

Gazette Project

Interview with

George Fisher,
Little Rock, Arkansas,
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Interviewer: Ernest Dumas

Ernest Dumas: We are talking today with George Fisher, editorial cartoonist for the *Arkansas Gazette* for a number of years, now a cartoonist for the *Arkansas Times*. We are in George's home on North Taylor Street in Little Rock. George, we did this once earlier, but at the outset I need your statement from you that you understand this material we are doing here today will be on permanent display at the archives at the University of Arkansas. It will be available for research or for whatever purposes the University deems appropriate. Do you understand that?

George Fisher: I understand that, yes.

ED: Okay. George, let's start with your beginnings, unless you want to go back farther than that. Tell me about where you were born, who your parents were, and your growing up.

GF: I was born in Searcy, Arkansas, just outside of Searcy, Arkansas, in 1923. My father owned a nursery there. He and his brothers had a nursery, a tree nursery. At the time he was starting a nursery for somebody else up in Higginson.

ED: That's in White County, right?

GF: White County. I was born just outside of Searcy and lived there until we moved to Beebe, where I grew up. Ironically, the house in Beebe where I grew up and the house where I was born in Searcy both were blown away by tornadoes.

ED: What was your dad's name?

GF: Charles W. Fisher.

ED: And your mama?

GF: Gladys Fisher

ED: Now, they had come here from Tennessee, had they not?

GF: Dad was from Tennessee. They came up about the turn of the century to Arkansas from White County, Tennessee, to White County, Arkansas. My mother came from Indiana. She was a German descendant, and her father was a German and spoke German. He was a Methodist preacher, and he was known for his foul mouth.

ED: Foul-mouthed Methodist preacher?

GF: Yes.

ED: Did he have a regular church, or did he ride a circuit?

GF: He had a regular church, I understand, in Indiana. When he came down here, he didn't have a regular church but preached some. He was always looking for cheap land. He kind of lived frugally. He got on a train one day – he had read in paper somewhere that he could buy land kind of cheap in the Hot Springs area – He got on a train and came down to look at it. The train stopped in Beebe, and he looked out the window and saw on the side of a barn - Property for Sale - Cheap.

So he got off the train and bought the property. That's how he came to Beebe.

My mother worked in the Doss hotel there in Beebe. That's where she met Dad.

She died when I was five, and I never did find out from my dad what she died of – something to do with the liver, I believe. My grandfather brought his family down from Indiana, and he lived there outside of Beebe. He was killed by a mule.

He kind of cursed the mule a little too much. He stabbed the mule with a pitchfork in the barn, and the mule kind of got tired of it, so he kicked him to death. My father found him dead in the barn.

ED: While you were still living there? You had been born by then when your grandfather got killed?

GF: I don't think so.

ED: That was before you were born?

GF: It was either about the time I was born or before.

ED: Well, did your father raise you?

GF: Yes, Dad never did remarry. We all said that we were so poor we couldn't afford a mother. He never did remarry, and Dad raised the whole family. A sister and two brothers.

ED: Were you the youngest?

GF: No, I was next to the youngest. My brother, Arlie, – you have never met Arlie. He's my older brother. He was on the team that designed the moon craft in Johnson Space Center. He was an engineer when he first came to Arkansas and graduated as an engineer there. I went to school with him up there.

ED: Up . . . ?

GF: Beebe College. I went to all grades in Beebe that they had to offer: grammar school, high school, and two years of college. I went to the army after one year of college.

ED: When did you get interested in art? Was that while you were still in school? Were you always interested in drawing?

GF: Yes, as far as I can remember, I was always drawing, as early as I can remember. I never had any drawing paper. Paper was kind of scarce in those days, especially drawing paper. I used to draw on the backs of calendars, big white space, you know. Dad encouraged me, and Dad knew something. Dad was a well educated man back in Tennessee. He got his college education back in Tennessee. Probably the only one of those brothers in a large family with a good education. Dad encouraged me. He could see that I could draw. He got me interested in following politics, and he gave me some ideas. The first cartoon I drew was an idea he gave me. Judge John Miller, I believe, was running for the senate. I don't remember exactly what the cartoon was about.

ED: He was running for, and was elected to, Congress from up here back in the early 1930s.

GF: Yes.

ED: John Miller, and he was up from around Izard County, or someplace up in there, as I recall. Was elected U.S. Senator.

GF: U. S. Senator and federal judge, yes. The first cartoon I can recall was during the

war. Homer Adkins was governor, and he was taking credit for getting so many war plants around Arkansas. The cartoon I drew showed Adkins on a fence as a rooster, and Arkansas was the hen sitting on a nest with eggs under her labeled "War Plants." He was saying, "Look what I did." This was my first cartoon that was published.

ED: Where was it published?

GF: In some kind of publication that was put out by a candidate from Jonesboro who was running against Adkins. What was his name now? I can't remember his name.

ED: Adkins was first elected in 1940, and he was reelected in 1942.

GF: About that time, yes. I remember John L. McClelland. I remember him getting out of his car in Beebe. I happened to be in uptown Beebe when this car pulled up to the curb and he got out wearing a white suit and white shoes. Without any crowd around him at all, he suddenly started speaking. He raised his hand in the air, and he had the answers to all our problems in the country. He was running for the senate. Before you knew it, he had a crowd around him. That was the way he got elected. He was no wall flower. He simply went out and got it. He was ambitious.

ED: Your dad was an educated man. Did he take a newspaper at home, the *Gazette*?

GF: No. He bought papers, but he never subscribed. I used to deliver *The Grit*. That was a newspaper out of Pennsylvania, I believe. Weekly, national, *The Grit*. You've heard of that?

ED: Yes, *The Grit*.

GF: I used to deliver that. They used to mail it to me weekly, a bundle of *Grits*, maybe around 25 or 30 that subscribed around Beebe. But Dad read a lot, and he wrote a lot. He wrote a lot about folklore in Tennessee and the history of Tennessee. He told me a lot of fascinating stories about Tennessee. But Dad never seemed to have any ideas about the ways things ought to be. I never picked up any ideas, and I never knew who he was for or who he was against.

ED: He wasn't a raging Democrat or anything like that?

GF: No. He was a close friend of Wilbur Mills of Kensett. We were from Beebe and Mills from Kensett.

ED: He was the county judge, I guess, in White County . . .

GF: Yes.

ED: . . . in the 1930s, and then he got elected to Congress when John E. Miller got elected to senate. He took up John E. Miller's place in U.S. House of Representatives from that area.

GF: Yes, he was county judge when Dad knew him. After that, I don't think Dad had any contact with him. Dad didn't have contact later on after he came to Beebe with Cordell Hull. He used to go fishing with Cordell Hull back in Tennessee. Cordell Hull was a circuit clerk.

ED: Cordell Hull was from Tennessee and became a United States Senator and later became Secretary of State.

GF: Secretary of State under Franklin D. Roosevelt.

ED: Yes. Secretary of State or Defense or something. I have forgotten. Secretary of State.

GF: Secretary of State. Dad was in Washington to visit my sister, who was in the WAVE, which was women in the Navy. They went up to the Capitol and met Cordell Hull. Hull remembered him as his “old fishing buddy” back in Tennessee. Dad had quite a history. He never achieved a great deal in the way of politics or his writings, but he always dabbled in those things. His income was the nursery, Fisher Brothers Nursery. He also built houses. He was a good carpenter. Dad encouraged me to draw cartoons and gave me ideas from all the candidates. But, strangely enough, he didn’t have opinions about which way to go in politics. Right or left, conservative, liberal, didn’t ever seem to have any ideas about it. Although, he ran for representative back in Tennessee and lost by 2 or 3 votes, I think. They later found his opponent had stolen the election, and the governor, whoever he was, offered to give the seat to my dad. Dad, for some reason or another, did not take it.

ED: Okay, you were drawing in high school and dabbling in cartoons. You went to junior college before the war, right?

GF: Right. Actually in the 8th grade, I started a newspaper, the *Beebe Grammar School News*, and they printed it. I did the cartoon and the newspaper by hand at home and would bring it to the first grade, where they had a hectograph machine with a jelly pad. You did the work in indelible ink. When you put the paper down on the pad, it would print what you put down. We printed it on a machine

called a hectograph.

ED: Called a hectograph?

GF: Yes, hectograph.

ED: H-E-C-T-O-G-R-A-P-H?

GF: Yes. Afterwards, when I was in the service, we did maps of the placements of American forces. Our regiment was the 417th. The 417th regiment was placed in an area, and we had to stick to the area across Germany. We did the maps to show where we were and to show each of the battalions where they were supposed to be. We sent those prints to the battalions, and we did those maps on hectographs.

ED: Well, let's go back and talk about how you got into the service. You recall how you came to get into the army. Did you join the army? Were you drafted?

GF: I joined the army during the reserves. They told us we could finish college that way, if we joined through the reserves. We wouldn't be called up until after we had finished college. Well, they did call me up. They called me up after I had finished my first year.

ED: What year would that have been? It was after Pearl Harbor?

GF: Yes.

ED: Pearl Harbor was in December, 1942, right?

GF: 1942? Okay. I joined after that. It must have been 1943. I could find it someplace.

ED: That's all right.

GF: It was about 1943. People who enlisted back then or were called out were usually called up in large groups. Only I was just one. Everywhere I would go, it was just one person. No group. I carried my own papers. They sent me out to California to Camp Roberts Infantry, the largest replacement depot in the world.

ED: This is where an infantry school was located?

GF: Yes, Infantry Training School. Red Skelton was right next to me. He had been drafted. We were in a cannon company. In other words, every infantry regiment has a cannon company attached to it, to give direct support to the troops. In other words, artillery did not give direct support. Artillery was in the distance. We were in direct support, with 105mm howitzers. Anyway, while I was there, they asked Red Skelton if he would entertain the troops. He had already made a name for himself as a comedian. Everybody knew him. That's where he came up with scrapbook satire. It was in some kind of a building there, a recreation building. The place was packed, of course, with troops all the time. He would lay them in the aisle. He was funny. Of course, I guess anything would be funny with him.

ED: So you got your infantry training there, and then they shipped you out to Europe?

GF: Yes, I went to Camp McCoy, Wisconsin, from there, and from there to Camp Miles Standish, in Massachusetts, where the ship was waiting. We boarded the ship on Thanksgiving Day in 1944. We left on Thanksgiving Day, and there were three ships and all around the horizon, dozens of ships, completely surrounding our three ships. Our three ships represented one regiment, the 17th regiment. Nothing could get near us. It was a good feeling. We were there 14 days and

landed in Plymouth, England. We went from there by train to Bournemouth.

That's where I met Rosemary, my wife.

ED: Tell me how you met Rosemary.

GF: Well, we were there in Bournemouth.

ED: How do you spell Bournemouth?

GF: B-O-U-R-N-E-M-O-U-T-H. We were there several weeks, and the regiment wanted to put out some kind of newspaper or bulletin or something to build up the morale of the troops while they were there. They asked me, and looked up my MOS number and my MOS . . .

ED: MOS is Military Occupational Specialty.

GF: Hush up, how did you know that? I said that I would be glad to do some art work for the paper, but I did not have any equipment. All I had was a lifeboat! So they made arrangements for an art college in Bournemouth. It was called Bournemouth Municipal Art College. They made arrangements for me to go there and use their equipment and facilities. My drawing board faced Rosemary. She was a student there and a sophomore. Her name was Rosemary Beryl Snook. She asked me if I would go out wassailing that night. I got acquainted with her since my drawing board faced hers. I said, "Well, sure, but what is wassailing?" It sounds like drinking. It sounds like a party, but it turned out to be – it was Christmas time, so it turned out to be caroling. So we went out caroling. During the time I was in England and Europe, I was corresponding with her as I liberated a lot of things.

ED: Was Europe already settled?

GF: We liberated Europe of some of the things in general. We didn't steal anything deliberately. I liberated a parachute in Trier, Germany, a German parachute made out of pure silk, and mailed it to her in England. I had forgotten all about it until I went over there to ask her to agree to marry me. She had already sewed up her trousseau, and there was that parachute.

ED: The wedding dress was made with the parachute? It was after the war when you got married?

GF: Well, yes, just barely after the war when I got married.

ED: Well, tell me a little bit about what you did in your soldiering in Europe. What campaigns were you in?

GF: Le Havre, across the channel, at Le Havre, after Christmas, it was early January.

ED: L-E H-A-V-R-E?

GF: Yes, France. We stayed there a couple of days and went by train to Rouen, France. Then we went to Bastogne.

ED: B-A-S-T-O-G-N-E?

GF: You've heard of Bastogne?

ED: Yes. "Nuts," the great response of General McAuliffe.

GF: Yes, you know quite a bit about that, don't you?

ED: So you were in the campaign.

GF: We stayed in the barn there, in the hay, and that was the best place to stay in the cold. It was miserably cold! It was the coldest they told us in 40 years in

Belgium. We slept with straw bound between our boot and our feet tucked between insulation because it was so cold. We slept in a barn full of hay. The Battle of the Bulge was just such a mixed-up mess that we did not know who was who. In another words, a tank came into town, and we didn't know whose it was. They captured some of our people and took their clothes. [Laughs] They would wear our clothes and come into town, and we didn't know who they were. [Laughs] So the general – no, it wasn't a general. It was a colonel. I forget now. – He put out an order to wear our field jackets one day because they had captured our clothing, like helmets and our overcoats. That was the dead giveaway, the overcoats. He said everybody on a certain day was to wear their field jackets, no overcoats. Nobody was to put on overcoats. If someone was seen wearing an overcoat, he was to be shot. The barn I was talking about, we got up one morning and found out two Germans had slept in the same barn that night. [Laughs] So they got up early and left. They didn't bother us. [Laughs]

ED: They were cold, too! Everybody was cold.

GF: Exactly! That's the reason they slept there.

ED: So did you march to Bastogne?

GF: No, I was in Bastogne, but we left Bastogne. The action went on in Bastogne, but we missed it. We were there to relieve the troops who had suffered so much. We stayed there a few days and then got on the trucks and went to Luxembourg, Echternach, Luxembourg on the Saar River and stayed there for a few days. We were in Patton's army, and they selected our regiment out of all of those armies

up and down the German border. The Americans had, I think, four armies

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

ED: All the regiments in the army in the service.

GF: That's right. It was the Supreme Headquarters in Paris that made the decision when and where to strike the Germans across the Siegfried Line. They decided to have one unit to pierce the Siegfried Line in one place rather than a flanking movement. There would be too many casualties, so they decided to use one unit, and that was us. We crossed the Saar River at Echternach. It took us seven days to get seven miles. The Siegfried Line was seven miles deep. We pierced it one mile wide, seven miles deep. Then they pulled us back, and the rest of the divisions all came through that hole that we pierced. They came in that hole and attacked the Siegfried Line to the north and the south. The pill boxes on the Siegfried Line could only fire in one direction, which was west. They attacked from the rear. Of course, it didn't take long. Then the rat race across Germany. Every day, you were in a new town. You'd find a new town, stay there and then go on to another town.

ED: Rushing to Berlin, right?

GF: Right. Actually, we were south of Berlin. The town there, south of Berlin, Erfurt

ED: E-R-F-U-R-T? I was there this summer.

GF: Yes. You told me that you were there.

ED: Martin Luther's town, where he went to seminary, I think.

GF: And they saved that town, apparently. The Allies saved it from bombing, apparently, because of the shrine of Luther. But when we went into the town, we noticed that every building, every house, every commercial building had a flag hanging out, a white flag. There were people all over the place. You couldn't stir them. You would think it was a big ball game going on or something because there were so many people in town. We asked them when we got there what so many people were doing in town. They said that Hitler was there. Hitler! [Laughs] Adolf Hitler was in town! All were gathered around his limousine. So we got there a few hours too late.

ED: Tell me a little bit about your art work while you were in the army. You continued to draw while you were in the infantry, didn't you? You were on the front lines, and you were still doing some drawings then.

GF: Yes. I would draw a cartoon every day. I had a little sketch book with me, and I would draw a cartoon of something that happened during the day, usually something humorous or something that was a close call, or something like that. I had one hundred and two days in combat, and I did a cartoon each day. A few days I had to miss, but most of them I drew.

ED: You still have that book, do you not?

GF: Correct.

ED: It is kind of a record of your combat in a way, kind of a humorous, and somewhat

. . .

GF: A diary.

ED: A diary of your combat.

GF: Yes.

ED: Did you publish anything while you were there?

GF: Well, a few things were published. After the war was over, they got some German printers to do something. I think they call it the Onaway, which was the name of our division, an Indian name that came, I believe, from Pennsylvania. An Indian term, Onaway.

ED: How do you spell it?

GF: O-N-A-W-A-Y A few things I drew for that publication. Nothing cartoonish except my little scribblings I did in my scrapbook. But not for very many publications.

ED: After you liberated France and Germany and Belgium and Luxembourg, you went back to England and married Rosemary? Did you go back to England and marry then or did you go back to the states first?

GF: After the war was over in Europe, they were going to send us back. The plan was for everybody, especially the infantry, to take a one month's vacation or leave, or furlough, in the United States. From there, we went to Japan. We went to Japan, and that was no secret. We weren't looking forward to that very much. They sent us back to Le Havre, France. They named all of the camps, replacements at that post in Europe, after cigarettes. We were in Camp Lucky Strike. We were there for several days, maybe close to a week. The largest replacement depot in Europe posted in Lucky Strike. Just north of there was Chesterfield, and then Camp

Camel, Camp Herbert Tarreton, Camp Top Hat. They named them after cigarettes, of all things. [Laughs] Anyway, while we were there in Camp Lucky Strike, they dropped the bomb in Hiroshima. A few days later they dropped one on Nagasaki, and they pulled all the orders. The next day we were supposed to get on the ship. We were to go the United States, but they sent us back into Europe. They sent me back to Brussels, Belgium. From Brussels, I got on leave with the basketball team. They had formed this basketball team to play other teams in Europe. Basketball was just getting popular in Europe at the time. There were former Globetrotters and former Celtics, former pros in the U.S. Army. They put them together and made a basketball team to play all the teams in Europe. U.S. teams beat them all, of course, and they would hold down the score. They were going over to London to play, and a major got me on orders to go to London with that basketball team. It was the only way I could get over. When I went over, I went down to Bomar, and there we got married. That was after the war.

ED: In 1945?

GF: 1946. That was early 1946, in March of 1946. Then we came back to the States. After we went back to Brussels, it wasn't long after that they sent me to the United States.

ED: So you picked up your bride and came back, or did you . . .

GF: No, she came later. She came in July, from March to July.

ED: You came back to Beebe or . . .

GF: Came back to Beebe, and she came over in a merchant ship they used for that purpose, for war brides. They used them to haul troops in and for brides. She got off the ship in New York and got on the train on orders. She was freight. She was sent by freight. She got off the train in Beebe.

ED: Did you pay by the pound?

GF: Technically, that was the only way they could ship them was by freight. [Laughs] And so she [laughs] had a tag around her neck, "First Class Freight." [Laughs]

ED: So you settled at Beebe. What did you do after the war? How did you make a living?

GF: I went back to school. I went back . . .

ED: The GI Bill?

GF: Yes, the GI Bill and went from Beebe to the University of Arkansas. I went to school up there. I took art, all the art I could take, up there. Took a lot of other courses. You can't take just one course. You have to take a lot, all that they require. The professor of art up there wasn't very impressed with my work. He said I would never make a living at art and that I should get into something else, so I quit. I quit school. I did not graduate. Well, what I wanted to do in life wasn't staying on the farm, and I knew that at that time. So I came back and got a job over in West Memphis with the Coughlin brothers' newspaper.

ED: Coughlin Brothers?

GF: *West Memphis News.*

ED: *West Memphis News.* And their names were what?

GF: Jack and Pete.

ED: Jack and Pete C-O-U-G-H-L-I-N.

GF: C-O-U-G-H-L-I-N, John and Paul Coughlin. Jack and Pete we called them. They were war heroes, and Pete Coughlin was dubbed “Sergeant York of the air” of World War II. He was in the Navy on a Navy ship in the Mediterranean and had battles in North Africa, and he herded the enemy from his plane, like Sergeant York did with his rifle. He did it with a machine gun, herded them back to friendly lines. Anyway, he was a big hero. And Jack was also a service man.

ED: So were they co-owners of the *West Memphis News*?

GF: Yes. Actually, they ran the *West Memphis News*, but they weren’t the owners, but they ran this newspaper. Strange that people who supported them were outs, people on the outside of the political machine.

ED: Crittenden County was a famous machine county.

GF: Machine county, yes.

ED: Probably the biggest machine county in Arkansas.

GF: Notorious.

ED: Notorious, yes.

GF: The guys in West Memphis, the business men, their names all started with J., so they called them the J-boys. [Laughs] They were the ones who supported the Coughlin brothers in their newspaper. That lasted for about three years, and the machine put them out of business. They were sued several times, and the machine put them out of business. They were sued several times. Of course, the

machine lost the suits because the paper printed the truth. [Laughs]

ED: The Coughlin brothers and the newspaper were pretty outrageous. I mean, they were unterrified, I gather.

GF: Yes, and they wouldn't pay their bills. I mean, they were slow in paying their bills, especially the electric bills, the utility bills.

ED: They were a hard-hitting newspaper.

GF: Oh, yes!

ED: They really thundered against that machine.

GF: A headline across the top of the front page that said, "Sheriff Gets Rake Off On Gambling." Wouldn't you say [laughs] – I mean, he had to sue for that. He had no other alternative but to sue.

ED: The sheriff had to sue.

GF: Yes, he lost the case because they proved they were right. [Laughs]

ED: What did you do?

GF: I did a cartoon a week. One editorial cartoon a week. I wrote stories. I wasn't good at writing. I was good enough for a weekly paper. I even did the sports. I drew up ads. They would sell the ads and bring them in and give them to me, and I would draw them up. Or I would draw them up, and they would take them to the customer and sell them. Sell my drawings.

ED: So your typical weekly newspaper, you did everything around there?

GF: Yes.

ED: Most days on a weekly newspaper you did most everything, except deliver it.

GF: Everything except type, and I did a little delivering. You know there are several towns around. I would use my jeep and take the paper around to the various towns.

ED: You were drawing political cartoons? That was basically what you did, draw political cartoons?

GF: Yes, that was where I got my first . . .

ED: About the political machines?

GF: Yes. You remember when the GIs in the state ran independents for offices? That's how Sid McMath got started with this group over in Hot Springs.

ED: There was a reform movement with the GIs all over the state.

GF: All across the state.

ED: McMath was elected prosecutor in Garland County, and Bob Riley, I think, got started in politics in that way and a lot of other people. GIs ran for office to clean up the government.

GF: Yes, you see the GIs got in late from the service. They came in too late to run as Democrats. And, of course, that was the only way you could run and be successful, to run as a Democrat. They had to file as Independents to run against the Democrats. Democrats were, of course, established around the state. The machine types and Ben Lamey and that bunch, you know, ran the state. The GIs in Crittenden County had a slate of GI Independents. Roy Upshaw and some of those guys ran as a slate. They all lost. GIs across the state didn't do too well in the elections, except Sid McMath and his group.

ED: There were only a handful who got elected.

GF: Yes. Nobody knew exactly why they couldn't get elected because they were popular and they were heroes in the service. They thought people would jump right in and vote for them, but that was not necessarily the case. One reason was they did not know anything about politics.

ED: The idea was that they had been over defending democracy and got back and realized we didn't have real democracy back here at home.

GF: Right, right.

ED: People don't rule here either, so . . .

GF: Well, they suspected whoever was in office was crooked because they had been in office so long. Of course, that was not necessarily the case. The GIs just came back from the service and thought they would change things back here at home – because this bunch had been in power for so long, surely, they would want the heroes back from service to run things. But, no, that was not necessarily the case.

ED: Well, so that lasted three years for you at West Memphis, right?

GF: Yes.

ED: Which would have taken you to about 1949?

GF: Yes.

ED: And then what? When the *West Memphis News* went out of business?

GF: Well, I had heard the telephone company in Little Rock was looking for an artist for the yellow pages, to do art work for the yellow pages. I came back to Arkansas and got the job at Southwestern Bell.

ED: At Little Rock?

GF: At Little Rock. I did that for five years. Then I decided that I wasn't getting anywhere. I wasn't very satisfied drawing illustrations for ads. It wasn't very satisfying for me, so I quit and made a deal with the company to take the art work with me on contract to open a new studio. So I did that for about twenty years, yellow pages advertising for Southwestern Bell in Arkansas.

ED: But you basically went down and set up Fisher Art Services?

GF: Yes.

ED: You did that art work on contract basis for Southwestern Bell. In the meantime, you did a lot of other kinds of contract work.

GF: Yes. Well, the studio was open to the public, and I did work for dozens of customers. Bell Telephone just happened to be my best customer. Still, that wasn't satisfying to me, doing art work to satisfy people, you know. They wanted letterhead, for instance. I had to try to find out what they wanted and try to satisfy them. In other words, you weren't satisfying yourself, you were satisfying someone else. Anyway, Jim Phillips, in Eureka Springs, one day talked to me about getting back into doing political cartoons. That was the ordination day of Orval Faubus.

ED: It was 1954? Was that when he was running?

GF: Yes.

ED: He ran for office the first time and beat Francis Cherry in 1954.

GF: Yes. Although, at that time, I did art work for Faubus.

ED: He was a liberal candidate. He was a liberal candidate in that race.

GF: Yes, he was.

ED: Well, since you can call anybody liberal in Arkansas. Francis Cherry was an honest guy, but very conservative, and Faubus had kind of a liberal tradition.

GF: Oh, I drew cartoons for him. I would take them up there to the Hotel Marion to his office. He would take them and say, "Now, I like that." Then he would hand the cartoon over to Frank Wills and say, "Here, run this." He would take the money out of his pocket, along with the cartoon, and say, "Run this." Now that meant run it in all the newspapers in Arkansas. I did that during the time that he ran against Francis Cherry. The cartoon subject matter was centered on Jim Johnson in 1956. In that election he was the moderate. Actually, he was a right-winger. Johnson was the right wing conservative. Faubus, ironically, was the moderate.

ED: Yes, there were a couple of other people. A guy named Jim Snoddy ran, but Faubus was clearly the guy who tried to steer a moderate course.

GF: Yes.

ED: Civil rights had become a big issue.

GF: Civil rights, and he was looking for that. See, Faubus was an opportunist.

ED: But it wasn't ripe yet.

GF: The time had not yet come, and he knew he was looking for that opportune time. We were in a hotel room with him one day, and they were talking about issues. I was there for one purpose only and that was to listen to the issues and see what I

could draw about him, see if I could pick up any ideas. He had just been out in the hustings that day, and he came back and was hungry. He was eating a steak. He said, "Man, if I could get that black situation stirred up, they would never get me out of office."

ED: Did he use the word "black" or did he use the other word?

GF: I have often wondered about that? I was quoted by Roy Reed, and I can't remember to this day what he said. But I can remember what he meant. And that's what he meant, exactly what he meant. "If I can ever get it stirred up, they will never get me out." Not long after that, the 1957 crisis hit us. I had doubts about what he said that day, so I asked his speech writer, whose name was Campbell – I don't remember his first name. – I saw him on the bus, and I asked him, "Did he say what I thought he said?" And he nodded and said, "Yes." So I know that I was right. He said something to the effect that he was looking for an opportunity to call out the Guard and stop integration.

ED: So, at that time, there was nothing to trigger it. The people of Arkansas were not really stirred up about it. We had the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, but it had not really affected Arkansas – except in Charleston, Arkansas. Dale Bumpers had gotten the school integrated in Charleston. But most people were not affected.

GF: Up at the university, I believe there was one black student enrolled. No, Little Rock was pretty much sold on the idea that they had to conform to the court's orders. Virgil Blossom, superintendent of the schools, went around and talked to

the civic groups. They had programs on the radio and other places. They talked to people about what they must do to conform to the court's orders. They called it "The Virgil Blossom Plan." People had pretty well accepted it. They even had an election, a school board election. I may be getting ahead of myself. They had an election. Faubus's slate was a CROSS committee.

ED: That was a couple of years later. That was in 1959.

GF: I realized I was getting ahead of myself.

ED: Well, let me ask you how you got into the newspaper cartooning business. You did not start with the *Arkansas Gazette*?

GF: Yes. It was the STOP campaign – Stop This Outrageous Purge – that I was thinking about.

ED: That was 1959, after the troops had been federalized. They had their big campaign in 1959 to recall the moderate members and another one to recall the segregationist members.

GF: Yes, the moderate members were called "STOP," Stop This Outrageous Purge, and the other group was the Committee to Retain Our Segregated Schools, or CROSS. The STOP people won the election, which told everybody we had accepted the fact that schools should be integrated, that we should do the Virgil Blossom Plan, follow his plan.

ED: The turning point in history.

GF: Yes, but the rest of the country didn't know, the rest of the world didn't know, that Little Rock had voted out Faubus's plan. So Little Rock got the black eye

that we were all segregationists. But I did not do many political cartoons during that time.

ED: After that, did you start drawing for the *North Little Rock Times*?

GF: Yes.

ED: How did that come about?

GF: Well, I just called up Bob McCord, editor of the paper at that time, and asked him if he would like a cartoon a week. He said, "Sure." [Laughs] So I sent him a cartoon a week and did not charge him anything for it. I just wanted to do what I loved doing. It sure beat doing commercial art, which kept my art studio going at that time, but I wanted to do something else. I did a cartoon a week. Jim Phillips, at Eureka Springs at that time, got me into doing cartoons. He shamed me into it. He said, "You've got this talent for doing political cartoons, and you aren't using it." He said, "You've got the best subject in the world right here in your own state, Orval Faubus, and you are letting him get away from you. He's got the state under his thumb. He's got all the issues going his way, and you're letting him get away with it." The only people who were opposed to Faubus and his plan was the *Arkansas Gazette*. He shamed me into getting back into the cartoons. The *Times* started running the cartoons, and then the *Gazette* picked them up every week and ran them in the Sunday editorial section.

ED: I thought the *Pine Bluff Commercial* picked them up for a while, too.

GF: The *Commercial* did, yes. Two or three papers did.

ED: Do you remember what year that would have been? 1959 or so, do you reckon?

Maybe 1960?

[End of Tape 1, Side 2]

[Beginning of Tape 2, Side 1]

ED: Okay, George, we were talking about (this is side 3) when you began drawing cartoons for the *North Little Rock Times*.

GF: Right.

ED: And that year would have been approximately . . .

GF: 1964.

ED: You drew one cartoon a week for them. As I recall, it had an instant effect. Even though this was a weekly paper circulated in North Little Rock, it had a pretty wide circulation.

GF: Right

ED: A lot of people watched it. I was here then, and I remember that everyone was impressed with these cartoons right away. How did the *Commercial* began to pick them up? Then later the *Gazette*. Do you remember the sequence?

GF: There were two or three other papers, *Pine Bluff Commercial*, and, of course, the *Gazette* did every Sunday. We would run them on the opposite page on Sunday. Let me see, what year was that, 1964?

ED: 1964.

GF: I did that for about ten years. I built up quite a readership around the state. They asked me if I wanted to draw full time. In 1972, I believe, they hired me to do two cartoons a week on commission. They ran them on the op-ed page.

ED: Is that the first time that you had been getting paid for the cartoons?

GF: Yes.

ED: So they were free to the *North Little Rock Times* all along? Surely, Bob began to pay you a little bit at some point.

GF: You know, I don't remember. If he did, it was very inconsequential.

ED: You continued to run your art studio up on Louisiana Street, just right up near Third and Louisiana Street, in downtown Little Rock. One block . . .

GF: Center Street.

ED: Center Street?

GF: 309 Center.

ED: 309 Center Street. You were a block, a block and a half from the *Gazette*?

GF: One block.

ED: So you began to draw two cartoons a week for the *Gazette*, which would run on the op-ed page.

GF: On the op-ed page columns. They weren't the big cartoons. They were the small ones. They were just about two columns.

ED: At that time the *Gazette* had a cartoonist named Bill Graham, who had been the *Gazette's* cartoonist since, I guess, about the end of World War II.

GF: Right.

ED: He had been their only cartoonist. A wonderful fellow who was a pretty good cartoonist, but pretty simple lines and a simple cartoonist. Well, pretty much did, I think, whatever the editorial page director suggested.

GF: Right. I think he came out of Ohio. He applied right after the war, and I applied about the same time he did. I was in West Memphis. They had seen my cartoons at the *Gazette*. But Harry Ashmore was the editor. Wasn't he the editor?

ED: Yes, he was the executive editor. He came about that time, about 1947 or somewhere along in there.

GF: He was called the editor.

ED: Yes, he was executive editor.

GF: Yes, executive editor. So I had cartoons to show them and Bill Graham did, too. They hired Bill Graham instead of me. Later on, I heard Harry Ashmore had his ideas about what a cartoonist was supposed to be like. They were supposed to fit whatever he thought was proper. Harry was a great editor and encouraged me all along. Even while I was at West Memphis, he said I did great work over there. But he had an idea about cartoons. They weren't supposed to be flashy. They weren't supposed to have big black areas. Someone told me that they interpreted that to mean that they weren't supposed to compete with the editorial. We were not supposed to stand out on the page. Bill Graham did not have black areas. He would have pitch black nights, only it wouldn't be black; it would be white with the moon showing. Anyway, you get the idea. But later on, Bill Graham got sick, pretty bad sick. At that time, he was in the hospital, and they decided to hire me as their cartoonist, but then he came back from the hospital. They didn't know what would happen to him in the hospital. They thought maybe he was going to die. But he didn't. He came back.

ED: They had a new editor at that time also. James Powell became the editor in 1960, in January or so of 1960.

GF: So they hired me in 1976. When Graham came back, they put him on the op-ed page, and I was on the editorial page.

ED: They assigned him some other duties, editing duties, in addition to cartooning.

GF: Yes, I think so. Composing and some stuff. It was kind of shaky there at first. I didn't know what the *Gazette* was requiring of me, although Jim Powell and Hugh Patterson told me to draw anything I wanted to draw. They had the option of accepting it or not. I found that they were very receptive to any idea that I had. That was what they wanted. They wanted my ideas. Even though the cartoon might not always dovetail with their policies, still, they wanted my ideas. I guess that is the way it should be. I was so surprised that they would accept some of the cartoons. I did not think some of the cartoons would ever see the light of day, but they accepted them, nearly all of them. Some of them they turned down. A lot of them they turned down in the stage of rough, and I didn't go through with them to the finish. Sometimes I would discuss an idea with them, and they would turn down my idea, and I wouldn't have to draw a rough art finish. I always thought the way they treated me was what a newspaper should be like. The editorial cartoonist is an editor, sort of. In other words, he is making editorial comments just like this guy at the typewriter. So they treated me that way. They treated me as an editor. This was a new role. I had never had anything like this to happen to me before. I enjoyed it very much.

ED: Well, it made you one of the best known figures in Arkansas within a year. The name of George Fisher became almost synonymous with the *Gazette*. You were easily, along with Orville Henry, I would say, the most familiar people at the *Arkansas Gazette*. If you went anywhere in Arkansas and asked anybody if they knew anything about the *Gazette*, they would say George Fisher. Maybe Orville Henry. So, all of a sudden, you were a famous person in Arkansas. Did that surprise you? You were aware of this, obviously. You got invitations to speak. You were in great demand. You still are, all over Arkansas. For all kinds of civic functions and whatever.

GF: Yes. I grew up without any kind of recognition at all. It was all so new to me that people would recognize me and my name. I was asked several times to be on Channel 2, to be interviewed. There was a lady there – I don't know who she is or who she was at that time. She isn't there anymore. – She asked me the question one day, "How does it feel to have such power in your left hand?" I [wondered], "How are you going to answer a question like that?" It was quite a while before I could answer. I said that I did not see it as power. I see it more as a responsibility. I don't see things as power. I don't know if I answered your question or not.

ED: Yes, you did. It was as much a statement as a question. I think probably you became as influential in politics and public life in this state as the editorials of the *Gazette*. I suspect you were one of the most powerful media voices in Arkansas for a considerable period.

GF: That's the first time I have ever heard that.

ED: [Laughs] You mentioned Channel 2. I want to digress one more time, and go back to 1953 or 1954. You did a TV show called "Phydeaux and His Friends."

That was my first acquaintance with you because I was back in high school.

When we first began to see television in Arkansas – we didn't have a television set – but I saw some television, and you did this thing called . . .

GF: "Phydeaux and His Friends."

ED: Phydeaux - P-H-Y-D-E-A-U-X.

GF: Right.

ED: It was a puppet show, right? Who did that?

GF: Channel 7 ran it. It wasn't Channel 2.

ED: Channel 7, right.

GF: I did the puppets in clay. Rosemary made the puppets out of paper-maché around the mold that I made out of clay. In other words, we did sixteen puppets. This was before I went with the *Gazette*. I was still with the telephone company, doing their yellow page advertising art work.

ED: Did Van Rush write the script?

GF: We both wrote the script. We took turns writing the script. We put the whole show on tape right in this house, the basement of this house. We would put it on tape, and they would play the tape at the station. We would operate the puppets above the table and pantomime to our own voices. Pantomime them to the tapes. The timing was perfect and had to be. We made sure the tape was timed just

right.

ED: They were kind of political parodies.

GF: Political satires. They say the audience was divided halfway between children and adults. Adults usually do not like puppets like children do. We always brought political issues into the script. The kids loved it because of the puppets. They loved the animation of the puppets. The adults understood the satire.

ED: I can recall that I thought they were hilarious. I recalled once Orval Faubus came onto the show when he first got elected, maybe before he took office or something. – or was it Francis Cherry? – It was Francis Cherry or Orval Faubus in 1954, because I watched it that day.

GF: Yes. The way that came about is that we had a chicken puppet, and we called her “Lady Wyandot.” No, first we named it something like “Buffington,” just “Buffington,” or “Lady Buff,” or “Miss Buffington.”

ED: Miss Buffington.

GF: Miss Buffington. In the story line on the show, she ran into some colonel who was a veteran of the Boer War in Africa. He was a rooster. I can’t remember his name. Let me think. His name was Lord Buffington, yes. Anyway, we ran into a possibility of being sued by Disney. He had a copyrighted Wyandot. I believe that is correct, but I will have to think about that. We had to change our name. I haven’t thought of that since that time. Anyway, we had to change her name, so we decided to stage a wedding and marrying Lord [Buffington] on the stage on the show. We decided to invite some of the politicians to let them sit in the

audience while somebody pulled a minister. We got a minister to marry them.

[Laughs] Puppets were being married on TV. A live minister came. – I don't remember his name – Bearden!

ED: Robert E. Lee Bearden.

GF: I believe he was the man who did it. A Methodist minister. We invited Governor Faubus and his wife, the mayor, Woodrow Mann, and Secretary of State Crip Hall. As they came through the door, the camera picked them up. Somebody took them and seated them. It was kind of a farce, you know. It was funny, and everybody enjoyed it. [Laughter]

ED: All right. I had just forgotten about that.

GF: There was some singer on the TV at that time. The guy played the organ and sang on TV. He came over and sang "Oh, Promise Me." [Laughter]

ED: Back to the *Gazette* and your cartooning at the *Gazette*, you continued to have an office – you never had an office at the *Gazette* – you continued to have a separate office, called Fisher Art Service.

GF: Which was one block away.

ED: One block away. How did that work each day?

GF: I would draw the cartoon at Fisher Art Service – sometimes I would draw it here at my house, but most of the time at my office, 309 Center. When I finished with it, I would run it over to the *Gazette*. Even after they hired me full time, I would still do that, up until a couple or three years or four, [before] the *Gazette* went under. I still had an office there at the *Gazette* for two or three years before it

closed.

ED: You didn't use it that much, did you? Did you do a lot drawings . . .

GF: I did for the last two or three years, that is where I did my drawings at the *Gazette*, in that little scruffy office. [Laughter]

ED: On the third floor of the *Gazette*.

GF: I was interviewed by some woman who provided some magazine of some kind – I can't remember. She recalled the modest office that I was in. [Laughter] I remember she said it was very modest. [Laughter]

ED: We all thought you were one of the best cartoonists in the country. You never tried to be syndicated. I gathered that was because it would have required you to draw national cartoons, primarily, if not exclusively, right?

GF: Right. The thing that got me started doing cartoons in West Memphis was local issues. I got back into cartooning because of Orval Faubus and the condition of the state. That was my interest. It was difficult for me to change that interest into national issues. If you did national cartoons, you were competing with some of the best in the country. They were syndicated, and the paper could pick them up for five to ten dollars a day and run them. I thought Arkansas issues were important, issues that are of the area of coverage that the paper covered in circulation. I thought that was important. I never had the desire to be syndicated. The *Washington Monthly* ran a story about that. The story was "Why Cartoonists Sell Out." They used me as an example and talked about the cartoonists who only draw national and international issues and don't draw local ones. The magazine

was pointing out the advantages or the importance of drawing upon issues like Faubus and the Corps of Engineers and things like that that I focused on. They were important because they were local. They said that cartoonists nationally seldom draw locally because they want to be syndicated. Syndicates don't want local cartoons for obvious reasons. [Cartoonists] also want prizes. They enter their work in contests and syndicates don't want local issues. People who select the prizes don't know about local issues.

ED: The judges wouldn't grasp the significance of the cartoon.

GF: The article pointed out that they do it for money, syndication and prizes. They are not drawing for the reasons that I drew them. They used that as an example and my cartoons as an example.

ED: Your most famous character was Orval Faubus, obviously. Faubus came to look more and more like your cartoon.

GF: Right. Every day.

ED: No matter how extreme your cartoon, his features would change to fit that cartoon. He was perfect. You just had Orval Faubus down. He was a recognizable figure. There were some others. Who were some of the others?

GF: Frank White was easy to draw. Of course, Orval Faubus had the big grin and the big nose and the grinning eyes. Frank White had the big eyes and the small nose and hair that looked like a mop. I could draw the hair. For instance, I remember up in Hardy, I was drawing. I was doing a program up there in chalk talk and started drawing politicians. I drew the hair like a mop, and people started

laughing. They knew who it was before I even finished the drawing. They knew it was Frank White.

ED: Well, there was another feature. You could always tell a Frank White cartoon by something else.

GF: Perhaps the half-eaten banana. I did a program the other night at Second Baptist Church on Pleasant Valley Drive. I did a program – the old school band was playing. They asked me to come up while they were on break, during the intermission. They asked me to come and entertain the audience. I talked to them about folklore, the fact that we always think of folklore as something of the past, but it is happening all around us all the time. I asked them how many people remember Orval Faubus and the farkleberry bush or Frank White and the half-eaten banana or Bill Clinton and his tricycle or Tommy Robinson and the Keyhole Cops or the Corps of Engineers Bull Moose and his keep-busy policies. That is folklore. It happens all around us all the time. It's not something just of the past. It has to be established first. It's legendary, mythical, but it has a close association with reality.

ED: Those that you have mentioned all have a basic premise, something these people did or something that happened to them. In the case of Faubus and the farkleberry bush, which you made famous through your cartoons, that came about one day while he was campaigning and driving down the road. There was a bush out there beside the road, and he identified it as a farkleberry bush. None of us had ever heard of farkleberry before, right?

GF: Yes, pretty close. He was in Franklin County and had overalls on one day. He had somebody drive him alongside the road with an axe. He was showing the highway crew how to clean the side of the highway and save the ornamental shrubbery like dogwoods, redbuds, and I added farkleberry to the list. While he was cutting those bushes, a woman stopped and she spoke to him and said, "Are you really you?" He said, "Yes, it is I." She quoted him saying that. Then came along Lou Oberste with his cameras. He just happened to come along.

ED: Lou Oberste – O-B-E-R-S-T-E – He was with the state Parks and Tourism Commission.

GF: He was first published in Parks and then in Park and Tourism and then something else, but I don't know what it is now. He just happened to be coming along, bristling with cameras. He got out of the car and took Faubus's pictures, in overalls, showing the crew how to do this job. The next day Oberste handed out ten photos to the press, saying, "I hope you don't think this is a half publicity stunt." I thought, "This is too good to be true. Whether it was a publicity stunt or not, it is still too good to be true." So I added the word farkleberry. He listed all the shrubbery.

ED: He didn't mention farkleberry?

GF: No. He mentioned the redbuds, dogwoods, and some of those. Thought they should be safe, not this shrub stuff. Of course, the farkleberry is a shrub. It grows wild everywhere. Everybody wants to chop it down because it's no good. The berries are not even any good. I edited in the word farkleberry, so from then on it

became synonymous with Faubus. I'm going to use that Saturday at the Art Center. The same speech about how the farkleberry got started.

ED: In the case of Frank White, the banana reflects his signing the creation science bill to prevent the teaching of evolution in our schools. Wherever evolution was taught, the biblical account of creation had to be taught.

GF: He signed that bill without having ever read it. I think he said he read part of it.

[End of Tape 3, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 3, Side 2]

ED: Another of your best caricature subjects was Governor and Senator David Pryor. From about 1977 forward, every cartoon of Pryor included an old hound dog. The dog was a constant companion, always trotting alongside Pryor, sometimes on a leash. I talked to him recently when we had an interview. He recalls that not exactly with joy, but I think he still enjoys the cartoons and the old dog.

GF: He loves the cartoons.

ED: But that came about in 1977, in his second term as governor. He came up with a plan for cutting state income taxes. He gave the people the option of what to do with the local taxes they raised. He hoped they would use those taxes to help the local government.

GF: Right.

ED: As I recall, he made a speech up in Mountain Home, promoting that plan. Jonesboro, Mountain Home, we have different memories. He recalled it at Mountain Home. I thought it was at Jonesboro. Nevertheless, he said in

explaining it, “we are going to give you that money back and you can use it for whatever purpose you want. You can use it for a new library, or you can even use it to buy a new coon dog. That is your option.” You picked up on it, and it became the “Coon Dog Plan.” It forever after became the “Coon Dog Plan.” That probably contributed to its defeat. I don’t know. It became kind of laughable. I think it was going to be defeated anyway.

GF: He called it the “Arkansas Plan.” That’s what any government would call a plan like that. It became known as the “Coon Dog Plan” because he said people could buy a coon dog or a shot gun with the money, or they could raise taxes locally. Sort of like the federal government. You know, federalism is giving power back to the states and states’ rights. He wanted to give the power back to the counties and local communities.

ED: But the county judges and city fathers did not want that power.

GF: No. I don’t know why they didn’t.

ED: They did not want to be responsible for raising taxes. They wanted the state to give them the money. Dale Bumpers was one of the great figures in the political history of your era. He is not so much identifiable like the banana, or the coon dog, or the farkleberry bush or anything else. As a matter of fact, you always seemed to have a little trouble with Dale Bumpers drawings.

GF: Politicians never really got a handle on Rockefeller either in those years. I always gave them a handle like Coon Dog or tricycle, things like that. I loved to give people handles. I couldn’t get a hold of Bumpers. Other cartoonists have the

same problem. There are people who do not lend themselves satire very much. Now that doesn't mean they are hard to draw. It just means they don't do things that you can get your teeth into it in the way of editorial comment. I guess it is because Bumpers did the things I wanted to see him do. I guess.

ED: He never did anything that was patently foolish.

GF: No.

ED: Or laughable.

GF: No.

ED: Maintained an aura of dignity about him in whatever he did. He wouldn't wear a crazy hat, for example.

GF: He wouldn't build a double wide in his back yard when he was governor and things like that. [Laughter] He wouldn't do things like that. Faubus did things like that, you know? He invited some unfortunate kids to pay a visit to the Governor's Mansion one year. He even stayed there for a while and got some publicity and all that. Faubus would do those things. Huckabee does. Only way I could get a handle on Pryor was through the Coon Dog, the Coon Dog Plan. I think ol' Pryor meant well all along and did as much good as Bumpers did. But the Coon Dog came along, and I couldn't pass that up. He loved the Coon Dog. Have you been in his office in Washington?

ED: Yes. Also here, he has a little office, or did have, down here on Kavanaugh, above the Family Video store. He has maintained the last year or two a little office that he and Barbara use. He has cartoons all over his office, and there is

the familiar coon dog in all of them. You mentioned Rockefeller, who is another one you had a little trouble with drawing. Except for the big hat and cowboy boots. In about 1967 or so, I believe in his second term as governor, he appointed you to the state Parks, Recreation and Travel Commission. How did that come about? What happened with that? Do you recall?

GF: I recall it just like it was yesterday. Of course, I didn't want it. Somebody died, and they had to fill the office. I had been helping out the people in Stone County to get their Folk Center started. I wanted to get the music started again, not the Folk Center necessarily. I wanted to get the people back to playing again like they used to. We were very successful with that. That's what got the Folk Center started. The people came out of the hills to Mountain View to play again. Everybody wanted to hear them all over the country. They were so exciting that Wilbur Mills decided to build a Folk Center. John Opitz really ran the thing.

ED: Opitz.

GF: John O-P-I-T-Z. First, to get the Folk Center there they had to do such things as have a city sewer department and all that. In order to get a frivolous thing like a folk center, they had to do some other things first. Well, they did those things. It took a long time to do them. Finally, they got the Folk Center. Anytime you talked about Mountain View and the Folk Center, my name came up a lot. Bill Conley . . .

ED: He was Governor Rockefeller's press secretary.

GF: He recommended to Rockefeller that I be appointed to the Parks and Travel

Commission, I guess because of the Mountain View work that I did up there. I tried to beg off. I said that I didn't want that. I am not good at that sort of thing. I don't need to be in politics. – I wasn't the *Gazette* cartoonist at that time. There was no conflict of interest this way.

ED: You were simply running Fisher Art Service, and some of your cartoons were being published.

GF: I felt some conflict of interest, somewhat, since my cartoons were in the *Gazette*, but I wasn't a full-time employee with the paper at the time the appointment was about to come up for approval. The state senate has to approve and confirm appointments. The senators from Pulaski County had to approve it. That's the way it is, isn't it?

ED: Well, the law is that the state senate must confirm them, but the practice is that they will defer to the senator from their district.

GF: So I had drawn a cartoon that just took the hide off Dan Sprick.

ED: Dan T. Sprick was a senator from Little Rock.

GF: From Little Rock. He was outraged at the cartoon. He let everybody know that he was not about to approve of me. Well, I laughed about that because Oscar Alagood came to me – Oscar was a senator at that time. He was a radio and TV man in Little Rock. – He came to me, and we went out to lunch, and he said, “George, you are in trouble. You drew that cartoon about Dan Sprick, and he is about ready to bounce you off of that commission.” I laughed and said, “Is that right?” [Laughter] He said, “I understand how these things work, George. The

paper got you to do that, didn't they? That was not necessarily your idea, was it?"

I said, "Yes, it was my idea. You can go tell Dan Sprick that he can go jump in the river." [Laughter] So you know what the rest of it was.

ED: You did not get confirmed.

GF: Yes, turned down.

ED: They had to appoint somebody else.

GF: Yes. They appointed Jimmy Driftwood, my neighbor up at Timbo. It was for a seven-year term, by the way.

ED: That introduces us to the other topic that I wanted to talk about, your great interest in folklore and folk music in Arkansas. You have had a great role in reviving and preserving and promoting this traditional lore of music in Arkansas. I guess that has always been an interest of yours. Talk a little bit about how you got involved in that and how you formed the Rackensack Society.

GF: When I was in Beebe, my dad used to get me to sing in the quartet, even before my voice changed. We used to sing gospel music. I was pretty good. My voice had not changed, but the men in the quartet were grown men, and it kind of gnawed on them to have me in the quartet. I sang alto like a woman would sing. During those bleak days when we didn't have any money or anything, we always listened to the radio. We could not go to concerts or things like that, but we listened to the radio. I used to listen to the Grand Ol' Opry, WLS out of Chicago, Barn Dance. Dad used to tell about life in Tennessee. I don't know. I just developed an interest in the traditional lore of Arkansas. I always loved folk

music. Roy Danuser from Mountain Home got me to design a village, a 1890 vintage mountain village, that he was going to build in Bull Shoals. He was going to build the village by going about the Ozarks, finding buildings of that vintage and moving them to the location. I drew what I thought a village was like in that period. We bought the buildings that fit my drawings. One of the places that we went to was down in Timbo, and we bumped into Jimmy Driftwood in his backyard. That was the first time I had ever met Jimmy. He had his dog in his lap and was pulling ticks off him. [Laughter] That's where I first met Jimmy. He just welcomed us into his living room. He sat us down, and his wife brought in dinner, a lunch, and we didn't even ask for it. She just brought it in and gave it to us.

ED: He was already by that time pretty well known for ballads.

GF: Yes. "Tennessee Stud" at that time. That's how I got linked or hooked up with him. I got him to look for a house. I wanted to buy a house . . . a place I could come to on weekends. The house next door to him became available. The people who lived there retired. I don't know what they retired from. He was a farmer, I believe. We moved into Mountain View and bought that house. I got involved with Jimmy. He had an idea. He said, "I want to tell you about my idea. People all over this country know how to play musical instruments. World War II came along, and they stopped playing musical instruments. They put them above the mantle over the fireplace, and they have been there ever since. I would like to get them back together." And so from then we got his pick-up and went all over Blue

Mountain, looking for these guys and talking to them to get them to come down to the doctor's office in Mountain View to just get together to play and sing.

They were a little reluctant at first, most of them were. They thought people did not want to hear that ol' music anymore.

ED: Brookmiller Shannon.

GF: Shannon was one of them and the Morrison Brothers and others from all over that part of the country. People playing mandolins, banjos, fiddles. All over that country, people had a musical instrument of some kind. At first, it was hard to get them to do that. A few of them did and that got some attention. They met in Dr. Hollister's office, and everybody started talking about it, getting those guys together and playing music. It was something nobody had heard in a long, long time. You know, that ol' mountain music. Not like Nashville.

ED: Not like country and western.

GF: Not country and western, but ol' folk music. It got attention out in Chicago and places like that. From Washington and Cleveland, folklore enthusiasts and anthropologists would come. These ol' timers began noticing that. "They came to hear us. We must be important. We must be good." It started to grow. After a few years people from the networks came. NBC came here. People did documentaries on the folklore of that isolated area. There were no paved highways in Stone County before World War II. That's how isolated they were. Many of them had not even been out of the county before.

ED: I remember my wife Elaine's Uncle Floyd Holland, a tiny little old man. Before

we got married, we were up in the hills, and I had met Uncle Floyd. He said, “Where are you from?” I said, “Little Rock.” He said, “Boy, that Little Rock, that place sure had changed from the last time I was there.” I said, “When was that?” He said, “1937!” [Laughter] This was about 1965. [Laughter] Go ahead.

GF: What do you think he would do if he came back there now? An old boy I went to visit once there on top of the mountain , I've got some tapes on him. – I taped a bunch of stuff from the old timers up there. For years and years I would take a tape recorder. – Many people liked hymns. They would say, “No, I don't think I know any of them.” So I would ask them to think a little bit. “Don't you know some old songs you could sing on my tape?” “No, I don't reckon I do.” “Well, so and so on down the road said you knew quite a few.” “They did?” And maybe I would get them to sing one song or two or three, and after a while you would have been there an hour. [Laughter] They continued to sing. Uncle Berry Sutterfield, I tried to get him to sing some. He said, “Oh, I don't feel like it today.” “Oh, really?” “Well, I got some Yellowstone out there in the car, do you drink?” “Oh, I take a drink now and then.” “Well, would you like some?” “Yeah!” So I had about a half pint out in the car. He took that half pint and turned it up, and he drank the whole thing without taking it down from the air. Rosemary was with me, and neither one of us could believe it.

ED: Did he sing then? [Laughter]

GF: Yes. He wipes his mouth with his sleeve and he says, “Now, what do you want to hear?” [Laughter] He knew some great songs. He knew some songs that I have

on tape that Vance Randolph didn't have in his books. In some of the songs that Vance Randolph had in his books, he would have dashes where they didn't know the entire the song. [Sutterfield] knew them.

ED: Now this was Berry Sutterfield?

GF: Uncle B-E-R-R-Y. Berry, that's what they called him. Berry Sutterfield.

ED: S-U-T-T-E-R-

GF: It could be Barry. They don't always pronounce things up there the way you think. Berry Sutterfield is what they called him.

ED: You formed the Arkansas Rackensack Society.

GF: Jimmy Driftwood and I got a bunch of people together who agreed to come down to the doctor's office. We sat in his kitchen one day. We decided to call it the Rackensack Folklore Society. That was his name for it, not mine. He knew what Rackensack meant. At least he thought he did. He made it up, I think. He's good at making things up. [Laughter] Fabricating tales, he's good at that. He thought it was an Indian term, but nobody really knows. It's an old folk term that a lot of people who come here from other places have said they remember their folks talking about. The land of Rackensack. Anyway, we decided to have it on the third week of April. That was thirty something years ago. The third week in April, that's the weekend the dogwoods are in full bloom. It's been on the third weekend in April ever since. After that, someone told me that there were more Stone County people living in Pulaski County than there are in Stone County. I started looking around, and there were a bunch of people from the hills.

Independence County, Stone County, Izard County, Searcy County – they were all around Pulaski County. I decided to start a Folklore Society here. The Arts Center was receptive to that. It is an art form. They said they would be willing to give me space.

ED: So when you first organized the meeting in the doctor's office back then, that was the first folk music festival?

GF: Since World War II.

ED: It's blossomed from that day and, as you say, the third weekend in April ever since.

GF: It went from there to the Stone County courthouse. They met at the courthouse for several years until the Folk Center was built. Then Jimmy fell out with the people at the Folk Center. I think Jimmy was the music and program director at the Folk Center for a year or two. He couldn't get along with the people.

ED: They had a philosophical difference about the purity of the music. The Folk Center wanted to use a lot of electronic . . .

GF: Well, no, it was notions like he didn't want big basses, upright basses. That's not how he remembered the old folk music, so he was against that. He would not allow it, to play big basses. It was problematical whether he was right about that. They used bass tubs and things like that.

ED: Jawbones of an ass.

GF: Yes. Jawbones.

ED: Handsaws. They played handsaws and all those kinds of instruments.

GF: Handsaws, musical saws, and pick ‘n’ bow. You put the bow like a bow and arrow up to your mouth and make music with it and that sort of thing. They split into three different groups up there, factions. This is what mountain people will do. One of them was square dance people – horsey, they called them. [Laughs]

ED: One thing that came out of all of this – well, it didn’t really come out of it, I suppose, but it had some affect on your cartoons. That old house you purchased next door to Jimmy Driftwood in Timbo became the prototype for the Old Guard Rest Home in your cartoons, not just the Old Guard Rest Home, but often it was a metaphor in cartoons. Those old ramshackle mountain buildings were in your cartoons, plus a lot of other rustic country metaphors that populated your cartoons.

GF: Fields, barns, front porches. All the porches in the hills, all the houses have front porches. They always sat on the front porches and watched people go by. In the city they have back porches, they don’t have front porches. That place I bought up there in Timbo was a model for the Old Guard Rest Home.

ED: Your cartoons often looked at the world from the vantage point of the front porch of these old country mountaineer places, how they would react to developments around the world or down in Little Rock. That made it so enormously popular across Arkansas, but it might not have gone over so well if you were syndicated nationally. I don’t know.

GF: No, it wouldn’t.

ED: They wouldn’t have known what it was all about in New York City or San

Francisco.

GF: They wouldn't understand the porch goes all the way across the front. What's it doing going all the way across the house? They don't do that up there. The cartoon I have of the old timer standing on his front porch, looking across the field, his wife standing by his side – he sees a mobile home looming over there, getting hooked up across the field in the trees, compared to his old shack. He said, "Well there goes the neighborhood." [Laughs] That's probably what you would find there.

ED: It's still relevant today to this week's news.

GF: Exactly.

ED: Well, all right George, I think this takes us about up to the point where we were the first time we did this interview. [Note: Inadvertent recording or tape-copying error left original tape blank. This interview was held to recover the missing interview.] Unless you have something else you can recall in thirty seconds or a minute we will close it out.

GF: We should mention that I do cartoons for the *Arkansas Times*.

ED: Yes, you are continuing to draw for the *Arkansas Times*.

GF: I do caricatures for gifts, a personal thing for people. I do those and help businesses with advertising specials.

[End of Tape 2, Side 2]

[Beginning of Tape 3, Side 1]

ED: We've talked about the political subjects of your cartoons. One of the great

political figures of the era was Wilbur Mills, yet he was not often caricatured, even when demon whiskey disgraced him nationally. Was Wilbur a taboo subject? Wilbur might have been a sacred cow because he was such an important person in Arkansas and, generally, a good man and did great things for the state. Some of his weaknesses later in life were hard to deal with.

GF: I had maybe a couple of cartoons that were favorable to Wilbur Mills, but most of them were not favorable. And I never knew quite why that was, but he did things that made good cartoons. He flubbed up with Fanne Fox, and we suddenly learned that he was a raging alcoholic. So his stock started going down and that's when I started drawing cartoons about him, but I think the feeling of the *Gazette* was that he had a drinking problem, but let's give him another chance to make it good. And so, with that, they turned down a couple of cartoons on Wilbur.

ED: I guess there were other occasions where there were questions about public taste. At the Arkansas Art Center, there was what we called the "Salon de Refusé."

GF: Refusé, yes.

ED: Cartoons that were turned down for matters of taste or else . . .

GF: Libel.

ED: . . . or libel, or, in some cases, maybe I really didn't seriously intend them to be published.

GF: That's right.

ED: You might talk about a couple of those because those are interesting. There was one cartoon that you did about the time that Wilbur had his problems with Fanne

Fox. Congressman Wayne Hayes of Ohio had problems with sex on his staff, hiring and promoting secretaries with dubious secretarial skills.

GF: Hayes. From Ohio. Yes.

ED: Congress was consumed with sex scandals in the 1970s. You drew a cartoon of the Capitol . . .

GF: Dome.

ED: . . . with the federal Capitol dome, which was kind of . . .

GF: A woman's breast.

ED: A woman's breast, and that's all there was to the cartoon.

GF: Yes.

ED: And that didn't run.

GF: Right.

ED: Did you submit that for publication?

GF: No, cartoons sometimes need to be drawn for fun.

ED: That would need to be drawn.

GF: Yes. And get it out of my system.

ED: There's another one of David Pryor, when he was governor of Arkansas and came up with the Arkansas Plan to shift state taxes and expenditures to the local level. The legislature just cut it to pieces.

GF: Uh-huh.

ED: And you drew a cartoon of Pryor, lying on the gurney as a . . . surgical specimen, I guess.

- GF: That's Rembrandt's "Anatomy Lesson."
- ED: So it's a take off on Rembrandt's . . .
- GF: Rembrandt's painting of the physicians.
- ED: Yes. You have all these physicians gathered around the prone body of David Pryor, and they're looking over his abdomen. The surgeons are members of the legislature.
- GF: The lead surgeon happens to be Ben Allen, who later became fast friends of David Pryor, you remember? And of Bumpers. But Ben has his scissors . . .
- ED: Scalpel or scissors or something.
- GF: Scalpel, pulling tendons out of his arms in demonstration. You don't do that in the newspaper.
- ED: People are squeamish about it.
- GF: Photographs of accidents showing somebody's body parts, part of a hand showing, blood and all that. Readers don't accept that. It's too gruesome. So that's the reason. Jim Powell, I think, goaded me into doing "the anatomy lesson."
- ED: And then he withdrew it?
- GF: Well, neither one of us expected it to be printed because, you know, you don't do a thing like that and expect people to accept it.
- ED: You thought the readers might be a little squeamish at the breakfast table in the morning?
- GF: Yes.

ED: Another one was of Orval Faubus as a monkey.

GF: Oh, yes. Yes.

ED: And he says, "I'm not yet ready to accept evolution."

GF: I think I did that sketch on a piece of typing paper, but I recently published it for my latest book.

ED: And the cartoon of Nixon in the manger.

GF: In the manger.

ED: He's the baby Jesus.

GF: He's a little large for the manger, but he's saying . . .

ED: "You say there'll be gifts?"

GF: I didn't expect that to be used, although they might have printed it.

ED: But religious metaphors sometimes rub people the wrong way. You often got a lot of trouble with those themes.

GF: I got a lot of criticism for using religious subjects.

ED: Complaints from people who thought that you were making fun of . . .

GF: Their religion.

ED: . . . religion.

GF: I got more criticism for using religious metaphors than any other subject, and it got me in trouble. I mean real trouble. I remember the donkey after Jimmy Carter won the Democratic nomination. I drew a donkey coming up out of the water. The caption was "Born Again." That got me in trouble.

ED: When you say trouble, you mean a lot of complaints . . .

GF: A lot of people wrote letters to the editor, complaining about that cartoon. But I thought that “Born Again” and “Baptism” were public domain.

ED: Do you think that’s because Arkansas is the center of the Bible Belt? Maybe if you were drawing it someplace else, it would not have been a problem?

GF: Yes. Still, if you draw a cartoon about the Catholics in Boston, for instance, you might get in the same trouble. But down here you stay away from — [laughs] it’s something to consider if you don’t want to annoy people for the wrong reasons. But I’ve always felt those things are fair subjects for cartoons or editorials.

ED: You sometimes upset the Catholics.

GF: Oh, gosh, yes. The subject came up in Washington about tuition tax credit for schools. Well, now, it’s back again. But when it first came out, I thought that that was against the separation of church and state and that they shouldn’t do that. And the Catholics were supporting it because they have private funding for church schools. And Senator Patrick Moynihan, for instance, was one of the ones trying to push it through the Congress. I showed Moynihan as a priest, sitting on a couch trying to make love to this beautiful woman. The woman was labeled “public schools.” Anyway, he was waving the incense over her head and trying to kiss her, and somehow or another, it slipped through and got printed. That coincided with the time I was supposed to get an award from the National Conference of Christians and Jews.

ED: Humanitarian Award.

GF: Yes. The Catholic Church is a part of the NCCJ, and instead of awarding it to me at the next banquet, which was a month away from the cartoon publication, they awarded it to me in a room in a bank building where few people were there to see it. [Laughs] It didn't get any coverage at all in the paper. But I don't think the people who took that seriously were a cross section of the Catholic people.

ED: Well, Moynihan asked for a copy of it, didn't he?

GF: Moynihan loved it! He called up the office. He said, "That's the best cartoon I ever saw on that subject." Moynihan thought it was a powerful cartoon.

ED: He later wrote an introduction . . .

GF: Yes.

ED: . . . for one of your cartoon books.

GF: Yes.

ED: It's the foreword or something for one of your books.

GF: The book, *There You Go Again*. . . .

ED: Did you ever get much personal abuse as a result of your cartoons? People calling and harassing you?

GF: Oh, yes.

ED: Threats, or anything like that? At home or at work?

GF: Yes. I never minded so much when they called me directly, but when they called my wife and told her to "tell your husband to watch it," she'd say, "Watch what?" "Well, just watch it, that's all." They won't go into details. She used to get a lot of those calls. When they called me, I'd talk to them about the cartoon. That's

okay if people do disagree. And I was always kind to people. I always treated them with dignity. That way they're not so scornful.

ED: Were these usually about race? Was that one factor that would get people riled?

GF: Race was one of them, yes.

ED: It would get them stirred up?

GF: Race, of course, and religion. But that's okay. That means somebody read it, and that they were readers, so I never objected to that.

ED: What cartoon got the greatest reaction? The *Challenger* explosion?

GF: Yes. The *Challenger*. After the *Challenger* spacecraft exploded, where school kids around the country could witness somebody being killed on television. They watched it from schools, and they knew that a teacher was on board. It shocked the nation, and that cartoon of the eagle, looking up into space and shedding a tear, that connected with people. Another one was Faubus addressing the legislature, remember?

ED: Yes.

GF: And everybody in the audience, including the galleries, including the people sitting behind him, including the microphone, including everything - the pictures on the wall - all looked like Faubus.

ED: Including a mouse . . .

GF: Yes, the mouse.

ED: . . . peeking out from the lectern.

GF: From a hole down below the platform. The mouse had a nose like old Faubus.

ED: And it seemed to capture everything. This guy who so thoroughly dominated the politics of the state for his long tenure. It was a perfect metaphor. . . .

GF: I got the idea from attending a party one night. I talked to Orval Cheney at the party, a Faubus appointee to some commission, and he looked sort of like Faubus, had the same mannerisms of Faubus. He gestured like Faubus did. That's where it first took hold. And the next day I thought, "Well, that sums up the state's predicament." It took a long time to draw that many faces, though.

ED: Well, it seemed to be printed many times, and I noticed not so long ago, like within the last month, one of the *Democrat Gazette* cartoons picked up the idea and used it in another venue. I think it might've been Bill Clinton's last State of the Union message. Someplace, and if I'm not mistaken it was in the *Democrat Gazette*.

GF: I remember something like that.

ED: The cartoon obviously picked up on that idea.

GF: Well, it could be, but I don't remember the cartoon exactly. . . .

ED: Talk a little about the *Gazette*. What kind of place the *Gazette* was to work for? Did you ever have the notion when you were drawing cartoons for the *Gazette* that you were working at a special place? Different from any other kind of newspaper? That it was more than just a job?

GF: I was very happy to be doing what I was doing. All my life I'd wanted to work for a newspaper, but I had never worked, besides the United States Army, for somebody else besides the *West Memphis News*. And the telephone company.

For twenty years, I'd always had my own business, and I didn't like taking orders from somebody else! But I soon learned. When I went to work for the *Gazette*, I found that people were so receptive to my ideas that it was kind of astounding that they wanted what I did. This was a new thing. I'd never been in that situation before. I wondered how to draw a cartoon. I wondered, "Am I trying to please the people at the *Gazette* or myself or the readers?" I soon learned that, much to my surprise, actually, that the *Gazette* wanted what I did. In other words, they wanted my own ideas, and that was something new to me. So I soon got used to that and realized that I had become a big shot. [Laughs] I walked on air. But that's the way it should be, of course. The happiest time of my life was working for the *Gazette* because, finally, I was a professional; I was communicating with people and doing what I like to do — draw. And trying to keep up with what was going on so that I wouldn't damage anything by my drawing, wouldn't hurt people unnecessarily, or try to put across an idea I didn't believe in. It's always a happy moment in my life to open a paper in the morning and see my cartoons. If you invent something, you see the final product and you see it accepted, then you know the way I felt when I saw my cartoons in the paper. I had a lot of pride.

ED: You later became almost a metaphor for the *Gazette*. Franchise *Gazette* readers, you could ask them about the *Gazette*, they'd associate you with the *Gazette*, George Fisher's cartoons were what the paper represented. It was unusual. Let me ask you about the whole approach to drawing political cartoons. I shouldn't

really pick on the *Democrat Gazette*, but they have a couple of guys over there who are talented artists, craftsmen, who draw funny cartoons, but, more often than not, they are simply gags. Funny situations. . . . Political cartoons are simply gags. . . . Your approach always seemed to be not just to look for a gag; you used metaphors to demonstrate your ideas. Principles and ideas seemed to guide your drawing. It was a mission and not simply the chance to get a laugh. Was that a conscious effort on your part?

GF: Yes. Like any newspaperman writing editorials, for instance, you have to have an issue. You don't ask a person to write an editorial that's against his beliefs. Or make a speech against what he believes. It's the same way, I learned, with cartoons. It's got to be something that you can believe. And sometimes it doesn't necessarily dovetail with the position of the newspaper, but many times the paper will go along with it if it is not diametrically opposed to their position.

ED: It often seems to me that the *Democrat Gazette* cartoonists and many others are simply drawing a comic strip. It's a gag each day, with some kind of political motif, but it's simply a comic strip. In fact, some of them do comic strips. They draw comic strips and then one big comic strip on the editorial page.

GF: I can think of about six cartoonists in the country that draw strips along with their editorial cartoon. I don't know where they get the time to do both because both are full-time jobs. But they do it anyway. I think [John] Deering at the *Democrat Gazette* does something called "Strange Brew," that he syndicates. He does one a day. I don't know where he gets the time for that. I've talked to some of the

people at the *Gazette* like Hugh Patterson and Jim Powell. They agree with me that five cartoons a week is a full-time job. And they never asked me to do any other work for the *Gazette*, that is, illustrations and other things the *Democrat-Gazette* does a lot of. You can see four or five on their editorial page every day. Where you get the time for all of that, I don't know. Sometimes on Sundays you see a whole page done by Deering, a colorful painting, drawing, or sketch of some kind. . . .

ED: Big pieces for the Sports Section.

GF: Where do they get the time to do all those things? I think it takes away from the time, your reading time and the time it takes to come up with a cartoon. You have just so many hours in the day. I don't think the paper should ask a person doing five cartoons a week to do all that stuff. Maybe they pay them extra. Maybe they don't sleep a lot. Or eat. But I just think that if a person is going to be a cartoonist, an editorial cartoonist, he should devote his full time to that. . . .

ED: Another popular feature of the editorial pages was that you always hid the word "Snooky", the nickname for your wife, somewhere in the cartoon. When did you start doing that?

GF: Almost immediately when I came full time with the *Gazette*. About 1976. Her name when I married her after the war was Snook, a good old English name. All the students from the college over there in England called her Snooky, and I still do. And so I hid Snooky in the paper every day in the cartoon.

ED: Was that a game for her originally?

GF: Just kind of a frivolous little thing between myself and her. And I didn't know that anybody would ever see it because it was hidden sometimes so that you had to be looking for it to find it, but it soon caught on after a while and just everybody knew it was in there. It became a game with people. Dorothy Harwell was my secretary, and she always knew where I hid it. She also knew when I would inadvertently leave it out. People would call up when I'd forget to put it in, and she'd tell them, "He forgot it that day." Somebody called from Pine Bluff and said, "I've been looking for Snooky in a certain cartoon for nine months." He said, "Every morning when I come to work, I pull the drawer out and I get that cartoon out and I look at it again. For nine months," he said, "I've been doing that. Now, where in the hell is it?" After he gave her the date of publication, she said, "He forgot to put it in that day." He said, "I'm going to kill that man."

[Laughter]

GF: Looking for Snooky became a big thing.

ED: I suspect that most mornings on the *Gazette* editorial page we got at least one call from somebody, saying, "I can't find Snooky in this morning's cartoon. Where is it?" And so, the secretary at the *Gazette* would . . .

GF: . . . tell them to call Fisher.

ED: . . . would find it or tell them to call Dorothy Harwell, or something, or would come ask one of us. And sometimes we'd all have to find it and tell her. And then some mornings, when you did forget it, we'd be . . .

GF: Pandemonium.

ED: It'd be pandemonium.

GF: The switchboard would light up.

ED: People calling in demanding to know where it was. Dozens and dozens of people.

[End of Tape 3, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 3, Side 2]

ED: We were talking about Snooky and how that became such a popular feature and, probably, attracted readers to the editorial page.

GF: More so than the cartoon itself, I sometimes thought. I'm convinced of that.

Because so many young people saw the cartoon who wouldn't ordinarily read the cartoon if it didn't have Snooky in it.

ED: Another enduring metaphor of Fisher cartoons was the Old Guard Rest Homes.

When did you first do an Old Guard Rest Home? How did you get the idea?

GF: Do you remember when Paul Van Dalsen was finally defeated? The lion of the legislature was finally defeated. It occurred to me, and I don't know why it occurred me, that there should be a place for him. And how about all the rest of them that went the same route that he did? So I showed the old porch of an old house, a post World War I vintage house. I showed these old guys sitting on the porch, Orval Faubus and Bruce Bennett, Mutt Jones, and Marion Crank. They were sitting on the porch . . .

ED: Jim Johnson?

GF: No, Jim wasn't one of the first ones. And they were sitting on the front porch, looking down the pike. Here came somebody carrying suitcases — a big, hefty

man, carrying suitcases, and he looked beaten. And they were saying, "It looks like it might be . . . Yes, it is, it's old Paul." And I didn't have to label Van Dalsen because everybody knew it was Paul Van Dalsen. That was the first one. The Old Guard Rest Home series got to be such a big hit, I thought I'd keep drawing them. So I did. And I guess I did about a hundred Old Guard Rest Home cartoons. They became everybody's favorite.

ED: People were debating whether to bring people in . . .

GF: Right.

ED: . . . or else discussing the issues of the day.

GF: During the post-Faubus era, you know, Faubus was on the porch, and he was the head Old Guard, the first Old Guard. In history the people who surrounded Napoleon when he came back from Elba were called the Old Guard, and that's where I got the idea for the Old Guard. There are a lot of old guards around everywhere in politics. Anyway, that was the first Old Guard Rest Home, and Faubus, who is, of course, on the porch, is Napoleon. All the rest of his cronies were on the porch as well. During the years, they kept adding new members. When politicians get defeated, they have to have someplace to stay. A politician has to have a place to stay and a room to sleep in and some people around him who understand him and share the same thoughts that he has. The Old Guard was the proper place for all these people, but they have to share the same philosophy, more or less, as Orval Faubus because he was the first one in the home. And he was the one who said that they're accepted into the home or if they're not. Over

the years, they've had people that they've had to turn down. I think they turned down Sheffield Nelson and the black man who ran for governor, W. Dean Goldsey. They turned Goldsey down because Faubus thought that if he was accepted, the members might make trouble; it might cause friction among the members. It would cause conflict, and we don't need conflict. Of course, this goes back to the crisis at Central High. Faubus didn't let the black students in because there would be trouble. He didn't want controversy. So . . .

ED: You let a couple of the Republicans in.

GF: It turned out that the last members there were Republicans. There's Jim Johnson and Frank White, Tommy Robinson, and Judy Petty.

ED: Ed Bethune, did he get in?

GF: Yes, he did, but he soon left the home and went on a cruise down in the Caribbean and never came back. Most of these were turncoats, Democrats at one time and turncoats. And all we have in the home now are Republicans, except maybe Casey Laman. He's still alive, but he's not in office anymore.

ED: What does the . . .

GF: Excuse me, by the way, I had breakfast one time with Bill Maulden, and Bill was fascinated with Old Guard. He said, "Nobody has ever done that before," take real live people and make a rest home for old, retired has-beens and their sycophants. It had never been done before. He was absolutely enthralled by the Old Guard Rest Home. He said I ought to keep it up, and I did. That was ten, twelve years ago.

ED: Bill Maulden, or was it Herb Block?

GF: Bill Maulden. Yes, you know, he was . . .

ED: He was at the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*.

GF: After he was cartoonist for the *Stars and Stripes* during World War II. The Joe and Willie series. “Joe and Willie” in World War II were classics. A lot of brass in the Army hated him and wanted him to quit, including General Patton. Patton hauled him in once and told him: “Cut that out. You’re hurting morale of the troops by showing the brass, officers, in such a bad light. We want you to quit that.” He didn’t quit. [Laughs] After that, I think his cartoons were even more pungent.

Ed: Great cartoons. What does the fall of the *Arkansas Gazette*, the death of the *Arkansas Gazette*, what does that mean to Arkansas?

GF: It means that a part of Arkansas died. And a part of me died. And a part of a lot of other people died with it. Since 1819, it has largely been the conscience of Arkansas. And you go back and read the history of the *Gazette*. They usually were on the right side. History has shown that they were on the right side so much of the time.

ED: Much of the time they were. There are a few lapses in our history.

GF: I’d have to name a few, but I’m talking about the big issues, the issues that were important to the country itself. Arkansas has been the *Gazette*, really, and when it died; the people lost a part of themselves. Everybody tells me that. I do talks to teachers. I’d have teachers come up to me --- this happened even a couple of

months ago --- with tears in their eyes, saying how much they miss the *Gazette*. And it's not fake. It's not that they're just trying to impress me. I think they really mean it. I think it shows what people thought about the *Gazette*. For all its good, for all its bad, the *Gazette* meant so much to everybody. People let me know everywhere I go how much they miss the *Gazette*, "You lost the *Gazette*, and I am so sorry." Bill Clinton once told me immediately after the *Gazette* closed, "We're all going to miss the *Gazette*." You know, almost as if I had lost a member of the family. Clinton was just that concerned about it. But he's just like the rest of the people. I have never been the same since. One reason is that I'm getting older, but [laughs] I'm not getting used to it. I've tried to recuperate in a lot of ways. I thought I'd found a home there to live the rest of my life at the *Gazette*, but, suddenly, it turned out that I couldn't. I didn't have any choice anymore. But we all had to face that.

ED: It certainly changed the political life of the state.

GF: For good or for bad, I don't know. But the state did change . . . the state in so many ways: education, politics, social circumstances, Arkansas's stature in the nation.

ED: All right.

[End of Interview]