

Gazette Project

Interview with

Max Brantley,
Little Rock, Arkansas,
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Interviewer: Ernest Dumas

Ernest Dumas: It is February twenty-fifth at the offices of the *Arkansas Times*. This is Ernest Dumas, and we're interviewing Max Brantley, now the editor of the *Arkansas Times*, and for a number of years a reporter and metro editor of the *Arkansas Gazette*. Max, the first thing I have to do is get, as well as your written consent, your oral consent that you acquiesce in this material being used for research or whatever purposes by the University of Arkansas archives. You realize and agree to that?

Max Brantley: Hey, man, that's okay by me.

ED: First, I want you to go back and start with your birth, or earlier, if you want to, but tell us something about your life up to the *Gazette*.

MB: Well, I was born in 1950, in Lake Charles, Louisiana, and I grew up there, finished high school there, developed early in my life, probably as an elementary school kid, an interest in newspapers. From, I think, the sixth grade on, I knew I wanted to work for a newspaper. When I went off to college, I wanted to go some place that had a journalism school, and I picked Washington and Lee University, which had the first school of journalism in the South, certainly.

ED: Go back a second. You were born where?

MB: Lake Charles, Louisiana.

ED: Okay. Your father and mother?

MB: My parents were Betty and Waddell Brantley. He was a stockbroker, she was a dietitian.

ED: Okay. And so, throughout your childhood, you lived at Lake Charles?

MB: And I lived in Lake Charles for all my childhood, until graduation from high school at Lake Charles.

ED: Okay, then you start off to college.

MB: Then I went to college at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia, and majored in journalism. I went there, partially because it had a journalism school that was thought to be of some decent reputation. I had an extremely undistinguished career in college, although I did major in journalism, and I did spend a couple of years working for a town weekly newspaper while I was in college as their sports editor. The *Buena Vista News*.

ED: That's in Virginia?

MB: It's in Buena Vista, Virginia. It's a little mill town, about seven miles away from Lexington. And when college graduation neared, I realized I didn't have much of a plan for my life, so I decided I'd put it off a while and apply to graduate school, and, to the surprise of just about everybody, including myself, I was accepted at graduate school at Stanford University in Palo Alto. I enrolled there in the fall of 1973, and it was a wonderful experience. I had a journalism advisor named Bill

Rivers, who had been a newspaper reporter in the South, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, among others. He was a great old journalistic veteran, but also had gotten a Ph.D., had written books on the craft, had a great reputation — a wonderful guy. But journalism school at Stanford was almost too good to be true. There were no Friday classes. All the classes began after ten, and most of them were done by about two in the afternoon. There was a lot of writing to be done in the classes I took, but there were no tests. It was sort of like a dream college.

ED: Were you writing for publication for papers?

MB: No, we were just writing for class assignments. And it was wonderful, because everything in Bill Rivers' class, for example, were sort of basic reporting and feature writing, and they would be short assignments. You were expected, say, to go out to the Stanford football game and come up with a color story of some sort, arising from the Stanford football game, and it would only be maybe five hundred words long. You would get five hundred words of critique back from Bill Rivers, everything from grammar and punctuation and spelling corrections with a red pencil to observations on your language and the way you could improve the story. It was really sort of unbelievable. But, after a semester of this, at pretty high tuition prices, I began actually to feel a little guilty about it. Spending my family's money going to school and really pleasuring myself, going to San Francisco every night I possibly could and all weekend drinking at the beer joints around the Stanford campus, and, you know, doing all the things that people in the early 1970s did.

ED: You felt guilty about that?

MB: I felt very guilty about it, and so I decided that what I probably needed to do was, before I invested another ten or fifteen thousand dollars in graduate education, to see if I really wanted to work five days a week as a journalist. So, we were on a quarter system. We finished the term right before the Christmas holidays, and I remember sitting around in the coffee shop of the graduate school of journalism at Stanford, talking to a bunch of my classmates, and some of whom went on — one is a journalism professor, one of them works for the *New York Times* now on the foreign desk. I said, "You know, if I could get a job that paid six thousand dollars a year, I would go to work." And they said, "Aw, man, no problem. That's easy money to get." So I wrote some letters. I picked the *Houston Chronicle* because it was the largest city in range of Lake Charles, Louisiana, my home town, and I sent a letter to Hodding Carter at the *Greenville Delta Democrat-Times* in Mississippi, because it had a record of being an advocate for civil rights, and I was already kind of a developing liberal, such as I gave any thought to matters philosophical. And the *Arkansas Gazette* also because of its reputation as a beacon of civil rights and also because, during college, I had made some friends in Little Rock, people who had gone to school in Virginia, too, and I'd driven through Little Rock and seen the *Gazette*. I loved the *Gazette*, in fact, from what little I'd seen of it. And, plus, I had an old great-aunt who lived in Huttig, Arkansas.

ED: Huttig is in Union County, near the Louisiana border.

MB: And I'd spent quite a few vacations over the years with Aunt Luna in Huttig. She took the *Arkansas Gazette*, which was delivered to her home, along with the Monroe, Louisiana, newspaper and the El Dorado newspaper, but the *Gazette* was the best of them. So I had started forming a favorable opinion of the *Gazette* as early as, I guess, six or seven years old, reading the football accounts on Sunday morning. Anyway, I applied to these newspapers. Greenville, I think, got a lot of interest from people like me, and it was a small paper, but they didn't have anything to offer. I did get an interview at Houston, but didn't get a job offer. And I got an interview at the *Gazette* with Bob Douglas, who was the brand new managing editor at the time. This would have been in December of 1972, and he said that he liked my resume and appreciated my interest, but that they didn't have any jobs at the time, and that maybe I could try to apply to a paper like the *Pine Bluff Commercial*, which was sort of a farm team for the *Arkansas Gazette*. I said thank you and went home and probably got drunk about ten nights in a row. That's mostly what I did in those days. One morning I woke up with a bad hangover and I said, "You know, I guess I'm just going to have to go to the *Lake Charles American Press* and get a job. See if they've got anything for me, start my career at home." But fate intervened. After my interview with Bob Douglas, I had flown back to Stanford, packed up my stuff, made my decision to drop out of school and drive home. While I was there, I happened to run into Bill Rivers and told him about my job search and said that I'd been to the *Arkansas Gazette*. And he said, "Well, I know the city editor at the *Arkansas Gazette*, Bill Shelton. He's

a friend of mine." And it turned out that Bill Rivers had done a press survey project with Ben Bagdikian, *Press in America*, a fairly well-known press review. Bill Rivers had done, had come through Little Rock and done some extensive interviewing here. He said, "I'll write a letter for you." And he did, indeed, write a glowing letter about me. It was probably a violation of his journalistic creed. It was a little bit of overstatement, but it was a nice letter. I didn't really look for anything to come of it, but the day I was going to go to the *Lake Charles American Press* and throw myself on the mercy of the Shearman family to get a job, I got a call from Bob Douglas, who said, "Well, we've got a job opening, after all. Can you come to work in two weeks, for a hundred and thirty dollars a week?" So I was in the chips, sixty-five hundred dollars a year, as a general assignment reporter at the *Arkansas Gazette*. When I went to work, I was introduced to Bill Shelton, who was a famous and fabled city editor at the *Gazette*, a stern and stone-faced visage, a man who was all business, a man, at work, of few words, and he walked up to me and shook my hand, and he said, "You've got a lot to live up to." And it became clear to me that he had got Bill Rivers' letter and recommended to Douglas that he hire me. This was very shortly after there had been a competition for the managing editor job, and Douglas was chosen over Shelton. There was rumored to be, perhaps, some ill feelings on Shelton's part. Actually, night managing editor and day managing editor, I think, is how it was described, and I suspect that Shelton's one last little show that he had some power was that he decided he wanted to hire somebody. So it was me, perhaps. I went

to work. I'm not sure that they actually had room for me, because when I went to work there, there were no spare desks. When somebody would go home, I'd sit at their desk, and I'd float around to whatever desk was open. If the beat people were at the courthouse or the Capitol, I'd sit at their desk until they came in and then move somewhere else when a seat opened up. I finally got a desk when our police reporter, Joe Farmer, quit in a fit of pique over some editor's decision, and I inherited Joe Farmer's desk. The coda to that story is I saw Joe Farmer last week, walking to the Salvation Army shelter on Markham Street in Little Rock. He said "Hello," and I said, "Hello," then we passed on.

ED: So you were a general assignment reporter? Did you have to do police?

MB: Yes, I started as a general assignment reporter. I generally drew one day of police, a weekend day. Saturday night, my schedule changed. It was like a dream come true to me. I mean, general assignment reporters didn't start work until 12:30, and, at that time in my life, that was perfect. I liked staying up until four a.m. and getting up about noon, so it suited my life style perfectly. Police beat really was even better. You didn't start work until four o'clock in the afternoon, and so I'd get that one day a week. Eventually I had this wonderful schedule where you work Sunday through Thursday, and Sunday you were really just kind of on a "death watch." There wasn't anything to do, except sit around, and if something burned, well, you covered it. Although, as it turned out, over the years, Sunday probably was my savior as a professional journalist because, like a lot of young reporters at the *Gazette*, I found myself, early on, on Bill Shelton's shit list. He

didn't tolerate sloppiness, he didn't tolerate lack of concern and lack of diligence, and I had a lot to learn when I got there. I still didn't know a whole lot about covering news for a daily newspaper on a deadline basis. He thought I had promise, but tired of my lack of demonstration of the ability to deliver, I guess. When that happened, you wouldn't get assignments, he wouldn't talk to you, you were like an invisible person. And so, the only chance I got to do much of anything was on Sunday, when he was off. A string of events happened on Sunday, while I covered the police beat. There were a lot of human and personal and civic tragedies that I had the good fortune of being able to cover. There was a famous case of an escaped mental patient who holed up on the top of a railroad bridge with a scoped rifle and started potshotting people downtown.

ED: I remember that.

MB: And Ernie Dumas came in and helped cover that story. I remember you talked to the police chief in Jennings, Louisiana, I think, about it. He was a guy I played basketball against in high school, in another of life's little ironies. And there was a case when a guy got on a bulldozer in Kanis Park, turned on the engine and ran off, and the bulldozer plowed through a house out in the John Barrow addition. Another Sunday, a gang of masked robbers came in and held up a whole church, and the other paper didn't find out about it. I had that story all to myself. So I just had this string of lucky tragedies that occurred, and I did a fairly decent job on reporting them. Gradually, I got to do some real assignments and did okay. Along about 1976, when I'd been there about two and a half years, they decided

they needed a second assistant city editor. At the time, the staff had one assistant city editor.

ED: Jerry Jones.

MB: Jerry Jones. Obviously, you have a number of shifts, weekend shifts, where you had to have somebody fill in on the desk who wasn't an editor. I had begun sharing some of those duties on Sunday. I more or less became Sunday city editor early on, in charge of opening the mail and making assignments.

ED: Were you Shelton's choice for this?

MB: You know, I don't know. I assume so. He told me I had been chosen. If there was influence on the outside, I'm not really aware, although I got along well with Bob Douglas. Shortly before I was chosen for that, Douglas had called me in and had told me I was doing a pretty good job and I might get assigned to the state Capitol, and so I ought to make a point of reading state legislative copy. I thought my next move, if I made one, would be to the legislative beat. But this came up. I think they decided they needed another person of responsibility, who had it five days a week. So I became assistant city editor, which meant working at night, and also I was Sunday city editor, which didn't amount to a whole lot, but I tried to do more on Sunday than some had before: make up some enterprise stories to do, try to put something in the Monday paper. And so I became an editor fairly early in my life, I guess. I remember talking to my wife-to-be about whether I should take the job, because it meant going strictly to a night schedule and no more overtime. That extra time-and-a-half a couple hours a week was a lot of money.

ED: You became management, too.

MB: I became management, and this was not long after the fairly unpleasant effort to organize the newsroom. I had joined the Newspaper Guild and had been a public supporter of the unionizing effort. So, despite that, I was given a management position.

ED: Talk about that union business. You came what year?

MB: I joined the paper in January 1973.

ED: 1973. When was the union meeting?

MB: Not long after that. No more than a year. Maybe in the first year I was there. I was young and a nobody. You know, it was easy for me. I was a liberal, and it was an easy cause for me to get behind without much thought because I think all young people sort of have a death wish and like to challenge authority. I didn't give it much thought. And looking back on it, it was really painfully easy for me, and whatever posturing I must have done, which I don't remember much of, I'm kind of embarrassed about, because I didn't have a family. I had nothing to lose. I mean, I had a job with take-home pay of about ninety-nine dollars a week. I mean, what did I have to lose by organizing for a union?

ED: That episode was unusual in that the *Gazette* was, as I recall, a place where we were relatively happy, were we not? At least, compared to across town. At the *Democrat* across town, people were miserable, pay was much less, hours worse, fringe benefits poor, yet the *Gazette* is where we had a union drive. What do you think the genesis of it was?

MB: You know, I don't know. To this day, I don't really know. I think that it's clearly true, given what happened afterwards — the company's decision to raise pay substantially somewhere in the months down the line, some of the pay raises that were given during the unionizing effort, some of what we learned years later in the antitrust trial about the profitability of the paper --- they clearly could afford to pay more than was being paid. And while I didn't feel I was on poverty wages, even for a single person in Little Rock, my money didn't go very far. I could pay my bills, but I wasn't going to get very far ahead on them. And I guess I credited some of the older members of the staff, who had been there longer. The nature of an institution is that the longer you are there, the worse you do, relative to what the paper is able to pay, because you pay a premium to hire somebody bright, but once they are there, they get routine cost-of-living raises. Frankly, the involvement of older, respected staff members in the movement encouraged me that it was the right thing to do, but in a way, it was a lark for me. The notion of a union, of solidarity, of group negotiation, of being able to press complaints, not just about pay, but about other things, as a solid front was an appealing thing to me. Philosophically, that was most of its appeal to me, but it's true that we were sort of a plantation. I guess the trade-off, in a way, was being a plantation. I think people, some under-performers, were tolerated probably and some quirks were endured and some problems were endured because that was just the way the *Gazette* was. It's kind of like Harvard. They say if you get in, you'll graduate. If you got on at the *Gazette*, you would stay unless you did something just

extraordinarily awful. I think maybe that was the trade-off for less pay. And I know today, twenty-seven years after the fact of hiring, that the pension plan that existed then just almost couldn't have been worse. Except none at all. That would have been worse.

ED: We were told it was one of the best in the business.

MB: And it is laughably poor.

ED: And I believed that. I never looked at it to see.

MB: In terms of pension and health benefits, the best thing that ever happened to a *Gazette* employee was Gannett's purchase of the newspaper. That's another story.

ED: We'll get to that. Who were the other reporters there when you went to work there in 1973? Bill Lewis was there, right?

MB: Well, Bill Lewis was there. Mr. Lewis, I called him, and he quickly corrected me and said, "Please, Bill." And it's funny, I had dinner with Bill about two weeks ago, and he looks, to my mind, identical to what he looked like in January of 1973.

ED: Pretty much. Pretty much.

MB: And he was a marvel. He's got to be the fastest typist in the western world. It was like a seamless clatter when Bill Lewis sat down to the typewriter, and he could turn out a story, a workmanlike, error-free story, faster than just about any human being I'd ever known. I guess he had wire service experience before he came here, and that may explain some of it.

ED: UPI.

MB: And he was fast. And kind of funny and kind of affected in the way he talked, "Old Bean" was, but he was kind of a fun guy to work with. At the Capitol, of course, there was you and Doug Smith. I think that the torch had passed shortly before my arrival there, and I think a lot of the old people had gone, and Jerol Garrison had just left, just barely. Very shortly after I came, he left for a UALR job. Of course, George Bentley was in the middle of his extensive tenure at the county courthouse. Jimmy Jones, who had been a pretty successful city hall reporter, had just moved to a special project, an investigative reporting slot with Tucker Steinmetz. These were what seemed like grand old men to me, but I guess they weren't very old at the time, thirties, maybe. Perhaps that seemed pretty old to a callow twenty-two-year-old, I guess. A group of kind of disreputable general assignment reporters, some of whom I don't know what has become of them. Arlen Fields and Tish Talbot are both now in advertising and public relations-related jobs in Little Rock. A young fellow named Dennis Michaels has gone on to I don't know where. Bob Stover was a recent OBU grad, where he had caused a stir by advocating alcohol by the drink in the student newspaper and lost his job, I think, because of it. He was a fairly new addition to the general assignment reporting staff, and he's now, I guess, the managing editor of *Florida Today*, one of Gannett's papers. He's gone on to be pretty successful in management with the Gannett Company. James Meriweather, right around the beginning time, was not the first black reporter for the *Arkansas Gazette* — I think Ron Coleman may have been --- but he was one of the earliest black employees on the news side of

the *Arkansas Gazette*. He was kind of a fearsome figure, wore muscle shirts to work. He'd been a wide receiver for UCA briefly. He was a football star in high school and well muscled and had a modified Afro hairdo, a bushy black moustache and a pretty tough physique and was a strong, silent type. Turned out, he was a funny, engaging, wonderful guy, but was a little scary to a guy who went to General Lee's college up in Virginia. But, anyway, a good bunch of people. John Woodruff was there then, of course, the eternal North Little Rock reporter. He would be there to the end. Jerry Jones and Bill Shelton were on the city desk.

ED: Was Trimble there?

MB: Mike Trimble was there. I, like everybody else of a certain age who came to the *Gazette*, had an instant affinity for Trimble. First of all, everything he wrote seemed to turn to gold, and he's a world-class raconteur and a funny person who liked to eat and drink and laugh and all the sorts of things that were appealing to young people. He was a great guy. My first vision in my mind of Mike Trimble is sitting at one of those old Underwood typewriters with a big tray of Sims barbecue or Ballard barbecue ribs sitting on top of the Underwood and all that juice dripping out of it. I'm not one to say, but Trimble is not a neat eater. And just trying to eat it all before the carton disintegrated. Some was on his shirt and some was on his pants and he was saying, "This is the best food in the world." And it was true, and it introduced me to Little Rock barbecue, which may be why I'm here today. Could be. Who else was around? Of course, I remember on the state desk, Matilda Tuohey was the long-time assistant state editor. Pat Carithers,

who was on the wire desk at the end of the *Gazette*, was there, and looking like he was about twenty. He was probably forty by then.

ED: Still looks like he's about thirty.

MB: Still looks young, and David Petty did the wire at night. He's a publisher for Gannett in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. On the news desk, a good group was there, Bill Rutherford was there then, Paul Johnson was there then, Carrick Patterson was spending some time on the news desk at that particular moment. He was the publisher's son, who worked through a lot of jobs on the paper and was trying to find what his role would be. Martha Douglas was doing TV in a little office right behind where I worked, and of course, there was the ladies' section down the hall. I didn't have much intercourse with them, but I remember the Harriet Aldridges and Betty Fulkersons of the world.

ED: This would have been in the 1970s, before Walter Hussman bought the *Democrat*. This was in the latter stages, I guess, of the ownership by K. A. Engel. What is your recollection of it?

MB: It was a shell of a newspaper, a page or two of paid classified, a very small paper. It was a classic evening newspaper. It was declining in circulation and advertising and in news coverage. They had a handful of staff members. They ran a number of afternoon editions, trying to capture some late headlines. They would play any kind of crime story up on page one, in the hopes of getting some single copy sales, I guess. That put some pressure on me in my first couple years there, when I covered the police beat, because they had a pretty good old veteran police man

named Bob Sallee, who spent all his time at police headquarters and knew a lot of cops and got fed a few things. We weren't on the same news cycle, and so they could be ahead of you, regardless. It was particularly terrible to get beat by them, since they came out after we did. If we had missed something entirely on our cycle, there was hell to pay with Shelton.

ED: How did Shelton handle it? Did he chew you out?

MB: No, you would get a note, and there would be some big black circle around it with one of those old number fifteen pencils, you know. The lead is about as big around as my thumb, and he would say, "Why we not have?" And you talk about striking fear in your heart! Just an awful thing to have happen.

ED: "Why we not have?" I remember those.

MB: The other awful thing about Shelton was, when he had time, he would mark up copy and just circle things in the copy and clip it and put it in his top basket at the city desk, in the "in" basket where we dropped our copy. And he would never pass it out, he would never explain it, and after he would leave, people would kind of slink over there and thumb through what he had dumped in there. I guess he knew we did that. I assume it was meant to be instructive. And sometimes you could tell. You misspelled a word, or you had failed to put a first reference in, a full first reference, on a name, and then sometimes you just didn't know what you had done wrong. You know, something would be circled, and it would look perfectly okay, and you didn't know what happened. This happened to me one time. There was a story during this period when I was in this great deep freeze.

Somebody who was on the city desk said, "Well, here's what you do. Dale Bumpers is governor. He's about to run for U. S. Senate. Why don't we do a story where we call all the former living Arkansas governors and ask what they think about a governor making a run for Senate?" So I called old Ben Laney and Sid McMath and Orval Faubus and did some little interview story about what they thought about Bumpers running. It didn't run in the Monday paper, for some reason, I guess because of the room. It ran in the Tuesday paper and had my byline on it. I thought maybe, maybe I'm coming out of the woods. That's another thing Shelton would do, if he was mad at you, he wouldn't put your byline on anything, didn't matter how long it was, how many people you had interviewed. So I was feeling better, until I was about to go home that night, the next night, and I saw my story clipped in his basket with a big, black circle around my byline. I thought, oh my God, what in the world? I thought, well, this could be good. Maybe this is good. The more I thought about it, I said, no, this can't be good. So I kind of screwed my courage up. I mean, you know, nobody ever approached Shelton and just asked him. There just wasn't any talking with Shelton, everybody was so afraid of him. But I walked up and said, "Er, uh, Mister, uh, Shelton, I just couldn't help but notice that in the basket and just wondered if there was a problem." And he said, "I want to know who put the goddamn byline on it." That's all I needed to hear. That was enough. So I walked away. I was not off the shit list yet. That was pretty much clear at that point.

ED: You called him Mr. Shelton?

MB: Oh, I called him Mr. Shelton until, I guess, at some point late, late in my career, shortly before he retired, I think I started to call him Bill. But I had been there a dozen years. I think at the time that they told me I was going to succeed him, I think I kind of tentatively began to call him Bill, but there was a great story that James Meriweather and Bill Green told. Bill Green was another general assignment reporter who came a little bit later. Toward the end of Shelton's career, it may have been the year that he had announced he was going to retire, they went out and had some drinks one night with several reporters, and they said, let's go drop in on Shelton. Wish him a Merry Christmas. It was kind of an unbelievable thought that somebody would do this. And so they went to his house in Hillcrest and knocked on the door, and he said, "Well, sure, come on in," and poured them all drinks. As many people said, you just had to see Shelton outside of work. Totally different person. Very gracious, very amiable, fun to be with. And finally, Bill Green got around to the issue about everybody calling him Mr. Shelton and how they called him things behind his back and this happened, and they wondered what they should have called him. And he said, "Well, Mister Shelton would be fine." He commanded that kind of respect.

ED: Well, I wondered about it all those years. I'd been there fifteen years and wondered about whether I could call him Bill or not. And I think at some point I screwed up my courage and called him Bill.

MB: And it passed.

ED: I think I probably relapsed then and called him Mr. after that.

MB: It was kind of funny. He was a commanding figure. That Fisher caricature of him as that stone face carved out of a mountain was really apt.

ED: You remember the best story that you ever did? Is there a story that you could identify?

MB: Well, you know, the thing is, looking back on my career, I didn't have that much time writing. Before I became a city editor, I spent some time as an assistant city editor. I stopped writing pretty early in my career. There was a period when one of our editors, Bill McIlwain, didn't want to mess with Shelton, I think, but he wanted some livelier writing in the newspaper. I don't even remember if we had a name for it, but it was sort of a special city desk reporting team. I was put in charge of it as an assistant city editor, and I had three or four good GA reporters. We were supposed to look for new features and more interesting features and not really investigative stories, although that was okay if we came up with it. So I found myself doing a few stories, contributing a few stories during that period. Actually, there was one feature story that I did then that McIlwain singled out for staff commendation. It was another story that Shelton handled, because I had somebody read it and he didn't put a byline on it, in fact. Everybody remarked on it, because it was a highly color-oriented feature piece on a downtown soup kitchen, which had not been written before, called the Stewpot. It included some interviews with people who kind of looked down their nose at the guys who went there and the sorts of meals they ate and the sorts of people who came. I thought I did a decent job on that. But then I had one other writing experience, and that was

the last year that I was at the *Gazette*. Unexpectedly, I became the political columnist. I was the assistant managing editor Metro-State, which was a huge bureaucratic mouthful. I was basically the top person before the managing editor over all the news reporters, business, state, city and everybody. John Brummett was our political columnist at the time, and he up and left in October of 1990, right in the middle of a gubernatorial election, and they needed a new columnist. Keith Moyer, who was the editor, asked me if I would do it, which was sort of a surprise to me. I had never harbored any desires or thoughts about being a columnist, political, news, feature or otherwise. But, because they needed it and he asked, I said I would do it. I jumped into being a column writer, and, you know, history can be the judge. I cranked out a lot of them. I mean, I was fast. I could write a lot of words quickly.

ED: You were city editor and a columnist.

MB: I remained assistant managing editor, and I wrote a six-times-a-week column. And I did all the usual stuff. I really let my politics show, which was interesting, because the column ran on the front of the news section, and it was frequently pretty opinionated. It was fun. I think even an idiot, even me, if you're on the front of a "B" section of a paper with a circulation of 250,000, a lot of people are going to read you in the course of a week. Especially if you are writing six times. So the exposure is pretty phenomenal. And it is a heady experience to get that kind of attention. It's probably more than anybody deserves. But I guess if there is one thing that I was proud of was, and I've still got a little certificate up on my

wall at home. When you work for a newspaper, you are never sure if you accomplish anything. Of course, in a twenty-five year career, there is not much I can point to and say, "You know my work resulted in this good outcome." It just doesn't happen. It's rare, rare, rare for that to happen. But one day, the Little Rock School Board decided, effectively without notice, to lock out the bus drivers union. And they did it in a way that was meant to happen without public debate and get it behind them. And I wrote a column that basically called them a bunch of sleaze bags for doing it. I mean, it may have been slightly more elegant than that, but not much. I mean, I was angry at the way they had done it. I thought it was a real breach of trust with working people, and it was done for no other reason than to cut the cost of their bus drivers' contracts. I wrote the column, and it was personally critical of individual members of the Board and the school superintendent at the time, Ruth Steele, and two days later they met in a special session and revoked the vote. Nobody else said anything. The *Arkansas Democrat*, of course, hated labor unions. They would have been in support of it, and I think, otherwise, it would have passed almost without notice had I not written the column. The union thought so. They gave me this little certificate for protecting the rights of the working man.

ED: Let's go back a little bit before that. We'll get back to that period, the last year or two at the *Gazette*. Back again to, I guess, the early 1980s. There was a point when Douglas was effectively fired as managing editor of the *Gazette*. Carrick was promoted and Bill McIlwain was named the editor. He had been editor of the

Washington Star.

MB: He was to groom Carrick to assume the role of leadership of the paper. I can't remember the precise year. I remember getting the news. I was in a hotel in Kansas City, Missouri, and a Little Rock lawyer knocked on my door and said, "There's a new managing editor at the *Arkansas Gazette*. Douglas is gone." I can't remember now how he found out, and it was all shocking to me that that had occurred. McIlwain was the first of many outsiders who came in and had an awful lot of harsh things to say about the way we were doing things.

ED: Were you an assistant city editor?

MB: Yes, I was an assistant city editor. I was just working at night and doing the normal things and working on the weekends. Of course, it was under McIlwain's reign that we really beefed up and improved the feature section, which was a good thing. A new design team came in and changed the look of the newspaper. In a lot of ways that truly I thought were an improvement. It may have been in that period that we switched from eight-column to six-column format, I can't remember. It occurs to me that it was right around that time. But one of the things he was not happy about, and it would be a theme that would echo and re-echo as subsequent new leadership came in, was that we were too boring, too stodgy, too concerned with matters of record, and not enterprising enough, and not colorful enough, and not in tune with everyday concerns enough, and we needed to have a whole lot more of that kind of writing in the newspaper. A direct result of that was his creation of this special reporting group. I don't think McIlwain

felt, as the Gannett leaders did some years later, that he had total free rein to rid the newsroom of people he didn't like and bring in a wholesale lot of new people, because there were not a tremendous number of personnel changes. Maybe I was the best of the bad lot and got this assignment to be in charge of the feature writing effort that arose on the news desk.

ED: Did you agree with that assessment of the *Gazette*? Was it behind the times?

MB: You know, probably, yes, but I had been schooled in it, and it seemed fine to me. I mean, I'm adaptable. I guess I'm a chameleon. I could see his point, and when the Gannett people came, I could see their point. I didn't think they were necessarily crazy, but I certainly had been schooled in Shelton's style of news gathering, reporting and presentation, and at age . . . by 1981, what was I, thirty-one years old . . . I was an old fogey. I mean, it suited me fine. I mean, there is a great deal of reassurance in approaching things in a formulaic way. I mean, you're never bad wrong. If your lead is a classic "who, what, when, where, why" lead every time, it may be boring, but it won't be wrong. You don't take near the risk on skewing context that you do when you reach for an anecdotal lead or reach for an interpretive lead.

ED: Shelton, I think, resented that, but there was one point, probably before that, when Shelton went on this crusade --- I expect it was not original with him --- for brighter writing. Do you remember that? And he put out some memos about brighter writing.

MB: Yes, vaguely, but how could that be? I mean, there are so many famous Shelton

instances where --- he's a great copy editor, first of all, I want to say, and he has a wonderful economy of words. He can improve a story in little ways that produce an incredible result without seeming to alter the texture very much. But also, at the same time, every now and then, he would get a story that you would just see him frowning about it, looking at it and frowning about it, and then the sign that you really screwed up was he would go, "Goddamn it!" and he would pull a sheet of copy paper out, and he would give up trying to fix it with a pencil or fix it by cutting and pasting, and he would write it over himself, from the top, or write a big new top on it to paste on the rest of your story. And inevitably, when he did it, he produced these curious, almost chronological, leads. They were not anything like what we thought we had been taught to do. They began with the beginning. There was Adam and Eve. And then a car came up. His writing style, when he did that, was most curious. He was not the man to implement a new type of writing, but I think he was probably trying to respond to pressure from above.

ED: So, Hussman bought the *Democrat* what year?

MB: 1974?

ED: Was it that early?

MB: Or 1976.

ED: I think it was a little later than that. Probably 1976 or 1977.

MB: Right around there.

ED: And so we had what became a newspaper war. And they hired John Robert Starr.

MB: Was he hired at the beginning?

ED: No, he was not hired at the beginning.

MB: They went a couple years of trying to make a go of it, it seems.

ED: Bob McCord was the editor over there for a while, after Walter took it over. I think he was the editor before Walter took it over and stayed there for a while.

MB: And they didn't make much progress.

ED: No. So, anyway, they bring in Starr, and we have what became known as the newspaper war. How did that affect coverage at the *Gazette*?

MB: Well, there were a lot of different effects. I remember a lot of them pretty clearly. I remember, rest his soul, Jimmy Jones, who knew Hussman as a scion of the Palmer newspaper family, which ran notoriously shoddy newspapers in small towns, and Jimmy wrote him off as of no concern. I remember he and Tucker Steinmetz went to the news conference at which the purchase had been announced and asked a lot of tough questions and talked about their newspaper's reputation. It was kind of lording it over the new kid on the block, you know. I don't know why, but that made me nervous. I am a pessimist, I guess. I didn't know that much, but I didn't discount any of it. I do remember Shelton saying, when they went morning — in the beginning, he kept a list of what they had and what we didn't have — "We have got to beat them on everything. We have got to have everything they have and we have got to have more. We have got to have more details. It is not just that we have the story, but that we have a better story." Shelton responded to it exactly in the proper way, I thought, which is to match up, day by day, the papers. Well, it became quickly impossible to do that, for the

reason that, over a fairly rapid period of time, Hussman made the commitment to publish the biggest newspaper in Arkansas, that is, the most number of pages, and beefed up his staff. The *Gazette* never, never, never, in the Patterson era, made the commitment to newsprint expenditure that Hussman did. And even if we had covered the same stories, even if we had done the same thing, we had no place to print them. It got worse and worse until the late 1980s. There were times, this wasn't really in the early era, but in the beginning of the Gannett era, I sat down and counted the column inches in the *Democrat* of local news versus the column inches in the *Gazette* one Saturday morning, which is a pretty good news day, typically. I had been so frustrated because we had so many stories that we had to cut into briefs or throw out entirely or save on leftover, and they had something like, I think, five hundred column inches of local news in the paper, maybe more than that. That is five or six full pages of local news, which is a pretty good amount of local news, and we had about a hundred and ten. They had five times the local news column inches we had, and I thought, I don't care how bright your writing, how good your editors, how smart you are about context, you are not going to beat anybody with that. More is more. And that was the story from the beginning of the newspaper war, and it was awfully frustrating through the years to work there.

ED: Shelton had the right idea at the outset. Were you successful for a while in matching up? Was it a superior newspaper?

MB: We had a superior staff, there's no doubt about that. It didn't instantly happen

overnight. One of the important decisions they made, too, was to place a big emphasis at the *Democrat* on investigative-style reporting. That was not Shelton's strength. I remember it distinctly, being a Sunday city editor, the day that Mike Masterson began a series for the *Democrat* on irregularities in the state medical examiner's office. They weren't disposing of organs properly, they were filling corpses with sawdust, a grisly, awful story. I tried to work up a follow to that story, and, in fact, we printed something. Shelton wasn't very happy that we had done that. I'm not sure that the thing to do in the face of a big, multi-part investigative effort is to try and get some spot news and that may have been a mistake on my part, doing that. But we usually ignored them. That was the end of it on the medical examiner. We chose not to follow it at all, for whatever reason. Ultimately, the medical examiner lost his job, and whether the story was right or wrong, they had written something that had a direct effect. I mean, they were responsible for removing the medical examiner from office. That would become a pattern of their kind of work, which is to pick on particularly public officials, because you can't libel a public official. You have got the FOI [Freedom of Information Act] as a tool to get a lot of information, and they don't have a natural constituency. They can't call in an advertiser to put pressure on your publisher. Public officials are, by some, supposed to be very powerful, but actually, they are some of the most pitifully weak people in the world if you decide to pick on them. They had a pretty good run of finding people. Public officials are human; they have their frailties. They had a pretty good run of

finding those sorts of people. Invariably, when they would find one of these cases, we wouldn't follow it. They would make news, and TV stations would pick them up, and people would be talking about them, and we would be silent on those stories. And we were not really generating those kinds of stories ourselves. Journalism was more about being a recorder of events that occurred rather than seeking things to write about. That is not entirely true, but I think, day to day, the mind set was more like that. I don't think you can underestimate how valuable that was in making the *Democrat* a talked-about commodity in town. Particularly among other public officials, who were notoriously chicken. You write a word about a public official in the paper, and it gets them nervous. They start shaking about it. In that news is inevitably mostly about public officials, that target group was really affected by what the *Democrat* was doing. Starr reinforced that through his column. He was the managing editor assigning these stories, and then, lest anyone miss the point, he would follow up with an opinion column that made it very clear what the point was, which was a break in journalistic tradition that journalism professors can argue about. It is viewed as somewhat unethical in the trade, although I kind of practice it here now in our weekly, so I don't want to be too hypocritical about it. In any event, it made for a pretty potent one-two punch.

ED: Didn't also, about that time, we get into the practice of trying to hire *Democrat* people. That seemed to be a key strategy of the *Gazette*, to pick off a *Democrat* reporter.

MB: Yes, we thought we would do them in by hiring their better people, and there were some people who thought that strategy more valuable than others. We got some pretty good people from over there. Some of them were good people that we were happy to have.

ED: We got some pretty bad ones, too.

MB: We got some pretty bad ones, but, as a strategy, it was doomed. I mean, Scripps was right. You know, reporters are a dime a dozen. Buy them up, chew them up, spit them out. Some are better than others, but no one reporter, no ten reporters on a newspaper can make it rise or fall. The *New York Herald Tribune* assembled the greatest assemblage of talent ever, and they're gone. It doesn't exist any more. And, of course, there was also an implicit insult to the people at the *Gazette*, that they pay big money to bring somebody over while solid people had been trudging away forever at low wages. But that was one of the mistakes, sure.

ED: Then the antitrust suit. The *Gazette* files the antitrust suit against the *Democrat*. How critical, do you think, was that? What effect did that have on the morale at the *Gazette*? Or did it have any effect?

MB: I can't speak for everybody else. My recollection is that I sensed it was powerfully important. The reason I know that is it was during that time that I was an assistant city editor in charge of features, and I worked a daytime, Monday-through-Friday schedule, and had a great deal of freedom. I didn't have a lot of copy-handling chores, unless one of my four or five people was turning in a story. So I went and listened to most of that trial. I wasn't covering it. I knew that on

this rode something pretty large. And, of course, it was one of those times when the *Democrat's* coverage of the case should be in a textbook for dishonesty. They had full access to discovery through their publisher, which we did not, and they did stories about every element of the case that was advantageous to the *Democrat* and none of the elements of the case that were disadvantageous to the *Democrat*. It was a remarkably dishonest bit of propaganda work by the *Democrat*. It still makes me mad when I think about it.

ED: Their coverage of the trial.

MB: Particularly preceding the trial, which I felt was an effort, such as they were able to influence the jury pool. They told the story that they were going to use in defense against the *Gazette*, on page one, day in and day out, in advance of the trial, in case anybody who potentially could be influenced by it would know what their case was going to be. Their coverage of the trial itself also tended to influence their strengths and downplay the *Gazette's* strengths. I am told that Starr read all the stories every day and made sure that the coverage ran that way. I don't know if that is true, but I certainly find it believable, given the tenor of the coverage. The *Democrat* certainly had some good defenses, but we had some pretty good points, too, and you didn't see much made of them in the *Democrat*. But I was nervous from the beginning. I don't know if I knew how important it would be when I read it, but when I read, first in the *Democrat*, not in the *Arkansas Gazette*, before the trial, that Hugh Patterson, who had brought the antitrust suit on the grounds that he was being run out of business, had taken four

hundred thousand dollars out of the company in the preceding year, in the form of a dividend, personally, I thought, "Son of a bitch." That was a lot of money. I mean, it's still a lot of money, but four hundred thousand dollars fifteen years ago was really a lot of money. I was assistant city editor, making twenty-five thousand dollars a year, maybe twenty-six thousand dollars a year. As interviews done by *Spectrum*, which was then an alternative newspaper in Little Rock, proved after the trial, there were jurors like the guy who rented buckets of balls out at a golf driving range who said, "Man, you're not being run out of business. You're making four hundred thousand dollars." Of course, the *Democrat* lawyers hammered it and hammered it and hammered it. The suit was premature, and it's easy to fault Hugh Patterson for filing the suit when he did, but the fact is he said, "I could wait until I'm losing money, or I could file it now." I'm not really second-guessing it. He was still the dominant newspaper in terms of revenue at that moment, despite what the *Democrat* had done.

ED: Not only that, but shortly, about the time of the sale to Gannett, I think, the *Gazette* was winning all of the awards in the newspaper contest. Maybe 1990 or 1991.

MB: Yes, that really came later. For the longest time, we didn't enter contests. We took the view that that was for the lesser papers. If we didn't win all the prizes, something must be wrong. *Noblesse oblige*.

ED: Well, for a time, we wouldn't enter because there was a policy that we never had entered them. This was a contest for small Arkansas papers. It was not fair for

the *Gazette* to compete against the *DeQueen Bee* or Hot Springs or Blytheville or whoever.

MB: But then the *Democrat* started entering all these things, winning all these awards and then advertising that they were Arkansas' award-winning newspaper.

ED: Arkansas' best newspaper.

MB: So then we had to respond, and, of course, there is real gamesmanship in the contest. It is a bunch of bull, really. Some of it is knowing how to enter a contest, and it took us a few years to figure it out. But then once we figured it out, then we won all the awards, because we were the best newspaper. I mean, once you figure out what it took to win, we did it.

ED: After losing the suit, all of us for the first time began to realize maybe the *Gazette* was not going to last forever, that we really were vulnerable. Until that point, most of us thought there is not really any way the *Gazette* is going to go down the drain. At that point, we began to realize.

MB: Oh, I did, and by that time, I was nervous. See, I had done a tremendous research project on the newspaper leading up to the antitrust case, in which I was closeted in a room with Hussman newspapers from around Arkansas. I added up their news hole and added up their column inches and looked at their percentage of news column inches and prepared a long document for our lawyers on what my assessment of the Hussman newspapers were. It was going to be a strategy of "Hey, if you let these guys win, they are just coming in here and buy the market and they are going to turn the newspaper to crap." That was going to be a defense

strategy of some sort. They never really got into it, but part of my memo was highly cautionary, because I said that, "You can say that about Camden, you can say it, to a lesser degree, about El Dorado, but the Texarkana paper is not a bad-looking newspaper, and it has a pretty good sized news hole, and it is an attractive newspaper." It was winning a lot of secondary prizes in the contest then. That project made me nervous. It made me exceedingly nervous. I also could see a company that had immensely successful newspapers in other places and clearly could carry on a fight for a long time. I was nervous from the late 1970s on and got more nervous with each succeeding year. I hated not responding to stories. I hated just being silent when they would break some story or cause some public stir. Finally, we took them on. On one famous story late in the tenure, Bob Wells did a story that finally showed that one of Mike Masterson's most famous investigations, which led to the conviction of a man for bludgeoning a teen-age boy on a parking lot, was based on perjured testimony by a medical examiner.

ED: Fahmy Malak.

MB: Fahmy Malak. But, you know, we wouldn't do that in the early stages.

ED: After the antitrust suit, it was clear that Patterson was going to have to sell the newspaper.

MB: Yes, then the rumors started, and the Ingersoll rumor came. That was, of course, a rumor founded in fact.

ED: Robert Ingersoll.

MB: The Ingersoll chain.

ED: He came down and spent a couple of days.

MB: It almost took place. I don't know the ins and outs, but I have talked to a lawyer who worked on the deal, and somebody walked away from that deal on the signing day, I'm led to believe. It almost happened. He was using junk bonds to finance a newspaper chain expansion, and he ended up coming a cropper. I think we would have just died faster, probably, if Ingersoll had ended up buying it.

ED: There was another group that Wendell Rawls was going to be hooked up with. Apparently, Hugh Patterson found out that he had a dog-racing track or something in Florida and decided the *Gazette* was not going to be owned by the owner of a dog track. So Gannett became the buyer. Were you there the day they announced the sale of the *Gazette*?

MB: Oh, yeah. I was there when they announced it. Al Neuharth came in in his sharkskin grey suit and drove up in his grey limousine and told us all they were there to win the war.

ED: Everybody was in the newsroom.

MB: I was there and then there was a session at the Capital Hotel as well. Of course, Neuharth took a limousine between the *Gazette* and the Capitol Hotel, which were a block apart, which told us a little something about their operational standards. But, you know, I was at that point so fearful about the *Gazette*'s future that I wasn't necessarily depressed by the news, although Gannett didn't have the best reputation in the world. I knew they had deep pockets. I knew that we didn't. I knew that, over time, Hussman, inevitably, with the antitrust suit won, could do

anything he wanted to in this market, and he clearly demonstrated that he was willing to do it forever. The thought that somebody was coming in with unlimited money, I thought, well, better that than going out of business. I preferred to be optimistic although they brought a retinue of Gannett overseers who made everybody a little bit nervous by the way they were looking around. Of course they had a big party at the Excelsior Hotel that night. I don't know if it was that night or in a week or so. Was it the same night? No, it wouldn't have been the same night.

ED: I don't know. I didn't go to it.

MB: Shortly after, but they put up a banner, "Gannett comes to Little Rock," and they printed these buttons, "Gannett merges with *Gazette*," which is a funny, funny word. Neuharth was there, and I walked through the receiving line and introduced myself as the city editor, and he said, "Why aren't you at work?" I went back shortly thereafter.

ED: But he laughed, I hope. Did he laugh?

MB: No, he didn't laugh. It was about 8 at night, and I guess he thought I should have been over in the news room, so I hustled back over there. But it was an interesting period because they had a name, a "transition team" or something, but it was a group assembled from around the country. A news executive from Gannett headquarters, who was Charles Overbey.

ED: And John Siegenthaler?

MB: John Siegenthaler came over from Nashville. He was the publisher of the

Nashville Tennessean. And they brought up an editor from the Jackson newspaper. They brought up a woman who was, I think, publisher in Monroe or Shreveport at the time, and various others, and they assessed every department of the newspaper. Went out to eat with a lot of people, spent time with everybody, and read the paper, and they basically formed an operational plan. They were also saying who they thought deserved to stay, and who needed to be replaced. It became clear that that was part of the process that was at work. We were assured that the *Gazette* team was going to stay in place, including and up to Carrick Patterson, but, you know, I don't think anybody really believed it. One thing that was reassuring: John Siegenthaler was a very reassuring character. He agreed that one thing we needed to do was be as big a newspaper as the *Democrat* was. And to have more news reporting. He is a news man at heart, and a lot of things *Gazette* people had wanted to do for years, start state bureaus, for example, he said, yes, and that was, in fact, something that happened very shortly after the Gannett plan was put in place. They did begin spending money on opening state bureaus. That was a good thing.

ED: Beefed up the staff.

MB: And beefed up the staff considerably, improved the pay, improved the benefits. There were improvements of many sorts. They asked everybody, "What would you like to have?" Of course, the first thing they did was improve us technologically --- began the process of adding to our printing capacity and upgrading us technically for design improvements and going to color

photography, which was, of course, one of the early shattering experiences for our readers, having color photography on page one. Of course, the *Democrat* had been having it for years. But that was something.

ED: But when the *Gazette* had color photography, it had an effect. It drew criticism.

MB: People criticized it. The *Democrat*, when they went color, clearly picked a picture every day that had red in it, to be above the top of the fold. It was a fire truck, or it was a fire, or it was a dog in a red coat. It was something red. But when we did it, we were tarding up the paper. It was terribly frustrating, because the *Democrat* was clearly making inroads with things that Gannett wanted us to do, whether it was front page features or color photography or investigative projects or more TV coverage, all the things that had been successful for the *Democrat*. When we did it, people thought it was crummy. It was whoring out, in some fashion. We were really caught in a dilemma. Although I think we listened to our critics too much, we made some miscalculations. We certainly went too far some days on front-page story selection and trying to be more entertaining. The Gannett company had a fixation on single-copy sales. They thought that was the real barometer of the saleability of your paper. They would watch single-copy sales with a magnifying glass. Part of the reason for the story selection changing was the belief that that would enhance single-copy sales. Put a lot more sports on page one, when the occasion called for it. Put the feature selection. Put a feature photo out there.

ED: Did it improve single-copy sales? Did we go up any?

MB: You know, once in a blue moon, maybe. Football sold more papers. That is

about it. The Razorbacks sold more copies, but we knew that. I mean, the old *Gazette* put the Razorback game picture on page one on Sunday, so that was really no change. We went too far in some respects, but a lot of things that we did were good. The early change was, of course, that Carrick Patterson couldn't really accept outside ownership. He tried some, but he rebelled at just being a Gannett editor.

ED: Now, he opposed the sale to Gannett, did he not?

MB: He says he opposed the sale.

ED: He was the only one in the family who was opposed.

MB: I think that is correct. And so he was resentful about that, and Carrick is a smart guy. He truly had spent a lot of years learning the craft at every level, but he was not always a particularly effective manager of people. Certainly, he turned Gannett people off early. In the sessions I had with their transition team, they were always sounding me out on what I thought about Carrick. But it was clear enough that they had formed their opinions already. It became clear later, too, that there were plenty of people telling them what they wanted to hear. One of his best friends, most particularly, who later succeeded him.

ED: We'll get him identified. We all know who that is. He can be identified later. I'll tell you who it is.

MB: It was David Byron Petty. He later wrote a letter apologizing to Carrick. He's now an executive with Gannett.

ED: All right, so the Gannett team came up with a plan, and they decided --- I don't

know how long it was --- that Carrick had to be fired.. Did they fire him?

MB: Well, they booted him over to the editorial department. They said they would let him keep working there, be in charge of the editorial page.

ED: That's right. Put him over the editorial page, where he was just lost.

MB: It was a safe move for him, because he had no constituency on the newspaper, which is sad in a way because as years would go by and people would choose people to villainize, sometimes they would villainize Carrick. If anybody didn't deserve to be a villain, among old *Gazette* loyalists, it was Carrick because he opposed the sale, he was brought up under the old traditions, and he got moved aside quickly because he stood up for them. But the fact was that he never was able to bring many people around him. That is why he wasn't able to survive.

ED: So Carrick came over to supervise the editorial section, in some fashion, although his role there was never very clear. Eventually, he just left.

MB: He just hung it up.

ED: And they brought in to replace him Walker Lundy. He was not a Gannett man, either. I don't think that he had ever worked for Gannett.

MB: No, he had never worked for Gannett until then. He worked for Knight-Ridder in Charlotte.

ED: And the *Detroit Free Press*.

MB: He worked with *Detroit Free Press*. He had most recently been fired in Fort Worth, which was not a Knight-Ridder paper at that time. He had gotten crosswise with somebody down there. So Lundy came in. I met him one Sunday

afternoon when Bill Malone, the publisher, was showing him around the building. Tall, kind of reddish hair, goofy-looking kind of guy. He proved to be sort of a goofy kind of guy.

ED: So he got hired. Were you in the news room the day that they assembled everybody in the news room around the city desk and introduced Walker Lundy as the new editor?

MB: You know, I was, but I just remember just a scrap of it, because he made some remark about me, and he was clearly an old metro editor. He said something about its being the engine of the news room. The way he said it, I took in a slightly threatening fashion, as if he had read it and hadn't liked what he had seen up to that point. It made me a little nervous.

ED: My recollection of him is that Bill Malone, the publisher, introduced him in the news room, and Lundy made some very short remarks, two or three minutes, perhaps, and then asked if there were any questions. The first question was from Chuck Heinbockel, from the business section, asking, "Can you tell us something about your management style?" His reply was "Yes, I can tell you this. I know how to fire people. I have experience firing people, and I know how to do it."

MB: I had forgotten that.

ED: That was a most shocking thing to tell your staff.

MB: It would become a theme of his tenure, and it would become the issue upon which, had not he been fired by Malone, I would have been fired, as I was told later by John Hanchette, who was brought in as an assistant managing editor.

It was a nip-and-tuck race between him and me, and, fortunately, it was him first and not me. He wanted me to fire people. He wanted all his editors to fire people.

ED: Your title at the time was city editor or metro editor?

MB: I guess I was city editor, or maybe I had become metro editor. That was a Gannett invention.

ED: But you had succeeded Bill Shelton when Shelton retired in 1985.

MB: January 1, 1986, I became city editor. That was the job, and they renamed it metro editor somewhere along the way, although not long after Gannett bought the paper. I think it was before Lundy came that they decided we needed more desk editors. Gannett was big on Indian chiefs. That was okay with me, more help. But still, at that point, I had Jerry Jones as an assistant city editor, and I can't remember my other assistant. Did I have another? I must have had one other assistant.

ED: Bob Stover? Was Stover an assistant?

MB: It may have been Stover, because he became state editor. But I worked long days. I worked long, long, long days, just like Shelton had. The paper immediately, under Gannett became a little bit bigger, and so there was more stuff. We were doing more, so they decided we need somebody else, and we need somebody with a broader vision. So they made me an assistant managing editor. This is something Gannett had recommended. We brought in a new metro editor, who had been in the Gannett group, but he was a native Arkansan, Craig Durrett. I was

assistant managing editor and had responsibility for both the city and the state reporting staffs by the time Lundy came.

ED: But you reported every day to Lundy. Lundy presided over the morning . . .

MB: The news meetings.

ED: News meetings in the morning, and the page one meetings in the afternoon.

MB: Right.

ED: How much of a role did he exercise in the day-to-day decisions?

MB: Lundy exercised a lot of control. If he didn't like the look of a budget, he would say so. If it was boring to him, he would say it was boring. He always wanted the features and sports people to promote stuff for page one. Always. He was a TV and movie nut. I mean, his life revolved around going to the movies and sports, secondarily. Most news stories just left him cold. Process stories, he called them, government process stories, and he just hated them. He just hated them.

ED: The Capitol beat and City Hall? Those kinds of things?

MB: Just hated them. Just hated them. Although, as bad a time as I had with him, there were times, on certain news stories, where you could see that he had been a metro editor and probably a fairly good one, in terms of seeing holes in stories, seeing key elements that should be there. He could get excited about a news story. I still remember being surprised when I was sent out to the Capitol as the assistant managing editor to be the onsite supervisor of daily coverage during the legislative session. Among the things I did was write some stories myself to fill in. We put out an eight-page tabloid every day, and so you could handle a lot of

copy. I stumbled across a story that the Pulaski County delegation had been meeting secretly to plan a consensus school consolidation bill for Pulaski County. I thought it was a decent story. By legislative standards, it was a pretty good story. He stripped it across the top of page one the next day. So he was not beyond being excited about government news. He was not totally worthless on news, but that was the exception rather than the rule, for sure.

ED: But he had some ideas pretty quickly about the staff.

MB: He thought we sucked. Just about from bottom to top. And made it very clear that he felt that way about it.

ED: He thought they were poor writers.

MB: Well, that they were lazy, and they wrote poorly, and they didn't know what a good story was. Without redeeming social value, for the most part, were most people. He pressed all of his line editors to weed people out, and he brought in some new people. The people he brought in were treated very well.

ED: So, he wanted you to fire people.

MB: Oh, yeah.

ED: Did he give you a list of people to fire?

MB: We started this very intense personnel evaluation process, very detailed, just a monumental headache, rating people in different areas. We stopped the old *Gazette* practice of giving everybody a certain percentage pay raise every year. Pay raises were given according to merit. He demanded that we redline some people every year, that is, some people on our staff had to be given no raise. He

said, "As a matter of course, it is not possible that everybody is performing at the same level. Some people are doing better, some are doing okay, some are doing worse. You have to grade them on the curve. Somebody has got to get an F." Once you had redlined somebody for a while, then if you couldn't demonstrate progress by that employee, then he would say, "You have got to fire them." And we just couldn't do it. I couldn't do it. I couldn't bring myself to do it. Looking back on it now, there were a couple cases, that, yes, we probably should have fired them. But that had not been the *Gazette* practice. That had not been the way at the plantation, and I was not going to be the one that was going to change it. Certainly not while people who were allowed some latitudes in reporting that I didn't approve of. It didn't make sense to me to fire someone, of low pay, who could at least get the state desk obits out right, who knew every cop in every corner of the state and could get you a short story on a tornado if one hit. It finally came to a famous head. Lundy got so mad about it very near the end of his tenure. I don't know if he knew it, but there had been a tremendous number of complaints, including by some of the late arrivals in the Gannett era. They had been complaining to everybody they could think of about Lundy's weird management style and strange story decisions. There was a feeling that we were being laughed at in the community because of some of the page-one story selections Lundy was making, "Dog Strikes Man," and "Microwave Blows Up" and whatever. The word had reached Malone, and Malone, for better or worse, had tied in pretty closely to Little Rock's old business crowd, which turned out to

be good for us, because that crowd didn't like the new *Gazette* much either. They were advertisers, and that was important. Anyway, we were nearing this crisis point. John Hanchette, who was assistant managing editor and had been assigned to Little Rock, I think to assess what was going on, quickly became a friend of the staff and quickly decided that Lundy was a crackpot, which was good for us.

ED: He came down from the Gannett News Service.

MB: He came from the Gannett News Service. He had been a writer, had worked on Pulitzer prize-winning reporting teams, was an old news man. Was kind of a fun guy. He had his quirks, too, but he quickly took the staff's side. He knew Lundy was a flake. Whatever else Lundy may be, he was a flake. So Hanchette was reporting back to his friends at Gannett, I'm quite sure, so there was some stuff building. We didn't know all this until later, but, fortunately for me, it was. Hanchette told me that I was close to being fired for insubordination. There was a famous, secret Saturday morning session that we had in the publisher's conference room. Hanchette, Lundy, Kate Marymount, who was, by then, the metro editor, who had come in from another Gannett paper.

ED: She had come down from Springfield, Missouri.

MB: From Springfield, Missouri, and she is now the executive editor in Springfield. She has gone back to her hometown as an editor. And Bob Stover, who was by then the business editor, which had become a very important job at the paper because we put a lot of money in business. We started a Monday business section. Or he may have made the move to state editor then. Maybe he was state

editor then. He had been business editor. Bob, Kate and I and Hanchette and Lundy. And Lundy said, basically, "I'm not happy with what is going on." The bottom line was, he said, "I want to know why you are not firing anybody, and we're not going to leave here until you tell me somebody you want to fire." I suggested firing one of his favorites. And he got red. I don't know if you ever saw Lundy get mad. His face would turn crimson red, and he about blew his top. It had just rolled off my tongue. It was meant, well, not totally unseriously, but it was more of a bridge to a discussion that this reporter was a bad force in the news room, that she backbit people, that she went around editors, that she was a negative force in the news room, and if we want to talk about negative force in the news room, I was ready to talk about negative forces in the news room. Well, it didn't get things off on the right foot with Lundy. I didn't know what the others would say. I was going to do what I was going to do, and it didn't matter to me what Stover did or what Kate did because they had jobs to protect and that was okay with me. They are not nearly as bombastic as I am, and that's probably good, but they quietly, more or less, reinforced what I said, which was that he was off on the wrong foot, that we had a pretty good staff, that they didn't have people they were ready to fire. They had people who needed improvement, that they were ready to work with. Finally, it came down to it. He said, "There has got to be one person in that news room you can fire. There has got to be one." He named a veteran obit writer. I went into a defense for him, too. There were things the obit writer could do, and, of course, he hadn't had a pay raise for about ten

years. He wasn't making dirt. I said, "You know, you pay obit writers that. I mean, he can write obits. He can do a traffic fatality. You have got to have somebody to do that. Why not have a thirty-year veteran do obits who knows the county seats and all the little jerkwater towns? That is all we have got him doing." Finally, the meeting broke up. We spent about three and a half hours in there, and I don't think Lundy ever spoke a civil word to me again. But, within weeks, he was gone. It was kind of in the middle of the night, like those things happen. It would be fascinating to know what finally tore it at the Gannett level that they removed him and decided they needed to make a change, but thank goodness for me, it bought me two more years.

ED: I heard that when Malone told him he was fired, he asked about John Hanchette: "Are you going to fire him, too? If you are going to fire me, you have got to fire Hanchette." He was very upset that Hanchette was not fired as well.

MB: That could be. Hanchette wasn't there much longer. They brought him back to Washington, but he was allowed to stay through the transition period.

ED: Let's go back to a couple of fairly important events during the Lundy period that you have some knowledge of, I think. The Dillard's story.

MB: I have too much knowledge of the Dillard's story.

ED: This week, I saw where Walter Hussman mentioned that one of the pivotal events in that period, in winning the newspaper war, was Dillard's switching all its advertising from the *Gazette* to the *Democrat*.

MB: Yes, I guess you could say Max Brantley singlehandedly lost the newspaper war.

If that is the truth.

ED: Well, that was the story.

MB: Yes, it turns out it was a more complicated story than we knew. But certainly, I'm directly responsible for the triggering event.

ED: Right. Tell us about it.

MB: I'll give you a little bit of the runup, and it is this. In the 1970s, when I came to the *Gazette*, there was no business section. There was Leland DuVall, who wrote a business column seven days a week, and general assignment reporters wrote news releases. Over time, we finally added a business page, then a business department, then a business section. Still, like newspapers everywhere, we were learning that we had a lot to learn about business coverage. Very unsophisticated about it. One thing that I did know, because I was the son of a stockbroker, was that there was a vast amount of public information available on publicly held corporations that they were required to file with the Securities and Exchange Commission. At that point, in the 1980s, in Little Rock, they didn't provide any of that information to newspapers. They didn't talk to newspapers, and Dillard Department Stores certainly didn't. Didn't then, don't now. And so I said, at the minimum, what I will do, and I called my mom, who by then worked in my dad's stock brokerage office, and I said, "I want you to buy two shares of Wal-Mart, Dillard, Arkla, and several other major Arkansas publicly held corporations in my name, so I'll be on the mailing list when they mail the proxy statement out every year. Because the proxy statement has great stuff about when they raise

executives' pay and give them stock appreciation rights and those sorts of things. So, my very first year to get a Dillard proxy statement, it so happened that the proxy statement that year indicated that they had fired the previous accounting firm and had hired a new one and were in a dispute over, I don't know, the figure twenty-six million dollars sticks in my mind. But there was a tax accounting dispute, and I think the bottom line was that maybe there was going to be an additional charge against them for taxes because of some accounting error or something. So there was this little arcane bookkeeping dispute. So I brought the prospectus in to work. I was a city editor, and I gave it to Chuck Heinbockel, who was then our first, or second, business editor. He wrote a little story about what was in the prospectus, and it was no more or less than what the prospectus said, and that Dillard's, of course, wouldn't comment. They don't ever comment about anything. We went to the news meeting that afternoon and Lundy asked what everybody had. It was a slow news day. Nobody had much of anything. And I said, "Well, we got this little business story out of the Dillard's prospectus, which nobody else will have," because nobody else was messing with that stuff then, "about this charge against earnings, and, you know, it's a little something." He said, "Well, put it on page one." I don't even think that was necessarily bad. It wasn't that big a business story, but a slow day, and, I mean, who knows? They put it down at the bottom of page one, maybe a two-column headline on it. The next morning, about mid-morning, it seems, the people started scurrying around, coming in from the publisher's office and the advertising department, and said,

"The Dillard's ads aren't here. Have they been jerked?" or something. Before the day was out, it was clear that Dillard's had pulled their advertising from our newspaper. Without, to the best of my knowledge, without directly telling anybody why. They just did it and didn't pay calls to the publisher or anybody.

ED: Even though they had a contract.

MB: Even though they had a contract. Of course, everybody knows newspaper contracts are basically worthless. You can't very well sue to enforce them if people don't buy what they are committed to buy. But they did have a contract. The other thing that happened was the *Democrat* the next day ran a very prominent story, it may have been on page one, saying that our story was all wrong and quoting Dillard's people as saying it was just some terrible story. I still say all of that is BS. Our story was correct. It was in the prospectus. Perhaps it was a minor story and not of great interest, and I can plead ignorance to that, but they never came back. And that was the end. That was the end of Dillard's advertising in the *Arkansas Gazette*.

ED: It was about four million dollars of advertising.

MB: It was a chunk. And despite efforts that included the head of the entire Gannett corporation coming down and trying to pay court to Bill Dillard, Sr., nobody would give them the time of day. We later found out that there were other events. There was simmering unhappiness, and I don't know at what stage it occurred. It had to have happened before then. Walter Hussman had gone to Dillard's and demonstrated to them that we had advertisers that got advertising rates that were,

per inch, lower than Dillard's, who was our biggest advertiser and should have had the most favorable advertising rates. Now the lower rates were on, as I understand, what we used to call "standby" advertising. They were ads that could be put in the paper, in the city edition, say, in space that developed unexpectedly or something. You couldn't dictate placement and day of publication and that sort of thing. Whatever it was, that rankled Dillard probably more than anything. But, by timing alone, it was pretty clear that the story was the last straw.

ED: Not too long before that, we, the *Gazette*, had written stories about his grandson.

MB: Well, I had a role in that, too. And that I have absolutely no apologies about. He had a grandson who was a troubled kid, who stole a car to go joyriding one night and was what they call "cutting doughnuts" in people's yards in west Little Rock. He happened to drive into the yard of an old fellow out on Hall Drive, I think it was, and was turning some doughnuts. A guy who was a pretty good marksman pulled a rifle out of his closet and shot the kid. Didn't kill him, but wounded him, stopped the joyride. It was a big story, and we played it on page one and interviewed everybody we could. By anybody's standards, it was an obvious, big new story, and we reported exactly what had happened. My recollection of the *Democrat's* coverage of the story was that they didn't mention that the car was stolen until the last paragraph of the story, I think. And they downplayed the Dillard connection. The story was just warped in any number of ways. A normal newspaper wouldn't have handled it that way. They handled it with the maximum discretion toward the Dillard family, which was typical of later coverage they did

in the business section. John Robert Starr had a writer, Becky Moore, who wrote an advertising column in which she criticized some Dillard's advertising, and he told her, "You will never do that again or you will be fired." They took good care of the department store.

ED: And they took good care of Wal-Mart as well.

MB: We wrote, to my knowledge, the first story ever written about Wal-Mart censorship. They pulled some teen magazines off their news racks because they thought the content was unacceptable. *Tiger Beat* was one of the magazines they pulled off the newsstand, and we did a front-page story on it. You know, it is a good, popular newspaper story when somebody pulls back some objectionable literature. Picked up by the AP, it ran nationwide, but the *Democrat* never ran the story.

ED: Wal-Mart advertised exclusively in the *Democrat*.

MB: They never advertised with us, although they had apparently tried to run some. There was an old story, which I don't know the truth of, that Wal-Mart had some inserts for us once, but because they weren't properly imprinted, Hugh Patterson ordered them off our docks. That had engendered ill will with Wal-Mart forever. Whether that is true or not, I don't know. It was unusual for them because they were an early insert advertiser. They had a standing, full-page ad in the *Democrat*, back in its earliest days, and we later found out that Hussman had a huge investment of company pension fund money in Wal-Mart stock. There was a relationship there that went beyond just philosophical compatibility.

ED: The loss of Dillard's advertising also had some additional fallout because other advertisers followed Dillard's.

MB: There were advertisers who wanted to be where Dillard's was because that generated traffic, they thought, for them, and without them, it clearly had an impact.

ED: Before that, there had been very little advertising in the Democrat, or at least it was dirt cheap. After that, they didn't get the sum of the *Gazette* advertising, but they got a substantial part of it. There was another episode in the newspaper war that you had some role in and I did, too, so this may be the only way to get the Orville Henry story on record. And there were other episodes during the period of the Gannett ownership of the *Gazette*. The *Democrat* was trying to hire key *Gazette* staffers, and we were hiring off some of theirs. But they didn't have any big guns like Orville Henry. It was, perhaps, 1988 when they hired Orville Henry, the longtime, celebrated, widely admired sports editor of the *Gazette*.

MB: Yes, it was an earthquake.

ED: The voice of the Razorbacks. Many people credit Orville with having a key role in preserving the *Gazette*. People had to read Orville.

MB: Had to read Orville to know what the Razorbacks were doing.

ED: Now if we could reconstruct this. My recollection is that Orville had moved to Fayetteville. Carrick had permitted Orville Henry to move to Fayetteville.

MB: Right.

ED: The decision was made before Gannett came along. And he was the sports editor

in name only. He effectively covered the Razorbacks in a column. Gannett brought in a new regime, and we had a new sports editor that they had brought in.

MB: He may have been called executive sports editor or something like that.

ED: There was an assistant sports editor named Henry. Remember?

MB: Oh, yes, but. Don Henry. Wasn't it Don Henry?

ED: I'm not sure, but anyway, there was a guy named Henry who was an assistant sports editor. He was a desk man, and he was responsible, I think, for handling copy and making up pages.

MB: And he hated Orville's copy.

ED: He hated Orville's copy and would cut it up every day. Orville would write these Monday morning stories after Razorback games. They were long and detailed, and your diehard Razorback fan read those stories.

MB: Every word.

ED: And this guy would chop those stories way down and bury his column. I think we were putting his column on page two.

MB: Inside the paper, where it had always been on the front of the section. Right.

ED: Orville was getting very upset. I talked to Orville a number of times. This particular week, this guy chopped Orville's copy up, left out a story or two that he had written, and one day Orville had written a column and sent it in, but instead they ran a column that had been published a week earlier. Orville picked up the paper, and he was proud of that day's column, but, instead, here is an old column. Orville was fed up. He was talking to me about it almost every night, maybe

because he thought I might have some entree into the *Gazette*, and he told me that Jack Stephens had approached him as the intermediary about a job at the *Democrat*. And he had talked to Walter Hussman. If the *Gazette* didn't offer him the equivalent deal or something — I think they had offered him a big bonus of some kind --- by Saturday night or Sunday or something, he was going to go with the *Democrat*. I called you about it.

MB: I went to see Lundy.

ED: On Saturday morning. It was on Friday night that Orville talked to me, and I called you, and Saturday morning you had to go some place with Lundy. You mentioned it to him.

MB: Right.

ED: And Lundy told you, as I recall from your conversation at the time, that he didn't believe it at first. "Do you really think Orville would go?" And you said, "Yes, I think he would." And Lundy said, "Do you think it would make any difference if he went to the *Democrat*?" And you said, "Why, hell, yes, it would make a difference."

MB: Yes, that is all true.

ED: That it would make a big difference, and we ought to do whatever it took, that we should not lose Orville Henry. That would be a big blow. Lundy piddled around about it and finally came back to you and said, "All right, I'll do it," and came up with a pretty good package, and then called Fayetteville. Orville was operating out of his house, but Lundy called him not on his home phone, but his office

phone. It was in the same place . . .

MB: I didn't know this end of it.

ED: . . . but it was upstairs, and Orville never went up there. Would not go up there and listen to his messages. So Lundy left a couple of messages on his office phone, but not his home phone, where Orville would have to answer. On Sunday, Orville didn't hear anything, so Monday morning Walter sent a jet up there to fly Orville back down here for a press conference.

MB: To make the announcement.

ED: And he went to work for the *Democrat*.

MB: Sorry, I had forgotten most of that. I vaguely remember talking to Lundy about it. It was over at the Convention Center, attached to the Excelsior Hotel. It was Sigma Delta Chi or something, but I remember talking to him that Saturday morning, and him having an incredulous look. Of course, I don't think he ever valued Orville, really. I think he understood he had a value, but he just didn't like his stuff. I mean, Orville was just old-fashioned, too long. To Lundy, it just wasn't relevant. And he moved with more alacrity later, when the same thing happened with John Brummett.

ED: Well, on Orville Henry, what effect do you think that had on the *Gazette*?

MB: Oh, it was demoralizing as hell.

ED: It was on all of us, I know.

MB: It was an incredible public signal that one side had the big "mo," as they say in the TV trade. One side had momentum. That was the sign of a marquee player going

to another team. They don't usually leave a winning team for a losing team.

Whether that was right or wrong, whether it should have mattered, whether it did matter, it was of an incalculable public relations benefit for them. Although the *Democrat*, once they had him, abused him, of course. We know they didn't respect him at all. He was merely a scalp for them.

ED: Did we lose much circulation? Several thousand papers they might have attributed to that.

MB: Could be. You know, that is hard to say. Circulation is such a funny business. All the circulation figures during the Gannett years can hardly be credited because there were so many artificial means to inflate them, and there were so many graces given by both papers that I don't know what the paper did in circulation. Maybe. Certainly on Sundays, people who picked up the paper just to get Orville. There had to be some loss.

ED: The other coup, I guess, was John Brummett, which was a year or eighteen months later, I guess. Well, they didn't get Brummett right off.

MB: No, Brummett thought the end was near, and, I'm going to give him credit, he sensed things were falling apart, and he didn't like Gannett management.

ED: No, although he was a hero with Gannett.

MB: Oh, they loved him. They loved him.

ED: He was their fair-haired boy.

MB: I think Brummett is one of those people who, if you pay him too much honor, he just looks down at you. He is kind of perverse in that way.

ED: They gave him great big, fat raises.

MB: Oh, huge bonuses, and they made him political editor and gave him just carte blanche to do whatever. The more they gave him, the less he respected them. That was the way it worked.

ED: Lundy had gone.

MB: Keith Moyer was the editor.

ED: Keith Moyer had come from Florida to be the editor, and Craig Moon had then come up as the publisher. Malone had been ousted and sent to Monroe, Louisiana, I guess.

MB: Right.

ED: And Craig Moon came, and Keith Moyer was the editor. There came a point when they had to name a new managing editor, right?

MB: Right.

ED: And they named Bill Rutherford.

MB: Bill Rutherford, well, yes.

ED: Was that the day that Brummett quit? That is my recollection.

MB: Was it? Was it the day? Well, you know, he quit twice. I mean, he quit once, and Lundy came to . . .

ED: What?

MB: He quit once, but he didn't quit. He went in to Lundy and said, "I'm quitting." And Lundy came to me and he said, "I can't endure this, on top of Orville and the other stuff. You have got to help me."

ED: Was he going to the *Democrat*?

MB: No, he wanted out, and Alan Leveritt had offered him a deal to come to work for both the *Arkansas Times* and *Arkansas Business*. And, if you remember, you and I caught him in the alley that night and said, "Sleep on it. Don't do it. It's a terrible mistake." And we lobbied him like big-time lobbyists that night. He went home and he decided to stay. And I don't know how much longer after that. Well, it was the night of the televised gubernatorial debate in October between Sheffield Nelson and Bill Clinton, whatever night that was, that morning, he quit.

ED: They brought Rutherford back in July of 1990.

MB: I think Brummett threatened to quit back in the summer of 1990, and that was when we had our discussion. The Rutherford appointment may have had something to do with it because . . .

ED: He was upset that Rutherford became the managing editor, and Brummett didn't have much respect for Rutherford.

MB: No, I think Brummett probably would have liked to have been managing editor.

ED: Well, I know he would like to have been. And I thought he was going to be the managing editor.

MB: Yes, because Brummett was absolutely a fair-haired boy with all the top brass. He was taken on the famous "Planning for the Future" retreat at Red Apple Inn. He was the only editorial person taken. Sure, I thought he would write his ticket, but see, that was a case where the Gannett people miscalculated. Rutherford had retired. Had announced his retirement and was going to go to teach at UALR.

For some reason, there was still a lingering feeling, left over from the Lundy era, that old *Gazette* people were leaving because Gannett had ruined the paper. And that people in the community felt that way, people at the paper felt that way, and so Moon walked into the news room and said, "I've got an announcement that is going to make everybody in here happy. I've persuaded Bill Rutherford not to retire from the *Arkansas Gazette*."

ED: Was this Moon or Moyer?

MB: I think it was Moon, but it may have been Moyer, but they were together. They really thought it was a coup. Of course, faces fell all over the news room. Rest his soul, Bill was not a popular choice as managing editor of the paper, and so it was just a miscalculation on their part. It was a figurehead thing. So Brummett left.

ED: Brummett, I know, was furious. He was just shaking his head. I had some conversation with him. That's why I kind of think of that date because I remember how furious he was.

MB: Well, that may have contributed to it. As I say, there was a two-part deal. He didn't stay long after he withdrew his first resignation. He finally left in October, just pulled up without notice one morning and said, "I'm out of here." Didn't give anybody a chance to lobby him again. He just left one night and didn't come back.

ED: And went to the *Arkansas Times* as the editor.

MB: And wrote a column for *Arkansas Business*, but quickly saw that he couldn't stand

to be away from daily journalism and worked out a deal, while working at *Arkansas Times*, to also send two or three columns a week to the *Arkansas Democrat*. So that was another blow. He was a popular columnist. He had developed quite a following. He was good. He is good.

ED: They also tried to hire Richard Allin and Charles Allbright.

MB: Offered huge sums, and both of those guys came back and told about it and promptly got matched and bonuses for staying, and they stayed. The good outcome was that the group of people who were identified as having some marquee value got boxcar sums of money to stick around. I came in October of 1990, took over as columnist for Brummett, and Christmas of that year they gave all of the house columnists huge bonuses. I had only been doing it three months. I got four thousand dollars. I thought I had died and gone to heaven, to get a four thousand dollar bonus. I assume Deborah Mathis and Allin and Allbright got ten or twelve thousand dollar bonuses. That was big money. No newspaper guy ever thought they would get money like that.

ED: You think they got ten thousand dollar bonuses?

MB: Yes.

ED: Orville Henry got a big bonus back there, early on, too, because he had talked about leaving.

MB: This was after Orville's promised departure, and they weren't going to ever let that happen again.

ED: Even before Orville left, they had given him a nice raise and a nice bonus.

MB: What they told me, when they gave me my four thousand at Christmas, after three months as a columnist was that next year it would be more in keeping with a full-time columnist bonus. They held out that annual bonus as a means of keeping you on the reservation.

ED: So they spent a lot of money.

MB: Not that I was going anywhere. But I certainly didn't turn down the money.

ED: But they spent a ton of money.

MB: Oh, yes.

ED: They expanded the paper.

MB: Giant news staff. Giant news hole. All the best equipment.

ED: Nice raises for people. Nothing for editorial, they didn't like us, but I got a couple of little raises.

MB: Brand new computer systems. You know, just everything. Of course, by the end, they were losing thirty million dollars a year. Of course, they had stopped charging for circulation and not charging much for advertising.

ED: They were matching the *Democrat*. The *Democrat* had been losing twenty-five million, and we were, too.

MB: Right. Right. Same thing. Yes, I wish I had kept a closer look at those papers we saw during that brief playing with the employee buyout of the paper.

ED: Well, let's talk about that. It was, I guess, some time in the summer of 1991 that, one weekend, there was a rumor that Hussman had bought the *Gazette*. We didn't carry the story, did we, immediately? It was on Channel 11. Channel 11, as I

recall, broke the story.

MB: The *Democrat* did. We did not. And, ultimately, the *New York Times*, I think, ran a story that, more or less, confirmed that something was going on. Weren't they the first? Seems like.

ED: I think that is right. I'm not sure. And the AP moved a story, based on the Channel 11 story. Maybe that is what the *Democrat* ran. I'm not sure.

MB: Maybe so.

ED: But Gannett refused to comment, as I recall. Hussman's remark was . . .

MB: Yes, he said that it had been a rumor started by the *Gazette* circulation department, which made no sense whatsoever. Gannett's silence chilled me to the bone.

ED: But Hussman's was just an outright lie. He just said it was not true.

MB: Hussman lied. He would lie, when it suited him, about business matters concerning the newspaper war. He couldn't be trusted.

ED: Keith Moyer was the editor then, right? What were his directives about coverage of this thing?

MB: By then, I was merely a columnist, and I didn't have any reporting responsibilities. I had ceded all control over reporting staff, and, as I understand it from my talks with Chuck Heinbockel, they were told they couldn't write any story that wasn't directly attributable to a fact. There was no point writing a story denying a rumor, and, in truth, that is kind of reporting gospel. It is not news to write a story denying a rumor. And that pretty well tied the business department's hands, pretty

effectively, even though it began appearing in some national prints quoting some unnamed sources. We were not allowed to use those, either. Finally, toward the last couple of weeks, I confirmed, through a source in the U.S. Justice Department, that the sale was pending final Justice Department approval. I couldn't name the source, but it was a primary source with direct knowledge that that was the case. I wrote a column to that effect, and Keith Moyer spiked it.

ED: Did he say anything to you?

MB: He said he wouldn't allow it to be run. And that is all he said. I guess I could have walked out, on principle, and said, to hell with you, but I had a feeling the end was so near. I didn't want to jeopardize my severance pay. I will admit quite, quite bluntly. Presuming there was going to be some severance pay.

ED: Well, there might not have been.

MB: There wouldn't have been in that case. I would have been out of there. Finally, the last two days we ran good stories. A week or so before, certainly there were some stories run finally. What finally turned the tide on some coverage was the group of us who got together and did some idle looking around at some means to stop a sale and some means to achieve an employee buyout. That, then, was news that could be covered. The formation of an employee group was a positive development that could not be denied. It existed, and it was being covered on television, and there was no way not to cover our public effort.

ED: Tell us about that. How did that occur? And who were involved?

MB: Well, you know, I can't remember. It may have been you, Scott Morris, Scott Van

Laningham, me, those are the ones I remember most.

ED: Anne Farris.

MB: Anne Farris, probably because she had a relationship with somebody who was a labor lawyer. We got in touch with Walter Davidson's law firm, and that was kind of the core group. I don't know whose idea it was first to meet. It wasn't mine. I was called early on, by someone, but happy to participate, and we started brainstorming after work a little bit. This was a short period of time. We had meetings with lawyers and heard about employee stock option plans, and I remember trying to call Rosalynn Carter on the Gannett Board and relied on Kaneaster Hodges, who was a family friend of the Carters.

ED: And I called Carl Rowan, the *Washington Post* columnist. He was on the Gannett Board. He said he didn't know anything about it. He didn't want the *Gazette* to die. He said that he would call John Curley, the Gannett president. He was sorry, but that was all he could do.

MB: We got a lot of "I'm sorry, but this isn't a decision that we can have anything to do about." It was a quixotic thing. We talked to a few potential financiers, but who wants to buy a company that is losing thirty million dollars against a guy who is willing to spend an unlimited amount of money. Didn't exactly look like a good buy for anybody.

ED: When did Harry Thomasson get involved?

MB: Harry Thomasson did come into the picture, a friend of the Clintons, an old Arkansas boy, successful TV producer, who, with his wife, had done the

fabulously successful "Designing Women." He was a very good friend of Hillary Clinton's. He came in because of his liberal political leanings, I think. He is something of a windmill charger, too, and joined in our meetings, footed some of our legal bills, in the end. Through the connection with Hillary, I believe, he won for us a curiously worded commitment from Wal-Mart for some sort of advertising presence, which the *Democrat* took pains to call somebody else at Wal-Mart to get them to deny. At that time, Hillary was on the Wal-Mart Board, though I believe she was the conduit for that announcement. David Pryor, I think, tried to intercede at Dillard's and so did B. Finley Vinson, who was a friend of the Dillards and a banker in Little Rock, with no effect. We drew up plans of how we could cut back the *Gazette* operations in a way that we could present a potential for a profitable corporation. Brought in people from other parts of the paper. The truth is, for the *Gazette* to survive, perhaps you could have cut it down to being a city paper, giving up the state, and conceived a way to have a dramatically reduced presence, but only then with some kind of capital investment. I guess that the thing foundered at the point at which the lawyers said, "Now, you know, under Arkansas law, if this sale is stopped, you could be sued." We did finally establish through lawyers that, yes, Justice was in the final stages of approval of a deal.

ED: But apparently, all of this activity delayed things at the Justice Department.

MB: It delayed things. Because what happens in a newspaper buyout is you can't do a combination like this as long as there is a willing buyer, and we were representing ourselves as potentially willing buyers.

ED: Along with Harry Thomasson and . . .

MB: We talked to a newspaper broker and got to look at the books. Walter Smiley, a respected businessman, came in and offered his volunteer assistance to help us review the books. We now know that we were submarined by Walter Smiley, not that the outcome would have been different. It turns out Walter Smiley hated the newspaper war, thought warring newspapers were bad for business. He came in, I am now convinced, to convince us as quickly as possible that we should quit and let the deal be done. Not because he liked the *Democrat*, but just because he wanted the war to be over.

ED: But apparently, he was collaborating a little bit with Hussman later.

MB: Oh, you later found out he talked to Hussman? It could be. He may have assessed the business situation. He was not our friend. He represented himself as our friend, and Walter Smiley was not our friend. It was an incredibly devious thing he did. However, I think the result would have been the same. I mean, as a practical matter, there was not an investor who would step in to buy the paper. The time it would have taken us to put a buyout together would have been prohibitive. We had no capital to finance the work that would have been necessary to do it. At the point at which the lawyer said, "We are willing to go forward, but you have to recognize that you potentially have liability. If money is lost by the seller-purchaser in their deal, they could sue you for liability for delaying their completion of the acquisition." You know, that was probably an abundance of lawyerly caution, telling us that. Realistically, it probably wouldn't

have happened. Who among us could afford that prospect? Of getting sued and having to sustain a legal defense?

ED: On a Thursday afternoon, we talked to Walter Smiley and with Walter Davidson. My recollection is that there was some hint there of maybe some lawsuit.

MB: I think that was seeded by somebody. Walter Davidson, to that point, had been so aggressive, and his assistant, after the fact, told me that he still thought the buyout plan had merit. But I think somebody planted that notion with Walter and he just, to be careful, said it. I don't think all of a sudden, after the couple weeks we were working, he said, "By the way, now, you know you guys have liability." I believe that somebody put the idea in his head, and he thought, to cover all bases, he should say it. Well, it certainly scared the bejesus out of all of us, I think. But I think it was in combination, too, with Walter Smiley saying, "I've looked at the books. You guys can't make this work."

ED: He told us on that Thursday. He had been very diplomatic.

MB: We met with him at his office, and then we had a final, concluding meeting at Davidson's office, I guess, and said, "No deal."

ED: It was at that point, on Thursday afternoon, that Walter Davidson sent a letter to the Justice Department.

MB: The message that we no longer had an active interest in purchasing the paper, and they quickly tied up things the next morning.

ED: That was late in the afternoon on Thursday the seventeenth. Friday at noon is when they shut the computers down.

MB: Although we were in suspension all that morning. Nothing was occurring and nobody knew anything, but I knew it was over. And, of course, it was a stroke of luck that we carried the picture on the front page of William Woodruff's grave. I still get upset about it. Everybody in my family cried when the paper came in that morning.

ED: It was a stroke of luck as well because I came up and talked to Jerry Dhonau. Jerry had written a farewell editorial, not knowing whether we would get a chance to run it or not. We talked about it that Thursday evening. The editorial had already been written, so I said, "Well, maybe tomorrow is the time to do it." We were thinking about waiting until Sunday, running it Sunday. There weren't many days left.

MB: No, the end was near.

ED: Well, let's don't take a chance, and Jerry said, "All right, let's go with it tomorrow." So we ran it on that day.

MB: I wrote a column saying it looked like the end was near and thanking everybody who had been supportive of us. I didn't know for sure, but I knew that that was the only topic I had left to write about. It was a hard time. I am glad about it, that the gestures in the editorial and in my column and in the paper, the final reporting was even-handed and the editorial and my column pretty generous, I think, under the circumstances because, by then, we were being treated like criminals by the *Democrat*. They had posted photographers around the building to take our pictures, to make sure we didn't leave with any of Walter Hussman's property.

The end of the paper had many low moments. I mean, the grim-faced *Democrat* people coming in with security guards and posting guards at the doors to watch us leave and to check our belongings to make sure we didn't take things. The hardest cut, really, though, was the morning *Democrat*, the first *Democrat-Gazette*, in which the headline is something like "It's Over - We Won" effectively, and an exultant, cheering band of *Democrat* employees. They were due their happiness, but there was virtually no mention in the extensive coverage that day of the seven hundred people who had been put out of work. And, if nothing else, it was major industrial closing in Little Rock, Arkansas, the kind of thing that is a boilerplate news story for most newspapers. You say, so-and-so lost their job, what is going to happen to them, the size of the payroll. We were an afterthought to the *Democrat*. They were totally consumed with their victory and their exultation. My son, who was only five years old at the time, but had begun to read, read that streamer headline on page one and said, "Dad, that is so mean." If a five-year-old can understand it, anybody could understand what a mean-spirited newspaper that was that won the war.

ED: I will never forget that we were told that afternoon that you were to have your stuff out of the building by 5:00, before dark, and so they piled a bunch of boxes in the first-floor hall, and that was the extent of their generosity, to give us a bunch of boxes to clean our stuff out with. I had back problems and had brought my own chair up to my desk. My wife, Elaine, came down, and I was rolling that old chair, which I got at some discount place for about fifty dollars. Some

security person tried to stop me as I took that chair out there. And I just said,
"Damn it, this is my chair."

MB: You know, I had known it was coming, and I did something I am glad I did. I had a drawer in the desk full of old personnel records. Because I had been an editor, I had employee evaluations, nasty notes back and forth among people, payroll records, things that I had accumulated over fifteen years of being a supervisor. Three days before the end, I started cleaning out my desk. I just knew it was over. Two days before the paper closed, I took all of the sensitive documents. They weren't of any value to anybody, but they could have been personally embarrassing to people. I took them home with me and dumped them in a 7-11 dumpster, so that they wouldn't even be in the *Gazette's* garbage. It turned out to be a good move because we later found out that the building was not emptied, even of trash, until John R. Starr had sent editors over to the building to go through trash cans, to make sure nothing important was thrown away. They went through our payroll records, and they shared them with each other. So, to what little degree I was able to protect some of that, people's privacy, I am glad I was able to do that.

ED: In a general way, was the *Gazette* a special place to work?

MB: Yes, I wasn't there three days before I knew I had found home. I don't know entirely why. It was bound up in a lot of things. It was bound up in what it had stood for in 1957, in a difficult time, and we all sort of felt heirs to that legacy. It was bound up in some truly extraordinary people who had a feeling about place, a

lot of people who could have gone anywhere, but wanted to be there, who made a home in Arkansas and Little Rock and the *Gazette*, specifically, because they felt good about the place and the people they worked with, its perceived mission, being a voice for a whole state, being a somewhat contrary voice, editorially, for a whole state. And so it made it great for me, For the longest time, I never thought I could work anywhere else, and when I had to confront the reality of otherwise, it was a pretty tough time.

ED: Anything else you can think of?

MB: No, I have probably gassed on enough here.

ED: All right. To close this thing, after the closing of the *Gazette*, you came over as editor of the *Arkansas Times*.

MB: Well, I took six weeks off after the *Gazette* closed. And then I had a couple of job offers from alternative publications here and took one at the *Arkansas Times* as an associate editor. It was then a monthly magazine, but with the idea that they were now, with the death of the *Gazette*, going to look at converting to weekly publication and step into some of the editorial niche the *Gazette* had left. The first week in May of 1992, we became a weekly paper, and I became editor at that point and have been that ever since.

ED: And this is something of a legacy of the *Gazette*.

MB: Oh, yes. Dismissively, some people at the *Democrat* say this is just bitter *Gazette* rejects, but I am proud to say that we include three former associate editors as writers, Bob McCord, Ernie Dumas, Doug Smith. We carry George Fisher's

cartoon. We carry Deborah Mathis' syndicated column. We have Bob Lancaster's column, and I am here, and I guess every member of our editorial staff, except our art director, is a former *Gazette* hand. I guess that is probably not a coincidence. And we are doing pretty well and making money, and I don't think that any small amount of that is because of the *Gazette* talent that is over here.

ED: All right, Max. Thanks.

MB: All right.

[End of Interview]