

Gazette Project

Interview with

Leroy Donald,
Little Rock, Arkansas,
9 March 2000

Interviewer: John Thompson

John Thompson: So this interview is for the Arkansas Center for Oral and Visual History. It operates from the History Department at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. The director is Jeanie Whayne. The Center is interviewing up to a hundred former *Arkansas Gazette* employees, and their recollections will be recorded and transcribed. Both the tapes and the transcripts will be deposited in the Special Collections division of the University of Arkansas libraries, where they will be available for use by researchers and others interested in Arkansas history. Some of the material may be made available over the Internet. Today's date is March 9, 2000. This is John Thompson. I am the interviewer, and I am going to be interviewing Leroy Donald. We are in my office at 221 West Second Street, Suite 509, in Little Rock, and I will state that the purpose of the interview, as far as the History Department is concerned, is to give people some kind of insight into what kind of newspaper the *Gazette* was. The *Arkansas Gazette* and what made it special. We will give you the opportunity to review the

transcript that will be made of this interview, at which time you will be asked to sign a release. So all I need you to do now is tell me your name.

Leroy Donald: Leroy, L-E-R-O-Y, Donald, D-O-N-A-L-D.

JT: And if you just state that you are willing to give the Center for Oral and Visual History permission to use this tape and make the transcription available to some other people at this point.

LD: That's fine. Yes.

JT: You do agree to it?

LD: I agree to it.

JT: You agree to it. Okay, good. So, first of all, a little background. Leroy, where were you born?

LD: In New Albany, Mississippi.

JT: And what year was that?

LD: 1935.

JT: '35? What was your date of birth?

LD: August 23, 1935.

JT: Who was your father?

LD: Leroy Donald.

JT: And your mother?

LD: Mahala Ford Donald.

JT: Mahala.

LD: M-A-H-A-L-A.

JT: M-A-H-A-L-A.

LD: Known as Hallie (*pronounced Hailey*).

JT: Hallie as is H-A-L-E-A?

LD: Yes.

JT: Okay.

LD: Incidentally, Albany, Mississippi, was where Hugh Patterson was reared.

JT: Really? Okay, good. Now did that have any connection with what happened later in your life? Did you know that at that point? Or did you know who he was before you?

LD: No.

JT: Where did you grow up and go to high school?

LD: I grew up in Goodman, Mississippi, which is the very center point of Mississippi. It is where the surveyor's mark is. It is right above Jackson. And we moved to El Dorado, Arkansas, in 1948.

JT: And were you in high school yet?

LD: No, that is where I started. You know, I was twelve years old.

JT: Twelve years old. And so you attended high school at El Dorado?

LD: Yes.

JT: And what year did you graduate there?

LD: I think it was 1953.

JT: And after that, you went to college?

LD: Went to University of the South, Sewanee (Tennessee).

JT: Did you graduate there?

LD: No, I transferred across to the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville.

JT: And what year?

LD: That would be 1964, I believe.

JT: Okay. So, what were you majoring in in college?

LD: Pre.

JT: You majored in what?

LD: Pre.

JT: Pre-what?

LD: Yeah. Pre. That is what I majored in is Pre.

JT: Pre?

LD: Pre-anything.

JT: Pre-anything. Were you taking journalism courses?

LD: No.

JT: You were not. Okay. So, when you graduated from college, what did you do?

LD: Went back to El Dorado to pick up another course. I could get another, a third degree in education, and I went back to El Dorado to live with my in-laws. After finishing up correspondence courses in practice teaching from Southern State College, at the time, Southern State University.

JT: So was your degree from Fayetteville in education?

LD: I never did finish out the degree program.

JT: Oh, all right. I understand. So, tell me how you got into the newspaper business.

LD: Well, in El Dorado, the only place you could work at night, if you were going to practice teach during the day, was either out at the refineries or at the newspaper. And Ernie Dumas, who I am sure you will be interviewing, and I were friends, went to high school together, and he said, “Why don’t you go to work down at the *El Dorado Daily News* and *Evening Times*?” And that is what I was doing, working at night, and gradually worked on into working full time at both papers.

JT: Okay, and so, how did it come to be that you went to the *Arkansas Gazette*?

LD: Well, that was in . . . of course, at that time, everybody knew the *Gazette*, and all the Central High crisis business, and Rodney Dungan, who was also from El Dorado and also worked for the El Dorado papers, had joined the staff up at the paper and I would go up and visit him, and I met A.R. Nelson, managing editor, who is from El Dorado. So, we all kind of knew each other, and then, finally after a year, maybe a year and a half down at El Dorado, Nelson calls me and says, “Come up. Time to go to work here.” At the *Gazette*.

JT: And was that something you were hoping to do?

LD: By that time, yes. It was kind of . . . I really didn’t have plans to go into journalism. It just happened that way. And then, whatever work he was doing at the time was in . . . I don’t know whether this is half-truth or truth, but it was kind of one of the things we always laughed about . . . was that Nelson was putting together what they called the “El Dorado Mafia.” There were a whole bunch of us in El Dorado that went to work for the paper up there.

JT: Tell me some of the other people.

LD: Well, Rodney Dungan was one, Ernie Dumas was there, came a little bit later, Nelson was there, one of the copywriters was from El Dorado. Of course, Buddy Portis . . ., who eventually came there, . . . was from outside El Dorado --- Mt. Holly. It was kind of a joke that Nelson just put his Mafia together. What Nelson told me was, “The only reason I am hiring you was because you got a Southern accent.” Because they the *Gazette* gone through — whether they were joking or not, I don’t know — but the paper had gone through all that Central High mess, and people were burning the papers out on the routes. And there was a lot of animosity out there in the populace, and, apparently, a lot of the reporters at the time either had Yankee accents or were looked upon as Yankees or something. So anyway, Nelson said, “We need somebody who can answer telephones and has a Southern accent.” So I went to work, as most people did at that time, as an assistant on the state desk, mostly just taking obits. Right next door to Nelson.

JT: Was Jimmy Jones also from El Dorado?

LD: He was from down at Hope. He was another “L.A” boy, they call it.

JT: L.A. was?

LD: Lower Arkansas.

JT: Oh, I see.

LD: And Jimmy Jones, of course, was from Texarkana, and Mike Trimble. I think I hired those guys eventually. Eventually, I was kind of Nelson’s hiring arm, and mostly because they could run people through the state desk on the crap desk part

of the state desk.

JT: Tell me what crap desk means.

LD: Well, that is obits, crap news items, rewrites or releases, that sort of thing.

JT: So, was there anything formal about the hiring process or was it?

LD: Nothing, except, once again, Nelson kidded me and said I was hired as, I was actually a magazine subscription. Something about he didn't have a place in his budget to hire me at the time, and he said he just made it a magazine subscription or something. So, that was the story, and I came as a magazine subscription.

JT: So, when you went to work for the *Gazette*, did you have any expectations that were fulfilled or not fulfilled? Was it like you thought it was going to be or completely different?

LD: Oh, it was great, because I came in the early summer of 19, I think it was, 59, when they had the bombings of the, I can't remember what all got bombed, it was in the fight over Central High. And that was when the B-52 blew up over Little Rock and scattered all parts and people all over the place, and so Nelson said I bring a lot of news to the paper.

JT: Were you involved with any of those stories?

LD: Nothing more than just, because I was still a crap desk writer, and just telling people how I saw the plane explode, like, it seemed like half of Little Rock did. And I could call down there. I was living in Rivercliff, and I could see that the plane was going down, and I called Miss Grace, the telephone operator down there, to tell her to get hold of photographers and where they could go.

JT: Talk about Nelson.

LD: Okay. The little anecdote about hiring people with Southern accents kind of indicated where the paper was at that time. They were trying to show the people of Arkansas that they were, you know, we are an Arkansas paper. We are not a Yankee paper, like was being preached by the rednecks and the rabble-rousers out there. And we did show concern. The process, you know, was so, I think I just showed up one day and I would get a check. That was about it. It wasn't very formal, not much formality about it. Of course, Nelson was gathering his troops, and so, it was kind of the "these are my boys, and here we are." And, of course, I worked the crap desk on the state desk under Gene Foreman. No, it was under Ken Parker, at first. Ken Parker, who is a character in his own right.

JT: What about him?

LD: Well, Parker was kind of a little gnome-looking fellow that had a real sly wit. And the best thing I remember him was, he would walk around the room, he had a headset on and a long cord, and he would get up and stroll about the room, talking to all these stringers all over the state. And he pretty well stayed on top of things through the stringers. And we didn't do a lot. The state desk did not do a lot of actual news coverage, other than car wrecks, maybe some routine murders and that sort of thing, and a lot of obits, mostly, we would have to take obits from around the state. But we did, once again, some crap stuff, some news briefs and what we called "12-R's" at the time.

JT: What was that? What does that stand for?

LD: Those are just little about two-sentence, one paragraphs. The *Gazette* was big for its little “12-R’s” or one-line headline little stories all over the paper. I guess they used it to break up the type, more than anything else. But a lot of them didn’t really say anything. They were just news releases or just minor things that happened.

JT: Well, did you, was it a learning situation for you?

LD: Oh, yes. Yes. One of the great things about Nelson was, and, actually, Rodney Dungan had told me this before I came up there. He says, “You think that writing an obit is easy. But A.R. Nelson will teach you how to write an obit.” And Nelson said, “I will teach you that for every ten words you write, I can edit one word out of it.” You know, he says, “I can show you how to clip copy.” And plus, it was real important for everybody that came to work for the paper to learn the state. They were really, I don’t know whether they emphasized it this much before, but at that time I know they did, and make acquaintances with people out in the state. If you handle obits, you begin to get every name out in the state. You would learn where people were from and what, how towns spell their names, for instance, De Queen would be two words and DeWitt would be one. You know, all the little oddities around the towns and made acquaintances with the funeral homes and you learned that you had damn better well spell the name right. And so, it was really a learning process through those obituaries. They should do it, continue it today. One of the mistakes papers make, I think, today is not bringing people through that route.

JT: Was that one of the things that made the *Gazette* special, do you think?

LD: Yes, I sure do. Because everybody in the *Gazette* pretty well knew if you said, “Where is Pisgah?” They knew not only how you spell Pisgah, which is P-I-S-G-A-H, but they knew where it was.

JT: So, talk about the quality of the, a little bit more about the quality of the editing and the writing.

LD: It was great editing, all the way up and down the line. Of course, by the way, Bill Rutherford was, kind of filled in on the weekends at the state desk. When I went up there, there was actually an editor and one-and-a-half people that worked the state desk. The other half was Rutherford, who really was the assistant telegraph editor with Pat Carithers.

JT: Carithers.

LD: C-A-R-I-T-H-E-R-S. I believe there is only one R in there. And so, but then, he would come in to handle the desk on weekends, and, actually, I never did, unless there was some reason to work a weekend, I never did really work that much with Rutherford on the state desk. Shortly after I got there, Parker left and Gene Foreman became state editor. And, of course, working under Gene, you learned organization. However, at that point, at that point, state desk did not really do a lot of coverage out there, but when Foreman came over from the city desk, he kind of wanted to get out and do a little bit more. So he started cutting me loose, just to get out there in the state and deal. And so I would make frequent trips out into the state, sometimes with Ernie Deane, just covering the Chamber of

Commerce meetings. But now, the point here that might be made is, I guess Ernie and I were just kind of stupid, because we didn't think anybody was going to hurt us, but there was some feeling that if you got out there and out in the state, that people would, you could be in some trouble if they started trying to argue with you. But Ernie and I both would just jaw with anybody and get along with them, and so that was another thing. We started going out there, if nothing else, to just be at the meetings, like Chamber of Commerce meetings or even ribbon-cuttings and things like that. Of course, Ernie Deane was doing the "Arkansas Traveler" column, and, I think, played a great role in bringing the *Gazette* back into the mainstream of the Arkansas scene. As much, I think he played as much a role as Orville Henry did in covering the Razorbacks.

JT: Well, talk a little about him. He had a column that was called the "Arkansas Traveler."

LD: "Arkansas Traveler."

JT: And what did that consist of usually?

LD: Well, at that time, it was a lot of, it was a lot of fluff stuff. It was not hard news. I mean, he would go cover the Malvern Chamber of Commerce and do a lot of names. You know, names is news, and that is what Ernie did. He put a lot of names in his column. And he might get a second column out of it down the line, and it was kind of a good old boy writing. Like I say, at that time, we were just kind of out there, just touching base, because I knew a lot of people out in the state, having gone to the University of Arkansas, and making a lot of contact up

there. And that was part of my job under Foreman, to just get out there.

JT: Was this a conscious effort by the *Gazette* to, just to do this, or did it just happen?

LD: It kind of just happened. Nelson approved of it, and I don't think there was any kind of grand scale meeting somewhere that was like, let's do this. I think it was just kind of, just kind of happened. And then, like I say, Foreman came along, and he said, "Let's try to do a little bit more news, making ourselves a gathering desk rather than the city desk." If there were a tornado at Cabot, for instance, normally the city desk would have sent reporters up there, or say, Blytheville, even, all the reporters would have come off the city desk. Well, when I got there, and Foreman began to build the desk a little bit, we started trying to cover that kind of stuff. And sometimes it would be a mix of city desk reporters under Bill Shelton and then us. Or we would actually get a couple of city desk reporters to cover major breaking news. It was also about this time that we started doing news feature pieces, which were just not done in the *Gazette*, for some reason. We had features, but that would go in the feature section over here. But actual news features, which was what is done most of the time now, just was not done.

JT: And the news feature being?

LD: For instance, one of them I remember vividly was, there was some kind of murder situation up in, like, Marked Tree, where there had been two mass murders, one where three people were killed and one where five people were killed. Well, just reporting on those murders each time would be the hard news. The news feature would have been how the town reacted to being a town where mass murder

occurs, and how people felt about it, and that sort of thing. So, that is what we had begun to get into.

JT: And that was groundbreaking for the *Gazette*, you think?

LD: I think it was. I don't ever remember doing anything like that before. For instance, and this is one of the things I think Foreman and I got together on and decided to do, was that, that was about the time that little towns were starting to break their contracts with the utility companies. I think Calico Rock may have been one of them, some other little town up that way. And so, we went out and actually went around and went to these towns where they were going to break their contracts with the big utilities and create their own little electric power companies or whatever it is they, or water companies, or whatever they were doing. I learned a journalistic lesson in covering the story: On the way to write about the utilities I passed through Lepanto and sent back a little four-graf story on their Lepanto Turtle Derby. Nobody saw the hard-to-put-together series, but they sure saw the one on the Lepanto Turtle Derby. But we started doing heavier coverage. I think the state desk picked up another part body (reporter), too.

JT: I was going to ask you, who were some of your reporting colleagues that were working on the state desk at that time?

LD: Let's see, I'm trying to remember. By and large, they were people that were coming in, and they were moving them through as if it were crap desk work. The same way I started, and Shelton had his own crap desk over on the city desk. We had our crap desk, and so, we began to pick up bodies, who actually could do a

little more work. We did a lot of telephoning and telephone work and used those correspondents, those stringers, around the state. I remember the stringers actually sending in strings to get paid.

JT: Tell me how that worked.

LD: Well, at the end of the month, the correspondent out there takes all the little copy he wrote that got in the paper, and he puts it down and takes a string and measures the length of copy and cuts the string off. . . . He sends in the string, and then he got paid by the inch.

JT: Well, talk about stringers. Were there any that were good? Or were most of them horrible?

LD: Oh, I thought they were great. They were some of the best we have around. Some of the stringers, oh, like Joe McGee up at Conway, and J.E. Dunlap up at Harrison. Then we had a lot of, we had what we called the, they had a lot of names like Esther Bendersky and Jacomini and Valochovic. It was just all kinds of names like that, and we had some good stringers, I think. By and large, at that time, they were newspaper-related people who worked on afternoon papers and could send in [news] during the day. Now, later on, we changed that a little bit, but still, to keep their hand in and to keep a feel of the community, a stringer didn't have to be a great writer. It was just like, he picked up on this and picked up on that. Down at Crossett, we had Janice Clark. Janice Clark at Crossett was really good, and she was kind of just a freelance writer. Some of them like old W.W. Halliburton at Arkadelphia. He used to call in and say, "W.W. Halliburton,

reporting from Arkadelphia.” He was a sports radio announcer, and his big thing was covering the Ouachita and Henderson games. He would call in in that radio voice and say, “This is W.W. Halliburton, Arkadelphia.” And later on, we had some that were quite well known names nationally. Remember Orval Faubus.

JT: Orval Faubus was a stringer for the *Gazette*?

LD: At Huntsville, yes. David Pryor was the stringer for a while when he and Barbara were up at Fayetteville, when they were going back to school. At one time or another, you know, most people wanted some kind of connection with the *Gazette*. I will tell you another one. It was Marlin Hawkins at Conway. Marlin was a great stringer, being the “High Sheriff” of Conway County. Marlin would call in, of course he knew everything that was going on in his bailiwick there, and he also understood newspapers and newspaper deadlines, and he knew my first edition deadline, which is what he made sure it would get into his papers up there, were such-and-such a time, I think it was seven o’clock, and he would call in earlier. He would say — say it was a bad car wreck — “I can’t get you in for first. I have to inform the families, and I may not be able to do that until second edition deadline, but I will have the families informed so I can give you the names and the details of the wreck in time to get in the second edition paper.” All of them understood. They were good. We had some good stringers.

JT: The *Gazette* was accused of bias by its critics. Did you ever sense any bias in any of the writing or reporting?

LD: No, I never did. Of course, once we got started on the state desk, because we

were so connected into the communities, they just knew we were straight. I think the bias attitude came more from, they would read an editorial, you know, by Harry Ashmore, and later on, J.O. Powell, and say the editorial feeling runs over into the news. Well, obviously it didn't, because I don't think those guys would even come back on the news room floor. I never saw any bias.

JT: Was there any, talk about any rules or sacred cows the *Gazette* had?

LD: Well, you had a lot of "Mr. J.N. Heiskells," as we called them. You know, you never said "kid." Kid is a goat. It is a "child," if it is a person. You couldn't throw a rock. You could throw a stone, but a rock was the Rock of Gibraltar. And, of course, you had a lot of style rules, Viet Nam being one of them, and I can't remember which way it was spelled. Eventually, the Associated Press had to go to Mr. J.N. Heiskell's style spelling of Viet Nam. And I do not remember which way it went, though, whether it was two words, and he said, "No, it was one word," or whether it was one word, and he said, "No, it was two words." Mr. J.N., he always had some comment. One of the things I remember is Nelson, when I started, when I became state editor, a lot of times we would design the page. For instance, if there were a tornado, we would have a tornado picture page. And whatever you designed, then Nelson would come out the next day and show you, "Well, this has got too much white space. This should have been moved here." So you still had a lot of learning process. He was a good teacher, and he was a buddy to most of the reporters and editors.

JT: Were there any sins that would not be forgiven at the *Gazette*? Or was it a pretty

forgiving place?

LD: I don't remember anything like that. I know other newspapers have, you know, one strike and you're out or two strikes and you're out or something like that, but no. And for one thing, it was because you learned, like coming up through the obit route, that people just didn't make a lot of mistakes. And if they did, it would be just, like a typographical error or something that got confused. It was not really, people, reporters just didn't make a lot of errors of fact. And once again, they had a terrific editing system. Because each desk, for instance, the state desk, you have a state editor, who is not just an assignments editor, but also he would edit the copy. And then that copy would go over to the rim [rim of the copy desk], which was edited by a copy editor on the rim, and then, once again, it would go to a slot editor, who placed it in the paper, and the slot editor would catch it. There were a lot of English and grammatical rules and punctuation rules and that sort of thing. The *Gazette* used a lot of commas, where others didn't. And if you did something, you would get a note from Mr. Heiskell. It was always these fine, fine, very intelligent notes written down. "I noticed that a comma was placed here instead of there."

JT: Did you ever see any of those?

LD: Well, every now and then I would get a note, as to why we didn't cover this or didn't cover that. And the reason is that Mr. Heiskell religiously read the *Commercial Appeal*. I don't know if he actually worked the *Commercial Appeal*, I can't remember.* But he would read the *Commercial Appeal* religiously, and if

something appeared in the *Commercial Appeal*, he would want to know, he had just not seen it, he had a secretary that clipped out things, in his paper, he wanted to know why it wasn't done. And a lot of times, we had actually done it and the *Commercial Appeal* had picked it up through wire services. [*J.N. Heiskell, editor of the *Gazette*, began his newspaper career in Knoxville, then moved to the *Commercial Appeal* in Memphis.]

JT: Did people get fired at the *Gazette*?

LD: No.

JT: No?

LD: I don't ever remember any. In fact, one guy was in a witness protection program, or else he was, he was something weird. He got fired when they found out about him. That is the only guy I ever remember getting fired.

JT: Why was that, do you suppose?

LD: Well, I think they recognized that you could make a human error. The reporters were not negligent reporters. They were good reporters, and they got the facts, and they got it spelled right, and they got it in. They were not necessarily the greatest writing in the world, in a lot of cases, but it was old AP writing, which was, you know, get it, get it right, and get it in. I know a lot of times you would have arguments between the copy desk and the desk as to how something should be worded. I remember one time they got in a big fight over whether a weapon used in a holdup of a gambling hall down at Crossett was a Thompson submachine gun or some other kind. It was late at night, and we were trying to

beat a deadline. We didn't have time to go back and determine the exact caliber of the weapon. But there was that type of thing. The copy desk, I could not emphasize more, was a great way of keeping things correct. Those people knew Arkansas; they knew spellings. A lot of them had come up the same route we all did. And so you pretty well felt confident that if you missed some something, that they would pick up on it. I don't remember a lot of errors in the paper at all. Or a lot of stories going haywire.

JT: Did you feel that the tight editing and writing at the *Gazette*, that the paper might have gone overboard on that and squeezed out some of the lighter or more?

LD: No, I never did. I thought it was just a great, well-edited paper and done just right. I don't think editors edited for the sake of correcting copy. I mean, they got it to fit in, and they got it right, and they didn't screw things around like so many editors tend to do in over-editing.

JT: Would you go so far as to say it was more of an editor's paper than a writer's paper?

LD: I would say so at the time, yes. Yes. In other words, today's reporting seems to be something. Not sure what it is today. Sometimes you can't even find what the story is about until you are seven or eight paragraphs or the next page in the story. I mean, the *Gazette* wanted the who, what, when, where, why, and all that sort of thing in the very first paragraph.

JT: No narrative introduction.

LD: No narrative introductions. That came a little bit later. They got a little bit more

lax, but, by and large, and they did not let certain words be used that were of pretty common usage. I am not talking about curse words or anything like that. And I can't remember what some of those words were. But you never split an infinitive. That was a no-no from the word go. Never split an infinitive, because it would be caught in a New York minute.

JT: Was there a bias toward hard news and against feature writing?

LD: I just think it wasn't done at the time when I came there in the '50s. I just don't think it was done. Features went to another section of the paper. It was not even necessarily in the news room. Features were like the Sunday feature magazine or society or wherever they did features. But they just, there wasn't just a lot of features done at that time. Your news staffs weren't that big, and we were still doing AP — get it in and get it right and get it out. So that is what it amounted to. Although we did begin to do a little more feature writing. I think one of the first real pieces of feature writing was a news feature, I am trying to think if I am right here. Of course, you know, like when the airplane blew up over Little Rock, there were some news featuring of how people saw it. Everybody seemed to have seen it, and what they did, a lot of that sort of thing. I think some of the real first news features was when Foreman sent me out to cover the panther, the Clarksville panther. Which there was a mountain lion on the, or a puma, on the loose up there, and so I went and chased the mountain lion. We did a lot of good news features on that one. And then I chased Joe Hildebrand, the Outlaw of the Ozarks, did a bunch of features on that. Those were among the first of the news

features that were done.

JT: What was that last one? Who?

LD: Joe Hildebrand.

JT: Joe Hildebrand was a?

LD: The Outlaw of the Ozarks.

JT: And he was a prisoner in a jail?

LD: Well, what he was, it was an old mountain family that lived up above Dover, on the mountainside. I think it is up above where Leland DuVall lived. Booger Hollow. He lived up, actually, I guess, you would call it Booger Hollow. And he had been down in the jail for various and sundry reasons. I think he held up some people on the highway, you know, on an overlook up there, and he was just kind of a wild kid, nineteen. He was down there in the prison farm, and he would just get out every now and then, and they would catch him and send him back to prison. Well, he got out one time on a furlough to go home and see his sick daddy and got in some sort of trouble with a branch of the family and ran off with his wife's cousin, or something like that. And Joe just didn't realize it was time for him to go back to the prison, so they wandered around through the Ozarks at the time and created this, and made a national figure out of him. They had cops and helicopters and dogs chasing him all over the place, and he really wasn't running. He was just wandering around up in the hills where he was home. It got to be a real, it was a front page story. They finally caught him and sent him back down to the farm. We did news features on him. I remember one of them, we

had. I found his girlfriend. One of the times he broke loose, his girlfriend was picking peaches up on Johnson Mountain, which is down below Booger Hollow, and they got a great picture of her up in the peach tree. And I asked her, "You know where Joe is?" She said, "He might be right behind you." I said, "Why?" She said, "Because he might be gonna smoke you down." I said, "Well, tell him not to," being that we got this great picture of her up in the tree, silhouetted against the sun. "Frances Picks Peaches While Joe Roams the Ozarks." That was his girlfriend's name, Frances.

JT: Well, was that?

LD: That was Foreman's idea was to, and Nelson liked it, so we began to do more of it. As staff picked up, everybody else started doing some more of it.

JT: I was wondering if there was any bias among the staff against change. I mean, was there a feeling that the *Gazette* was more or less perfect and there was no reason to fiddle with it too much?

LD: No, it was just that whatever was done should be kept as tight as the *Gazette* was making a tightly edited paper, that you could pretty well do what you wanted to do as long as it was not wasted words and wasted space. One thing is, there was great camaraderie during those days, because of all the adversity out there toward the *Gazette*, and so we all kind of ran together as a pack, lot of visiting back and forth amongst families and people, and we would go out and eat together. There was a lot of people coming through that time that came, great, well-known names in the business, and I suspect you already have all that, like Gene Foreman and

Bill Whitworth and Buddy Portis and people like that. Ray Moseley, all those names that went on to become. Let's see, was Ronnie Farrar in that group? Who became the head of the Journalism Department down at Texas? I think he was in that crew about that time, too. Charlie Allbright, Richard Allin came aboard about that time.

JT: Would you say a lot of newspapers are like that anyway, but that it was especially true at the *Gazette* because of how the paper was regarded by outsiders?

LD: Oh, I think a lot of people were coming in. There was a kind of sense of change in Arkansas at the same time. That was up until the late 1950s or mid-1950s, people tended to graduate from schools in Arkansas and then head south to Dallas, Houston, St. Louis, New Orleans, so forth. And by this time, people were looking for a place to, so they could stay home, and the *Gazette*, of course, becoming one of the great newspapers in the country, attracted them, good reporters and good writers. So I think that had a lot to do it. I mean, a lot of them wanted to get in there and fight the good fight, as Mr. Heiskell said. But they were, like I say, there was a lot of camaraderie in there, lot of good working together, never did have much turmoil in the news room itself. Everybody worked together. Something happened, everybody would pitch in, big storms.

JT: Was there any notable confrontations over the years?

LD: Oh, yes, I mean, you have always got the great, who was it, uh, it happened right before I came there, that a new reporter smarted off one time too many to a city editor and just got pounded. Are you talking about confrontations within the

news room?

JT: Yes.

LD: Yes. There would be some pretty good shouting matches, but it didn't amount to much.

JT: In the end, it was only that. Just an isolated incident.

LD: Yes, just an isolated incident. Nobody even thought about it fifteen minutes after it happened. Oh, you know, you have heard all the fun stories, probably, about the . . . this doesn't have much to do with news coverage, it was just news room incidents . . . they rigged this kind of strange gizmo that moved copy from the copy desk to the back shop. Has anybody talked about this one? It is a wonder that everybody hasn't brought this one up, because this is one of the grand things people remember. It was, that is the best you could call it, was a contraption, because what it was, it was done with pipes and a belt. And it ran from the copy desk up a pole to the ceiling, and then it traveled across the ceiling and then back to another copy desk back in sports, and it was still traveling around. It made more noise, and then, somehow or another, it would go over the wall, back into the back shop and drop off in a basket back there. This was copy. Instead of having copy boys running, they would stick it on this gizmo. The thing never worked right, and paper copy was always falling off here, falling off there, and, eventually, when they changed the news room, incidentally, when they did some redecorating, they found about half the copy had fallen down in the wall itself. So it never got into the back shop. But anyway, the one great story is a guy in the,

copy editor named Ray Kornegay, and he was just sitting right next to that thing, and it made more noise, [imitated noises here]. And one day the belt had split or something, it was making more flapping noise than usual, and Kornegay was one of these guys who was always cutting apples, you know, eating an apple, cutting an apple, slicing it. And he just couldn't take it any more, so he just went nuts and just cut the belt. And ended that thing. And everybody just applauded. Ray Kornegay.

JT: Talk a little bit more about the news room. Was it, what was the atmosphere?

LD: It was fun. It was a wild place.

JT: Some practical jokes?

LD: Always practical jokes going on.

JT: Every day?

LD: Every day. All the time. Lot of repartee crossing.

JT: Can you give me an example of anything?

LD: I am trying to think if I can give you some examples that can be used. It would get pretty rough. My brain will have to circulate on that one a little bit. They were always doing practical jokes on each other.

JT: I want to mention some names, and if there was, you could talk about their strengths and their weaknesses. What about Mr. Heiskell? What was his strength?

LD: Well, he was a figurehead and a very erudite fellow, you know. Everybody admired him. Could write great notes. It was worth getting a note from him, just

to have him write about it. And people like Shelton and Jerry Jones can probably remember his notes better than I can. But anyway, he was a noble figure. Everybody admired him and, of course, he was known as Mr. J. N., and he would come by and talk to you. He was friendly with the staff, but, by and large, the news room kept everybody who had no connection to the news room out of the news room, even the editorial staff. Of course, Mr. J.N. could walk in if he wanted to. But I can remember one instance where the comptroller from downstairs, no, it was the general manager of the paper, tried to come upstairs and put some notices of some sort about something on our bulletin board, and old A.R. came storming out of that little corner office of his and ripped those notes down and crammed them in that guy's hand and said, "Don't you ever come on this floor with notes again." He was that type.

JT: Who was this poor fellow?

LD: Well, he was the general manager of the paper. Worked downstairs. But he just wasn't thinking when he did it, because normally it wasn't his thing to do that.

JT: Do you remember his name?

LD: Yes. Jim Williamson.

JT: Jimmy Williamson? Oh, okay.

LD: Who was a big man, and I don't know why Williamson, I'm sure it was Jim Williamson, though it was somebody from downstairs in a position that should have known better than to go up and put a note on the bulletin board. It was a pretty innocuous note. It was just that they were not supposed to come up on the

news room floor.

JT: What about any weaknesses, as far as Heiskell was concerned?

LD: Well, there was always some question about who really made the stand that the *Gazette* took on Central High. And that is back in editorial, and I am sure the editorial people can remember that, since I was not part of it. But there is some question as to whether Mr. Heiskell really, whether he was the one that set that direction or whether it was somebody else and he didn't go along with it for a while or something. I don't know. People from back in editorial would know that.

JT: In your mind, was he a satisfactory in his role as owner, major owner of the paper?

LD: No question.

JT: Did he fulfill that in a way that you thought was [?]?

LD: Oh, well, I think that is what made the *Gazette* the *Gazette*, because the man was such a great figure. I was going to say character, but he really wasn't a character. He was just a very noble fellow who had great grit and humor and could make great speeches and write great notes and pretty well. I think it was in one of those, was it A.J. Liebling's book, where he uses the term "J.N. Heiskell and his band of Merry Men" or something where Mr. J.N. just turned loose and said, "You all cover the news. That is your job. My job is to own the paper and your job is to cover the news."

JT: And was that true? He was hands off?

LD: Yes. Yes, he was hands off.

JT: Except for elements of style.

LD: He was big on style and grammar.

JT: And propriety?

LD: And propriety. Quite a bit on propriety. I mean, propriety as far as news, because that was my baby. That staff did not have a lot of propriety. They were wild people. I mean, I can remember some wild stunts they pulled in the news room.

JT: Can you give an example of any of them?

LD: Well, I can remember one time, in fact, this would be, this was in the days when the Arkansas Power and Light Company and the Arkansas Electric Co-ops and so forth, as you remember, used to give these great Christmas parties. And one of the best ones was the AP&L party down at the Lafayette, and they would have Betty Fowler on piano and shrimp. Of course, those news room characters would go anywhere where there was food, free food and booze. Lot of booze. And, of course, it went on way into the night, because they tried to let everybody, including, at that time, a lot of people worked, in the news room, worked late into the night to get the paper out. And I can remember standing there, and, once again, Nelson, we were standing there, just overlooking the party, and Nelson said, "Leroy." Nelson has always been this head nod. And he would say, "Would you run back down to the paper?" The hotel is, what, two blocks from the *Gazette*? "Would you run back down to the paper and see who is in the news room?" And I said, "Sure." I went back there. There was one poor old, this was

on a Christmas, one poor old soul was in there, editing the whole paper, laying it out, and I went back and I told Nelson, I said, "Nelson, nobody down there in that news room but Deke Parker. Everybody else is up here." And he said, "Okay. Deke can handle it." But they would stay out late and long. They were big, big boozers.

JT: Hugh Patterson: His strengths?

LD: Well, Hugh was a hail fellow well met. He didn't mess with us. I don't ever remember him messing with the news room. Most of the time he would spend, they all liked the boys to join them for a drink. Harry Ashmore and Nelson particularly liked them to join them at lunch down at the Flaming Arrow or Tom and Andrews or wherever was the popular place to go then. And Hugh would, like, always want the boys to meet him for a cocktail at the country club every now and then or something like that. But he pretty well left the news room itself alone, although he met with the editors, I am sure. Although, I don't remember, I was state editor for a while, and I don't ever remember meeting with him. He would just leave you alone. But he and Ashmore, you would see them coming through, and you would go, oh, Lord, I have got to go out and spend the afternoon having a few toddies with Ashmore and Hugh.

JT: What about Ashmore? Did you know him?

LD: Not well. Just a few times I had drinks with him and Hugh. I didn't really know him. I think he may have even been out of the job at the time I came and was just kind of in an interim situation. I remember him being at the paper, and, of course,

everybody knew him as being the great writer that he was, and he could establish a position of fairness, even though it was a controversial position. He was just a wonderful writer to read, so we all read him very, very carefully.

JT: Did he have any weaknesses that you know about?

LD: I never did know of any. I always thought he was just a hell of a writer and a hell of an editorial page editor. He was very fair, even though he got in, you know, some pretty rough situations, he was a very fair writer. And I think that helps staff. Everything about that paper was to be nonpartisan, to not have any bias, to report the news, and, if you were going to do an editorial, and the editorial, up in the ivory tower, the editorial had to make some sense. It couldn't just be wild-eyed ranting and raving, and I think, once again, that was Mr. Heiskell's hand. He didn't have a lot to do with a lot of daily work at the paper. His was mostly dealing downstairs with the advertisers and that sort of thing.

JT: What about Bob Douglas?

LD: Bob Douglas was a great copy editor and a great slot man, and he was okay as a managing editor. He could have been a lot better.

JT: What were some areas where he could have been better?

LD: Well, he had some personal vendettas that I think he kind of let override his handling of things.

JT: Grudges he had against people on the staff?

LD: Well, it had to do a lot with, of course, Douglas, remember, was a union man.

JT: Oh, yes.

LD: And then when he became editor, managing editor, he was the one who opened up the paper to women and tried to hire minorities and couldn't get, couldn't find any minorities to work. But he did open it to women, because, heretofore, Nelson just didn't. He didn't have anything against women, he just didn't think they really ought to have a bunch of them in the news room. And I think Matilda Tuohey, for a long time, was the only one in there, and then, when you couldn't get reporters, it was hard to find reporters to come to work, he started hiring women. I know Brenda Spillman was one of the early ones and Linda, I can't remember her last name, was one of them. When Douglas came, he really started hiring a lot of them. And he felt they kind of turned on him when they up and then tried to organize the union, organize the union plan.

JT: Was this back in the '40s?

LD: No, the '40s was when he was in the union. That is when he and Martha, his wife, tried to, were in the organization effort.

JT: The guild.

LD: The guild effort.

JT: And that failed after a strike.

LD: Right.

JT: Okay. And then there was another effort in the '60s to do it?

LD: I think it went on into the '70s. It was either in the late '60s or early '70s. I am going to say the '60s, and it failed by, I think, one vote tied it, and at that point, you can't tie and have a guild. You have to have one more, and that tied it, so the

guild never was, just dropped its efforts. He took it personally, that these people that he had helped get into the, he made a great effort to bring aboard, had just turned on him.

JT: And he was, at that time, pro-union or anti-?

LD: Well, being managing editor, he was then anti-.

JT: He was management at that time. Previously, he was pro-union.

LD: Yes. Yes. He was one of the ones in the front lines.

JT: But in this latest, the later organizing incident, he was on the other side and he felt that there was some.

LD: As managing editor, it was his job to do what he could to discourage it.

JT: Yes, okay.

LD: And it was kind of a strange organization situation, because a lot of them, a lot of it was copy boys and kind of strange people to be operating in a news room and to form a guild, when they didn't have much to do with writing.

JT: Bill Shelton.

LD: Well, of course, Bill Shelton was the great stone face. Always liked Shelton. I thought he was a great editor. I mean, if you could get something past him that he didn't just get, I mean, once again, it was the editing of the paper, it was the editors kept it tight and kept it right. And Shelton was one of the best. He was tough, because he was a kind of a quiet, nonsocial guy, he, you know, some of them were kind of afraid of him. But I never did see that, because I knew him outside the news room. You know, he had a real wit about him.

JT: Was he too tough to be a leader?

LD: No, no. He was a good leader. I thought he was good. Anybody worked under him will always tell you that he was one of the best they have ever worked under. As far as covering. I mean, he had everything covered. And then he had it right. And he always had it tight, and he was another wordsmith. We had a lot of wordsmiths that could. But I remember his own writing was kind of a conversational style, which I admired and kind of picked up on after a while. But Shelton, to give you some idea of his personality, he had a crap desk man named Paul Brower, who just would give him mitigated hell. Just was constantly badgering old Shelton, and old Shelton, kind of like a big dog dealing with a pup, used to “Okay, whatever today.” Trying, you know, whop, to keep Brower under control over here. And on Shelton’s birthday, Shelton wore the world’s worst clothes, and there is no question about that. He would show up in some of the ungodliest old, looked like he had been down to the Goodwill or something and got his suits. But, at any rate, one birthday, Brower showed up and gave him all these wonderful presents. And what it was was a pajama top as a dress shirt and some godawful tie and like pink socks, some awful outfit. And, of course, everybody was just howling, laughing over it. Well, Shelton puts it on and wears it very proudly. So we don’t know to this day whether Shelton thought this was a really nice gift or whether he just went along with the joke. I suspect he went along with the joke. But that was the kind of guy Shelton was. But you know, George Fisher has him as the great stone face carved into the side of the

mountain. But he knew [the] business. He was good.

JT: But no perceived weaknesses that you can spot. If there was perfection, he was almost there?

LD: Yes. Yes. He was. Now I can remember when I was state editor, he and I had, it wasn't really a disagreement, it was just that I thought such and such should be covered and he may not have. He tended more toward the hard news, once and awhile. And I was working toward the softer stuff, the more featurey stuff.

JT: Did you have a hard time getting that in the paper sometimes?

LD: No, as a matter of fact, when we started doing it, it seemed to be accepted pretty good. It wasn't, it was just a case of the time had come for it to be done, and, like I say, if I remember right, Foreman was the one who gave the word to go out there and start chasing this stuff. Let's do some more news, as I call them, news features. They weren't really feature pieces, they were news feature pieces. We go on to the next era now, or are we still playing with this one?

JT: Well, we don't have any real rules. I am just mentioning some names here. Larry Obsitnik.

LD: The Chief. The Chief was one of the great characters, and he defined the word character. And, of course, everybody is going to tell you Chief Obsitnik stories. I will give you my favorites.

JT: Being Chief Photographer.

LD: Being Chief Photographer. Of course, there is always the great one of him . . . the photography staff liked to hang out down at Miller's, which was a beer hall just

around the corner. And every now and then, they would kind of miss their assignments, but they usually made it up somehow or another. The Chief, one of the great ones was, he was supposed to get the, capture an eclipse of the moon, I guess. Sun, maybe, whatever it was. Anyway. He was at Miller's, and he kind of missed it, and he got out there, and he didn't see much to it anyway. So he turned in these beautiful photos to Bill Shelton. And Shelton says, "Chief, what are you trying to pull here?" He said it was obvious that what Chief had done was put a coin, he had taken a picture of the moon and put a coin over it and moved it across as if it were the eclipse. But he took it the wrong direction, Chief did. In other words, the eclipse was going left to right and he had moved it right to left or whatever it was. And Shelton knew about it. Chief was a wild man. I remember one time, going down to, we went to Camden for the Doolittle Raiders Reunion.

JT: Do what?

LD: Doolittle Raiders. You know, Colonel, Major Doolittle, whatever he was, that led the raid on Tokyo. This was one of the last ones [i.e., reunions], and they were having it at Camden, where one of the Raiders ran a hotel down there. And that's the reason her was there. Well, it was about the time that there was a lot of controversy involving the bombing of something, and Doolittle was involved, so, of course, it was attracting a lot of media attention. Well, anyway, we get down there and Chief is, we get there early enough that it is too early to really, they haven't really got gathered yet. But they had a cocktail room, and the Chief said, "Well, we can go up and have a cocktail." So we go up to the cocktail room, and

there are a few people up there, and Chief is, has a few cocktails, and he finds one of the, on his way through the lobby of the hotel, he just looked over there and in the news rack was a magazine with something about the Doolittle raid in it. Well, Chief's mind, as weird as it was, started clicking about something, so he grabs the magazine. And he gets in the cocktail room and he finds a guy, one of the waiters, and he says, "You know, I want to get this great picture of you reading this magazine." So he has the guy almost falling out the window, leaning out the window, so he could get this guy above it and reading the magazine. Chief was always wanting, what do you call it, in the heart of the picture, I think that is what he called it. He got on the floor, down on the floor, which he was wont to do frequently, to shoot up to catch the guy in the window reading the magazine. Well, old Maurice Moore, who was state editor over at the *Democrat*, — and we were all big buddies and all traveled together at that time — was kind of a guy, he would go, he just took pictures. He just went click one-two, click one-two, click one-two, click one-two all the way around the room, having no rhyme or reason other than that is just the way you got everything. Well, I looked over there, and here comes old Maurice, click one-two, click one-two. The Chief is down here, doing his arty picture. Old Maurice goes click one-two, just steps all over Chief, never misses his click one-two. And Old Chief was just crumbled by it. And right as Doolittle was arriving, a short time thereafter, and so I think Chief probably popped another couple pops before he went out to the airport. He got out there, and the plane was landing, and they were coming off at the Camden

airfield. And, once again, as Chief was wont to do, he was trying to get a low shot, get low and shoot high, of the general coming down the steps, so he is down there. Of course, by this time, he is drunker than [?], and he just falls over backwards, but he keeps on shooting the camera. Well, all the other photographers from around the state, who were just awed by Chief Obsitnik, the next thing I look, about half of them are on their backs, shooting, because they said, if the Chief did it, I can do it. But anyway, that is one of the Chief Obsitnik stories. Of course, there is the great one of him trying to do the similar thing on a chair in the fancy new board room up at the First Commercial Bank, First National Bank, at the time. The Chief gets up in a chair to shoot this great picture of the board meeting and just falls off backwards and goes through about a three thousand dollar wall, just tears it to bits. And got up and said, "Well, I need to get the picture, you know." That is just the way Chief was. Ooh, he defined the word character, though. He was great.

JT: Leland DuVall.

LD: DuVall saved the Ozarks. Well, I worked closely with DuVall, because eventually I was working the business section. Of course, DuVall was the revered columnist of farm and business, but mostly farm. He was a great believer in having the first draft simple enough but enticing enough to pull you into what would be an otherwise pretty boring story about agriculture. He used the Bible a lot. But he smoked that pipe, which was great, but DuVall looked like your, I mean, he was the archetypal agri writer or agri columnist and looked the part. He

was from Booger Hollow, up there where Joe Hildebrand held up the couple. And had a great wit, and I loved his columns. It was hard to change anything he ever wrote, even though I think I was his editor of a sorts at one time. But you really didn't change DuVall's columns, because it was a column thing. But I remember one of the great DuVall stories is, one of them is he wouldn't use a computer when we got computers. He just said he was not going to use a computer, he was going to use his typewriter. They had a hell of a time getting him to use the computers. But DuVall's office was the biggest mess you could find anywhere. It was stacked to the ceiling with pamphlets and publications and papers and stuff. No telling what was in there. But I caught him doing this one time, and he laughed about it. I saw him one day looking up, trying to find, and finally found, something, some pamphlet or booklet or something, and he carefully went around and he stuck it in the middle of this pile over here. I'm going, "What are you doing, just sticking it? You found it. Why are you sticking it in this pile?" And he said, "Watch what happens." Some guy came in and talking to him and DuVall says, "Oh, yes, I think I have got something around here." And he just reaches up out of the pile and pulls out this pamphlet, as if he knew where everything was. Of course, he had set it up. That was DuVall. He had a sense of humor about him.

JT: Ernie Valachovic.

LD: Oh, Doctor Valachovic. Well, when I came in, Valachovic was at the Capitol. And, I mean, he couldn't write a sentence, but he could fair get the news.

Valachovic was another great character, too. He had that, he was from where, Pittsburgh? Philadelphia? He had that accent. He was a great Capitol reporter. I mean, he could get stuff out of that political arena when nobody else could even get near it. And he couldn't write, so it was a great, it was kind of fun to get his stuff, because it was easy, because all his facts were there. Almost everything he got was just beating the tar out of the competition, but he just was not a great writer. And so you did a lot of tightening up his copy or putting it in a sentence form that could be used. He never pretended to be. A lot of times he would just call in notes. I think I'm right there. I remember dealing some with him, and he was easy to deal with because it was all there. It just wasn't in a sequence. Good guy. Of course, he died too early. You remember he worked, he was in the Follies. You remember, that was where he met Betty. [Betty Valachovic, widow of Ernest Valachovic.] Still, she vowed when he died that she would carry on as a member of the cast because he loved the Follies so much.

JT: Follies being the Gridiron show.

LD: Well, it is the satire put on by the journalism group. But he was awfully good. I don't think anybody ever beat him.

JT: Did you, I suppose you were there when attitudes toward the *Gazette* among the people of the state started to change.

LD: Yes. In fact, that is one of the things that Ernie and I did, Ernie Deane and I did, was going out there, and we tried to, we visited as many people as we could. We would go to a town for, like I say, some kind of Rotary Club meeting. We just hit

everything we could, because that is when Ernie wrote about it. Once again, he just wrote about simple things like civic club meetings, threw in a lot of names and kind of did this good old boy look at things, which really, really helped us get back in. And then I began to work with the stringers out there and got so to the point where if you went into a town, they would take you around to lunch and meet people and you would just visit and kind of talk to them and listen to whatever their gripes were. And most times, you would say, "Yes, okay, appreciate your saying that." Pretty soon, it got, we kind of worked our way out of it. There wasn't that great hatred of us like it had been at one time. In fact, some of the arch enemies of the *Gazette*, I utilized . . . quite a bit as news sources.

JT: Can you give me an example of that?

LD: Well, old Jerry J. Screeton, over at Lonoke, he sued the *Gazette* over a report that I still don't, can't forgive the copy desk for the way certain people, for the way they handled that thing and then blamed it on a kid that didn't, wasn't his fault at all.

JT: Is that something you can go into?

LD: I don't think so, particularly because it involved a legal proceeding, but it was just, well, they treated the guy very unfairly about it, [?] it was not his fault. But, you know, you wouldn't necessarily depend on him [i.e., Screeton], but you made enough rapport with him that you could talk to him about things, because he was one of these guys that knew everything in two or three counties, and you could just kind of get a feel of what was going on. But that was the kind of things

we did. And, like I say, I don't think there is a highway or a town in this state that we didn't hit during those years. That was part of it, just to get back and say, "Hey, here's somebody from the *Gazette*, and he isn't half bad." We dealt with a lot of newspaper people out there. They were real good at getting us back into the communities.

JT: So, was that something else that made the *Gazette* special, that it was a statewide paper?

LD: Well, it was a state paper. It was our paper. I think, later on, that is where Gannett made its big mistake, forgetting that it was *our* paper and not Gannett's, and not *their* paper. I mean, whether people liked or didn't like the *Gazette*, it was still *our* paper.

JT: Meaning it was a paper about Arkansas.

LD: It was Arkansans' paper, and they were proud of it, even though they didn't agree with it many times. It was still the paper that they read.

JT: They felt some ownership of it.

LD: They felt some ownership. Now, there was a time there when the, you know, it was almost an understood thing that, no matter where you lived, you were going to have your paper, you know, on your front porch next morning. And I can remember one time, going back into the hills where you can't get there from here. It was down in Madison County in a township or a section or something that I mean, we had to go ungodly roads back in there and got in there about midmorning and pulled up to the general store in the middle of the little old

community, there was your morning *Gazettes*. Right there on the rack. Ready to go for the day. And how they got back in there, I will never know, but there they were. Being state editor, I had to deal with this a lot, but most people didn't realize that one time the *Gazette* had the largest trucking operation in the state of Arkansas, because they had to move those papers every morning.

JT: They owned their own fleet?

LD: Yes. Had their own fleet. I don't think they did a lot of contracting at that time. As you know, there is some kind of legalistic situation there, where you contract rather than own, but they had their own fleet, yes, at one time. That was so they could get those papers all over that state in the morning. That has always been one of the *Gazette's* problems — it was a state, quote, paper, so that meant that it got to Springdale, and it got to Eudora, and it got to Texarkana, and it got to Blytheville every day, and that is a lot of area to cover.

JT: And it got there in time to be read in the mornings.

LD: Read in the morning, yes. Some of the farflung papers, it was late morning, but, by and large, they had it on that doorstep by 6:30 at the very latest. And they had to do that with a network of truck routes.

JT: Would you consider the *Democrat* your main competition, or did you consider the local papers, or did you consider anybody your competition?

LD: No, really didn't. TV came along, and you wanted to be sure TV didn't beat you on some little something, but I don't think they really felt they had any competition except themselves. In other words, you were your own competition.

JT: Explain that.

LD: Like a track man out there by himself, or a golfer. You are just trying to beat your own score.

JT: Better your score.

LD: Better your score. It was just a case of trying to get in the best deal and getting it done better. Of course, again, about that time now, you are coming up on some great social changes in Arkansas. Prison reform, Rockefeller, the gambling situation, the end of the Faubus era, oh, civil rights. Lot of things happening in Arkansas. Arkansas was, and I guess still is, one of the great news states in the country, because we used to train for every newspaper and publication in the world back there in those days. And they just said, "We just can't believe that so much news comes out of one little old state." And it was fun stuff. They would let us screen at the time who could do it.

JT: Was that true? Was there an abnormal amount of news or was it the fact that the *Gazette* was alert?

LD: The *Gazette* was alert. And our networks just covered it like the dew, and we spent a lot of time on phones, and the *Gazette* could spot a news story when nobody else could see it.

JT: Got an example of that?

LD: I am trying to think. Jimmy Jones and Mike Trimble were great at doing that here in Little Rock. I mean, they could take the acquisition of an aardvark at the zoo and turn it into a big news story, somehow or another. Or, we could get the, I

guess a lot of it was institutional memory, because so many people at the *Gazette* had been there and they could remember things. So we could tie one thing into another. I am trying to, the prison situation. For instance, we got when Rockefeller was going to commute the sentences, he was going to drop the sentence from death sentences to life for those people on Death Row. We got to get in and stay on Death Row when it happened. It was that type of thing, and a lot of other papers wouldn't have been able to do it. We had cultivated. But the paper could spot a good news story. I guess, once again, who is your competition? Your competition is yourself, spotting, getting the news story.

JT: How about the *Commercial Appeal*? Was it any factor at all?

LD: No. Only factor is was was that was the paper that Mr. Heiskell read. He would come around and want to know why we didn't have this piece that *the Commercial Appeal* had, and we had already had it the day before.

JT: Talk about the sale of the paper to Gannett. Were you surprised that it happened?

LD: To Gannett? No, not really. No, because Hugh had said that if, he said that they couldn't keep the paper going like it was, and he had said, remember that there was a suit, an antitrust suit, and he had said, "If we don't win the antitrust suit, I am going to sell the paper."

JT: He did say that?

LD: Yes. And I think two or three times, and so I remember that we would look up every now and then and there would be some strangers kind of walking through, looking at the news room or something, and we would know those are people . . .

who may be thinking about buying the *Gazette*. And I remember specifically the St. Louis crowd, I can't remember their names, but we actually sold it to Gannett itself. I think we were surprised that it was Gannett that bought it, not somebody else, because Gannett just wasn't the type of company that we would see Hugh as seeing running this paper. Of course, Gannett came in and, once again, made the mistake of trying to, thinking it knew everything and that it, Gannett, owned the paper, when the paper belonged to the state of Arkansas. But Gannett put a lot of money in there, and we all made a lot of money off of them, and they gave us a lot of benefits, so we couldn't holler too loud. But it was a strange operation.

JT: Talk about some of the strangest things that happened. That shocked you or whatever.

LD: They always had meetings. They had meetings to talk about having meetings, and you would look around, and there would be more people in an editors' meeting, than there would be, twice as many people in an editors meeting as there would be reporters out trying to cover things. And there was always, we called it "Gannettoidism," nut graf, which I am not quite sure yet I understand what a nut graf is. All this deal of color and charts and stuff like that. One of the strangest things, like they would send teams out. I remember one instance, that everybody remembers, when Walker Lundy sent a team over to Oklahoma to a church where a kid was cutting up all the time and they were having a big fight in the church as to whether to tell the kid he couldn't come to church. For some reason, we sent a team of people over to Oklahoma to cover this story, which didn't have anything

to do with Arkansas. That was the type thing Gannett did.

JT: Was that because the other Gannett papers were interested in it, probably? Or just because he [Lundy] was interested in it?

LD: I think just because he was interested in it. Or one of the worst was, he was big on movies. For some reason, he just went to every movie there ever was. And I think it was the first of the Superman or the Batman movies, I can't remember which one it was that made such a big splash. And he held the presses and had a special reporter staff to go out and cover the . . . first showing in Little Rock, of Batman or whatever it was. I think it was Batman. I mean, it was late at night and everybody was going. You know, it is not like it hadn't been shown before around the country. It was just like, what the hell are you doing out here trying to make a whole page, front page news story about Batman showing? And then he did the one about the flying saucers of north Arkansas, and nobody was ever sure what that was all about.

JT: People were seeing flying saucers?

LD: Saucers. And he did a whole front page story on people seeing flying saucers. It was just out of the blue. It wasn't even during the flying saucer craze.

JT: Well, what was the attitude of the staff?

LD: We were working for a bunch of crazies.

JT: And did people stand up to him and ask him?

LD: Well, we tried, but it was like dealing with Jell-O. Some of them, like Pat Carithers, he really just ate their lunch every time he opened his mouth about

them. He just said, “You know, you all are the biggest bunch of fools we ever ran into in our lives.” They didn’t like any of us. They wanted to get rid of us anyway.

JT: And did they get rid of some people?

LD: They never did make it. They never did get rid of anybody.

JT: And there was just this standoff between the old guard and the Gannett people.

LD: Yes.

JT: Nothing ever got resolved.

LD: No. The Gannett people got run off, and Walker Lundy got run off, but it was strange in there. Of course, David Petty, who by that time had become managing editor or assistant managing editor, anyway, I think by then he was a managing editor. . . . I think David was assistant, and Lundy would try to get him to fire all the old guard, and David wouldn’t do it.

JT: Gannett: It would have been fine with them if David Petty or somebody had gotten rid of all these old *Gazette* [people].

LD: Oh, yes. Yes. Telling about things that Gannett did. . . . One of the things they tried to do was, of course, eliminate the “News in Brief” column . . . , which is the *Gazette* . . .

JT: . . . signature.

LD: Signature.

JT: On the front page, a column of news briefs on the front page.

LD: And another thing they tried to get rid of . . . they wanted to know why we ran the

river and tributaries report. Carrick [Patterson] wrote this wonderful letter to them. It is still in existence, wherever it is. It was just witty, but it explained to them, you are a bunch of dummies if you don't realize that this is an agricultural state, and farmers depend on how high the streams are. It has a lot to do with what they can do in their crops. Or where they can go fishing.

JT: But Gannett did bring in people who were friendly to their way of doing things. Is that right?

LD: Yes, except it turns out that Gannett people just were constantly battling with each other, backstabbing, and, apparently, this is the way that what's-his-name wanted them to be. What I am trying to say, the guy . . .

JT: Al Neuharth?

LD: Al Neuharth. That is the way he wanted them to be, was backstabbing and conniving and doing each other in, because the stronger one wound up being the victor and the best. But we would just kind of back off and looking at them, going, "Golly, what are they doing to each other?" It was strange. Just one big conspiracy after another. I mean, I can remember many times [it] being said, "Now, I am going to do this," and one of the editors they brought it saying it about another editor. It was just a constant conspiracy. I have never seen a paper operate like that. They no more had any concern about the state of Arkansas than the man in the moon. They just said, "Well, this is the way we are going to put out this paper. And that is the way it is going to be."

JT: They had a formula that had worked elsewhere,

LD: Apparently.

JT: and they thought it would work here.

LD: Right. It just didn't, but we could see that coming. You couldn't explain to them that the paper belonged to the state. And you can't do that. You can't just tell them, this is what you are going to want and we are going to cram it down your throat. As you all did in the [Farkleberry Follies] skit to that old geezer.

JT: So, talk about the end days of the *Gazette*, when it came to an end.

LD: Well, the . . .

JT: Was this a surprise?

LD: Yes and no. If you remember, the news that it was going to be sold to the *Democrat* was broken by Channel 11, one of the TV stations, who had, allegedly, picked it up from a circulation director at the *Democrat*, to be prepared to start handling a bigger volume of paper, because they were going to buy the *Gazette*. So, we had that. And then a lot of people who look at, study that sort of thing, was saying, "There is no way the *Gazette* can continue without the Dillard's advertising," and all that sort of thing. And, you know, it wasn't just Dillard's pulling out, it was the fact that banks were merging, so, instead of four or five strong banks making a lot of advertising, it wound up just a couple banks . . . doing a lot of advertising. S & Ls were falling by the wayside right and left, and they would be advertisers. Retail stores were pulling back. So, it was just a case of the town wasn't going to be able to . . . support two papers on what was left out there.

JT: So you think partly it was the economics of the times that led to it as well as . . .

LD: . . . certain arrogance at the Gannett *Gazette*. I mean, those guys wouldn't even come out to meet a public figure who would come up to see them. They never went to any kind of civic club meetings. They just, it was like this is not our deal. We are here to put out a Gannett paper, and that does not include getting out and meeting the public. Of course, by then, Starr [John Starr, managing editor of the *Arkansas Democrat*] and his crowd had realized what was going on, so they were taking every advantage to capitalize on it. But probably the best thing, the smartest thing they did was do that free classifieds, and, of course, Hugh just would not hear of that. That just wasn't going to happen.

JT: Well, did you get a lot of, did you get any calls from readers about the paper and why things had changed so much?

LD: Well, . . . I don't know whether Gannett was that bad. I don't know that we had become a quote "Gannettoid" paper or so forth. I think the public had just perceived that that was what was happening. And they were still going to buy the *Gazette*. It was just a case of the advertising account was going down. I mean, one of the dumbest things I ever heard of, and I don't know this for a fact, but I have been told, was when the advertising director back in those early days kicked the Wal-Mart inserts off the dock.

JT: Well, why did he do that?

LD: Well, you remember, at that time, what he did is they sent out the Wal-Mart inserts, and they would have an insert for *Arkansas Gazette*, *Arkansas Democrat*,

Cabot, Blytheville, etcetera. Well, I think it was Louis Munos that said, “We are not going to permit that. You are going to have to say insert for *Arkansas Gazette*. And that is it.” And so, . . . Wal-Mart would bring them down here and then have to pay . . . I thought it was the *North Little Rock Times*, but maybe it was Bobby Simpson’s paper, press to reprint them.

JT: Oh, wow.

LD: And when they didn’t do it, he kicked them off the dock. You know, it was that type of thing. And, of course, everybody remembers the Dillard situation.

JT: What happened to the Dillard’s advertising?

LD: Well, the story was, originally, that we had run an article that had to do with . . . Hugh Patterson had put together some land over on the river and was selling it to builders. And in the process of doing it, he had to take out a lot of old, scroungy property that was up on the hill, and the *Gazette* wrote a story in one of those weird, regional zoning issues they were putting out at the time, about that this was ‘destruction of Little Rock’s Little Bohemia.’ Anyway, . . . Mr. Dillard got mad about it. But my understanding was that what really happened was that he found out, or somebody at Dillard’s found out, that the *Gazette* was charging them a premium for putting the Dillard’s ads in, even more than it did other, less regular advertisers. That has probably two sides to it. One, they probably, by paying that premium, Dillard’s probably got the best spot in the paper or something like that, so that was a story that I never did quite take.

JT: Dillard’s always had page three of the *Gazette*?

LD: Yes, or whatever it was. I think that is one of the reasons they paid, probably paid premium. I don't even know if they did. That was just one of the stories that went around.

JT: Well, talk about that last day or that last week.

LD: Well, I had been knowing that the sale was coming, because I used to eat lunch with Mr. Witt.

JT: This being Witt Stephens.

LD: Witt Stephens. Who knew, there was nothing in this town or this state that Witt didn't know about. And he had told me something about it the year before and even given me the price on it, but he had said that Walter couldn't raise that money at that time. And then, of course, the price dropped, until Walter was able to make up the difference somehow or another, so he could borrow the money, as I understand. And so, I was aware that this was happening, and particularly because of, Mr. Witt was really worried about where we all were going to go to work afterwards. Because at one time, of course, he was a, had a third ownership in that paper. And so, we were aware of it, and one of the things that, the week before, I had been telling people, said, "If you have got any chance to make a move, or you want to get your resumes together, you better go ahead and get it done now, because any day it is going to close on us." And so, a lot of people were just pulling out copy they had on those machines right and left, to have their copy when the paper shut down.

JT: To have copies of their work?

LD: Of their work, because they didn't want the, if for no other reason, just to keep the *Democrat* from getting it. They just didn't want the *Democrat* to run their copy.

They just hated the *Democrat*.

JT: So they were cutting it out of the computers?

LD: Printing it out and killing it out of the computers. In fact, that is one of the problems that happened was that they, there was so much of that that it got jammed to the point that a lot of people couldn't get their copy out. Because you couldn't get to the printer, because everybody was trying to get their copy out. We just didn't want the *Democrat* to have anything. This was the reporters, some of them didn't care. I just remember that last day. I was writing, I was trying to pull something out, because there was a good series that I was going to try to sell some place else. I didn't care about whether the *Democrat* got it or not. It was just going to be a good enough series that I could sell it to somebody, I thought maybe the *Arkansas Times* or *Business* or somebody. But anyway, I was trying to get my copy out and, all of a sudden, the computer just blanked out and said something like, I want to say it was something like, 'you no longer have access to this computer or this file or whatever.' And at that point, it was like you said, to heck with it. So they all started packing up. A lot of stuff, because of the way it was being done, it was real cold-blooded, so a lot of people were getting their dictionaries out, certain information books they had, that they were just letting the paper use, or they had their own little personal libraries, private libraries. They were getting that stuff out of the building. And, sure enough, because the day that

computer shut down, you looked out the doors, we could look down the street, and saw the *Democrat* people coming over, and, at that point, each one, they had groups at each door and marching to each floor and overseeing that you didn't take anything. Nothing. You couldn't take anything out, whether it was yours or the *Gazette's* or now the *Democrat's*. It was just, they were saying that everything was now ours, and you have to leave this building, and you cannot come back into this building. And the next day, they let us back in with a, quote, guard, which was just somebody from the *Democrat*, which would walk with you to your desk, help you get your stuff out of your desk and put it in a cardboard box and leave. But I remember that afternoon, it was early in the afternoon, I will bet it was probably maybe even around one o'clock, that the computers went down, and everybody knew then that the *Democrat* had bought it, and we had to wait. We were kind of waiting around for them to come over, because they said there would be a meeting in an hour or so forth. And the meeting didn't come about, so people were beginning to get fidgety, and a lot of them went out and got beer and some booze and, you know, just said, "Well, we can't put out a paper. We might as well just kind of sit around and enjoy this." Some of them got kind of drunk.

JT: This was a Friday afternoon?

LD: It was, what was it? Thursday? I think it was the eighteenth, wasn't it? '91? October 18th. It was either October 18th or 19th, I can't remember which one.

JT: So you were just waiting for the axe to fall, but it wouldn't fall.

LD: But it wouldn't fall. So they started gathering in the news room, and some of them was getting pretty drunk, and they were getting pretty mean. And they got people to stand up and tell what they could recall about their days at the *Gazette*. And, of course, by then, there were so many of them there, their numbers of days was about a week. They hadn't been there that long. And the old guard was just kind of quiet. We had already gotten our stuff out, and we just kind of slipped off into the shadows and went down, went somewhere and drank beer or something. And then Paul Smith came in, and somebody was hollering obscenities at him, and I thought that was pretty stupid.

JT: Paul Smith being the general manager of the *Democrat*.

LD: And, you know, who is as nice a guy as you can meet, and he had all the sympathies for everybody, but he simply explained the very quick situation that the *Gazette* had shut down, the *Democrat* had bought the assets. Said, . . . "That is it. That is all we can tell you." Everybody had to leave, and they were doing, they had to do a lot of stuff to get the people their checks, their pension money, all that sort of thing. And so, but, as I remember, once you were out of the building, you were out of the building. You couldn't get back in. There was a scuffle out in the alley. Some guy from down in advertising, . . . I think he was just a clerk, but he was a real hothead. And he walked out in the alley and some *Democrat* photographer stuck a camera right in his face. And the guy popped him. Popped the photographer. I don't know if anything ever came of it. He wasn't arrested. One of those things. Everybody was mad. But I can remember,

I think it was maybe *Democrat* staff members, management members. It wasn't even staff, it was management, or editors, came in and they stood, walked you up to your desk, and you unloaded what was left in your desk that you wanted, in a cardboard box and carried it out, and that was it. Of course, then they started having some rallies or had begun to have some rallies and stuff, which was kind of, kind of futile. But by then, I looked at it and I said, you know, most of the people who were standing on the platforms, trying to promote buying the *Gazette* and having the employees do a buyout and cursing the *Democrat* and all that sort of stuff. You know, most of these people hadn't been, couldn't be really considered *Gazettters* anyway. Even, you know, even, I guess, Max Brantley was about as near as anybody, and Max was just trying to keep everybody under control. So, some of them were real, kind of foolish, you know. It was done. It was a done deal, and you got beat, that is all there was to it.

JT: But there was a lot of resentment, right?

LD: Well, there were some reporters that were really, really angry and hurt.

JT: How did you feel? Any of you felt that nothing that you could have done personally about it, and so you just accepted it?

LD: Oh, you could have, you could have kidnapped some certain management people at the *Gazette* earlier, early on, and dropped them in the river. Maybe that would have helped. But, no, there was really nothing you could do. The *Gazette* management wasn't listening to what anybody said. They thought they knew. Well, they also, they had the problem of knowing what the finances were, and

what the projected financial situation would be, and they had to do something. It just wasn't there. The money just wasn't there. And it was too late to try to bring people back in as advertisers, because they just didn't exist any more. Grocery stores, you know, had failed, so, the ad revenue just wasn't there any more. I had kept some friendships at the *Democrat*, so I didn't, I didn't think there was any use even of being angry about it. I just thought it was kind of foolish, really, that the *Gazette* people get out there and be such great boosters of the paper. Most of the old guard just kind of slipped away. Just kind of folded their tents and said 'adios.'

JT: Did you have any, probably said earlier, maybe, that you and others were a little bit surprised that the paper was sold to Gannett.

LD: Gannett. Because that was not the type of newspaper operation that Hugh Patterson or the Heiskell family was identified with. I mean, Gannett being the more, Gannett being Gannett.

JT: Ever since the creation of *USA Today* and that type of newspaper.

LD: Yes, yes, right.

JT: It was almost an antithesis of what the *Arkansas Gazette* was, right?

LD: Right. Right.

JT: Or was it?

LD: Yes, it was.

JT: And so, a little bit of the fault has to be borne by the Pattersons?

LD: Management. I would think so.

JT: That their selection was not the best.

LD: It may have been the only, it may have been the only. By that time, see, the paper was losing a lot of money.

JT: Yes.

LD: And there was a big debt there. And it may have been Gannett was the only one that could have taken it over.

JT: I see.

LD: It was just not the type of operation that we thought the Pattersons or the family would, wanted for their paper. But, I mean, they came in, if you remember, Gannett came in and said, "We are going to infuse everything it takes to win this newspaper war. All the money it takes."

JT: And that got a big . . .

LD: Well, see, that didn't go over good with the state of Arkansas at that point. Then it made Walter Hussman the underdog, and he played that role *real* good. But, at that point, the *Democrat* was doing nothing but attacking them. One of the things I remember about that situation was, was that I was working the business section and covering media, so the newspaper war fell under that category . . . Something would happen like, I don't know, I think maybe one thing was the *Democrat* jumped out, kind of, on Sunday circulation. And if you will remember, they threw a big party down there. But anyway, I went to write the story, and all the *Democrat* people were very up front about it, and said, yes, and we are proud, and this is what we are trying to do, this gives us a jump. The *Gazette* people were

just trying to weave some kind of, trying to do a spin doctor business. And, as a result, no matter what I wrote to try to be fair and news, straight news, it wound up being some ungodly story that I had no idea who wrote it.

JT: Really?

LD: So I finally quit. I just said, "I am not writing it any more. You all can write it from . . ."

JT: You quit trying to cover the newspaper war?

LD: I said, "I am not covering it any more." Because I just thought the way it was being done was terribly unprofessional. But they said, this is a do-or-die type thing, and I said, "Well, then you all do it. I am not doing it."

JT: And who did you say that to?

LD: I think maybe I just told Jim Hopkins, who I think was business editor at the time. I just said, "Jim, this, this is not right, making me do this." They pretty well agreed it wasn't fair. Because I remember going in there one time to the 'last of the Moe Hickeys,' who was the editor sent in to close the paper down, that was his specialty. What was his name? Moe Hickey. We called him 'the last of the Moe Hickeys,' that is all I can remember. And he said, "How are you going to spin this one today?" And I said, "I, I just, I don't know how. I am just not going to do it." And he wasn't saying you got to do it. He was just kind of laughing about it. It was at that point that I said, "No. If you are not going to do it straight, don't do it. Let's don't do it."

JT: Want to get into any other areas? I mean, was there something that you wanted to

talk about that we didn't talk about?

LD: Well, except we didn't get into how strong we covered the state during the great social upheavals, and that came from the fact that we had such a strong base from city side and Capitol beat reporting, and then the state desk came into its own as a strong, strong desk with tentacles everywhere. And a staff. Finally had a staff to do it. State desk staff got pretty big. Can't remember what it was, so that when things like the Hot Springs gambling, we could cover it, and we could do the features and the news features and everything on gambling and historical perspective. The same thing with prisons, and we covered all the civil rights out in the state. I mean, we were there for every meeting, every blooming gathering of anything. We covered the Ku Klux Klan gatherings and, oh, SNCC, Core [Congress of Racial Equality], anything that was outside the city of Little Rock, we covered it like a blanket. We were there for everything. Wayne Jordan played a bit role in that. We sent him everywhere, because he was connected with both sides, seemed like. So we were able to really do a good, solid job on covering that type of thing, because we had a good base to start off with.

JT: And so, what happened to that, to that state desk operation when Gannett came in? Was it cut back? Or was it de-emphasized?

LD: It had begun to change, even before Gannett came in. Without mentioning names, the network had pretty well been destroyed, simply because the state editor didn't, didn't, didn't get along, for some reason, with the stringers, who he thought ought to be like bureaus. He wanted bureaus instead of stringers. And he got a little bit

of some bureau operation, but it wasn't enough to really take care of the state. In other words, the little stuff started getting missed, but, you know, you swap one thing for another. He was swapping more professionalism for just the feel of what was going on. But the state desk, nothing, nothing got by the state desk there for years.

JT: But eventually, it did.

LD: Yes.

JT: Yes.

LD: Simply because it couldn't keep up with what was going on around. We didn't have enough contact. I don't know why. They didn't want to do it. I guess every state editor to his own.

JT: What else did we not get into?

LD: I am trying to think.

JT: What about after hours stuff? Parties?

LD: They did a lot of that, too. And it was a lot of, they had the party crowd, and, of course, Hugh was a big partier, and, a lot of times, they would wind up at Hugh's house, much to Mrs. Patterson's chagrin, because she would have to go in and either tell them to go home or tell them to go find a couch to sleep on. They did a lot of running around together. They had a lot of parties at each other's house.

JT: Did that continue during the Gannett years, or did that stop then?

LD: No, by then, some of the new people coming in, and the younger people, doing their own thing. I don't know what they did. I am sure they did, but the old

guard had begun to go their different ways, so, you know, that kind of ended that. You didn't have the crew that would sit on the bar at the Officers' Club every afternoon any more and solve the problems of the world. There was no more of those gatherings led by A.R. Nelson.

JT: Every afternoon?

LD: Every afternoon.

JT: He would hold forth at the Officers' Club, which was across the?

LD: Yes, back, a couple of blocks away, back in the warehouse district. One of the reasons for that was he and Jerry Neil, who was an editorial writer, they would catch a cab home. I think neither one of them liked to drive, and either somebody from the paper who was going that way would be with them, or else they would wait over at the officers' club for a cab to come get them to take them home. They lived in the same neighborhood. So they would go over there, and, of course, that got started. Then news room staff, as they got off work, they would wander over and, pretty soon, the whole length of the bar would be *Gazette* folks. I am trying to think if there was. Like I say, by the end , everybody was kind of going their own way. We couldn't be the party boys forever. Fact is, one group we had that covered Central High included Jerry Dhonau and Jerry Jones and, I think Ray Moseley was among them, a couple of others that lived in a house right across from Central High, and that was kind of a headquarters, because they could see everything that was going on at Central High. And other news people would come into town would stay over there, too. I am going to say them they called

them ‘the party boys’ or ‘the jolly boys.’ I think it was ‘the jolly boys.’ Jerry Jones can remember that one.

JT: What was the attitude of the *Gazette* crowd toward outsiders? Were they pretty clannish? Was there any animosity toward outsiders?

LD: I don’t really recall that there was a lot of animosity. Just don’t forget, the *Gazette* was pretty much held in awe by everybody during those years. So if somebody came in from outside, it was kind of like, ‘oh, man, can I even sit at this, in the same room with these people?’ They were just ordinary people, and so, they didn’t care. They weren’t being clannish. It was just because they worked for the *Gazette*, they were considered out of reach or something, I don’t know, which really wasn’t the case.

JT: Yes.

LD: As I remember, there was a lot of cross friendship, crossover, with the *Democrat* people, for a while there anyway. I don’t ever remember having any controversy with, when I was state editor, with even any of the state editors. We traveled together, as a matter of fact. We would go cover things together. Because we were on different time zones and time periods, and so it didn’t really matter.

JT: Yes. Okay, getting back to our first thing we talked about, about what made the *Gazette* special. I know you talked about the statewide news coverage, the tight editing.

LD: I think it basically, in the first place, it was the fact that the *Gazette* was the paper of record. That it was a chronicle. And that was drummed into your skull from

the minute you got there, that this is history. What you write is history, and this is the way it is. Because, you remember, there was a time that the *Gazette*'s feeling was, if it came in by packet boat and was two weeks later, it wasn't news until the *Gazette* printed it. And so, that is the way it was a lot, and then, you had the people in there who were, like Shelton, Jim Clark and Mr. J.N. and A.R. Nelson, who were real wordsmiths and knew the English language and grammar backwards and forwards. And you rarely, rarely saw, ever saw a punctuation mistake or a grammatical mistake in the *Gazette*. And I am talking about, when I say grammatical mistake, I am talking about no split infinitives, I remember that was the thing. Prepositions were used properly. Every rule of, it wasn't necessarily the AP Style Book, but every rule of grammar and punctuation and spelling was closely adhered to.

JT: I don't mean to lead the interview, I am not supposed to, but did the fact that the *Gazette* paid a lot of attention to little things, what effect did that have on the big things? I mean, was that the very? I mean, if you are going to get the little things, if you are going to get the grammar, the facts, the punctuation, the spelling right, did that mean you were going to get everything right? I mean, there was a real focus on accuracy.

LD: Well, there was a real focus on accuracy, but, like you say, that would include everything, from the right place to put a semicolon to the fact. Gathering the fact and having a complete piece of information. That is what I say is, I think one leaked over into the other and vice versa. As you moved through the paper, and

as you became more of a writer or an editor, of sorts, the accuracy situation was it. Like I say, it was a chronicle, and so, you know, historical fact, and so, you had to have it right. You wanted to have it right.

JT: And that was emphasized.

LD: That was emphasized. And, after a while, you know, you would be like, for instance, Nelson saying, "I can cut one word out of every ten words you write." It became a challenge to try to beat Nelson. But I think the public, that is one of the things the public always says about the *Gazette* was it was such a well written, well designed paper. And that was the way, as I remember, even when I came up there. That was it. If you wrote for the paper, you were going to learn how to write. Not the writing, what we call writing today, but I am talking about writing, get the facts, get it simple, keep it right and get it in and leave it.

JT: Well, maybe the *Gazette* was special because it was old, too.

LD: Oh, yes.

JT: It was such a tradition.

LD: Generally venerated. I mean, when you walk down that hallway with all those Pulitzer Prize plaques and things stuck up on the wall and the old printing press and all the pictures of the grand old men looking down at you, it was quite impressive. And I understand that the building has been redone like that. That it has that impressive hallway. Now whether, I am sure the *Gazette* stuff isn't in there, because it went to either the Little Rock Library, I mean, UALR or to the *Democrat* guy. They got the big redneck populace rug that hung on the wall that

now hangs in the *Democrat-Gazette* news room.

JT: Any particular stories you wanted to recall that you worked on that you thought said something about the *Gazette* or what made it special and the way anything was handled?

LD: Well, we just did a good job of getting it all in there and getting it right. There was a lot of things that happened during those years, and I am talking about the '50s, '60s and on into the '70s. You had a good staff, and they could get it. They went out there and got it, and they got it right. But I still, the one deal is that the *Gazette* was tight. The writing was tight. The whole thing was just . . . in fact, when I went there, I was told that the *Gazette* could be used as a textbook in schools that had no other books. That if you took the *Gazette*, you could learn everything you was supposed to know by reading it.

JT: Really?

LD: Yes. And that was kind of what everybody said — I want to continue that that feel. And I think that goes back to, probably, Mr. Heiskell was the, because he was such a precise writer. And I remember being kind of scared doing the, first doing the sit-in days, sit-in in the first Central High days, and then the civil rights sit-in days and then some other revival of the Ku Klux Klan and the Citizen Council types. Those people are pretty scary.

JT: Was there ever any worry that the *Gazette* might be bombed?

LD: Yes. Oh, yes.

JT: Did that have an effect on anything? Didn't do fire drills or anything, did you?

LD: No. If they are going to bomb us, they can catch us some place. Number one, the structure of the building was such that you didn't worry too much about anything happening, because it is such a massive building.

JT: Access wasn't particularly restricted, was it?

LD: No. No. I guess you could walk up those back stairs and throw a bomb in the news room. The biggest fear was little old ladies with umbrellas that would come in and beat the editor about the head and chest. We never were scared or anything like somebody shooting us up or bombing or something. But we had enough connections . . . that if something were going to happen, we pretty well would, I think we would have been tipped off.

JT: Really?

LD: Yes. Like old Joe Wirges. He knew the criminal element from A to Z, like the old newspaper reporters. They pretty well lived in two worlds. I know we had some guy in Hot Springs that used to call up and want to know if we were ever having any trouble and such and such, and did we want to do anything about it and he would say, "Nope, and I didn't talk to you. You haven't said a word to me."

JT: The *Gazette* was supposed to be a liberal newspaper, but you didn't . . .

LD: There wasn't any question that it was a liberal newspaper in its editorial stance. But I didn't see, liberal and conservative, I mean, it was a liberal Democrat paper. And I don't think they ever said it was otherwise, politically and certain looks at things, you know.

JT: Was it too far to the liberal side?

LD: I don't think so.

JT: Did they lose the support of the readers?

LD: I don't think so. They lost some during the civil thing at Central High, you know. They were down to way low.

JT: What about during Viet Nam?

LD: No. I don't think the loss of readership occurred for any particular reason other than just the economics. I think we lost, rather the *Democrat* gained, readership because of those free classifieds and because they made an effort to get out in the state. Where the *Gazette* was cutting back, the *Democrat* was going out.

JT: I believe when Al Neuharth was here in town recently he said that the mistake that Gannett made, I mean, that what the *Democrat* did that was good was put news in the paper.

LD: Well, he is talking about after Gannett took it over.

JT: Yes.

LD: Yes. That is so, but what he is talking about is the *Democrat* concentrated on getting hard news and a lot of it, where Gannett was trying to do spacey feature stuff.

JT: Soft, soft, soft.

LD: Gannett was going off to north Arkansas to cover people who saw a flying saucer, when there wasn't a story. That's what it was. That is the perception the public got. The *Democrat*, the *Democrat* became, I think, the state's paper.

JT: Really?

LD: I really do, before it was over with. I think the state just didn't even see the *Gazette* as being the state's paper any more after Gannett took it over.

JT: They saw it as some sort of an outside . . .

LD: Being run by some [?] way off somewhere. I think I said that one time in a, when they were doing some taping to have people do TV ads. You know, it was a series they ran, where they would get a reporter or a columnist to kind of sitting there, talking about the *Gazette*, and then they were doing some of the test video. I think one of the questions was, "Well, do you feel the *Gazette* is the state's newspaper?" And I got to saying, "No." I said, "I think that it has let the *Democrat* become the state's newspaper."

JT: This was a tape that was made for a promotional?

LD: Yes. That tape wasn't going to be used for promotion. They were taping to see how would do with it.

JT: On tape.

LD: On tape.

JT: Oh, I see.

LD: Maybe they wanted to use it, but nevertheless, I just said, "Well, you know I am just telling you like I see it, and I deal with the state, and so that is what I see that the perception is out there. That the *Democrat* has become the state paper."

JT: Anything else?

LD: I can't think of anything. We just make a lot of good friends in the journalism

profession during those days.

JT: Okay, well, I do appreciate it very much.

LD: Can you think of anything else you want to know about?

JT: Well, I don't have anything else on my sheet here, really. We can do a follow-up, if you want to. If you want to think for a couple of days, we still have one side of one tape left.

LD: Okay, if you think of anything.

JT: I will be glad to meet with you again, if you want to have another hour. I have got one more hour left on the tape.

[End of Interview]