

Gazette Project

Interview with

Martha Douglas,
Fayetteville, Arkansas,
2 March 2000

Interviewer: Roy Reed

Roy Reed: This is Martha Douglas and Roy Reed, March 2, 2000. Do we have your permission to tape this interview?

Martha Douglas: More or less. More or less.

RR: [Laughs] All right. And when we're finished, I'll ask you to sign this thing here.

MD: Okay.

RR: Start out by filling me in a little bit on your life before the *Gazette*. Start at the beginning.

MD: Well, I was born in Warren, Arkansas; I went to first grade there. My dad was a paper mill installer, and it was during the Depression. And we moved, it seemed to me about every year. And I went to school, I don't know, about eight to ten places, and I loved it.

RR: You liked moving around?

MD: Oh, yes. Met new people, I liked that. And then I ended up — let's see, my grandfather was ill in Warren, so we went back there and I was in junior high there. Well, my mother helped take care of my grandfather, who was dying. I didn't know that at the time. And then after that, my father trained as a barber and we moved to Dewitt where I went to high school and finished high school.

Then I went to, let's see, I went to business school and I worked a year and then went to college in Denton, Texas. TSCW then, TWU now.

RR: Now, what does that stand for?

MD: Texas State College for Women. And then Texas Women's University now. It's now coed.

RR: Denton. That's where Mike Trimble landed up, I believe.

MD: That's right, yes. Bob's had a couple of emails from him.

RR: What year did you get out of college, do you remember?

MD: '47.

RR: Okay. Is that when you came to work for the *Gazette*?

MD: No, I came to the *Gazette* in 1950. After I got out of college, I worked at the *Denton Record-Chronicle*, where Mike is now, for a year for a woman managing editor. And then I worked a year at what they called the News Bureau at TSCW. And then a friend of mine, a former roommate who was from Ohio, and I decided to go get us jobs on the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, but they were having none of it, so we both ended up working in Cleveland at a department store called Halle Brothers.

RR: H-A-L . . . ?

MD: H-A-L-L-E. And she was a floor walker, but I got a job as a secretary to the comptroller. But that didn't go well, so I came back to Arkansas and applied at the *Gazette* and Harry Ashmore was there, and he had me write some stories about integration going on in Arkansas county — well, this was before

integration, but it was — hmm, how would you say it? They were trying to improve the black schools, I think, to avoid integration, so I did some stories on the conditions at this particular black school where all the kids went. Pretty horrible conditions.

RR: Which school was that?

MD: I can't remember the name of it. Near Dewitt. In Arkansas County.

RR: What year are we talking about?

MD: It would've been probably '49 or early '50. Probably 1950. So after that he hired me and I took, or they gave me, the school job.

RR: Covering the schools?

MD: Yes, Sara Murphy had had the job, and she was leaving. I think her mother was ill in Louisiana, and she was leaving, so that's the job I was hired for, which was, you know, it was sort of part time. We had a Sunday page and then you did general assignment otherwise. So that was about a day or a day and a half, and then you covered the school board and that kind of stuff.

RR: Back up a little bit to Denton, Texas. You said you worked for how long down there?

MD: About a year. Well, a year at the paper and then a year at college.

RR: While you were at the paper, you said you worked for a woman managing editor?

MD: Yes.

RR: Tell me about that.

MD: Her name was Elizabeth Hurley. I should have done a little bit more thinking

before we started this interview. She was quite a character. She had a deep scar across her head. She'd walked into an airplane propellor.

RR: Oh, my.

MD: And she was — oh, she had witnessed an execution. She was a great woman, you know, but all business. Little bitty woman, now dead. She was good to work for. She worked us hard, but — actually, I didn't start working on the news side at the beginning. I took a job on the business side just to get my foot in the door, even did switchboard operating. And she knew that I wanted to work on the news side, so one time she gave me an assignment, just to see whether I could write, I guess, about a parade or something. And she thought I did that okay, so as soon as there was an opening, she let me come over and work for her.

RR: Did she have a good news sense?

MD: Oh, yes, she was a fine newspaperwoman.

RR: Do you remember any stories that you covered during that time?

MD: No, not really. It's been too long ago.

RR: Well, you came to the *Gazette* in about '49, you said.

MD: 1950.

RR: '50 and went to work for Ashmore.

MD: Well, he hired me, right.

RR: Who was managing editor at that time?

MD: A.R. Nelson.

RR: Oh, Nelson was already . . . not Count Dew then?

MD: No, no. I just heard stories about Count Dew. I never did know him.

RR: How was Nelson to work for?

MD: Well, you know, I was kind of brash and so I didn't take him very seriously. He was kind of crusty and I think probably he'd pretend being tough. I can remember one time — when I had worked on the paper in college, we would edit galleys and just paste them up, you know — and he saw me doing that and he thought that was the most ridiculous thing he'd ever seen and he told me so. But I just told him, "Well, that's the only way I know how to do it."

RR: I gather it was not Nelson who hired you, but Ashmore.

MD: Ashmore did. I don't know why that worked that way.

RR: Because when I came there, Nelson hired me.

MD: Is that right? I don't know. I don't remember.

RR: Did Nelson ever give you any indication that he saw women in the newsroom in a different way from men?

MD: It was pretty obvious somebody saw it that way because there were only two of us in there.

RR: You and . . .

MD: Matilda.

RR: Matilda Tuohey.

MD: Yes.

RR: I once heard Nelson say that he didn't think the newsroom was any place for a woman. Did you know that he had that attitude?

MD: No. He never said that to me. And I don't think a woman's presence was really a problem for the guys. I mean, I didn't see them necessarily clean up their language or anything. You just learned to close up your ears if anything bothered you. Besides the place was so noisy, you couldn't hear a lot anyway, with all the teletype machines going.

RR: I'm not sure what he had in mind when he said that, but I think he did not really want women reporters.

MD: That's probably right. You know, being a morning paper, you have to go out at night, so, I suppose, maybe that was it. I never did know that he disliked women particularly. I never did have that feeling personally.

RR: But there were two reporters in the newsroom, you and Matilda Tuohey. Were there any other women in the newsroom? On the copy desk or any other job?

MD: No, not that I remember.

RR: I guess it was later that the desk got some women as copy editors?

MD: Yes, a lot later. Maybe Georgia Daily was, maybe, the first woman that I remember on the copy desk.

RR: I guess by the '70s that would have been considered an odd situation not to have any more women than that.

MD: I don't think that they had a heck of a lot of women ever that I can — you know, we had some, but still it was predominantly male. It's changed now.

RR: Yes. Do you remember how you felt about it back then? Not now, but . . .

MD: I didn't even think about it, you know. I just did my job. That's all I figured I

had to do, and that's what I did. It never did occur to me that I was competing with guys. I just knew I was getting paid less.

RR: You were getting paid less?

MD: Oh, yes.

RR: Do you remember . . .

MD: I don't remember any numbers. I just knew, you know, that that was the way it was.

RR: Was that okay?

MD: Well, what could you do?

RR: Of course, it was not just women. There were not any black reporters.

MD: True.

RR: In fact, were there any ethnic minorities in the newsroom at that time?

MD: Not that I recall.

RR: That didn't happen until, well, were you there when the first black reporters were hired?

MD: Hmm. Who would that have been?

RR: It might have been James Meriweather. I think Bob hired Meriweather, didn't he? James Meriweather?

MD: Yes, I was there, yes.

RR: I know I've heard Ozell Sutton talk about the liberal *Arkansas Gazette* and, with some derision, point out that the *Arkansas Democrat* hired him as a black man years before the *Gazette* ever hired . . .

MD: Yes. I was with him on a number of school board stories he would be covering at the same time as I was.

RR: Really? Well, in the beginning, you covered the school stuff, school board meetings and that kind of thing.

MD: Yes.

RR: Were some of the same people involved in the schools then who were still there in '57 when the Central High Crisis came? Of course, Virgil Blossom was not there yet. Do you remember who the superintendent was?

MD: I think, wasn't it Dr. Little?

RR: Dr. Little?

MD: Yes. I don't remember his first name.

RR: How did he feel about the desegregation of the schools or did you know at the time?

MD: I don't recall it ever coming up. I don't remember that that was ever discussed.

RR: What . . . was your next job at the *Gazette* after the school beat?

MD: Well, you know, when I was doing the schools, I did all kinds of general assignment stuff. And then I did a lot of features out at the med center. I was particularly interested in that, and when there was something new and unusual, it was fun, a real fun thing to do. Then, after that — I guess that was when I started the radio and television stuff. I can't remember exactly when that was.

RR: In the early '50s?

MD: No, I think it would've been later. I think it would have been maybe mid-'50s.

Maybe. No, because — let's see — Bob and I were married in 1955, and I was still working in the newsroom then. So it must have been after about '56 probably.

RR: So you spent several years as a reporter before you went on to radio and television.

MD: That's right.

RR: Then you did that how long?

MD: Till I retired.

RR: In what year?

MD: In '83.

RR: And somewhere you picked up a church page, didn't you?

MD: Well, that was part of the school beat. It was church/school.

RR: Oh, church/school. You moved out of the newsroom. . . .

MD: No, I did church/school.

RR: I mean when you did radio and television.

MD: Oh, yes. Well, actually, I did write it in the newsroom for some time.

RR: When you moved into a separate office — as I remember, it was back there between the newsroom and the library?

MD: The newsroom and the library . . . Yes, there was a little office there, yes.

RR: You and Charlie Davis?

MD: Yes, and then we moved, when they did remodeling, we moved further down the hall, near where Mr. Heiskell's office had been.

RR: Now, you and Charlie were kind of office mates for a long time.

MD: Oh, yes, a long time. And I filled in, when he was incapacitated for some reason or another, I would be the one who would have to take care of the magazine section.

RR: That's right, he was doing the Sunday . . .

MD: Sunday mag.

RR: Sunday magazine, yes. What kind of a guy was Charlie?

MD: I'm not really quite sure. He was an affable fellow, but he always seemed to be sort of on the edge, like he was pretty nervous most of the time and kind of worried. I remember he used to carry copy around in his pocket, and I think he would kind of edit it, you know, like maybe at home or something. I don't know. You know he had been a good newspaperman, and this was sort — it was not a good fit for him, the job, I don't think.

RR: You know, I'd forgotten all about that. He'd have copy sticking out of his pocket every time you saw him.

MD: Yes!

RR: I wondered if he ever lost any of it.

MD: I don't know whether he ever lost any. I think he — I don't know, I guess he was afraid things were going to get ahead of him. I don't know why he felt like he had to carry stuff in his pocket all the time.

RR: Charlie, of course, was known for taking a drink, but he was not the only one at the paper. How widespread was boozing . . .

MD: That's not a question I can answer. You mean on the job?

RR: Well, on and off. I can think of a few who did it on the job, but mostly it was . . .

MD: Yes. Well, I think most newspapermen, you know, were not averse to having a drink every now and then, but as far as the heavy drinking, you know, some of it was pretty heavy, yes.

RR: What about the *Gazette* parties, do you remember them?

MD: Well, I remember the parties long ago before Bob and I were married. At Tom and Jane Davis's house, that was the place we partied. Did you ever go there?

RR: I never did. I came too late for Tom and Jane.

MD: Really? I guess you did, that's right.

RR: They had moved to, I remember, Shelton's house and the Obsitniks' and other places.

MD: Well, at one point, the Davises were the only ones who owned a home or house. The rest of us lived in apartments or places that weren't quite appropriate for late-night parties.

RR: Yes.

MD: And they used to start about 10:00, you know, when the first edition was coming out. Some of us would get there a little bit earlier, and people would bring in the first edition and we'd critique it. It was fun. It was a lot of fun. We spent a lot of our time, having a beer and reading the paper and talking about it and saying what should have been done and something that was good; something that wasn't so good.

RR: Yes. Do you remember the parties, not the *Gazette* parties, but the Christmas parties that some of the various companies . . .

MD: Well, I didn't — I went, you know. I went to those, but I did not stay for the singing and the end of the stuff. I mean, you know, I had kids at home and I had to get home to get up the next morning and . . .

RR: You never saw Larry or any of them fall into the tub of beer or anything like that?

MD: Oh, no. I had already gone home.

RR: [Laughs] You make it sound as if you lived a sheltered life, but I . . .

MD: Well, not really, I just was very busy by that time, you know, having kids at home and trying to work at the same time.

RR: How was it when you started having kids? When was — Bruce was the oldest, wasn't he?

MD: Yes, he was born in '57.

RR: Okay.

MD: In April '57 before the . . .

RR: Tell about how you worked around — I assume you took off a certain amount of time.

MD: Only six weeks, which was what we were allowed. I'd have never missed a day beforehand because I always planned to quit and take some time off and it never quite worked out that way. You know, I always had the kids on my own time and that kind of thing.

RR: Yes. But that was *Gazette* policy, six weeks?

MD: Yes, six weeks. I don't know what we got, half pay or something like that. I don't remember what the hospitalization arrangement was at the time.

RR: Were your hours — when you were working as a reporter — do you remember what time you came to work and went home?

MD: Let's see, I think I'd go to work about 10:00 and I'd get off about 8:00, something like that. Would that be right? Maybe it was 6:00.

RR: Of course, those school board meetings would go on . . .

MD: Well, that would be overtime.

RR: I was thinking, driving in, I knew I was going to be a couple of minutes late and it ran through my mind that this is one more thing that's a hangover from working for a morning paper all those years. You can't quite get going in the morning.

MD: That's right.

RR: You don't really wake up really until one or two in the afternoon. But somehow — do you remember how it was, the tempo in the newsroom and how it changed as the day went on?

MD: My most vivid memories are election days, you know, and election nights. It was just organized chaos, as you remember, during elections. Everybody knew what they were supposed to do and you had deadlines and you met all of those. And it was — if somebody from the outside were looking in, they'd think, "This is the most disorganized place I've ever seen in my life," and yet all of us knew exactly what we were supposed to do. It was fun. The next morning was not such fun because if you had to come in to work early, you'd been up a pretty long time. It

was pretty tough.

RR: And the next day with all those tables of votes.

MD: Oh, yes, all the boring stuff, you know, dull, boring stuff.

RR: And then you'd have to analyze it and so forth.

MD: Right.

RR: James Warren, do you remember him on election nights?

MD: Oh, sure. Oh, no – oh, you mean serving food?

RR: Yes, bringing in sandwiches. I never knew where he got them.

MD: They weren't very good either.

RR: No! [Laughs] Do you remember the story, was it being told when you were in the newsroom, about an election night years before when a governor of Arkansas had the presumption to walk upstairs into the newsroom and Fred Heiskell threw him down the stairs?

MD: I never heard that. Well, maybe I did; I don't recall.

RR: It was always told to illustrate the fact that the newsroom was a working place and it was not a town gathering spot as some people would like to have made it and also to illustrate that even the governor couldn't just come barging in uninvited.

MD: Hmm. I like the story, but I don't remember hearing it.

RR: I think it also helped that this particular governor was not well liked by Fred Heiskel and the *Gazette* staff. The ordinary, day-to-day news coverage, how would it — Can you describe a typical day, working as a reporter?

MD: Well, you'd come in whenever you were supposed to and look in your newsroom box, and you would get your assignments for the day, usually, you know, meetings and that sort of thing. In those days, I think we covered everything that moved. Usually, at first, you'd come in and have to go to some luncheon club which was usually pretty deadly. Occasionally, you'd get a good story. Occasionally, there'd be a good speaker, and you'd get a story there.

RR: And free lunch?

MD: Yes, and free lunch, such as it was. And then you would just work through your assignments and get them in as soon as you could.

RR: A lot of it by phone?

MD: A lot of it by phone. Yes, a great deal by phone. Some, you know, you would have to go, but most of it was by telephone.

RR: When did the speed start picking up during the day?

MD: Hmm. I would think mid-afternoon, when . . . the copy started flowing. Back, talking about my earlier work, I also had the federal building beat, I believe, at the same time I was doing the school and the church news. That could be interesting. Again, that news was pretty routine, but occasionally, there would be interesting cases going on.

RR: You mean like a trial?

MD: I didn't cover the trials. I just would cover the, you know, when the cases were filed. And then there would be maybe background that you'd need for those.

RR: Did you talk to lawyers and people like that?

MD: Just by phone, just to get them to explain what all the mumbo-jumbo meant.

RR: Yes, I can remember the challenge of trying to turn a legal brief into English.

MD: [Laughs]

RR: And then the first-edition deadline, do you remember when it was in those days, in the early '50s?

MD: Not really. I just — they kept moving it back, I remember, and making you get your copy in earlier and earlier. That's all I remember.

RR: It seems to me it was seven o'clock when I went to work there.

MD: Yes, I think it was maybe eight in the beginning and then, probably by the time you got there, it was seven.

RR: I've never understood why, as technology improved to enable a newspaper to work and faster and better, they had to keep getting our copy earlier and earlier in the day. Do you understand . . . ?

MD: Well, back in those days, the technology was still the same old linotype stuff, you know. There was just an enormous bottleneck. Copy would pile up in the composing room; they just couldn't get it set. And I think that was part of the reason that they had to keep pushing our deadlines forward.

RR: Did it have something to do with the various editions that went to different parts of the state?

MD: I don't know. I don't know anything much about circulation.

RR: The first edition, I always thought, was for the far-reaching ends of the state.

MD: Well, yes, and it was always pretty sloppy.

RR: I remember hearing it said, well, I think from your husband one time, that the first edition of the *Arkansas Gazette* could get itself out.

MD: [Laughs]

RR: The second edition might be a little more problematic. Mistakes were something we all dreaded. Do you remember what it felt like to make a mistake? Or did you ever make any?

MD: [Laughs] Oh, I certainly made them! Well, embarrassing, I would think, was the most terrible thing, but as you know the big problem, you'd find an error, maybe in a galley proof or even on a page proof. You'd correct it, but then another error would be made in the corrected line, so it was really frustrating sometimes.

RR: Talk to me about some of the people around the paper when you were there. Who stands out in your memory, besides Bob Douglas?

MD: Well, I guess, maybe Joe Wirges because we shared a kind of a desk. He was a police reporter for many years, a crusty little guy with a crew cut, a really heavily lined face, and I don't know whether he chewed tobacco or not, but it kind of looked like he might. And he would come in about the time I would be leaving because he would have been at police headquarters, and so we would sort of change chairs right there. He's one of the guys that I remember.

RR: What'd he sound like?

MD: A real gravelly voice like he'd smoked too many cigarettes and I don't know whether he drank or not, but he had sort of a whiskey-sounding voice.

RR: Did you ever take a story from him on the phone?

MD: No, but he would say, "Let me speak to somebody," [with gravelly voice]. No, I don't think he'd dare talk to me; he didn't think I could do it, probably.

RR: Did you ever cover police, filling in?

MD: Well, not Little Rock police, but I had to cover the dear old North Little Rock beat that you know about when somebody was sick or something. And I don't remember what the police chief's name was, but he was kind of a ferocious guy. What was his name, do you know?

RR: It'll come to me. He was ferocious. How'd he treat you?

MD: Well, pretty brusquely.

RR: Well, the cops, generally, did you get along with them?

MD: I covered that just a few times then. There was never any big story going on, so I think they would've been okay. I just made the rounds like you did there, you know.

RR: Who else do you remember from the *Gazette*?

MD: I remember Miss Nell Cotnam and Millie Woods. At one point, they had a desk down the hall from each other, and they would call each other on the phone. They both spoke with loud, loud voices, and they could very well have used the same tone and talked down the hall!

RR: [Laughs] Tell what Miss Nell and Millie did.

MD: Miss Nell, I guess, she worked in the society department, and Millie was the food editor for many, many years. Millie Woods. I remember the story about Miss Nell that kind of interested me. She was, you know, getting along in years when I

came. They took me to lunch one day when I first came there, some of the ladies, and they were telling the story about Miss Nell flying in an airplane under the Arkansas River bridge. Did you ever hear that story?

RR: No!

MD: And I don't remember who the pilot was, you know, but she was famous for this exploit. And, you know, looking at her, you'd think, "How can this old lady ever have done that?!"

RR: Right. I can't picture. . . she was such a lady!

MD: Oh, yes, a real white-gloves type lady.

RR: And I can sort of hear her voice.

MD: She had a pretty, I'd say, pretty . . . how would you describe it? Raucous is not right. Well, she had a lot of volume, anyway.

RR: Yes. Wasn't she from the Delta somewhere? Scott, maybe?

MD: No, I think she was from Little Rock.

RR: Oh, was she?

MD: Yes, she had been, I think her folks at one time had money and something and she was in the Country Club crowd.

RR: What was her accent like?

MD: I don't think she had a particular accent. She didn't have a Delta accent.

RR: Millie Woods, tell me about her.

MD: Well, Millie, you can't describe in a word. She . . . was very intelligent and a good writer, had no newspaper training, but managed to write a very interesting

food column every week that often included a lot of politics. She talked about her two daughters a lot. But she had grown up, I think, in Pine Bluff and was, I think, was a sort of upper-crust type. I don't know. She was an interesting person and a very opinionated person, but someone I liked very much.

RR: I remember a very strong personality.

MD: Oh, yes.

RR: Do you remember how she died?

MD: She killed herself.

RR: Why?

MD: She'd always said — nobody believed her, I guess — that she was never going to linger with any illness, and I think she might have had emphysema. She had been a heavy smoker. She killed herself with a shotgun in her daughter's house while everyone was gone. This was after she'd retired.

RR: Do you remember how she happened to come to work at the *Gazette*? I mean, here she is kind of an upper-class . . .

MD: Not really, I don't really know. I don't know how she got hired.

RR: Or, for that matter, Miss Nell Cotnam, wonder why she . . .

MD: Well, she'd been there always, and she'd been, she was a real big friend of the Heiskells. She'd known them forever. She called Mr. Heiskell, "Ned."

RR: Did she?!

MD: Yes!

RR: I didn't know anybody called . . . !

MD: She did. She called him, "Ned." We all called him, "Mr. J.N."

RR: Yes. I've heard it said that Joe Wirges called him, "boy."

MD: Oh, I never heard that!

RR: Purely in jest . . .

MD: I'd think!

RR: Who were some of the other women? How about Betty Fulkerson, do you remember Betty?

MD: Oh, sure. Betty had not had, I don't think she had had, newspaper training either. And I don't know --- I never did quite understand that department. The people in there were, I suppose, competent enough, but I never did understand society sections anyway. I couldn't figure out how they decided who to put on the front page or any of that. It was sort of beyond me. I never did quite understand any of that society . . .

RR: In those days, the society page was different from today, wasn't it?

MD: Oh, yes. It was supposed to be just the real, you know, upper-crust people. And, I know, Betty used to agonize over what bride she was going to feature. In those days, they had the front section on Sundays for brides, you know, and she used to agonize over who she should put on and how many. She'd have about eight, six or eight, people on there.

RR: Pictures?

MD: Yes. And she would agonize over who deserved to be on the front page.

RR: Wonder if she ever got any feedback?

MD: I'm sure she did! [Laughs] I am sure she did. You mean from her readers or from her employers?

RR: Well, from families who thought they ought to have been on the front page.

MD: Oh, I'm sure. I'm sure.

RR: Does this kind of presume that the person who is the society editor, making that kind of decision, needs to know a lot about society?

MD: Right. Yes. And she did. She did know.

RR: Because she was from that level?

MD: Yes, she was from that.

RR: And I guess Nell Cotnam was, too.

MD: Yes. They both were. They both were. They knew, you know, who was who and who was important and who was not.

RR: I'm trying to remember, it seems to me I've heard it said that Ashmore hired Betty Fulkerson because she was a young widow from a good family who needed a job.

MD: Could be. It could be.

RR: Her husband had been a prominent young lawyer.

MD: Right.

RR: Wasn't he at Nuremberg?

MD: Yes. Yes, he took part in the Nuremberg Trials. And died young. I don't know what of, but I do know that he died young.

RR: Yes. What about some of the other folks around the newsroom that you

remember?

MD: Well, there was Bill Shelton, who was the crusty city editor his wife called “The Great Stone Face.”

RR: His wife called him that?

MD: [Laughs] Yes! Dixie. In jest, of course. He was, you know, a very serious-minded city editor who kept us all busy.

RR: He sure did. Who were some of the old reporters who were still in the newsroom?

MD: Let’s see. John Fletcher, I think, was . . . I remember one time he complimented me on a story, and I thought that — it made my day because I remember it was an election-night story and I think I was at Jim Johnson’s headquarters, and he complimented me on that story. And I thought, you know, that was really high praise because I had great respect for him, for his political knowledge and just for his writing ability in general.

RR: He’d been there for some time?

MD: A long time.

RR: Do you remember any of the other old timers?

MD: Let’s see.

RR: What about Matilda?

MD: Matilda, yes, she had been there. She worked at the Capitol. We didn’t work together at all. I mean, she was gone all day out at the Capitol.

RR: What kind of person was Matilda?

MD: I didn't know her very well. I really don't know. I do remember she and her sister and brother-in-law — took me out to eat one time and to a play. And that was really nice. And that was the only social event that I ever shared with her.

RR: Seems to me that when I came to work there the newsroom had four or five old guys. I do remember Fletcher, but I'm having trouble . . .

MD: Maybe Heinie Leisch?

RR: He was already gone.

MD: Was he?

RR: Do you remember him?

MD: Just barely. By the time that I knew him he had had strokes, and he was in pretty bad shape, but when I first knew him he was doing Sunday mag., and he would do his work out in the newsroom in the slot, and he was a real sweet man.

RR: How do you spell his name? Heinie?

MD: I have no idea.

RR: I would say, H-E-I-N-I-E.

MD: I guess, and Leisch, L-E-I-S-C-H, I guess.

RR: L-E-I-S-C-H. Okay.

MD: Bob might, Bob would probably know how to spell it.

RR: I guess Count Dew was already gone.

MD: Right. Yes, I never knew him.

RR: Were they still telling stories about him?

MD: Oh, yes, a lot. Setting fires in the waste baskets and that kind of stuff. He didn't

pay much attention where he — I guess he smoked a pipe — didn't pay attention to where he knocked out pipe ashes.

RR: Did a lot of people smoke in the newsroom?

MD: Oh, yes.

RR: Did you smoke in those years?

MD: Oh, yes.

RR: I can remember how smoky the place was.

MD: Oh, I know, it was terrible. In the days before air conditioning, it was pretty awful.

RR: Do you remember the sound of the newsroom?

MD: Oh, yes, the clatter. The clatter of the teletype machines, the telephones ringing, and the typewriters going. It was a very noisy place. Using the phone, which we did mostly in our work, you had to learn to concentrate against the noise and just listen to what was said to you on the phone. It was an art you had to learn.

RR: Yes. The teletype machines, I remember them being in a bank across one wall.

MD: They were against --- well, they moved them around, but at one point they were against the windows and went around the corner and I was fairly close to them and that was when they were really distracting.

RR: And then the typewriters make a fair amount of noise.

MD: That's right. You get typewriters, telephones and teletype machines going and you have pretty good noise.

RR: And have people talking. Some of them have voices that carry.

MD: That's true. Right.

RR: Was there a — the way the people who worked there felt about each other, how would you describe that when you first worked there?

MD: I think at the parties you found out that, you know, you really had a lot of camaraderie, and it was a fun place. You know, a lot of jokes. And when you were doing your work, you were very, very busy and intent, and when you weren't busy and somebody else wasn't busy, you were probably passing the time of day. It was just a very friendly place.

RR: Yes, I can remember just moments, minutes, thirty minutes maybe at a time, when nothing was going on for me and, say, Allbright. And that's when we'd plan to sail around the world in a ten-foot boat or, you know, some such nonsense.

MD: [Laughs]

RR: Who were your conversation buddies in the newsroom?

MD: I don't know. It's, you know, whoever was there. And usually it wasn't long conversation. You were just passing the time of day.

RR: Did you share a phone?

MD: Yes, and I can't remember with whom. At one point I — back when Joe was coming in to take over the [desk?] — Let's see, who was it? I don't remember.

RR: I remember each two desks had one phone.

MD: Yes, a phone in between them.

RR: That can be a problem sometimes.

MD: It can be when you have calls out.

RR: I wonder why they were so . . .

MD: Chinchy?! I have no idea!

RR: Yes. [Laughs] Well, you know the paper had enough money to afford . . .

MD: You would think. You would think. I can remember the real highlight was when we got air conditioning. Boy! I went away on vacation; I came back in the hot summertime, and the place was air conditioned. I couldn't believe it.

RR: When was that? Do you remember what year?

MD: No, I have no idea, but it would've been early '50s.

RR: I think it was air conditioned when I got there in '56.

MD: Oh, yes. I'd think so.

RR: Who was the telephone operator who was there for years and years?

MD: Miss Mary Grace?

RR: Mary Grace, yes. Do you remember if she had a last name?

MD: Grace was her last name.

RR: Oh, was it?

MD: Yes, her first name was Mary.

RR: That's the first time I knew that . . .

MD: But we always called her Mary Grace Miss Mary Grace was what they [called her?].

RR: Tell me about her.

MD: Oh, well, she was a dear lady, and she had a pretty sharp tongue, or could have. But she was, well, she was well known for — well, at one point, now, I don't

remember this, but the switchboard was in the newsroom — and she was well known for covering for the guys, you know. When the wives would call and she would call out their name, and they would signal whether or not they were there. So she used to cover for them if they'd been out, if they'd gone out for beers. She was very nice about that.

RR: Kind of one of the newsroom characters, as I recall.

MD: Indeed. Indeed.

RR: Do you remember any of the printers?

MD: Not too much because the make up that I did would be for the Sunday pages — it would be with the daytime printers, with the Sunday magazine or with the television page, the school news. I think maybe the less said, the better about some of them!

RR: Tell me what it was like working there in September, 1957.

MD: Tense, I think is the word. I had nothing really directly to do with covering any of the '57 crisis except I did telephoning, and that kind of thing. I don't know what war is like, but it must be the same sort of feeling. You had that tension everyday, you know. I don't know, it wasn't that you were really afraid; it was just . . . I think tension, stress is the only word. Because it could've been so easy for the segregationists to put the press out of business. In those days, you know, the press was right in sight, behind this plate glass window on Louisiana Street. Just throw a rock in there, and you could knock out the paper for a day, at least that day and maybe longer. It wasn't that you were — you weren't afraid. It was

just the tension. And I think it was citywide; it wasn't just in the newsroom. You know, people knew it was bad and you wondered when it was going to end. And it was not fun.

RR: You said you made some phone calls.

MD: Yes.

RR: In what regard . . .

MD: Oh, they were really nominal, just helping some reporters out, trying to find out, maybe, what was going on inside the school. I didn't have much luck trying to find stuff out.

RR: Everybody was doing a little extra work on that story, as I recall.

MD: Yes, but not much. You know, I did very little. Mainly, I just kept on with my own regular stuff.

RR: And you were glad it was over. It was not much fun.

MD: That's right. I was glad when the troops came in.

RR: That's interesting. It hadn't occurred to me until this moment that I was not glad when it was over.

MD: Oh, you weren't?

RR: Well, I was for the sake of the town, but the story, even though I was not covering that story day by day — I was over in North Little Rock — that tension and that buzz in the newsroom was . . .

MD: You liked that?

RR: Yes.

MD: I don't know. It disturbed me. It was disturbing to me.

RR: Well, I remember feeling disturbed when I would get home.

MD: Yes.

RR: Norma and I would talk about what's going on in the town. We had little kids in the early grades of school, as you did, probably.

MD: Well, Bruce was born in '57. He was just a few months old.

RR: But at work, even though I was not out at Central High like Ray Moseley and some of the others — Jerry Dhonau, Bill Lewis — I just remember being kind of caught up in it.

MD: Well, it permeated the atmosphere really, you know, in the newsroom. By that time I was not working out of the newsroom, but it just permeated the atmosphere. Of course, the coming of the troops didn't end anything, but it had a settling effect as far as peace was concerned.

RR: Yes, I think the fear of violence subsided at that time.

MD: That's right.

RR: What do you remember about Ashmore during that period?

MD: I remember him being in the newsroom a lot and being complimentary of stories. And he was not directing the coverage at all; Shelton did that, but he was into it. I mean, he was very, very, very interested. Of course, I'm sure he knew what was going on behind the scenes, and we didn't know. We didn't know any of the behind-the-scenes stuff.

RR: You mean, with federal officials and people like that?

MD: Yes, and the school officials.

RR: I guess he and people like Sid McMath, Henry Wood . . .

MD: Yes, I am certain they were doing what they could to try to . . .

RR: Win Rockefeller . . .

MD: Yes.

RR: I was interested to hear you say that he was not directing the news coverage. Do you remember what some of the old segregationists were saying about the *Gazette*?

MD: Oh, they were sure that he was, and they charged that the news was slanted and all that. Well, no, it wasn't. I mean, he wrote the editorials, and they were slanted, of course.

RR: But some of those folks had in their head that Harry was dictating every word.

MD: Oh, yes, but he was not. He was there; he knew who was covering what; he would go over and talk to reporters who'd been on the scene and all that sort of stuff, but he was not directing any of the coverage or making assignments, as far as I know. Shelton did that.

RR: Was the news coverage fair?

MD: Well, of course, I am prejudiced and I would say, "Certainly." And I think that it was.

RR: Do you remember any signs that those of us who were reporters and editors might have let our personal feelings get into our copy?

MD: I don't think so. I don't think so. Even those who might have had leanings

against integration, I couldn't detect anything in their stories. I read them pretty carefully.

RR: I've worried about that because I knew my own personal feelings were so intense.

MD: No. Because even those who had grown up in states more Southern than Arkansas, shall we say, even in that copy, I could not detect anything that was slanted or biased. And you would sort of expect it to happen, but it didn't happen.

RR: Let me wind up with one last question. That's the end of the *Gazette*. What do you remember about the death of the newspaper?

MD: Well, of course, I wasn't there when it really died, but I was there when it was starting to die. And I had a sort of a, you know, I had to walk a tightrope because of Bob's involvement, so I sort of kind of kept my eyes straight ahead, did my job, is the way I did it. And you could see what was happening. I mean, there were changes being made and attention wasn't being paid to our readers the way attention had always been paid, and, again, it was distressing.

RR: I guess it needs to be pointed out that you worked on for a while after Bob left the paper.

MD: That's right, for two years.

RR: Two years. He left in '81 and you left in '83. And the paper was sold to Gannett

...

MD: I think before Bob left. I'm not . . .no, no, it wasn't.

RR: No.

MD: I'm not sure.

RR: In the mid '80s. After you were gone, I'm pretty sure.

MD: No.

RR: No, it had been sold . . .

MD: No, that's right. You're right about the Gannetts.

RR: You were aware of Bob's kind of running problems with the . . .

MD: I don't think I better get into that, but certainly I was.

RR: Well, he has talked to me about it, but I was just wondering if that made any difference in the way you did your job?

MD: No. No, I was very careful about that.

RR: All right, since you retired and moved to Fayetteville, talk about what you've been doing since then.

MD: Having a good time mainly! I've been auditing classes from the beginning. Two usually, then it sort of tapered off now to one, but in all fields. In fact, I took Roy Reed's class and enjoyed it very much. And politics, I've taken a lot of political science classes and history classes, art classes, English classes, anthropology classes, on and on. Let's see, what else? I've done some volunteer work, not too much, but with the Friends of the Fayetteville Library. And play bridge. I like to play bridge.

RR: How often?

MD: I play once a week with a foursome and then twice a month with two tables, eight people.

RR: Looking back on the *Gazette*, what was it that made the paper special?

MD: I thought about that. You know, with Bob, I always thought the *Gazette* was sort of his mistress, but then I decided that the *Gazette* was his religion, so that made it better. I didn't feel that way about it except I was very proud to work there. It didn't consume me the way it did some people, like Bob and some of them. Because to me, I decided that, as far as a career, mine was going to be a job and I was going to have a family. And I didn't feel that I had the energy to do both, to make it a real, you know, important career and rear a family. So, I loved working there and the people, but it was . . . I'm glad I did have the experience.

RR: Anything else you got on your mind about the *Arkansas Gazette* before we . . .

MD: No, I'm just sorry it's gone.

[Tape Interrupted]

RR: This is Larry Obsitnik we're talking about.

MD: Yes. Larry Obsitnik was the chief photographer at the *Arkansas Gazette* for many, many years, and he was full of fun. He loved parties. He loved Christmas more than anybody I ever knew. He would put his kids' toys on layaway. He's the only person that I ever knew who put his Christmas whiskey on layaway!

RR: [Laughs] I never knew that! I do remember parties at Larry's house when . . .

MD: Yes, Larry's house was the party house.

RR: . . . the little kids, three years old, would be up till midnight as long as anybody else.

MD: And dancing, dancing to the music. Those little kids would dance to the music all

by themselves. Larry loved dancing, also. He knew all the steps. His kids, as his kids grew up — he had a houseful — as they grew up, they taught him all the latest steps, and he loved . . . he did love partying more than anybody I knew.

RR: Did you ever ride with him in his car?

MD: Oh, yes, a time or two.

RR: Do you remember his driving?

MD: Yes, he'd kind of drive with one finger, it seems to me. On assignments, we'd have to go and there'd have to be pictures made, and I would ride with him.

RR: I remember the speed more than anything else.

MD: I remember he was a very careless driver.

RR: I'm not sure if I actually saw this or simply heard somebody else describe it, but he'd get in his car, start the motor and reach out and hand blow a kiss at the — what's the little statuette that he always carried on the dashboard?

MD: Oh, that probably would have been . . .

RR: A saint.

MD: Saint Christopher.

RR: Saint Christopher. And then he'd just gun it and go roaring off.

MD: [Laughs] I never did see him do that, but I bet he did.

[End of Interview]