*, not just the new regime, started doing the same. Every paper Orville has worked for has taken a little shot here and a little shot there at him. That must be what happens when you are really on the top of your field.

BD: Well, there was an anti-Razorback trend.

NA: Absolutely. That’s when the University of Arkansas, which was always synonymous with the Fayetteville campus, suddenly became UAF in the *Gazette*. An attempt to level

it with UALR, I suppose. It seemed, too, that newcomers to the paper in the 1980s seemed resentful of the Razorbacks' prominence and seemed to think they could put their personal stamp on things by championing UALR as Arkansas' basketball team. [Note: UALR doesn't have a football team]. Walker Lundy [the first managing editor that Gannett brought in] in particular seemed to think UALR hung the moon. I remember Clay Henry, one of Orville's sons who is the publisher of *Hawgs Illustrated* magazine, at the time was at the *Tulsa World*, I believe, and Paul Borden wanted to hire him as assistant sports editor. Clay went to Little Rock just to interview with Paul, and a somewhat embarrassed Paul said he was told Walker Lundy now was handling the interview then was going to give Clay an editing test. Clay said Lundy asked him what the most important sports beat was in Arkansas. "The Razorbacks," Clay answered without pause. "The Razorbacks are king in northwest Arkansas," Clay recalled Lundy saying, "but in Pulaski County, our surveys say UALR is most important to our readers." "Where did you do the survey," Clay recalled saying. "the UALR gym?" "I see we have a difference of opinion," Lundy said, according to Clay. Clay agreed there certainly was. He declined the editor's test and stayed with the *World* until he came to Fayetteville to publish *Hawgs Illustrated* magazine. Funny thing about Lundy — I couldn't stand how he was changing the paper, but he treated me well. Very fairly. I liked him better than the yuppie who replaced him. But it wasn't just newcomers regarding the Razorbacks. I remember George Fisher, who I really think is the best cartoonist that's ever been, but would periodically have a cartoon that would hint Razorback athletics was taking money from the school.

BD: Well, everybody knows that it doesn't.

NA: It's self supporting, mandated by its charter to be self supporting, although other college athletic departments around the state are not. Some of the editorial highbrows never quite grasped that. Not that the Razorbacks don't deserve critics. Frank [Broyles, the longtime Razorback athletic director and former head football coach] has made some mistakes, big ones at times. Anyone who has been at one place so long is going to do that over time. But by and large, you can't fault the man for what he's done making a nationally competitive total program with the budget he's worked with.

BD: That certainly seems true.

NA: Especially considering Michigan or Florida spends with the resources they've got to what Arkansas spends. Frank's gotten a pretty big return for the buck.

BD: Well, I think that will get it for awhile. I may have to get back to you, I don't know.

NA: Okay.

BD: Let's talk.

[End of Interview]