

Gazette Project

Interview with

Charles W. (Bill) Bell
Office of *The New York Times*,
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Interviewer: Jim Barden

Jim Barden: [This is Jim Barden on August 30, 2001] interviewing Bill Bell here in New York. In fact, in *The New York Times* office. Bill has stopped by on his way to do a weekly column that he is now doing for the *Daily News* after retiring from there. So let's just start with the *Daily News*, then, Bill. How long were you at the *News*?

Bill Bell: Twenty-five years.

JB: Twenty-five years.

BB: Twenty-five years and a few months.

JB: And what department were you in?

BB: I started out as night national editor. I had come directly from Italy. Over the years I did a series of things. I wrote and still write a religion column about ethics, spirituality and morality. I wrote two other columns. I do a lot of book reviews. I'm still writing and I'm under contract. I do a hell of a lot of traveling.

JB: I know that.

BB: Twenty-nine trips to the Pope, for one thing—Oklahoma City—too many. A lot of foreign travel. And a lot of heavy rewrite on big stories, but that's about how I spent it.

JB: Yes. Well, that sounds pretty good. It doesn't sound like they were cutting back on expenses if you're still doing all this.

BB: Yes. Well, I'm just doing book reviews and the religion column now.

JB: Yes.

BB: I gave up the other columns. I'm trying to write a couple of books myself, and I don't have time to do all that screwing around.

JB: [Laughs] Okay. Listen, now. I'll go back to the start of your career. Just chatting before you came over, you said that you started out—well, first of all, what is your—you are a native of Arkansas?

BB: Yes.

JB: And what is your . . .?

BB: Watson Chapel, which then was separate, but has since been annexed by Pine Bluff.

JB: I see.

BB: It is now a southern suburb of Pine Bluff, but at the time, it was a separate little entity. The population must have been about three hundred if you count the blacksmiths and our mules.

JB: And down there—you started with a *Gazette*, I believe you said, as a correspondent?

BB: Let me go back just a little bit and tell you. I got out of high school in 1951. That fall I enrolled at Harding College, where I came under the influence—I had been writing sports covering Watson Chapel for the *Pine Bluff Commercial* and doing

other things. I got to Searcy, and two guys took me under their wing. Both of them had connections with the *Gazette*. One was Lin Wright, who later became something for the *Gazette*—I think a sports writer—and Jimmy Atkinson, who had been something for the *Gazette*. I'm not sure. They were both leaving Searcy. Jimmy was taking a job as a sports editor of the *Pine Bluff Commercial*, and Lin was going to Little Rock to do some damn thing, maybe with the *Gazette*. They both suggested to Ralph Leach, who, at that time, was state editor at the *Gazette*, that I take over the Conway operation that they had been doing. Now, at the time—remember, we're talking about the fall of 1951—the *Gazette* didn't have, as far as I can remember, any bureaus anywhere in the state. They had a guy in Conway; they had a guy in Searcy; they had a guy, I think, in Forrest City or West Memphis. They had somebody in Pine Bluff, maybe two somebodies in Pine Bluff because that was the second-largest city in the state, and they had a sports thing over in Fayetteville. Ralph Leach told me they had about a dozen guys scattered around the state. If I remember right, we were paid two ways: we were paid some kind of walking-around money, and then we were paid by how much of our stuff they printed, the old stringer idea. If I remember it right, I got a check for \$60 a month or something, and then they would add onto that however many inches I had.

JB: Yes.

BB: Well, Searcy was a pretty busy place back then. They had Harding College, a lot of high school sports, the obituaries, the farm news. You always had something

every day to write. So starting the fall of 1951, that's what I did. And the way it worked, then, in those troglodyte times, was there were two Greyhound buses that stopped at Searcy on their way to Little Rock, and I had to make one of the two, preferably the first one, which was at about 3:15 in the afternoon, and hand the driver a special *Gazette* envelope filled with whatever the hell I'd written that day. The driver would pass it on when he arrived in Little Rock. There was always somebody from the *Gazette* to meet the Greyhound buses. That's how copy was delivered by everybody, it turns out, unless you telephoned. You would telephone with stories that broke late or you missed the bus. Later, when I was talking to Ralph Leach about this, he said, "Yes, we had two guys on the staff who did nothing except shuttle back and forth between the *Gazette* building and the old Greyhound bus station," delivering these things. It was a weird time. Crazy, primitive times. But I did that until probably late in 1953. It had to be two full years. The *Gazette* would send me to some stories that were breaking. Bald Knob had a big tornado once, and that's where I met Joe Wirges for the first time. Joe would come up to cover the Bald Knob tornado—Kennsett, Bald Knob way—I was over there helping him. And then there'd be jail breaks. One time the *Gazette* sent me over to Kennsett for some kind of a jail break. My first page-one byline, in fact, if I remember right. Most of this stuff was signed "Special to the *Gazette*," right? The first byline was on page one. I was terribly proud of it. I may have it someplace. It was about two guys who broke out of jail in Kennsett by carving a bar of soap into the shape of a pistol and intimidating the jailer's

wife. And so it was stuff like that. It was a lot of fun, and I paid some of the bills with it. Then, in the fall of 1953, I got a call from Jimmy Atkinson down in Pine Bluff. Jimmy and I had stayed in touch over the years. He said, “Hey, Bill, they’re looking for somebody full time down at the *Gazette* if you’d like to try out for it. Tell them I called you.” So I called Ralph Leach because he was the guy always on the phone with stringers. He was the guy who taught me how to spell “cemetery.” [Laughs] I used to spell it—I used to get these crazy messages from the—I always spelled it with an “a” at the end, “cemetary,” and Ralph said, “Bill, by God, one thing I’m going to do is teach you how to spell cemetery!” [Laughs] So he did that! Anyway, I called him up, and he said, “Yes, we’re looking for somebody to work on the state desk,” handling the copy from guys like me who had been sending it down there. A thankless task, I’m here to tell you, Jim! I don’t know how it was by 1957, but I can tell you in 1953, it was a thankless task. Ralph would open the envelopes and he would look down the list of stories—unfold the papers and so on—because then, as now, the editors and department heads would have a meeting before the state edition. They’d take a look at what was important enough to move out front or was important enough to keep on the obit page or the sports page, farm page or wherever. So he would cast a cursory look over all this stuff. He’d say, “Okay, Bill,” or Ned, or whoever the hell was sitting there with me, “Do something with this.” So we would edit it or rewrite it or whatever. That’s what I did for about six months, but I also got sent out because I had a strong sportswriting background.

JB: Yes.

BB: That's where I came from. I would be sent out to cover these damn high school football games and basketball games because the season had gone from football to basketball. One day, about six months later, I got a call from Jimmy Atkinson again. He said, "Bill, the sports editor's job is open at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*. You ought to take it." So I went in and wrung my hands and told Ralph. He said, "Take it. It's better to be a boss than it is to be a guy on a desk." I said, "Thanks." Little did I know. [Laughs] I went down to Pine Bluff, where I was sports editor for seven months, then I was drafted and sent away from Arkansas forever. I never went back.

JB: So that was 1950 . . . ?

BB: 1954. I got drafted in November of 1954. I only go back to Arkansas now for family reunions and occasional class reunions at Watson Chapel.

JB: Who was on the *Gazette* when you were there? Joe Wirges was . . .

BB: Well, Joe was. Roy Reed was there, but I never met Roy because he was in—where was it, Washington? At the State House? He was something.

JB: Yes.

BB: Harry Ashmore was still the editor, but you rarely saw him. Remember, this was long before the integration crisis.

JB: Yes.

BB: Ray Moseley was there. Do you remember Ray?

JB: I knew Ray very well. In fact, he was the best man at one of my weddings, my

first wedding.

BB: Now, when did he leave?

JB: Ray left in 1958.

BB: He had been there for about four years then.

JB: Yes, about four years.

BB: Well, Ray and I have been buddies for so long that it's scary because I followed Ray as bureau manager in Rome for UPI [United Press International]. I followed Ray as bureau manager in Cairo for UPI, and Ray and I worked together in Paris, London, and several other places. He's still in London with the *Chicago Trib*.

JB: Well, you know, that's very interesting because I know Ray very well. I've stayed in touch with him through the years, and I never knew that you knew him so well.

BB: [Laughs] Oh, a long time! A long time. I just saw him in London about four months ago.

JB: Well, I'll be.

BB: Earl King said he was there when I was there, the late Earl King. King was on the copy desk, and I wasn't there long enough to get to know him. Did you ever bump into Earl?

JB: Earl came up here, didn't he, and worked . . . ?

BB: Yes, he worked for the *Daily News*. He died a few years ago, and I spoke at his funeral out in Queens. Earl claimed that he coined the word "desegregation" while he was at the *Gazette*, that he put it in the headline and that it stuck. But I

don't know. I really don't know, but that was his claim to fame, he said. There was a guy named Ernie Wilkerson who worked at the *Gazette*. My memory is shot to hell and gone, but Ralph had three guys on the state desk. Ernie Wilkerson, I think, was one of them. I'm not so sure. I can't for the life of me remember the other two guys. One of them may well have been a guy named—and you may know the name, too—Al Schay. S-C-H-A-Y. Alvin Schay.

JB: No, that name doesn't ring a bell.

BB: Al didn't stay long because he went to the Associated Press in Memphis, where he was working with John Starr. I don't know if you remember John or not.

JB: Sure, I do.

BB: John had not yet added "Robert" to his name, but he was working for the AP in Memphis and was a good, hardworking guy.

JB: So you spent actually less than a year on the staff of the *Gazette*?

BB: Yes, exactly. Exactly.

JB: Yes.

BB: And that's why it's almost fraudulent to ask me for my memories of those times.

JB: No, we want to get everyone who worked for the *Gazette* back in those years. Now, who was the managing editor then? Was A. R. Nelson the managing editor?

BB: Yes, he sure was. A. R. Nelson. Yes, he was still there. Ralph Leach—you guys don't know this story—Ralph left the paper to become an Episcopal priest after I left. I don't know what, but I think it was his mother who lived up in Conway

and worked for the *Conway Log Cabin Democrat* as a secretary, or something like that.

JB: Yes.

BB: I remember meeting her once when I went back to Arkansas someplace. I went to the *Gazette* building, and she was there. She told me her son had become an Episcopal priest. She said he just burned out and decided he wanted to do something that was more constructive. And I said, "That's almost anything in this business!" [Laughter]

JB: Well, that's amazing. Now, let's go back a minute. The city editor at that time—do you remember who that was?

BB: Nelson was the . . .

JB: He was the managing editor.

BB: No. Well, let's see—it went from [J. N.] Heiskell to Harry Ashmore to Nelson to Leach. That was the batting order, as far as I was concerned.

JB: No.

BB: I have no idea. No, I don't.

JB: Okay, that's all right. No big deal. You were on the state desk anyway.

BB: Yes.

JB: So you went down to Pine Bluff, your home town?

BB: Yes. I became the sports editor down there, a one-man sports department. I learned to use a Speed Graphic and write headlines.

JB: And you were drafted. Where did you go?

BB: Well, I got sent to Fort Knox for basic [training], and they discovered that I had worked as a journalist. They sent me to the Panama Canal Zone to edit a weekly command newspaper called the *Caribbean Chronicle*, of all things. I did that for two years. I also got a job at one of the local Panamanian newspapers, the *Panama American*, a bilingual daily. The editor there asked me if I'd stay on after I got out of the army, so I took a local discharge in Panama in 1956. I stayed in Panama to work for the *Panama America*. The Arias family owned it. They had strong ties with a newspaper in Cuba called the *Havana Post*. After about nine months, my boss, a guy named Reese Smith, a wonderful man, said they needed a sportswriter in Cuba covering the ABC community, American-British-Canadian. You had to cover horse racing and cricket and stuff of interest to those three groups. Would I be interested and would I go? I said, "Sure. I'd love to see Cuba." So I went. I stayed there until [Fidel] Castro came into power. He closed the paper and threw us all out. Then I went to France because I had always wanted to go to the Sorbonne. I had the G.I. Bill, so I went to the Sorbonne for a year, worked at *Agence France Press*. After a year and a half, I went to UPI in London and spent the next sixteen years in Europe and Africa.

JB: That sounds very interesting. Let me go back just a minute to Cuba. Now, you were down there, and you were doing sports as the revolution was going on, so you didn't get involved?

BB: It was the damndest—you could write a book about this—I lived on the top floor of the Hotel Sevilla Biltmore, where George Raft, the mob's greeter, worked at the

casino—all the hotels had mob-run casinos—George Raft, the old actor, was the guy who was the host at the Sevilla Biltmore Casino. I used to see him every day. The paper paid my rent by running Sevilla Biltmore ads. It was a swaps deal. So I stayed rent-free at the Sevilla Biltmore and I was paid \$75 a week. Now, this was in 1957, early 1958 by then. I stayed—I’ve got a picture of me at home with Ted Scott from NBC [National Broadcasting Company], who worked as a columnist there, and a couple of other guys. There were bullet holes in the walls and the windows and everything else because we used to get shot at. It was a mess.

JB: Shot at by . . . ?

BB: By rebels trying to overthrow the government. I got in a couple of street fights, including the famous street fight. The Sevilla Biltmore was across the street from the presidential palace. I was caught in that gun play that famous morning when they attacked the presidential palace.

JB: Oh.

BB: The rebels were shooting wildly. I was sprawled on the street with a bunch of other people trying to keep from getting shot. Anyway, that’s what I did. I wrote sports. I covered horse racing, covered cricket. The cricket came in so handy later because when I got to London and asked the great Danny Gilmore if UPI ever hired overseas, he said, “No, but the only thing I can tell you is that we need somebody to cover cricket for the next three months.” It was June of 1961 by then because the West Indians were making their famous Calypso Tour of 1961. I

said, “You know, it’s funny, I know cricket,” and I did because I had learned it in Cuba.

JB: Yes.

BB: He said, “You’re hired.” [Laughs] Now that I look back—so that’s I did. I covered sports.

JB: For UPI?

BB: Yes, I covered sports for UPI. I only worked for UPI and the *Daily News* after I . . .

JB: Now, Danny Gilmore—you were talking about Danny Gilmore—he’s with . . .

BB: UPI. The was the news editor of—he was its London bureau manager.

JB: That’s right. Exactly.

BB: And Paul Allerup had come over from INS [International News Service], and he was the European news editor. Two wonderful guys and wonderful years. I stayed on in London as a sportswriter for about a year and a half, and then, because I was single and expendable, they sent me to Africa. I spent the next six years there, and then I came back.

JB: Where were you in Africa?

BB: I started in the Congo when Katanga broke away and they killed Patrice Cumumba. Then I went from there to Rhodesia, and then I spent some time—I was East Africa bureau manager, a totally useless, totally meaningless title because we all have titles—but I traveled around. I covered Malawi, what is now Zambia, and the high-commissioned territories of Swaziland, Basutoland, and

whatever the hell the other one is called, Bechuanaland. I did a lot of traveling, and we had a staff there based in Rhodesia. Not Kenya, oddly enough, but Rhodesia, because that was where the action was in southern Africa. We had a staff of four people and I supervised them.

JB: Now, when you came back from Africa, then you went to Europe?

BB: Well, I had worked in London sportswriting and then the “MEDAF Desk,” as we called it, because the Middle East and Africa news shared a single wire. Then I went to Africa. Then I came back to London to run the MEDAF Desk operation. Then I was sent briefly to Paris, and then to Rome for five years.

JB: Now, you preceded Ray Moseley there, is that correct?

BB: Ray was in the Rome bureau when I arrived.

JB: Oh, I see.

BB: In the fall of 1968, Ray was still the bureau manager, and I think Ray left in 1970 or 1971, because I was bureau manager for five years when I left in 1975. So Ray left in 1971. Ray had a pretty good background. He had been in Moscow briefly. He had been in Warsaw or Prague, I forget which. He had been in the Middle East. He had been in Cairo, so I knew him from there, along with Ray Wilkinson, who you may or may not know. All these guys came out of the MEDAF operation. Ray had gone to—Ray didn’t travel in Africa. He didn’t do much traveling in Africa because Cairo and the Middle East was enough for him. He went back to London to run something. I believe he quit UPI in London to join the *Trib* then. He wanted to settle down more than this craziness of being up all

night writing cables. And Ray is still with the *Trib*.

JB: Yes. I believe he told me he's going to retire this . . .

BB: In London.

JB: Yes.

BB: He's not coming back. He got married a second time to another woman named—what was his first wife's name? She's got the same name. I said, "At least you won't have to change tattoos." Jennifer Moseley was her name.

JB: Have you been married?

BB: I've been married for thirty-six years to a girl I met in what was then Rhodesia. She was an actress, and her sister still is a fairly well-known actress, Stephanie Beecham, who was on "Dynasty," "The Colbys," and "Sea Quest," and all that stuff, and is still acting. But I married her older sister.

JB: And this was when you were in Africa?

BB: In Rhodesia, in Africa, what is now known as Zimbabwe, yes. We met and got married six days later.

JB: Six days later? Wow!

BB: I know, I just decided it was time to get married.

JB: And it's still . . .?

BB: Yes, we're still speaking [laughs].

JB: How about children?

BB: We've got two girls. One works for ABC [American Broadcasting Company] for Barbara Walters's production company. I'm not sure what she's doing. I think

she's a gofer, and the other teaches fourth grade in Greenwich, Connecticut.

They've done all right. They're doing okay.

JB: That's terrific. How did you get from London to the *Daily News*?

BB: Well, it's crazy. I did a lot of traveling through UPI. I had gone to Jackie Kennedy's wedding on the isle of Skorpios to Ari Onassis. I met Bill Sunderland, who was then the European news editor, and I knew Bill from telephone conversations and things, but I don't know if we had ever met or not. We hit it off in Greece. A few years later—I forget how many years later—I got a call from him. He said, "Listen,"—he was the national editor for the *Daily News* in New York, and I had never been in New York except to pass through on a plane—he said, "We're looking for somebody. How would you like to work for me?" I said, "Let me think about it." In the meantime, the *News* had sent me credentials for the 1976 Summer Olympics in Montreal. I had covered the last three Olympics, and I hated to give up the credentials because you couldn't transfer credentials. I hated to let UPI down. That was a big consideration. I had been in Detroit covering the Jimmy Hoffa disappearance. I had been there for two months. I had decided—I have two daughters—the deciding factor for me was simple: "You know, we've got two little girls"—one who was one year old at the time, and the other was four—I said, "Wait a minute. Do I want to drag these kids around Europe—wherever the hell I'm going to be for the rest of my life, or do we want to settle down and have a stable life?" I called Bill and said, "I'll take the job." So I did. That's how I got to New York. It was a good decision.

JB: Well, when you came to the *Daily News*, did they have a universal desk there?

BB: No, it was and still is called the national desk. When I arrived to be night editor, there were—it's mind-boggling to think about it—we had seventeen people on the national desk. There are now three. We had three people at the UN [United Nations], who answered at the national desk. It was absolutely—I couldn't believe it. I said, "Wait a minute, we've got all these people for a New York City tabloid?" "Oh, yes, we need them all." The thinking back then, when the *Trib* owned it, was that you staffed for the worst possible scenario. You know, if World War III broke out, you had sixteen guys you could send off. In fact, I had been at the *News* for four days when I got a call at home from Bill Sunderland, who was my boss. He said, "Hey, listen, can you fly to Cincinnati?" I said, "Yes, when?" He said, "Right now!" I said, "Why?" He said, "Well, there's been a nightclub fire across the river in Covington, Kentucky, outside of Fort Campbell. Four or five people are dead." I said, "We're sending a guy halfway across the country to cover a nightclub fire with four people dead?" He said, "Oh, yes, it looks like it could be a big story." That was the thinking back then. That's the kind of money they threw around, the kind of staffing they did. Now, of course, they flew me to London for [Princess] Diana's funeral [laughs], and they would say—Mike Daley came with me to write columns—they said, "Now, can you handle 18,000 to 20,000 words a day?" [Laughs] I said, "Sure I can! A wire service guy? Always!" And they weren't kidding. They were not kidding. They were putting out eight-page supplements every damn day, and I never slept! [Laughs]

But that's how they had cut back by then. In the old days, that Diana story would've sent half the staff over there.

JB: Yes.

BB: And, in fact, when Diana got married—I also covered her marriage to [Prince] Charles—we sent three people along, including one guy who sketched her clothes at Westminster. So times change, and the news [media] changed with it.

JB: Yes.

BB: The whole business has changed. The last time I was at the *Democrat-Gazette* a couple of years ago, you could see the shrinkage down there, too. I mean, they've cut way back. I don't know what it was like when you were there, but we seemed to have an awful lot of people running around the office.

JB: Yes. When did you visit? You went back a couple of years ago to visit?

BB: I went as long as there was anybody there that I knew. One of the Wilkerson boys was still there, and we had known each other a long time. I used to drop in and talk to Joe Wirges every now and then. Joe had collected—one of the things he liked about Arkansas was all the crazy datelines he could use. His favorite dateline was the Toad Suck Ferry. He would try to get to outside Conway once a year to do a dateline Toad Suck Ferry. But he liked a lot of things. He liked a lot of these places. Timbo up in Stone County—there's another one—He loved to write stories from Timbo, Arkansas [laughs]. Anyway, for some reason, that was Joe—you knew Joe?

JB: Yes, I knew him.

BB: Crazy guy. He had been a police reporter all these years, and, from time to time, would cajole somebody into sending him out on a feature story—famous unsolved mysteries [laughs].

JB: I have a great picture of Joe taken down there, and he's sitting there with his pipe in his mouth. It just personifies . . .

BB: His new teeth in, all his new teeth in. Yes.

JB: Now, you went back to the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* a couple of years ago. Who did you see?

BB: Let me tell you.

JB: Yes.

BB: Let me tell you. Do you remember the day Gannett bought the *Gazette*?

JB: I do.

BB: I was in the newsroom that day, just by accident. I had gone down for a family reunion. The Bells always have a—we've got a cemetery outside of Rison, down in Cleveland County—we have a church down there, the Bell Church. Every June, we get together. I flew down. A couple of days before the reunion, I walked into the *Gazette* newsroom to ask if Ernie Wilkerson was around. I don't know anybody anymore. By then, Joe was gone and everybody else. Orville Henry was semi-retired, I guess. They told me he only came into the office once a [week], and he didn't speak to anybody when he got there. Then Jim Bailey was still there. I knew Jim because he had—I had known Jim forever. Do you remember Jimmy Bailey?

JB: Yes, I know Jim well.

BB: He's a sports editor now, I think.

JB: Is he?

BB: I think he is. He covered the AIC [Arkansas Intercollegiate Conference] for a long, long time. He covered Arkansas college sports. Wilkerson wasn't around. Nobody knew where the hell he was. He probably retired or died or something. So I asked, "How's Jim Bailey?" "Oh, Jimmy's back in the sports department." I walked back in to talk to say hello to a couple of people I thought might remember. Somebody said, "Bill, are you here because of the sale?" I said, "What sale?" He said, "We've just been sold to Gannett!" I said, "Are you kidding? Gannett?" They thought I was part of the new management team or something. I said, "No, no, guys. This is all news to me! I don't work for Gannett, anyway." I'd rather work for Rupert Murdoch. And I'd rather be on food stamps than do that! [Laughter] But I went in—I didn't go last summer. It was about three years ago. Not a soul. Not a soul did I recognize. Not a soul did I know.

JB: Yes. Well, it would be the same for me.

BB: Well, it was fifty years ago, for God's sake!

JB: Yes, absolutely!

BB: It was fifty years ago, almost.

JB: Incredible.

BB: Nobody. I don't know when Joe left. Joe probably died sitting there at his desk,

for all I know. Jim Bailey is still there.

JB: Well, now, he would be somebody I know. I would love to see him.

BB: Jim is still there.

JB: He's the sports . . .

BB: He's still down there. I think they told me he's the sports editor now. It wouldn't be hard to find out.

JB: Yes.

BB: I don't know anybody else who has survived. Orville Henry, they tell me, is now writing a column for a weekly newspaper in Little Rock. [Note: Orville Henry passed away in 2002, several months after this interview was conducted.] He's still doing his golf and football. But I don't know anybody else down there. Joe B. McGee is dead.

JB: Yes.

BB: Joe B. was a tenured Conway staffer for a long, long time, and a real character. I liked Joe an awful lot. He's dead now.

JB: Did you know Bill Rutherford? He might . . .

BB: Bill? Is he still alive?

JB: I thought he was.

BB: He may well be. I haven't stayed in touch.

JB: Yes.

BB: Once you left—yes, if he's still alive, you'd better get to him pretty soon.

JB: All right. Getting back to the *News*—now, King was an ace copy editor on the

Gazette.

BB: Who?

JB: King.

BB: Earl King. I don't know how ace he was, Jim. I don't know how ace. He told me once—we were really good buddies. I know Earl King stories, and I told a couple of them at the funeral, to the embarrassment of his family, but that's another story—Earl told me once that he was a boomer in this business. He used to answer ads in *Editor and Publisher*, “No boomers or boozers need apply.” Nearby. Must have a driver's license and know how to take pictures.” But he had worked in Denver; he had worked in Des Moines. He was working his way east. He was at the *Gazette*, I think, for about a year or a year and a half, maybe, he told me, before he felt like he'd worn out his welcome. But they were good years. They were the years—he must've been there when you were there because the desegregation thing was . . .

JB: That was about the time he was there.

BB: Yes.

JB: He left. I can't remember if it was—well, anyway . . .

BB: He didn't come directly to the *News* from there. I know that because . . .

JB: Oh, did he not?

BB: No. He told me once there was another stop someplace.

JB: I see, yes.

BB: He was very proud of desegregation [referring to the notion that he had coined the

term]. I don't know how you'd check it out except he said had a note from Harry Ashmore saying what an inspired idea that was.

JB: That's amazing.

BB: Yes.

JB: And it very well could be.

BB: Yes, it could well be. I never called him on it because it seemed to make sense to me. You've got to corner him someplace.

JB: Yes, that's right. Well, I remember Richard Davis spent some time with him. Did you ever know Richard Davis?

BB: I knew him by name.

JB: He came up here about the time I did. He spent some time with Earl when he was up here. Now, how long was it before Earl retired after you went to work? Do you remember?

BB: Earl died on the job.

JB: Oh, he did?

BB: He died. He had a heart attack when he was driving out—he lived out in Forest Hills in Queens. He died of a heart attack while he was driving to a store at night to buy some cigarettes. He was a chain smoker in the office. Everybody back then smoked and drank and everything else in the office. I mean, I smoked cigars in the office.

JB: Yes, times have changed.

BB: They've changed. They've changed. But Earl died of a heart attack. Yes.

JB: How long ago was it that he died?

BB: Let me tell you what I did. When was [Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak] Rabin assassinated? I was being sent to the Middle East to cover Rabin's assassination. I said, "Can you put me on the next plane instead of the first plane because I promised his family I'd speak at his funeral?" So whenever Rabin was assassinated . . .

JB: That was about four years ago. [Note: the actual date of the assassination of Rabin was November 4, 1995.]

BB: Whenever it was—it was a Sunday afternoon. I think Rabin was shot on a Saturday night at a peace rally in Tel Aviv. I got a call to go on the first flight on a Sunday. I said, "Can I hold it until Sunday afternoon? I have to speak at Earl's funeral." That's when it was, and I did. Fortunately, it was a church in Forest Hills, so I just took a cab from Forest Hills to JFK [John F. Kennedy International Airport] and got on a plane.

JB: That might have been—they were sending you all over. Were you the . . .?

BB: Well, it was because I had spent so much overseas, and they knew that I didn't have to look at a lot of maps and figure out a lot of things. I spoke Spanish, French, and Italian.

JB: I was going to ask you about that. So you spoke them pretty well, then?

BB: I spoke Italian—I still speak Italian fairly well. I've forgotten almost all my Spanish, and I still read and listen to some French.

JB: Yes.

BB: And I call up *Le Monde*, a Paris newspaper, every morning on the Internet and read it just to see if I remember it. That came in handy. I had done a lot of that stuff. So the *News* would say, “Hey, listen, let’s send this guy, Bell. He can probably get us through that.” [Laughter] Poor fools!

JB: So you went to Harding. Did you ever graduate from down there before you were drafted?

BB: I got kicked out of Harding College. The only reason I went to Harding College—my aunt was dean of women there at the time, Dr. Zelma Bell. Go back in the *Gazette*’s history with Harding College. I think it was the *Gazette* that called Harding College “the West Point of the Far Right.” I think they named them that. It was Church of Christ.

JB: I’m sure.

BB: They didn’t believe in playing football back then because they couldn’t find anything in the Bible that said “Jesus wore a football helmet,” that kind of stuff. But, you know, I was naive. I kept my nose clean. I worked on the student paper, the *Bison*, and was the *Gazette*’s man in Searcy. That took up two or three hours a day in the afternoon, making the rounds at the funeral homes, calling the football coach.

JB: How did you get kicked out?

BB: Well, they said I was consorting with Catholics. They had a meeting that was headed by a man named Pinkie something-or-other, the athletic director of Harding, which only had intermural sports. They didn’t believe in . . .

JB: Yes.

BB: Yes, Pinkie Barnwell, I think was his name. Pinkie said, “Well, Bill, you were spotted socializing with Catholics.” I said, “Who? I didn’t think we allowed them on campus.” He said, “We don’t, but you were off campus when you did it.” It turned out to be a guy named Bob James, who ran a funeral home, and that’s when I learned that Bob James was Catholic. I didn’t know it. Anyway, they booted me. But it was okay. It’s okay. About two weeks later, Jimmy Atkinson—I was trying to figure out what to do with my life next when Jimmy Atkinson called and said, “Why don’t you call Ralph Leach?”

JB: How long did you go to college there?

BB: Two years.

JB: Two years. Gee, I cannot believe that they kicked you out!

BB: They wouldn’t do it now. When I was there, people called it “Hard-up College at Search-me, Arkansas.” I was talking to Dwight Yoakum, you know, the country singer?

JB: Yes.

BB: His sister is at Harding, and they call it “Hardly College at Scarcely, Arkansas.” So some things haven’t changed much. But, yes, it was an interesting time. Boy, they used to give me a hell of a hard time when I wrote stories about Harding College in the *Gazette*. Harding had a right-wing think tank that was constantly inviting big-shot speakers in. I did the coverage. You know, [there were] calls for revoking the first amendment and that sort of thing. [Laughter] But it was a

good time! And the *Gazette* got me started.

JB: Well, it got me started, too.

BB: I would still not know how to spell “cemetery” if hadn’t been for Ralph Leach! He was a very wise guy. I don’t know if you ever knew Ralph or not. Was he gone by the time you got there? I guess he had to have been gone.

JB: He was. I didn’t know Ralph.

BB: Well, he was a very solid, serious guy. Remember, it wasn’t a drinking environment at the *Gazette* at the time. Nobody would go out at night and get drunk and come in with a hangover.

JB: That has changed.

BB: We’re talking 1951, 1952, 1953.

JB: Yes, but when I got there, that had really changed.

BB: Well, yes.

JB: That’s what the *Gazette* was when I was there, drinking and carousing!

BB: Well, we were laughing about that. I got sent down in 1992. I traveled with Bill Clinton for a couple of weeks during the campaign because the editors here at the *News* thought, “Well, this guy is from Arkansas. Clinton is from Arkansas. They’ll get together and talk about a strategy.” Well, I talked to Clinton once in two weeks on the plane. Anyway, they sent me down to Little Rock for election night. Clinton heard the results down home.

JB: Yes.

BB: The bars were closed. They wouldn’t sell whiskey on election night in Little

Rock. I said, "I cannot believe this!" No, they didn't want people drinking on the sidewalks because the national television crews were there, and they [would have] filmed Arkansas rowdy and drunk. So things had changed. Things had changed, but the culture of Arkansas has undergone a revolution, like everywhere else. Small-town, laid-back—and the *Gazette*, when I went there, was the newspaper. The *Democrat* was looked down on as kind of a knock-off.

JB: Sure.

BB: But the *Gazette* was the real deal. The state edition was a big deal.

JB: Absolutely. But, now, when you go back, the atmosphere in Pine Bluff has changed, huh?

BB: I went into the *Pine Bluff Commercial* two years ago. Nobody. They've all gone. Joe Stroud is working for the *Commercial*. Do you know Joe Stroud?

JB: No.

BB: He won a Pulitzer at the *Commercial* for editorial writing, and then he went to the *Gazette*, and I think he's still at the *Gazette*. But I went down to see if anyone was still there. The *Commercial* has changed ownership twice. It's a rip-and-read sheet, always was.

JB: Yes.

BB: But they've got four people in the sports department now.

JB: Wow.

BB: Oh, things change. Things change.

JB: All right. Bill, I want to thank you very much. It's really nice of you to stop by

on the way to do your religion column.

BB: Yes, I'm not so sure it's all that helpful, but . . .

JB: Well, listen, these recollections will be . . .

BB: Well, I was hoping you'd tell me who was writing the "Arkansas Traveler" column when you were there.

JB: Allbright. Charlie Allbright.

BB: Charlie Allbright was writing it when I was there, and he gave way to Charlie Portis, I guess.

JB: Well, maybe Charlie Portis wrote it for a while, but then I think Allbright went back there because Charlie Portis came up here, you know?

BB: He sure did. Charlie Allbright was a sweetheart of a guy. He loved to get in that car and drive off to some damn leaf festival or fishing tournament. [Laughs] He got more mail than anybody in the office!

JB: Yes.

BB: He got a hell of a ton of mail. He was a good man. I guess he's history now, too, isn't he?

JB: I don't know. You know, he may still be at some festival in Arkansas.

BB: No, no. He's not still writing, I can tell you that.

JB: Well, okay. Thanks a lot.

BB: Okay, my pleasure.

[End of Interview]