

Gazette Project

Interview with

John Brummett,
Little Rock, Arkansas,
25 June 2000

Interviewer: Ernie Dumas

Ernie Dumas: This is June 25, 2000. This is Ernie Dumas at my home in Little Rock.

We are talking with John Brummett, who used to be a state Capitol reporter and columnist at the *Arkansas Gazette*. He shortly will be a columnist and reporter for the Donrey Media Group. John, first we have to do orally what you wrote on this sheet of paper, which is to acknowledge that you understand that this stuff will be public and will be available for the use of researchers and others at the University of Arkansas in the History Department Archives. You understand that and accept that?

John Brummett: I do. I accept it, yes.

ED: Well, let's start off and talk about the life story of John Brummett. Where were you born? And when?

JB: I was born December 4, 1953, at the old St. Vincent's Hospital in Little Rock. I was the firstborn of J.T. and Ozella Brummett. He was a warehouseman at Nabisco.

ED: O-Z-E-L-L-A?

JB: Yes, O-Z-E-L-L-A. She was working at the 7-UP Bottling Company. We lived

in an apartment on East Capitol, owned by my Uncle Bob Bevis. He was a well known man about town in those days. He had Bevis Recreation Hall.

ED: Oh, really?

JB: Yes.

ED: Bevis? You are related to Bevis.

JB: Well, by marriage. My dad's sister had moved from Dierks, Arkansas, earlier to Little Rock and married Bob Bevis, my Uncle Bob.

ED: Bevis Pool Hall.

JB: Later Bevis Dodge. Bevis Pool Hall, I can say, was a bit of a notorious place. It was doing well enough that Bob was able to have some rental property, and we lived in an apartment on East Capitol about where Interstate 30 runs now. That's where we lived. That's the story of my beginning.

ED: Then you moved to southwest Little Rock from there?

JB: Yes. I was to start school in 1959. You will notice the coincidence of my being four years old in downtown Little Rock in 1957. I have very dim recollections of my mother being fearful of "all that mess out there." I later came to understand we were moving out on Arch Street Pike, to southwest Little Rock, to get into the Pulaski County School District, which was, of course, a white-flight segregated school district. We were among the original white flighters as it turned out.

ED: And so you started school in southwest Little Rock at ...

JB: Baseline Elementary School there in the fall. I was not quite 6 in 1959.

ED: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

JB: I have a younger sister, 19 months younger, Judy, who lives with my mother. My father died in 1990 of lung cancer. They live in southwest Little Rock. My sister works in a mid-level management role at the Arkansas Development Finance. She is in charge of their information systems and is quite a computer whiz.

ED: Was she down there when Larry Nichols was there?

JB: She was there with Larry Nichols and can tell you about her early intense dislike of him. She never tipped me on anything. She was very circumspect about telling me about things. Only after the fact did I learn about that episode.

ED: So you went to high school at McClellan High School?

JB: McClellan High School and Cloverdale Junior High School. I graduated in 1971.

ED: Were you athletic?

JB: In junior high, but then I quit. I was a little bit too fearful of injuries. Even in junior high ball, I stayed hurt all the time. I quit in high school.

ED: Basketball or football? Or both?

JB: A little of both, but more football. I wasn't that familiar with basketball. That was before basketball was big in Arkansas. I really did not know that much about the game. It wasn't as cool in those days to play basketball as it was football. Everybody had to play football.

ED: Particularly at McClellan?

JB: Yes. That was at the time of Mike Malham, who was a self-styled Bear Bryant type from Catholic High. He came to McClellan and was trying to build a program. He changed the name of the team from "Lions" to "Crimson Lions."

Sort of a take off on the *Crimson Tide*. I dealt with him as a student journalist and liked him but knew I didn't want that Junction City type of thing. I knew that wasn't for me.

ED: Did you work for the high school paper?

JB: I did.

ED: How did you come to write for the high school paper? Did you have an early fondness for writing?

JB: Yes, a very strange kid, I lived on a dead-end gravel street off Stanton Road near a subdivision called Windermere. I remember summers that my dad worked at nights and would leave the house about 2 o'clock and go to Nabisco. My mother didn't drive, and he had the car, and we didn't live near anyone. In those days I had learned to amuse myself. I played imaginary ball games by myself in the backyard. I remember looking forward – strange, but as a child – looking forward to the actual arrival of the *Democrat*. We didn't take the *Gazette*, we were conservative people. We were Church of Christ people. We did not take the *Gazette*. But I would look forward to the guy throwing the paper in the afternoon. I would get in the middle of the floor and read at least the sports section from an early age. I was just a newspaper freak. Even as a boy, I thought these people with the bylines must be the coolest people in the world. That's what I would like to do. So there was that, and then, as long as I can remember in school, I was pretty good in math, horrible in science, but bang-up in any English or history. I mean, I would look forward to those courses, social studies and

writing. I was the only guy in class who was hoping to get an essay test. I enjoyed it. I had some confidence about it.

ED: You could “snow `em,” no matter how much.

JB: Yes, even if I didn’t really know the subject matter, I could write probably a couple of pretty good sentences.

ED: I did that in economics in college. It was my favorite course. I didn’t know much about economics. I could write these essays covering up my lack of knowledge and got straight A’s. Usually got 100%.

JB: I remember, just a brief story, to jump forward. Probably the best story of my whole undistinguished college career. I was in UCA. I was taking political theory and constitutional law. The finals were on the same day, and I didn’t study much. I was going to study for one and then go take it, and then go cram for the other and go take it. I got them backwards. I crammed for the wrong one. I went in to take the test, and it turned out to be the other one. When the other teacher came in and instructed us, I nearly panicked. It turned out that it was the Con Law final, and I knew I had a chance when the test was the facts of three cases that had been appealed to you as a judge, and you were to write the opinion. I knew I had a chance. I did well on it. I don’t think I did well on the other one. Just give me a chance to write an essay. Always something I had an aptitude for.

ED: In high school did you write sports?

JB: High school – oh, yes, back to high school. Yes. Here is the story for that. Sort of weird how it happened. In the tenth grade, the honor’s English teacher was

Beverly Billingsley, delightful woman. She lives here in Cammack Village. I still see her, just a wonderful woman. She was the sponsor of the yearbook staff. At McClellan High, the next best thing to being a star athlete or cheerleader was to be on the yearbook staff. That was just something. I thought that was something I wanted to do. The tradition in her class was for the tenth-grade honors students to make their bids for it by writing compositions to apply for the yearbook staff. I remember working very hard to try to get on. I knew I had written some very wonderful things. I wasn't one of the popular kids, and I remember when we had the assembly to announce the selection. I thought I had a chance because I knew that I had done pretty well. I did not get picked. As soon as it was over, Beverly Billingsley came over to me and said to me, "I want you to know, I have never had a better application. The others had a little higher grade point. I'm just sorry. I have talked to the school newspaper sponsor" – who was her friend – "and she would love to have you." Well, being on the school newspaper wasn't as cool as being on the yearbook staff, but it was better for me. In the junior year I was the sports editor of the student newspaper. The next year I was the editor. My senior year I was working mornings at the old *Democrat*, helping them put out the afternoon sports section covering high school sports.

ED: This was your senior year when you did that?

JB: Yes.

ED: The papers were doing those kinds of things, having high school students come in

...

JB: I didn't know that. Living out in southwest Little Rock, I was barely sixteen, and I told my mother, "I am going to write a letter to Jack Keady" [the *Democrat* sports editor]. – I would never have dared to write anything to the *Gazette* because I did not know anything about it. It seemed more remote for me. He was the sports editor for the *Democrat*. – "I am going to ask if they will hire me for high school games. I am just going to ask for a job." She tried to soften me for that. She said, "You know they are not going to hire a high school boy." I mailed the letter, and the next day she said that Jack Keady was on the phone. That was how hard it was to get a job at the *Democrat*. "Come down at 6 o'clock in the morning. We put out an afternoon paper. You work from 6:00-8:00. We got two kids from Central who are doing it, and a kid from Parkview." The kid from Parkview was John Bloom, who is now Joe Bob Briggs. He said you can cover your high school on Friday nights. So that's what I did. I started with the newspaper shortly after my sixteenth birthday. Driving from southwest Little Rock down to the *Democrat*, working until 8:00 and then going to school.

ED: 8:00 in the morning, so you would go to . . .

JB: Yes, it was an afternoon paper. See, I would get up early, before dawn. I remember one morning I got up in the winter and drove down to the *Democrat*, and it was actually about 3:30 a.m. I had just awakened and assumed it was time to go. I could have slept two and a half more hours. I worked from 6:00-8:00 a.m. I think the next school term, I got the school to give me study hall or work study for the first period because I enjoyed it so much. We were just getting

going at 8:00, writing headlines. In those days the *Democrat* would clip out the *Gazette's* high school basketball reports and simply rewrite them. That was my introduction to the newspaper, which wasn't a good one. I loved sizing the pictures, writing headlines, writing cutlines. I just couldn't get enough of it. I eventually worked from 6:00 a.m. until about 9:00 a.m., then I would go to school in time for the second period in my senior year.

ED: What was your pay? Do you remember?

JB: \$1.60 an hour

ED: \$1.60 an hour

JB: Yes. Where did you start out at?

ED: Do you mean the *Gazette*, or when I first started the job?

JB: First started a job.

ED: 70 cents an hour, which was minimum wage. In 1954, the minimum wage was 70 cents an hour. I was working at the *El Dorado Daily News*, for Clyde E. Palmer. When the minimum wage went from 75 cents an hour to 80 cents an hour, the stories in the paper said, "The minimum wage goes up July 1 to 80 cents an hour." Attached to our check that week was a little mimeographed sheet, about an inch deep, so they could get about fifteen to a page. You clipped it off, and it was stapled to your check and it said, "Dear Employee: Keeping with the News-Times' policy of seeing after the welfare of our employees, we are happy to announce your pay will be 80 cents an hour." [Laughter] As if we had not read it in the newspaper. So this was 1954? What year did you graduate?

JB: I graduated from high school in 1971. I began this morning work in the winter of 1969, maybe January 1970, and continued it into my senior year. Then I graduated from high school in May of 1971.

ED: Then you enrolled at the University of Central Arkansas?

JB: No. No.

ED: What did you do then?

JB: I enrolled at University of Arkansas at Little Rock. I won a scholarship, a small one from the *Arkansas Democrat*. They had a \$250.00-a-term scholarship to the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. I was headed up there. But I had a girlfriend that I couldn't leave. She was a year behind me in school. I stayed for that – not solely for that because I was loving working at the newspaper. When I got out of high school, that summer I became a full-time employee. In those days that paper was dying as an afternoon paper. Nobody was working there or staying there very long. They brought in a new and very intriguing fellow as sports editor, Fred Morrow, who was a great writer but sort of a strange figure that I took a liking to. I just loved being down there. I just said, "I'm going to stay here and do this and go school at UALR," which I did for a while. Then I decided to move to Conway, mostly to be the sports editor of the *Log Cabin Democrat* and just coincidentally to go to school. I was quite an unsuccessful student because I was always so distracted and obsessed with newspaper work. The most I ever took was 12 hours. I was mostly a part-time student for five or six years.

ED: How did you get to be sports editor of the *Log Cabin*?

JB: Directly, I don't know. I think John Ward, who was the editor there, who was the former PR man for [Winthrop] Rockefeller, knew of me. I think I just decided I ought to do that. I don't remember. I think maybe it was my initiative. I called up there and said that I would like to go to school up here and write sports. I heard that the sports editor – oh, yes, the sports editor had been a fellow that I knew named Loyd Ryan, who was moving from sports to the city desk at that paper. I knew about that, and I said, "I can do this." So I went up and showed him some clippings.

ED: So did you move up there?

JB: Yes, and by this time I had gotten married at age 19 to my sweetheart. She was going to UALR, and we moved up there. I was the sports editor of the *Log Cabin Democrat* in 1973, 1974, 1975, somewhere in that area. Actually, 1973, 1974, I was the sports editor. Later on, I relinquished those duties and became a regular reporter for the paper, all the while, taking six to nine hours at UCA, dropping as many courses as I was completing.

ED: So you were never a full-time student?

JB: I never was a full-time student for a full year. I may have pulled some kind of an equivalent load.

ED: Did you take journalism courses there?

JB: No. I did write for the *Echo*. Dean Duncan [journalism teacher at UCA], I got to know him just hanging out with him as all of us did. I never took any journalism courses at either institution. I got into political science and sort of a pre-law type

thing. Just whatever interested me.

ED: But your main interest was newspaper, and you – you are still talked about at UCA. I taught up there for some years, and in talking with professors around in those days, your name would come up. I think I told you this quote from some professor about you. I tried to think who it was. It could have been Norm Schedler. Did you ever have Norm Schedler for a teacher?

JB: I don't think so, but what's the quote?

ED: Well, the quote was, "If you had told me back in 1970s when John Brummett was in my class that I would some day . . ."

JB: Bob McChesney.

ED: McChesney. Well, I didn't know McChesney, so this was probably told to somebody else. He said, "If you had told me someday I would get up early in the morning at the crack of dawn, when the sidewalks were covered with ice, that I would put my robe on and my slippers on and bundle up, and make my way out to the slippery sidewalk and fetch this frozen newspaper just so I could read John Brummett, I would have said you were crazy. But, in fact, that is what happens." That was McChesney, you think?

JB: It sounds like something that he would say. I can understand that. It was a weird thing. I would begin every school year thinking, "Don't be ridiculous. Don't just work in a newsroom. Get a good education." Inevitably, I would lose interest during the term. I would get involved in a big story at the newspaper. It was probably a reflection of my lower middle-class upbringing that I did not value

higher education as much as I should have. I had somewhere in the back of my mind, I thought I was good enough I might be able to make it by just doing this newspaper work without having to go to class. I sort of carried that in the back of my mind that I could do that.

ED: All right, so you stayed at the *Log Cabin Democrat* as a reporter. First as a sports writer and editor, then as a regular reporter. John Ward was the editor, right?

JB: Right.

ED: Until what year?

JB: 1977. 1973 to 1977, going to school at UCA, getting six hours a term if I am lucky. Sports editor for two years covering – That’s a crazy sports town. You got UCA, which is always pretty good for sports stories. Conway High School won the state basketball championship while I was there. But about midway through, about the second year there, John Ward called me over to his desk one day and said, “You’re too good to be doing the sports page. Think about writing politics.” And I said, “Yes.” Because in addition to having an interest in sports, I had really gotten interested in Arkansas politics during the Rockefeller days, as a boy, watching that sort of progressive era. Then Dale Bumpers and Ted Boswell before him. As a kid outside of southwest Little Rock, I had really gotten wrapped up in this whole idea of the Young Turks and the New Progressive Movement in Arkansas politics. And so I said, “Yes.” He asked me to do a piece about the Second Congressional District Democratic Primary, the year Wilbur Mills was not running again, 1978 – no, 1976.

ED: 1976, Jim Guy Tucker.

JB: 1976, so that's when that would have been.

ED: Jim Guy Tucker, Cal Ledbetter, Bob McHenry.

JB: Bob McHenry and that John Bircher out at UALR, Ed Gran, and somebody else.

I took that, as you can imagine, just with the utmost seriousness.

ED: [C.V. Ford, Jr.?)

JB: Yes. That's right. Interviewed all those guys, hung out with them, and just did an exhaustive article about it. I loved it. From that I continued to cover the city council, the county courthouse. One of the first political stories I did was the vote fraud in Conway County. The circuit judge, Russell Roberts, and Alex Streett, the prosecuting attorney from Russellville. Tom Glaze was head of the Election Laws Institute, and there were reformers trying to change the obvious voter fraud that historically occurred in Conway County. There were progressive brave women in Morrilton through the League of Women Voters, who were fighting for reform and I covered all that. I would cover court hearings. I got to know those people. Ginger Shiras, of the state desk of the *Arkansas Gazette*, was coming up to cover a lot of that, and I got to know her well. She later was probably a factor in my getting hired at the *Gazette* in 1977.

ED: Russell Roberts was the circuit judge, and Alex Streett was the prosecutor. Was Mutt Jones still in the Senate?

JB: Mutt Jones had been expelled in . . .

ED: He was expelled in about 1974.

JB: Must have been about 1975 because even though I did this piece on the Second District, I believe the first political story that I ever did was the night of the special election to fill Mutt Jones's seat in the state senate. I believe there was Dan Stephens, and Stan Russ was the Conway reform candidate. I think I was dispatched, even though still a sports writer, to go out and do a color piece, a sidebar, on Stan Russ. I remember he had carried Faulkner County overwhelmingly, but he was scared to death he still wasn't going to win because he didn't know how many votes they could steal from him up in Morrilton and Conway County. I did a piece about his night. He still talks about that article and how I captured how uncertain he was. I think that was probably the first political story that I ever wrote. But then, after that, I did the Second District of 1976. Then I moved altogether out of sports to just being a reporter there. I was just as happy as I could be going to Conway City Council, Faulkner Quorum Court, doing a little regional work up in the Sixth Judicial District.

ED: He had other reporters there at the time?

JB: David Terrell was there.

ED: David Terrell. Okay, he was . . .

JB: He was ahead of me, a little older. He was going to Hendrix. He was more serious about his academics, less serious about his work. He had magnificent talent. Just a great guy. We got to be friends and, later, roommates in Little Rock.

ED: Jim Schneider?

JB: He was already gone.

ED: He was out at UCA by then.

JB: Joe B. McGee, of course, was the institution up there. He was still there, but in his declining years. In fact, he and I always got along well. Initially, there was a little resentment because Ward gave me a couple of beats that McGee had covered for about sixty years. There was a little bit of tension there.

ED: Joe was the reporter? Joe was the editor.

JB: Yes. But, see, then Frank Robins has replaced Joe, sent him back out to the basic reporting job and brought in John Ward as the editor. So there was that kind of tension there in that little building. Here was this kid from Little Rock that Ward was telling to go out and do news stories, moving in on what little area Joe had left. I got along with Joe. He was a wonderful guy. It was a great experience to work with him, with all those guys. But, anyway, I did that. I don't want to get ahead of you.

ED: Well, if you have any other stories to tell about *The Log Cabin* years – Well, that's what I want to talk to you about, how you left. I got the account that John Ward gave, and I want to hear your account.

JB: To see if they blend? I heard that he had denied that he had fired me. I think maybe it was the use of the word "fired." I'll tell you precisely what happened. I was working, more or less enjoying it, doing a little bit of college and a whole lot of work and playing some tennis. I had gotten divorced from my childhood sweetheart and was going girl crazy, which was sad at the time. I was a little bit

out of control. There may have been an occasion or two when I was supposed to cover the Conway City Council and never actually made it. It may have happened or something like that. But I figured, “Hey, I can cover this in the morning. No biggie!” Anyway, there is that background. One afternoon, early summer, about this time of year – it would have been 1977 – Ward called me over to his desk. You know he is a very personable fellow. We just did all sorts of things, friendly talks, a lot of banter. For all I knew, that was all this was going to be. But I soon realized it was more than that. Essentially, he told me, in so many words: “You are just wasting yourself here. You are not doing us any good, and we are not doing you any good. I think we need to set up a little timetable for you to move on.” I probably at the time said, “I’m fired?” I think he didn’t want to say that, but that is essentially how I took it. That’s what that amounts to: it is time for you to move on.

ED: But there had been no incident that triggered it?

JB: Not to my knowledge. Not to my knowledge. There had been a series of, well – does he remember this?

ED: No, he doesn’t. I had a question about it. I guess his account makes him look good. He called you in and told you that you were “too good for us. You’ve got potential beyond these little walls here and . . .”

JB: I believe he did say that.

ED: And then he called Jimmy Jones and said . . .

JB: I was going to tell it my way. [Laughter] I think he did say something about

“you’re too good for us. We are a small-time thing, and you have big-time talent.”

ED: I had never heard of anybody admitting to doing that before.

JB: No. You understand, all I could hear was I was fired. Everything else, had he said it, and he may have, was like he was placating me, trying to let me down easy. He may have said that, but that’s not the main thing I got out of the conversation. The conversation was, “Where was my check going to come from next week?”

ED: Had you pissed off Frank Robins?

JB: No more than usual. I mean, there was, maybe. I was living in his mother’s house. I was a boarder in her house and flooded the place. I had slept through an overflowing commode. I think I was sleeping soundly because I had quite a bit of beer or something. I flooded the place. But I don’t think they fired me because of that.

[End of Tape One, Side One]

[Beginning of Tape One, Side Two]

JB: Well, as we were saying, there was this incident in Virginia Robins’s house. I think it was on College Avenue, a big house with a lot of apartments that a lot of guys had lived in over the years, and I did flood it. I flooded the commode, and it just overflowed and made a big mess. I did not realize it until the next morning, mainly because I had too much to drink. I slept pretty soundly. There was that incident, but I personally don’t know if that had anything to do with it. There was

a work incident where I just – Oh, it's come back to me now. I was supposed to cover Conway City Council. I decided one afternoon, a Tuesday afternoon, to go over to Joe B. McGee and say, "Why don't you cover city council? I don't feel like doing it. I got something else to do." And he did. The next day the copy comes through John Ward's desk, and it's Joe McGee covering the city council. I remember Ward shaking with anger. He looked over his cubbyhole to the little pass-through area where I was, and he said, "What is this?" I said, "Well, Joe went to the city council." He said, "You were supposed to do that." And I said, "I know, but I just didn't." And he said, "I want you out of my sight. I want you to go home." I said, "Okay." I went home. The next day I wasn't sure whether to go back in, but I did, and it was forgotten. It seemed to be forgotten, at least for the time being. Before too long we were having this discussion about how I was too good for the paper and how it was time for me to move on. He did say in that very conversation, "Jim Standard is an old friend of mine, who is now the editor of the *Daily Oklahoman*, and I think I can probably get you an interview with him." And I said, "I'll take it." It was a terrible paper and I didn't know anything about Oklahoma City.

ED: Standard was an old *Gazette* hand.

JB: Yes, and an old Arkansas guy. I went over and chatted with him, and he brought in his managing editor, and they hired me right there. I said, "Okay. I'll be at work soon." Then I got back to Conway, and Ward told me he had also set up an interview with Jimmy Jones [state editor of the *Gazette*]. More than an interview,

it was a tryout. People had told me they had never heard of the *Gazette* actually trying somebody out for a job. I assumed it was because I was damaged goods. I had been fired. I went down to the *Gazette* in early July, right after the 4th, on the 5th and 6th, for a two-day tryout. I remember my actual employment date was 7-7-77. I spent two days on the state desk just doing whatever Jimmy and Matilda Tuohey told me to do. I had a little interview with Bob Douglas [the managing editor] and got hired. I was so thrilled, so thrilled, that I had been hired at the *Gazette*. By then, I had educated myself, and my politics had evolved, and I was just a great fan of the *Gazette*. I think it was a week before I realized I was still supposed to go to Oklahoma City, that I had another job with Standard. I remember when I called to say I wasn't coming, it was a very uncomfortable conversation. I had already, in fact, been working for days at the *Gazette*. I had missed my employment date. I was just so thrilled to go to work for the *Gazette*. I was just delighted to be there on the state desk of Jimmy Jones.

ED: Did you call Standard, or did he call you asking where you were?

JB: I don't remember. But I remember I forgot to call him. I don't know that I talked to Standard. I think it was one of his underlings. They may still be looking for me, for all I know. [Laughter] When I got that *Gazette* job, which I got, by the way, after the two-day tryout, Jimmy said, "You have got to go in and see Bob Douglas." Douglas in later years said it was the worst interview that he could ever remember. Not for his part, but for mine. Douglas said, "But I hired you. I figured if anybody was that bad, you would probably be a pretty good newsman."

ED: Did you think the interview was bad?

JB: Yes. I was so nervous and so excited. I was intimidated by just being there. The *Arkansas Gazette*, Pulitzer Prize, sitting here looking at people who were like my heroes, like when you would come in from the Capitol, Ernie Dumas. God, there's that man, a few feet away, knocking out the stuff. There's Doug Smith, or Mike Trimble. I went in to see about Douglas, and I was just nervous, excited. I remember he said, "What do you think you will be doing in five years?" And I said, "Who can say?" [Laughter] Poor choice. I think that actually was the wrong thing to say. The other thing about that tryout, you know, about working for the *Log Cabin Democrat* and going to school – I was a rather scruffy dresser. I did not dress up for work. So I show up at 10:00 a.m. on a Monday or Tuesday morning at the state desk at the *Gazette* in some blue jeans and not a T-shirt, but a knit shirt, a golf-type shirt. That night I got a call from John Ward, and he said that Jimmy had called him and said I had handled all my work for that day and my phone manner was good, and the pieces I had done were very good. They probably were going to hire me, but they had two questions. One is: Had John Ward fired me? John had denied to them that he had fired me. The same kind of thing he is probably saying now. And the other is: What is wrong with this guy? He is trying out for a job here, and he shows up in blue jeans, knowing I was sort of a ne'er-do-well anyway. Ward just couldn't wait to tell me to slip on a tie or something. Then the next day I put on khakis and a blue shirt and a tie, which became my uniform, subsequently. So the bad interview and the bad clothes –

that's how I got hired.

ED: Who was on the state desk? Jimmy Jones was the state editor?

JB: Matilda Tuohey, Tiger as we called her, was the . . .

ED: T-U-O-H-E-Y

JB: Yes. She was assistant state editor and a very intimidating presence to a 22-year-old kid.

ED: She was my seatmate when I went to work at the *Gazette*. She was pretty intimidating.

JB: You had to prove yourself to her, but once you did, she was your friend.

Fortunately, I was able to. But those first couple of days, sitting there in my blue jeans and trying to make the grade, it was pretty nerve wracking. Also on the state desk, as I have mentioned, was Ginger Shiras, who I assumed, probably – Let me back up here briefly. Ginger and I had become, I think, friends. I think she had become somewhat respectful of the work that I was doing on the vote fraud case in Conway County. I suspect she was helpful, part of the confluence of factors that helped me to get hired there. Also, on the state desk was Wayne Jordan, who, of course, I knew of as a legend covering crime and the Porter Rodgers murder case. I remember reading every day the coverage of that, which had happened a couple of years before. So that was an experience. And . . .

ED: You weren't intimidated by Wayne Jordan, were you?

JB: No, I'm not going to say I was intimidated by Wayne. Wayne and I got along handsomely. I was taking the place of a good friend of yours, a somewhat

legendary reporter there in personality, Tom Hamburger. He had just left to go to the Washington Bureau. No, no – He wound up doing that. I'm not sure if that was direct – maybe it was. It seems like Roy Bode – I worked with Bode for a while because the Washington Bureau was under the state desk, and I would take Bode's dictation.

ED: I think Hamburger may have gone to the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*. Then we hired him away from there to be our Washington Bureau guy.

JB: Yes, I think that's right.

ED: He went from there back to the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*.

JB: In addition to the various intimidations that I suffered as sort of an unlettered kid from Mabelvale in blue jeans, trying to make the grade, I was also told that I was replacing a guy that everybody had great stories about and fondness for, Tom Hamburger. So there was all of that. In short time, Steele Hays, grandson of Brooks Hays, joined us on the state desk. I forget whose place he took.

ED: Did he start out on state desk?

JB: He did. He did. It was shortly after I got there. He was, of course . . .

ED: He was a graduate of Yale.

JB: Yes, he was from a little school in New Haven, as he liked to say. He was the grandson of a historical and admired Arkansas politician who distinguished himself in 1957 and 1958. I was just absolutely thrilled to be there around these people.

ED: So you had a pretty big state desk staff. I didn't recall it being that large, but

Jones . . .

JB: Jones had taken over for Leroy [Donald] and had done two things. He had cut back on Leroy's statewide network of stringers. He had built up the central staff. His approach was to see what was happening and send these young staffers out to do stories rather than take dictation from stringers. We traveled a lot and got out and saw the state.

ED: Do you remember any stories you did on the state desk?

JB: I do, I do. That very summer – black towns in Arkansas. Jimmy said he wanted a piece on this. Head east and go to towns like Mitchellville, Madison, Allport. Talk to people, and see what's life like and how things are going in these towns. I hit the road. I had a high school friend who was working at the *Marianna Courier Index*. I remember I walked into his office one afternoon, and he said, "We have to go to Memphis. Elvis Presley just died." He and I were outside the hospital. I forget the date [16 August 1977]. That gives you some reference. That was when I was researching the story. Not only did I write an article about black towns in Arkansas. I wrote a series of articles. One of them was about how some of them were doing better than others because they were better at what Sterling Cockrill at the Housing and Urban Development Department called grantsmanship. The mayor of Madison, over near Forrest City, was getting a lot of projects, and Allport and Mitchellville were withering on the vine. I remember the *Gazette* nominated those articles for the Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award. Of course, it didn't win. That was right off the bat. I mean that was like

the first story that I did. Oh, one morning Jimmy got me out of bed and said, “The Allied Telephone Company in Harrison has blown up. Allied is taking a plane of executives, and you can go with them.” At the time I thought, “Should we even be traveling with them?” It was a way to get there. So I went up and spent the day just looking around and talking to people, trying to figure out what the ramifications were. I remember just walking the square at Harrison, trying to see just how far away things were destroyed. It was an extraordinary thing. The Allied people flew back about 6:30, and I strolled back in that office about 7:00. The deadline is 7:30. Jimmy says, “Damn it, why didn’t you call?” I said, “Jimmy, the phone company blew up. I didn’t have a way to call.” [Laughter]

One thing I am, and that is fast. I knocked that story out.

ED: I read that story a few weeks ago, as a matter of fact.

JB: It was written in about 15 minutes.

ED: Good piece. I still have that story in there. The comprehensive . . .

JB: I think you probably remember those days like I do. The most fun I had was having to write on deadlines. A big story like a tornado or going to the Capitol and, say, something came up at 4:00 that afternoon. You are working the phones and getting information. You are writing and have to get it done by 7:00 or 7:30. That was what it was all about.

ED: That was the most fun you ever had. Those are the best stories, too. I look back on those type of things, and the best stories were the ones I did under pressure. If I’ve got a lot time to polish, it just comes out stiff.

JB: The energy in that place when the deadline is approaching and Bill Rutherford is getting a little nervous on the copy desk. The beat reporters start coming in. There were not a lot of editor meetings, like there came to be later. Whatever you got, that's what got put in the paper. It was sort of a reporter-driven culture. You get it, and it could be something that you didn't advise the desk of earlier. But they got it in somehow. It was tremendous energy, great fun.

ED: From 5 to 8 o'clock it was the place to be in.

JB: Yes. I was smoking in those days. Some days I would have 3 to 4 cigarettes going at a time, sitting back there trying to knock out those stories. I was loving it.

ED: Okay, you go to the state desk in the summer of 1977, and how long were you on the state desk?

JB: There has been some discrepancy about when I started at the Capitol. I believe it was 1980, early 1980. When did you become an editor?

ED: I left the Capitol in January of 1979, I guess.

JB: They immediately replaced you with Steele Hays.

ED: Steele Hays.

JB: Which hurt me enormously.

ED: Was he on the state desk?

JB: He was my colleague on the state desk. He had come to the state desk after me. The Capitol was the prime-time superstar beat. When it came open, I said I wanted it. They said, "Okay, we will consider you." The next thing that I knew,

they had given it to Steele. We got along great, but that hurt me. I thought I should get it, and he got a little advantage because of his background. But, at any rate, by 1980 David Terrell, my old friend from Conway, was leaving. He came to my house.

ED: David had come to the *Gazette* and had been on the courthouse . . .

JB: Courthouse beat and then . . .

ED: Went to the Capitol.

JB: Somehow, he also wound up at the Capitol.

ED: He and Brenda Tirey and Steele were at the Capitol.

JB: Yes, Doug had since moved to the Omnibus section, as they called it at the time, the feature section. Or he took some time off to write a book and then came back and wasn't at the Capitol. Steele was the numerical replacement for you. I think David got sent to the Capitol after they reassigned Carol Griffey.

ED: Reassigned Carol, to her chagrin and eternal unhappiness.

JB: Then David was leaving to go the Memphis paper or to go to Washington, I forget. I think he was going – Do you remember where he was going directly in 1980?

ED: Well, he went to Memphis. I don't know whether he went directly to the *Commercial Appeal* from there or if he – He married Pam Murphy.

JB: Right.

ED: The *Democrat* sent her to Washington as their Capitol person. Right?

JB: I thought he went to Washington and wound up working for [Senator Jim] Sasser

and then he wound up at the *Commercial Appeal*. At any rate, I knew him when he was working at the Conway paper. Then when I came to the *Gazette*, he and I wound up as roommates, living on East 7th Street in an apartment. I wound up not living with him anymore but cohabitating with the personnel director of the paper, by the time he left. He came to our house and said, “You should have gotten it when I got it. You should have gotten it when Steele got it. You have to get it this time because I am leaving.” I went in and skipped over Jimmy this time and went to see Douglas. I said that I wanted this Capitol thing and I deserve it. He said, “Of course, you do. I didn’t know you felt that strongly about it.”

ED: Bill Shelton was . . .

JB: Bill Shelton was the city editor. This was my first experience of working for and under Bill Shelton. He was legendary. I had worked for Jimmy Jones, who had his own skills but did not have the kind of “iron hand” reputation. He was sort of a softer manager. I was able to sit there in the newsroom and enjoy a collegial relationship with Jimmy, watching all the city desk reporters sweating, working for the “Grim Man,” Bill Shelton. Now it was time for me to go to the state Capitol and to work for Bill Shelton. This was early 1980.

ED: Did you talk to Shelton beforehand?

JB: I don’t remember. If I did, it was only to say, “You’re coming to the Capitol.” That was about it. You know how conversations with Shelton were. You did not have heart-to-heart talks with him. I think he was actually, and is, a splendid fellow who cared a lot about people. He wasn’t expressive at all. Nor was I that

expressive. Douglas said I was going to do it and I assumed that Jimmy had told Shelton that I would be good. That's how it came to be.

ED: This was in 1980?

JB: Yes. I forget what time of year. I want to say winter, but I am not sure.

ED: Did you cover politics in the year that Bill Clinton was defeated?

JB: Not only did I cover politics. I covered Clinton. By the end of that year, I don't know how it had happened, but we decided that the Frank White-Bill Clinton race, sometime in early October, was a real race. There is a story out there, and we've got to go on the road full time with both of them, White and Clinton. I remember Frank White telling me that when the reporters started showing up and he had front-page coverage, they knew they had a chance. Anyway, I was assigned to Clinton the first of October and stayed with him throughout, until November. Steele Hays covered White. I thought we should have switched out. Some people on the staff were saying we should switch out. But we didn't. He covered Frank White, and I covered Bill Clinton. I traveled with Clinton, would meet Clinton and his travel aide at Central Flying Service at dawn. We would fly around the state, ride with him, hang out with him. Entirely too chummy with him. I liked the hell out of him. But I sat there and watched him as his young political career was collapsing. I thought he was going to survive that election. But I could see each day the tension grow.

ED: Did you have any sense of what was happening to him? Why he was losing?

JB: No, no. Not in the campaign. Not in the culture I was in, which was to travel

with him, hang out with him, chat with him, watch him give the same speech over and over, write about what happened today. You could not tell – only when you realized that he was having to respond to so many charges. When it was the car tags, and then the Cuban refugees, you had to have that context to begin to center on his troubles. Then when Hillary joined the campaign – I had met Hillary, and then suddenly she showed up – I just had a sense that she was there because they had to have a family presence out there. I remember the day before the election, I said to him, “Do you know what you are going to do if you lose?” I meant it as a serious question. I think I had a conversation with you on election day, and I remember you saying to me, “I guess you guys can cover the Frank White administration all right.” So we had an inkling that it was going to happen.

ED: Where did Hillary show up in the campaign? Had she been . . . ?

JB: Non-entity.

ED: In the campaign? Until what? A couple of weeks out?

JB: I think ten days to two weeks out she showed up. A Saturday rally in Oceola. I did not travel with them that day for some reason. I was on the road in my own vehicle. I caught up with them on Saturday morning in Oceola. She was there, and she introduced herself. It was the first time I had ever met her. I remember her talking to me and asking me if I had any children. At that time I had just gotten married. She went on about how a life-changing experience it was to have a child. I thought she was patronizing me. She is coming on too strong with this kind of stuff. It was a strong first impression. The very next week when I would

show up at the flying service, she was there. For the last week and the weekend before – the last ten days – she was traveling and was a strong presence.

ED: At some point they did figure out that they were in deep trouble. I got a call one day, about ten or twelve days out in the election, from somebody from Clinton's office wondering if I could go to the mansion that night and see Clinton. I said, "What about?" "Well, he will have to tell you." He said he wanted you to come to the mansion. It was about 9 o'clock at night. I didn't take the call. I didn't talk to Clinton. So I went out to the mansion and Carl Whillock was there, and Bill Wilson may have been there. I think Dick Herget was there. Anyway, Clinton comes in and sits down and says, "Am I in trouble?" That was his question to me, "Am I in trouble? Am I going to get beat?" Everybody went around the table – "Do you think he will get beat?" I forgot what people said. I wish now that I had taken note of it. He was obviously deeply concerned. It had been a sudden shock that there was a strong chance he was going to get beat. I have forgotten what I said. I think I said something like, "I think you will probably win but it has really closed up a lot."

JB: Yes. That is what I think. But when you are an incumbent and it is closing in on you, that's trouble. I remember I wound up at the Holiday Inn in Camden spending the night. The next night there was going to be a joint appearance, not exactly a debate, between White and Clinton, in Hot Springs Village. White's commercials about the rioting Cuban refugees were all over television. It was apparently having some effect. I got a call in the hotel room from Patty Criner,

who had been scheduling for the campaign. She said, “Hillary says for me to make sure you cover everything at Hot Springs Village tomorrow. Make sure that Brummett, not Steele Hays, who is with Frank White, covers it.” Even as a naive young reporter enamored of Clinton, I knew I had gone over the line here. I didn’t need to have my assignments dictated by the governor’s wife. I remember calling Bill Shelton and saying, “I hope you won’t ask me why, but it is just important to me and the paper, that I not cover this thing tomorrow night.” He just said, “Okay. Steele will cover it.” I tell that just as an interesting little additive, how I came in contact with Hillary’s controlling nature. Also, they were scared to the point of making sure they got the friendliest reporters.

ED: Steele would have been just as friendly.

JB: Oh, yes. They would have liked him just as much. It was nonsense and offensive.

ED: You said you liked Bill Clinton. That’s true of all of us who covered politics. Particularly at this level, it is inescapable that you develop some rapport with these candidates. In fact, with all those years of covering candidates, there weren’t many that I did not like. I found myself liking Jim Johnson at times. I spent a lot of time covering Orval Faubus. The first candidate that I covered in 1964 was Faubus. I always found them personable, likable people.

JB: I don’t think it is possible. If he is likable and if you are drawn to a certain type of personality, you will like the person. Ed Bethune – I covered him in 1986. He said, I thought, some of the meanest, most vicious things about David Pryor. I

found his politics highly offensive. But I liked him, and we had a good rapport. As I read, and as I look back now at those dispatches from the 1980 campaign, I can tell as I read them they are almost boosterism. It's obvious that I am caught up in what Clinton said that day. I think that it is true and I think it is important. Maybe I know that because I know what was in my heart at the time I wrote it.

[End of Tape One, Side Two]

[Beginning of Tape Two, Side One]

ED: So he loses that election. Now you've covered him. He was at the Capitol before that. He is already in office and he's . . .

JB: Had two special sessions that year.

ED: So you were flung into it during the special session?

JB: Of Clinton and the legislature that year. I had met [state senator] Nick Wilson that year, [state senator] Knox Nelson. It was a crash course.

ED: So you did not have much preparation for covering the legislature. Did you go cover the House of Representatives or the Senate?

JB: Neither. I have never covered either one.

ED: You've never covered the House or the Senate? Steele was covering?

JB: Steele was covering one, and Brenda Tirey was covering the other.

ED: You were the floater.

JB: I was supposed to get the Supreme Court and the Court of Appeals agencies. I just sort of parlayed that into what I call "covering the Blind Stand" [reference to the third-floor Capitol snack bar run by the visually impaired], following the story

and giving a short shrift to some of the other stuff. That's where the story is. That's how I developed the reputation for getting scoops and angles on things. That's just from hanging out.

ED: You were the one to do that. With all respect for Steele, he could have never done that.

JB: He had a different kind of skill. It takes an ability to develop sources among the lobbyists and the legislators. I'm just sort of a regular Arkansas guy, and I was able to do that. It became my permanent role, even as a columnist, and even today. During the legislative session, I wander out there and do what I have been doing since 1980. Walking the halls and trying to see what the story is.

ED: That's your peculiar skill. That's what your skill is as a reporter. As I say, Steele would not have done it as well.

JB: I could not have sat where they sat all day and followed those dreadful proceedings and read the Legislative Digest and done probably the thorough reporting on the legislature they did.

ED: You would have done both had you been in that situation. You would have done the other as well.

JB: People have different kinds of skills is what we are trying to say.

ED: So, 1981, Frank White is governor. You were still covering the state Capitol. What did you think of Frank White as a governor? Did you develop some kind of rapport with Frank White?

JB: [Laughter] No, I thought it was a fluke that he won. I remember the day after

elections I told [state senator] Jerry Bookout, Clinton's buddy, and a fine senator from Jonesboro: "If we vote again tomorrow, Clinton will win. It was a fluke. The people are mad at him. They did not mean to do this. Frank White does not have a clue as to what he is doing." That was sort of the attitude that I had about Frank White. He and I eventually became good friends, but that was sort of the way I covered him the first two years. He was sort of a usurper of the governor's office and was there by fluke and demonstrated that he was unworthy of it. I had a lot of stories about just needless gaffes that he would make. He would make a civic club speech and say, "I'm going to electrocute somebody." Or he would announce that he was appointing a PSC staff director when he hadn't told the current director that he was out. He would write a letter to the head of the Governor's School saying, "I want my agenda taught at the Governor's School" – or "my values taught at the Governor's School." Just thoroughly heavy-handed and inept, clumsy. You know. I did most of those stories. The creation science thing, I was not the one who asked, "Governor, did you read this thing?" That was Bill Simmons. When he said something to the effect, "Well, I've read it, yes. The parts I didn't read the staff briefed me on." That's was sort of a classic answer. I remember writing a front-page story about his not knowing what was in the bill. It wasn't just that he didn't read it. In extensive questions about the content of it, he was pretty much asleep. Those were the kinds of things I would write about.

ED: You don't think you wrote unfairly about him?

JB: No, no. I don't think so. He deserved every bit of it. I do know that we all come with our preconceived attitudes, and we try to control them. I know I was not real respectful of his skills from the outset. I had that attitude. And it was borne out. If he hadn't screwed up, I would not have had opportunities to write those articles. And he did screw up. By his own admission now, I think.

ED: Yes, he has acknowledged making a lot of mistakes.

JB: He said the Governor's School was the biggest mistake.

ED: I had a little to do with that story. Bob Cabe told me about the letter.

JB: Are you going to reveal our sources?

ED: Bob Meriwether was involved.

JB: Gloria Cabe told me.

ED: I got the letter somehow or had it read to me.

JB: Well, I wrote about it without getting it. The first day, I knew it was such a good story. I wrote about it quoting Bob Meriwether as saying what it said. The next morning a fellow called and said, "I've got the thing." I think you got a copy also. I do remember, and it was sort of typical of the way I do things, the haphazardness of my work, that I got a copy of this letter and that I had already written about it that morning. Sometimes I would go out and forget to have a notebook. I had this letter and spent all day talking to people about it. I had made notes all over the letter. Somebody says in the *Gazette's* budget meeting, "Brummett has a copy of the letter." Carrick Patterson came up to me and said, "We want to reproduce it on the front page." [Laughter] I showed it to him, and

it was just covered with my scribbling and doodling, and he was just outraged.

Maybe you had the other copy because we got it in the paper. Thank God. I was forever doing stuff like that. Getting the story, but being a screw-up about it.

ED: Can you think of anything else about the Frank White administration? Stories you can remember? Creation science was one.

JB: That was one.

ED: Creation science and the Governor's School were two big series. There were others like it. The market . . .

JB: Oh!! The big one!! On over into the second of the year, we had started the election cycle. I'll not go into detail about how I got this tip, but I had the big story. When facing an appointment to Public Service Commission, White had sent three prospects to be interviewed by a vice president of AP&L.

ED: Jerry Jackson.

JB: To just run them by him, to see what he thought of them. The best White could do to explain it was that he just wanted them to learn a little bit about the utilities. But, basically, it was sort of a shocking and inappropriate thing to do.

ED: And Jackson himself, the general counselor of AP&L, was embarrassed, by having these prospects coming around to see him before one was appointed.

JB: Now that was the case. I will say this much, that this was a case in which political opponents got wind of it and tipped the press. You get used. But the story needed to be told. It happens all the time. That is what we do. I'm kind of cynical about that. There are occasions, I not saying this is necessarily one, when

the opposing campaign wants the press to hit someone first to give it more credibility. Then they can follow up. Rather than make the charge directly, they want to use the press. We get used like that. My rule on that is: If I agree to accept a tip from you, I will then judge it on its newsworthiness. It is something that happens every day. I am sure that you have been there.

ED: Yes. 1982. Clinton runs again. Did you spend any time with him during the period that he was out of office? Did you talk to him much?

JB: Yes. We became entirely too close. Yes, I spent time with him. We did a little socializing, but not much. I was a little younger than he was. I wasn't one of his best buddies. But I spent some time with him. I had dinner with him, had drinks at the Afterthought with him. I would see him on the sidewalk and pull over and say, "Where you heading?" I drove him to get his car. I saw him at the jogging track and the grocery store. That kind of thing. Visiting with him on friendly relations.

ED: Do you think it was genuine on his part, or was it all just cunning?

JB: I think it is both. I always felt Clinton's tremendous eagerness to be liked and to be your buddy. I think that is the natural way he is. It is just like my dog, Bubba. He just loves you and wants to come over and be friends with you. But it is always in a simultaneous context of manipulation.

ED: That is just what he is.

JB: He is a gregarious, tremendously manipulative person. He is both of them, don't you think?

ED: I think so, yes.

JB: It isn't one or the other. It is both.

ED: Most people who have been around him, on terms like that, think so. People like Dale Bumpers, David Pryor, in their private moments would tell you the same thing. His eagerness to be loved is his greatest weakness as a public figure.

JB: You can see him even now, if he could possibly be outside the protective ring of the presidency, you could see him across the parking lot, and he would yell at you. "Hey!" He is just bouncing with eagerness to chat. You just sort of go along with this. This is a superstar politician, and he is really coming on strong here and, eventually, you realize it isn't all good or all bad. It is just Clinton. That is just the way he is.

ED: Did you cover his campaign in 1982?

JB: Again in 1982, me on Clinton, full time, knee to knee in the airplane, out there doing a lot of objective reporting. [Laughter]

ED: Steele?

JB: Maybe Steele was still there. I do know in this campaign we switched. About two weeks out I went with White, and Steele covered Clinton. It may not have been Steele in 1982, whoever was on the other side. But it was much to Frank White's chagrin. He would have preferred that I cover Clinton. He was not happy to see me show up to deal with him. But he was a good man. I was able to see that Frank White was losing that one, too.

ED: Did it slip away from him, or had he lost it from the outset?

JB: He had lost it already. A candidate works so hard, and it is such an obsessive thing that he doesn't realize it. It just seems to me that when it is obvious for a long time that you are going to lose, it only starts to hit when you get tired. In both Clinton's case and White's case, you are looking to charge your battery and keep going. You can see it in their eyes: "I am not going to make it."

ED: You covered Clinton three or four more years, I guess. Did your attitudes about him change during the next three or four years? You traced your own maturity as a reporter. . . .

JB: I think I achieved some maturity as a reporter, coming to realize that you need to have some distance and that I had been too cozy. There was that. I would tell people that I had the world's first full case of Clinton fatigue. By 1985 or 1986 – I think through 1983 and 1984 during the educational session, I was beginning to have a little more objectivity in my work. I still admired him and liked him. He had been around and dominating my life so long. I was getting weary. There was not one specific thing, but it was the transparency of his ambition to get the hell out of Arkansas and his boredom in the job he was doing here. That became obvious to me. And everything he did seemed to me to be just a calculated political move. It may have always been that way, but it just sort of began to occur to me. He wasn't quite what I thought he was. It was no specific thing. It's partly my own evolution. But it is not an uncommon thing.

ED: Let me ask you about another thing that seemed to be taking place. Maybe, this is just from my perspective. This effort to co-opt John Robert Starr. Clinton had

another friend in the 1980s, and that was John Robert Starr at the *Democrat*.

JB: How could I forget?

ED: He seemed to be eager to cultivate that friendship, or at least the neutrality of the *Arkansas Democrat*. I know Max Brantley, who was the city editor of the *Gazette* at that time, was aggravated. It aggravated him that the administration seemed to be favoring Starr and the *Democrat*. Did you get that impression?

JB: Yes. I hesitate to talk about it because you sound almost like a lover scorned or something. We had been his buddies and suddenly he is being chummy with the hated newspaper rival. John Robert Starr, beyond being a guy who we were in a newspaper war with, was writing very personal and hurtful things about us in the paper. When Starr gave himself a column, he was as apt to blast me as he was the politician. I had no use for Starr. And Clinton, for obvious cynical political reasons, saw a need to neutralize the *Democrat*. It was sort of a populist, working-man's paper that had done him a lot of damage in 1980. We at the *Gazette* resented it. I remember that I never really confronted Clinton about it. I remember having a shouting match with his press secretary, Joan Roberts, over some favoritism of the *Democrat*. It was obvious to me that it had occurred. I was telling her just how much I resented the kind of coverage they were giving. I remember telling her that John Robert Starr was not the only son of a bitch in town, and that kind of thing. Those kinds of things. We all had to experience it, I guess. I was there on the front line. That was certainly a factor.

ED: I remember Joan Roberts telling me once, during that period I guess, after she had

a little bit of wine one night, that her number-one job was to keep John Robert Starr pacified, to keep him happy. She talked to him every day, every week, seven days a week, Saturdays and Sundays included. She had to spend a lot of time with him.

JB: I think she came to like him.

ED: She did. I think she did come to like him. After that she went up to the University of Arkansas of Fayetteville, with the same fervor she had then. She said that was what she was supposed to do.

JB: Here is a little anecdote about Starr and the Clintons and me. Oh, yes, 1984. Clinton announces for re-election. He had gotten back in office, elected in November of 1982. In 1983, late in the year he does the education session – the standards. He passed the sales tax. In 1984, he was opposed by a Republican named Woody Freeman, whom he beat very badly. At the formal announcement of his re-election campaign, Starr attended and had a Clinton for Governor button on. In my news article the next day about Clinton’s formal announcement, I reported that the managing editor of the *Democrat*, John Robert Starr, was there wearing a button. I thought for a guy who pretends to be directing the news coverage for the other paper to be openly supporting a candidate, it was newsworthy. It was not the lead of the article, but it was there. The next day the phone rings, and it is Hillary. She says, “John, I’m so disappointed. Why do let John Robert Starr bother you so much?” That’s just a little anecdote to demonstrate what was going on in those days.

ED: Let me tell you an anecdote about that same period. That was after the 1983 legislative session passed the sales tax for education, but failed to pass the severance tax on natural gas and the corporate income tax. I had written some critical editorials and columns after the session, that it was a mediocre program overall. They weren't really going to make these great forward steps that we had talked about. Clinton should have made a greater effort to pass the severance tax and the corporate income tax. I did not think he had made much of an effort to pass them. He should have gone for two cents of sales tax and exempted drugs and groceries. I don't remember if it was a column or an editorial. I received one of the strangest calls I've ever gotten. Not from Bill Clinton, or even Hillary, who never called me, but from John Robert Starr, managing editor of the paper across town. He was rebuking me for that column. He said, "Look, Bill feels the same way you do and so do I. But the practical matter is that he could not pass those taxes this time." He used the first-person plural: "We're going to come back in two years and get the second bite. I think you ought to go lightly on Bill until that time. This is just the first step of a long process. We are going to come back in two years or in a special session later and do it again. I think you ought to be more patient with Bill." I was absolutely astonished in getting a telephone call such as that from the managing editor of the other paper!!!! He was very affable about it. He didn't chew me out about it. I ought to understand what he and the governor were doing. It was just astonishing.

JB: In the context of this, we are locked in a hellacious newspaper war, and we're

beginning to see that it was not going just ideally for the good guys. So it was a strange time. Clinton was explaining that the only reason he ever got any bad publicity in the *Gazette* was because of Starr and the resentment of Starr. He and Hillary always had an explanation. It was always somebody else's hang-ups. That's another story.

ED: You were a reporter in those days. You did not write a column until . . .

JB: February of 1986.

ED: February of 1986. That's when you wrote your first column. I remember, somewhat, about how it came about. How did it come about that you came to write a column? At the *Gazette*.

JB: I don't know that much about it. I know that Starr had been writing a column for years, so had Meredith Oakley. They had two government, local politics, opinions columns. You had done one for a while. It was irregular, or off and on, and a little more cerebral, maybe.

ED: Yes. Of course, I wasn't doing any reporting. I was just, in effect, writing another editorial or two a week. Whether I did one or two a week or whatever, it changed according to the whims of Jim Powell or somebody. Those were just opinion columns. My recollection of what happened is that we had all heard that Jack Stephens was going to run for the senate against Dale Bumpers. He had gotten pissed off at a luncheon one day. Dale Bumpers had had lunch with Witt [W.R. Stephens], and it had gotten kind of nasty. He had insulted Witt. Jack was furious and said he was going to run against that son of a bitch. And so for a few

days after that all this stuff floated out about Jack Stephens might run. Of course, nobody could talk to Jack Stephens. Meredith Oakley put it in her column, this rumor that Jack Stephens was going to run for the senate. It was just a rumor. We realized that at the *Gazette* we don't really have any forum for this kind of thing. For just somebody to talk about things going on. Rumors are not new stories. We had a little bit of frustration about it, and I remember talking to Jimmy Jones about it. There was some discussion about a political column, and Jones and I argued that John Brummett was the one who should write it because he's got his head full of this stuff. Nobody knows any more about this stuff than John Brummett. I think Jimmy talked to Carrick [Patterson, the editor], and I think he's the one who made the decision.

JB: Carrick is the one who called me.

ED: We ought to have a political column – not just an opinion, however.

JB That was one of the real moments of my life, and I had several. And they are all around having this great good fortune in my career. I had always dreamed of being a columnist, but writing a political column for the *Arkansas Gazette*?

ED: Did you ever thank Meredith Oakley?

JB: I never tried to thank her before. I thought, "I have to get out of this office and get some champagne. This is too good." It was so unusual, people said at the time. The *Gazette* had a tremendous history of political reporters and writers. But nobody had ever gotten this opportunity, and it was, "Why did it happen to Brummett?" God, I guess, and miracles.

ED: Part of it was competition at the time. The *Gazette* was really feeling the competition from the *Democrat* in those days. We were thinking about ways the *Gazette* could compete, and it wasn't competing. Meredith Oakley, of all people, was beating us on things that people wanted to know about. Yet we had somebody who could beat her hands down. That's how it all came about. February of 1986. You were writing, what, five a week? You didn't start off writing that many.

JB: It is so typical of me. They were trying to explain to me what I was going to do, and he said, "Could you do three a week?" I said, "Let's at least start with four. I want to be in the paper more often than not." And then the war kept going badly and becoming more intense, and somebody would say, "Could you do five? Can you do one on Monday?" By the time I left, I was doing six. Every day except Monday, I had a column. It was on the front of the high page.

ED: And it was easy for you. Did you really sweat it much? You knocked them out easily. You could have done seven or eight.

JB: I could have done two a day. I just could. Especially on the campaign. A friend of my wife who is a Baptist preacher, a good Baptist preacher, a progressive Baptist preacher, said the other day, "When I read your column, I get the idea you are doing what we call preaching from the overflow. You've got so much, and what you are telling us is not all that you have got. You need more space." Well, I hope that is true a lot of times. I think that is what makes it good, if it is, just to be consumed with information. But beyond that, a lot of people, far

smarter and far better writers, couldn't have done it because they would have sweated it too much. They can't produce that much and can't write it and let it go. I always call myself a wiper rather than a scrubber. Just do it and move on.

ED: Compared to somebody like Mike Trimble, who sweated every single word, and could not produce – a great writer.

JB: A good reporter in a lot of ways.

ED: But just could not produce, but he didn't have sources. The other thing was the sources you had.

JB: I think sources, instinct, and speed. I remember Shelton, later on, made a review of me one year when I was on the city desk. I think I can remember exactly what he said. He obviously did not like to do these annual reviews. You had to sit down, and it required some communication. He handed it to me and it said: "John Brummett has good instincts and is fast, very fast. Did I mention that he was fast?" That was his review. [Laughter]

ED: Originally, what I think got you where you were was your speed. You could do everything fast.

JB: From the beginning, people were saying that. People compared me from the beginning to Bill Lewis. He could crank out fifty inches in no time flat. I may not have done quite that well, but I wrote fast.

ED: Also, another knack is a reporting skill. You could find people and get stuff. Everybody else seemed to say, "I called. I couldn't reach him." But you always seemed to get people on the day you needed to. Other people would carry over

stories for three or four days. You got the story that day. I remember if I got a tip – after I was retired to the editorial page, I would occasionally still get little tips over the years – I would call you about it because I knew it would be in the paper the next day. You would have the story. If I passed it on to somebody else, it may be a week, and the *Democrat* would have it first. But nobody ever beat you.

JB: I was fast and I had the competitive instinct. When I got a tip, I wanted to get it in the paper. Plus, I just enjoyed it. I enjoyed knowing what was going on. I love to tell things to people that they don't know. Even now, in talking with my new employer, I would rather write a column telling you something you don't know, rather than giving you my opinion about something. My opinion is of less value than the information that I can report. Anybody can write an opinion column, and some people do it better than others. Even now, I would rather report the news. It is just an instinct that I have. I do remember that I liked that challenge of trying to find something out about 7 o'clock that day and working the angles. I remember Patty Criner, who had been around a lot of politicians and Clinton's friends and was Clinton's press secretary at one time, told me once, "The key to a governor staying a governor is not knowing state government, but knowing who to call about something." That's the way I approached it. You, on the other hand, I think, mastered a lot of policies. I couldn't tell you today much about how the school funding bill worked. If I have to do something about it tomorrow, I know who can tell me. That is how I approached it. Having a network of people, trying to think, "Okay, this person can tell me a little bit about

it, and then they can put me in touch with somebody.” Just knowing who to go to. I always enjoy that, and I still do. That’s just the way I function. Just the other day, I had a column about the Clinton Library looking to buy some property on Lake Hamilton for a retreat. It is for a conference center retreat for the Clinton Library. I heard about it earlier in the day, and I just had to have it in tomorrow’s column. That is the most fun I have had in a long time. Just spending three hours that day finding out where the land is and who owns it, what’s going on. And then having it in my column for the first time anybody has seen it the next morning. I just like that.

ED: That’s what we are going to miss about you not being at the *Democrat* on a regular basis. You started writing a column in 1986, and, as you say, you were writing it six days a week by the time you left the *Gazette*. It was 1986, that fall, five or six months after you started writing your column, a sea change occurs in the Arkansas newspaper war. Gannett Corporation buys the *Gazette*. Do you remember that day?

JB: I do.

ED: What did you think when you heard?

JB: I was thinking pretty short term, at the time. I so hated the *Democrat*. I thought, “There is no way we are going to lose this thing.” I knew that Gannett had a less than solid reputation for journalism. I did not even want to think about what kind of paper they would put out if they won. I thought we had the best paper, we have the best history, the best tradition, the best people. And now we have all the

money in the world. There was no way we were going to lose. I just did not want to even think about it. A lot of the other guys were turned off by Gannett. I knew it wasn't ideal. I really wasn't thinking about what comes after. I was thinking about winning the war. Those were my thoughts.

ED: They sent in Walker Lundy to be the editor, and they liked you. You were valued at the paper.

JB: I don't know if they were shrewd enough to notice anything else, but again I was lucky. Lundy was just hateful to everybody and seemed to torment all the good guys at the *Gazette*. He took a shine to me. He was helpful to me. In one very important step. I had begun writing the column in February of 1986, and Carrick had said, "We are going to run it in the news section, and we want it to be a place with inside political news. We are not making an editorial writer out of you. You are not going to write your opinion." I was sort of hamstrung as a columnist. I was writing almost a gossip sheet, and it was going okay. Then Lundy came to town and had a meeting with the staff. When it came my turn to go meet with him, he said, "I really like what you do. It is what I am using to learn about Arkansas politics. Which is sort of good, but you seem to be limited. You have a column, and you are not sharing enough of yourself. That's what a columnist is for. Blow them out. You have a lot of information, and I like it, but it is a glorified news story. Write your opinion. That's why you have your column." I knew that this in itself was a change in the paper. We were getting ready to have an opinion outside the editorial page, and two, we were getting ready to have

somebody write opinions at the storied *Arkansas Gazette* who is not up on the editorial page. I knew this was controversial, but I knew that it was also good for me and for the column. You have got to do that. You have to be free to do that. He was the one who said do it. If you were to go back and look and the pattern of those columns, they got more bite. They got better. He did that.

ED: There was a big change for the *Gazette*. The division between opinion and news was sacred. Even when we would write columns, I could write the column on the editorial page and it had an opinion with it, but I would basically just write an editorial for that space. I remember when I wrote a column at the *Gazette* years before when I was covering the Capitol, Bill Shelton emphasized repeatedly, “You are NEVER to put your opinion in these columns. Never.”

JB: I had been in this position for months. Go out there and be our high-profile guy. But I couldn’t play the game the other guys were playing. I was doing glorified reporting. It was okay, but it was important in the long-term growth, for me as a columnist, that I got that liberty. He was the one who gave it to me.

ED: Lundy met with me and his recommendation to me, which I did not take, was that I use the first-person pronoun in all my columns. He said like John Robert Starr. He said he noticed that I never used the first-person pronoun.

JB: Because you were from the old school?

ED: From that old school? Yes. Occasionally, on rare occasions. I think I used the first-person recently. I can’t remember. I think I did.

JB: It sort of gives you pause when you do that.

ED: Yes. It is really embarrassing; I blush when I do it. He told me I needed to do it. I said, “Well, why do I need to do it? I don’t need to say, ‘I think so and so.’ I am writing an editorial. That is my opinion. I just need to say what my opinion is and I don’t need to say, ‘I think, or I believe, or whatever.’ If something comes along and I need to relate some experience, I’ll do it.” He said, “No, no. You need to find a way to get yourself in your column. People need to know Ernie Dumas. You need to find ways to write about your personal experience and exhibit your personality.”

JB: You weren’t comfortable with it, and I respect this. It becomes – it is an essay, an editorial, but I think a column has to have the columnist’s personality to really connect with readers.

ED: You never reached the point of John Robert Starr. Yours is very natural. Starr was the hero of all his columns. I don’t know how many columns he wrote. It must have been ten thousand, but he made himself the hero of every single one of them. Even when he was acknowledging a mistake. Anyway, things went all right with you personally around there. Lundy thought well of you.

JB: [Bill] Malone [the first publisher of the *Gazette* under Gannett] liked me. I had established a high profile and then they would go out and talk to the people in the community and hear that people liked my column. Gannett was horrible for so many people, but it was good for me.

ED: There came a point where you were pretty disillusioned with Gannett. Can you talk about how you came to leave the *Gazette*?

JB: After Lundy, they brought in a new regime. I may be one of the very few of the old-timers of the *Gazette* who liked Lundy more than the new regime. That is almost blasphemous, to like Lundy more than anyone. How could you possibly? I thought Lundy was not as evil as some. I just thought he was odd, quirky. Quirky doesn't quite get it. Quirky plus. I mean, putting the Saturday morning reviews on the movies that opened on Friday nights on the front page! That kind of thing, which he wanted to do. I just think he was extremely odd, extremely odd. The new regime, I just didn't have any respect for them.

ED: You are talking about Keith Moyer. He was the editor and new publisher after Bill Malone was Craig Moon. Right?

JB: Right. I just found them a couple of golfers. BMW golfers, corporate risers, without a great deal of sensitivity to their time or place here in Arkansas. The climate just became sort of poisoned. They were losing the war. They were in trouble. They could not knock out [Walter] Hussman [publisher of the *Arkansas Democrat*]. Mainly, their tactic became to throw obscene amounts of money at everything. To raid employees from the *Democrat*. To create columns. By the end I think everybody had a column, sort of like the *Democrat* now. I had gone to Roslyn, Virginia, to a couple of Gannett functions and absorbed the corporate culture. I was just totally turned off by it. It became clear to me that these really aren't very good guys. Even if they won the war, this isn't going to be a good deal. So all of that is happening with me. But, even as I say these bad things about them, the second regime liked me, too. They thought I was good, to the

point that they invited me to a managers' retreat up at Red Apple Inn. They wanted to get my input. What are we going to do? Trying to make me a part of the inner circle. It was the worst thing they could have done. I sat around and watched how inept they were. I sensed the frustration, and I knew that it was over. My motivation at that point became survival and fear. It is a very personal thing – I don't have a lot of confidence in a lot of ways, but in other ways I do. I am not sure, but I knew that I did not want to work for a sorry Gannett monopoly paper. I knew that I did not want to join GNS [Gannett News Service] or *USA Today* and become part of the corporate culture and leave Arkansas. I knew what I do best, and what I wanted to do was what I am doing right now, learning about Arkansas. And I said, "Something bad is getting ready to happen. I have to take care of stuff. I have to find neutral ground and get out of here."

ED: Now when is this?

JB: This is October 1990. The retreat was in the summer. I knew about the third day of that. It was one of these deals where they take about forty people and put us all up individually in rooms. They rent a conference room. They bring in these facilitators to do these silly little exercises to build teamwork. Then you have three very nice, expensive meals a day. All the while, you are talking about how you are losing money. You can't get any subscribers and you've lost Dillard's and you've lost the UA movies. I just found it to be a horrifying experience. I had no idea how . . .

[End of Tape Two, Side One]

[Beginning of Tape Two, Side Two]

ED: This is side four. We are talking about . . .

JB: My departure in October 1990. I abruptly left the *Gazette* and became senior editor with the Arkansas Writers' Project and editor of the *Arkansas Times*. By the time I had left, my thinking was, "One, Gannett is not going to publish a very good paper here even if they win. Two, if they lose, they might find me a job, but I would have to relocate, and I don't want to do that. Three, there is no real nobility in this fight anymore. We are fighting for the Gannett Corporation." I was certain of all those things. By the way, let me back up to a few months before. They asked me to become a sports columnist before they gave it to Kelley Bass. I would cover the Wimbledon and the French Open and all that stuff.

ED: Is this what Craig Moon and . . .

JB: Moon and Moyer. That's when I decided that they are absolutely out of control.

ED: They wanted you to write a sports column?

JB: Do you remember when Kelley Bass became the sports columnist?

ED: Yes. Unfortunately . . .

JB: I'm sorry. I like Kelley, but Kelley was at least the second choice. They wanted me to do it. They wanted me to quit writing politics and take on Wally Hall. They thought I could handle it. They wanted some sports column with an attitude. They were going to pay me ten to fifteen thousand dollars more a year, and they were going to send me to any international tennis event that I wanted to go to. I remember thinking, "This is a joke. They have lost their minds." Maybe

I am the one who had lost his mind. Maybe I should have done it. No, no. I knew I couldn't do that. What I was getting at, I had all of these things, and my thinking when I left, to the surprise to a lot of people was, one, knowing there was no nobility in the fight anymore. Two, we are probably going to lose. Three, even if they win, they have a crappy paper. I'm getting out of here. What I was not sensitive to was the heritage of the paper. I mean it was the *Arkansas Gazette*. It was an institution. It was a major factor in the history and political culture of Arkansas. I came later to regret that I did not stay to the bitter end. It was futile, and it was sad. I just didn't calculate that factor as much as I should have. I didn't take it in. It all worked out. I got over to the Arkansas Writers Project and became senior editor of a monthly magazine and of a weekly business magazine, *Arkansas Business*. I was bored to tears. Wonderful people, but I am bored.

ED: You are putting out a monthly magazine in which you write a column.

JB: I actually became the editor of it, and that engaged me somewhat. I had no particular interest in it. I knew very soon I had made a very severe miscalculation. I knew my ego wouldn't let me go back over to the *Gazette*. I probably should have done that. I signed a contract to write for the *Democrat*.

ED: Shortly before you left, what happened? They made Bill Rutherford the managing editor.

JB: I, in fact, was an assistant managing editor by the time I left. I held that title for about a week. I'm not sure how that happened. I think they thought I was unhappy or something.

ED: It shocked everybody when they made Bill Rutherford the managing editor.

People, of course, loved Bill in many ways, but they were amazed they had made him editor. They had the impression that it would excite everybody if Bill Rutherford became the managing editor.

JB: I saw that happening at the retreat. Rutherford was there, seeming about as out of place as I was. Moyer and Rutherford spent a lot of time together. In my brazen way I said, "What are you up to?" Moyer told me he was trying to talk Bill into becoming managing editor. He said, "Don't you think this would be great?" I said, "Oh, yes, sure." With Bill sitting right there, I couldn't say much else. But I did think he thought this was a way to connect to the heritage and the old staff. That this would blend all the worlds. That Rutherford was the answer. There was no single person who could have done it. I know there wasn't. Bill was a fine news editor and a great institution. But he didn't provide that kind of attitude.

ED: I don't know that anybody could have.

JB: You might have.

ED: No, I don't think anybody would have. Not at that point.

JB: That's what I had determined.

ED: Not with those people in charge, anyway. If you had got those guys out then, it might not have been too late to save it. Let's talk a little bit about Max Brantley. I think over the years there has been some tension between you. I think, also, some special camaraderie. Max, in a way, was a champion of yours over the years. I think, probably, he still is.

JB: I was talking to somebody about it the other night. He came to the *Gazette* before I did. He was such a large, expansive personality. He was an extraordinary person to get to know. About as bright a person as I had ever been around. Just a dominant fortress in the formative years that I had been there. A lot of people did not like him. He was quite gruff. Some people thought he didn't treat them right. I never had a personal problem with Max. We became neighbors over on Woodrow Street. He's one of my favorite guys. Max is a very passionate person, very passionate and emotional person. He was into that newspaper war more than anybody. When I bailed out, his resentment was stronger than anybody else's. He resented me, and I knew he did. But, then, the *Gazette* closes. Max is the guy who is giving the speeches at the last and walked out carrying the feud. I knew what was going to happen. I knew exactly how it was all going to turn out. At the time, I was editor at the *Arkansas Times*, editing the slick monthly magazine, and I was writing three columns a week on contract with the *Democrat*. I went in to see Alan Leveritt [publisher of the *Times*]. I said, "Let's just fast forward to this one. You are not going to be able to resist. You are going to turn this into a weekly newspaper, to try to compete with the *Democrat*. If you want me back, great. But I am not the guy to be the point person. I will do everything that I can, but I am not the editor or the point person. I'm in the other paper three days a week. The guy you want is Brantley. It's up to Max. I remember Max and me meeting at the Wallace Grill one morning, trying to work through our differences. I remember Max crying, and he said, "You went with the bad guys." It was sort

of a cathartic thing. I am about to cry right now, just thinking about it. It was a sweet moment. Then he came to the *Times*. He became the editor, and I wrote my column and went to Washington. He puts out a helluva weekly, and he does it singlehandedly.

ED: Yes, the *Arkansas Times* is Max Brantley. They've got the satellites out there . . .

JB: Now I'm going to be back in his paper.

ED: Okay. So when you take off, you're still with the *Arkansas Times* when you go to Washington?

JB: In 1993, from all the Clinton business and national press contacts, I got a book contract to go to Washington to write a book on the first year of the Clinton administration.. That year, 1993, I live in Washington. I moved my family, my dogs, everything, to Washington. I was writing three columns a week for the *Democrat*, a column for the *Arkansas Times* and articles for the *Times*. About every two weeks I would have a cover piece or a major article. Tremendous stress on every level. People say, "How did you like Washington?" I basically looked at a computer screen. That is all I did there. So then it is time to come back after that.

ED: You write a book about the first year of the Clinton Administration. Then you come back. Who is the publisher of that book?

JB: Hyperion.

ED: Then you come back to Little Rock in 1994.

JB: Yes. I doublecrossed the *Arkansas Times*. My contract, a three-year contract

with Hussman, was up in 1993. My book contract was up in 1993. One thing I knew all year was that I was coming back to Little Rock. I did send a letter to the *Washington Post* to say I would stay in Washington if I could write for the Style section. They wrote back and said, “Well, you can’t.” So I knew that the only thing I wanted to do was come home. So I decided it was time to go with the good guys, to come back to the *Arkansas Times* and help Max with the paper. I said I would, and they announced it. And then I came back in November at Thanksgiving and went by the *Democrat* to do something. I had a mail slot there, and I was there to check it. Hussman saw me and called me into his office and made a nice offer. So I took it without question. To join them full time.

ED: And you stayed there for six years?

JB: Yes.

ED: And, as we speak, this is your last week at the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*.

JB: I have written all my columns now.

ED: Next week you will join the staff of Donrey Media Group. You will be writing . . .

JB: I will join their Little Rock Bureau. I will write three columns a week for their newspapers, principally, their Arkansas dailies, the *Morning News of Northwest Arkansas*. They own some smaller ones. My contract also provides that my columns on the national level, on national issues, will be made available to papers outside Arkansas, Las Vegas, a newspaper in Hawaii. I am going to do reporting. I am going to go back to my old days. Not so much government reporting. Just

go out and find stories in Arkansas. That's what I will be doing.

ED: I guess we skipped over a six- or seven-year period when you wrote for the *Democrat-Gazette*. You established or enhanced your reputation statewide. It was obviously important to the *Democrat-Gazette*. I would like for you to go back and talk about the joys and tensions of that. I know that has been documented in your columns, the troubles you had with Paul Greenberg [editor of the *Democrat-Gazette* editorial page] and Starr and others who frequently attacked you. That's all in the record. I would like to go back and just talk in a general way about the *Gazette*. Was the *Gazette* a special place to work?

JB: Yes. A very special place. I was telling Walter Hussman that just two weeks ago. He wanted to know why I was leaving. I grew up in a newsroom that was like a family, where everybody liked each other. I don't have that anymore. I haven't had it since 1990. I miss it, and I'm still sort of looking for it. It was the people and the energy. The people and the heritage. You knew you were working for a place that had distinguished itself with greatness. You knew you were working with like-minded people. I don't know how it came to be, but everybody sort of saw the world the same way. There was a kind of person who fit in the *Gazette* newsroom. I don't know. It is hard to describe how it felt. One problem with Gannett was that people began to work there who didn't have that sense of heritage or sense of place. It became less a fun place to be. It was a time when you could be an Arkansas journalist and it could be your career. Now, at the *Democrat-Gazette*, the general assignment and beat reporting staff is basically

very talented, bright, graduates of Ivy League or other top-level schools. They have decided to make a play to get those types of young people. They come here to build a clip file to get another job. There is not a sense of place or an Arkansas culture now. There was. That is what it was all about. We were friends after work. It was just sort of an unspoken language of fellowship and brotherhood. It's just magic. It began to erode toward the end.

ED: Is that peculiar to the *Gazette*? You haven't worked at that many papers, and I certainly haven't either. My experience is almost totally with the *Gazette*, except for some years when I was in school. We have impression that the *Gazette* is unique in that way. Do you think there are places like that?

JB: I don't know. I can't say. I can tell you how it was. I've been in a newsroom for the last six years, and it is not that way. Of course, it wouldn't be that way for me because I was sort of an odd man out there, an island there by design. As I look around, I haven't seen any. You don't have long-term employees, and you don't have long-term relationships. You don't have storied old editors sitting up there that you call "The Grim Man," yet you really respect him. He may not have many interpersonal skills, but it is a wonderful thing to work for him. You don't have that. You have kids, and you have a bank of editors, instead of one editor. It is not reporter-driven anymore. Those days we decided what we were doing. They didn't have an editor's meeting at 11 o'clock and say, "The Capitol reporters are going to produce this and this story." We went out there, and we recorded what happened and came back and wrote it.

ED: You came in at 6:30 and said, “I got a hell of a story.”

JB: That was part of the competitive environment. You came in, and you would take your old Underwood – in the early days of the computer – and type out your budget. It may be seven items. You determined what it is. Nobody told you earlier in the day what it was going to be. There was such a premium on just reporting. That was a part of it. The fact that so many of us were not passing through, we were there to stay. I was not there to build a resumé for somebody else. I thought with my academic record, I was lucky I wasn’t sweeping the floors. There were a lot of people who thought that it was where they wanted to stay.

ED: My other question, I guess, if you could answer this. What you think the long-term effect in Arkansas will be from the closing of the *Gazette*. First, let me go back. I think we probably agree that the *Gazette* if Gannett had won its battle might not have been a good paper, and Hussman probably puts out a better paper in some ways than Gannett would put out. I don’t think it would have been as harmful as this right-wing editorial section, which carries over and affects the news coverage of it. But that is a difficult question.

JB: I think the state’s political environment is changing. Arkansas had a charming uniqueness, where politicking mattered. The *Gazette* played a role. A tremendously talented generation of moderate Democrats came along. And even before that, McMath and Faubus were progressive early. All of that is changing. I don’t know how much of it is term limits, how much of it is inevitable and how

much of it is owing to the fact that we don't have the *Gazette* anymore. I do think the state's political culture has come apart. The *Gazette* was a big part of it. It had so much history. It was so rich in history. Without the *Gazette* there is a void. What I can't get a handle on is whether things are going to change anyway politically. It seems inevitable that given a chance to pass term limits, that the people of the state would. With a two-party system it is not only inevitable but desirable. So I can't put my finger on the political effect. Here in Central Arkansas, you've got a very vicious, right-wing editorialist at the dominant paper. But you've got a delightfully iconoclastic liberal congressman who was elected in the time of their monopoly. We are just going to have to wait and see. You probably have a better sense of it than I do.

ED: No. It is a good question. You have to go back and start with the demise of the *Gazette* in 1986 rather than 1991. It's hard to project anything based on the *Gazette* at the end.

JB: The whole era of Rockefeller, Bumpers, Clinton, and Pryor. How much of that happened because the *Gazette* was the dominant paper? I don't know.

ED: Pryor gives the *Gazette* a lot of credit. Diane Blair in her book quotes Pryor as saying the *Gazette* is responsible for them.

JB: Well, I would like to think so, and it didn't hurt. I don't have much sense of self-importance. One of the hardest things about my deciding to leave the *Democrat-Gazette* was that I thought it was kind of important that there be another view expressed. I did not want to be the one to do it. That's too much on one person.

Plus, one token, obligatory, unreliably liberal columnist does not change the essence and soul of that paper. It's right-wing Republican both in its editorials and in its news columns. That can't be good.

ED: All right, anything else that you would like to say?

JB: I've said too much already.

ED: John, I appreciate it.

JB: Glad to do it.

[End of Interview]