

Gazette Project

Interview with

Maria Henson,
Austin, Texas,
2 July 2001

Interviewer: Denise Beeber

Denise Beeber: This is Denise Beeber. I'm interviewing Maria Henson for the oral history project. Maria, is it okay that we use this tape and its transcription for the oral history project?

Maria Henson: Yes.

DB: Would you spell your name for me?

MH: M-A-R-I-A H-E-N-S-O-N.

DB: And what is your current job?

MH: I just changed jobs two weeks ago. I'm assistant managing editor for enterprise at the *Austin American Statesman*. It's the first one they've ever had. I started that about two weeks ago. Before that, I was deputy editorial page editor.

DB: Let's start at the beginning. Where were you born?

MH: Marion, North Carolina, June 17, 1960.

DB: What did your folks do? What was it like growing up in Marion?

MH: I grew up in Raleigh, mostly, in the state capitol of North Carolina. So I consider North Carolina my home state. My father was a star athlete who then went on to become an insurance executive in North Carolina. My mother was an elementary school teacher who eventually left teaching to raise three children.

DB: Are you the oldest?

MH: I am the oldest of three. I have a younger sister five years younger, and a brother eight years younger. All of us were born in North Carolina.

DB: Where did you go to school?

MH: I finished high school, because we moved my senior year, in Louisville, Kentucky, at Ballard High School. And from there, I went back to North Carolina to college, to Wake Forest University. I was there from 1978 and graduated in 1982 with a bachelor of arts in English. My minor was art history. I took a few journalism classes, but we didn't have a journalism major.

DB: So you were interested in journalism even before?

MH: No, I wasn't on the school paper in high school. I wasn't on the yearbook staff.

DB: What got you interested in journalism classes in college?

MH: Beginning my sophomore year — that was when you were supposed to declare your major. I lived in a girls' hall, and we kept having upperclasswomen come in and talk to us about different majors. I was really liking economics at the time until I got my midterm grade, and I wasn't so happy with that. And I thought, "I don't know." And my father was pressuring me to go into business, and I wasn't interested. But I didn't want to teach at that time, either. And this upperclasswoman named Robin Bird came in and said, "You know, you could be an English major and be a journalist and that is really fun." She told about how she went home to her small-town paper in North Carolina for the January term we had, when a lot of students would go abroad or go do a special internship. And I

thought, “That’s a good idea.” By this time — because my freshman year, my parents had moved to Little Rock because my father became vice president for Arkansas Farm Bureau Insurance. That’s why we ended up in Little Rock. I knew nothing about the place. I was furious at my family for moving yet again to a place. I didn’t exactly know where it was on a map. I’d never paid attention to it. I cried all the way across the Mississippi River, coming across from Memphis, and I started seeing the Delta and seeing the houses along the way and I thought, “Where have my parents taken me now? This is just too bleak.” I ended up growing to love that state and really appreciating that drive through the Delta, in fact, but at that time I was shocked. So here I was in my sophomore year, and my parents had lived there maybe seven months by that time, and I thought, “Well, this is a way to give Arkansas and Little Rock a chance. I’m going to see if I can grow to like the city by learning more about it.” So I wrote letters to the *Democrat* and the *Gazette*, and said, “I am a college student, and I’d like an unpaid — ” I think that was the key word — “unpaid internship.” And the *Gazette* was the — certainly at that time — we were big newspaper readers in my family. We knew that was the older, more respected newspaper in town. So I was very happy to get a letter back: “Yes, come on. You can spend January here in the *Gazette* newsroom.” Because I wanted to shadow reporters and photographers, anybody who would let me tag along, just to get a taste of what this career was like, and that’s what I did.

DB: So this was during your sophomore year in college?

MH: Yes, January of 1980. And I was really scared, going into this newspaper. I didn't know anyone. I had not a single contact. I was just showing up cold.

DB: Did they pair you with anybody?

MH: The whole four weeks, I would get to go out with different people. So I went with Bob Stover to the courthouse. He's a managing editor now in Florida. I went with Brenda Tirey to the State Capitol, and I remember seeing Steele Hayes, Jr., at work, and he was this Yale graduate with the houndstooth coat with the suede patches on the elbow, and he smoked a pipe, and he was only probably in his twenties, but I thought that was the most debonair person, and he seemed so smart. He was writing about bills and laws. This was my first time to see any of that in action. I was really sold on it when I went out with Steve Keesee, the photographer. Julia, who was the fashion editor, was doing a piece about fur coats and about how furs were caught. And let me say, in Austin this would never play well with the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals crowd. She was writing about animals and the fur industry in Arkansas. So the photographer's role was to go out and shoot photographs, and I went with Steve before dawn — he was combining two assignments that day — and it was so wonderful. We were out near Brinkley, watching ducks fly at dawn, and he was shooting photographs of these ducks. And then we had to stop by a taxidermist's shop. And that, again, as a sheltered, middle-class kid whose big excitement had been going to the mall, I walked into this grungy old place, and they opened a refrigerator and dead animals are stacked up, and these are going to be made into

fur coats and, I mean, I thought, “This is just astonishing. Gross and astonishing.” But what a career! I was hooked. I was totally hooked. All those people at the *Gazette* took time, and — there were more of them I went around with — and told me about their jobs and told me why they liked to be journalists and what their days were like. Bill Shelton, the city editor, the first day or two I was there, said, “The first thing you have to know is the *Gazette* style.” So they put me in a corner, near the windows behind Bill Shelton’s desk, and I had this little spot where I was sitting, thinking I might read a style book — I think I’d heard from other people that journalism had that — he brought this big manila folder with little pieces of paper sticking out in every direction, and my memory is that it was a foot and a half high. And I was supposed to read what was referred to as the “style pile.” And so I did.

DB: Did it take your whole day?

MH: Oh, I just kept reading these little scraps of paper and I just remember thinking, “Oh, my gosh, this little piece of paper is dated 1910!” And it was J.N. Heiskell. And there are things I still remember to this day – never use the word “nation” unless you are referring to “Indian nation.” “Drouth.” “Employe with one e.” Why is that? All these things and they were all little tiny yellowed — and I mean really yellowed — pieces of scrap paper, and you were supposed to memorize it. But obviously I didn’t. I did think, “Oh, my gosh, how could anyone remember all these things?”

DB: The scary thing is, there were people on staff there who did memorize all that

stuff.

MH: Yes. How could you not, when you had the editor from 1910 to 1972 and you'd known him? So, that's a long way to tell you that the *Gazette* is what hooked me. That's why I became a journalist, because of that experience in January. I decided I am a person who likes to write, but really my inclination was to be an English major. And, all of a sudden, I discovered a profession that had a public service component that I'd never considered before. So it took me by surprise [that] you could be in this job, write, report, ask anybody questions, and do the public good by what you found out. And those people I met at the newspaper really had that attitude. So I learned it from them, just watching them that month.

DB: So you went back to school?

MH: I went back to school and joined the school paper. Joined the *Old Gold and Black*. And started taking journalism courses. Had a wonderful advisor there, Bynum Shaw, who had been at the *Baltimore Sun* and covered the Berlin Wall going up. At a little liberal arts college, he looked out for his people and had had some good journalists come through there. And so then it was coming time for the summer, and I thought, "Well, I'd like a summer internship, too." But the *Gazette* didn't quite get back to me because I was hoping for a paid internship. And guess what? The *Democrat* — all of the sudden, I was like a hot property, I guess, because I had been at the *Gazette* for a month. So I got a summer internship at the *Arkansas Democrat*.

DB: And how did you find the *Democrat* different from the *Gazette*, in your short time

at the *Gazette*? I'm sure you picked up on some of the differences.

MH: Oh, it was [laughs] — I didn't know much about newspapers, but just the aesthetics alone was enough to say "this one over here's a ragtag operation," and you never knew — you had to watch your feet so you wouldn't trip over wires, and really old furniture, and just cluttered — and just filled with really young and inexperienced people, in many ways, comparatively. But, at the same time, incredible energy and fun. The *Gazette* had the reputation and respect in the community, and the *Democrat* didn't. This was the summer of 1980, and the [newspaper] war was on in a big way. And I was just pleased to get a paid job, a paid internship, to begin with. I know this isn't about the *Democrat*, but I showed up thinking, "Well, I guess I'll be sharpening pencils or something."

DB: And they had you writing stories right away?

MH: Yes, they said, "Go out and cover something," and I got to interview the Territorial Restoration guy, who is still there, I think, and I said, "I'm sorry, it's my first day, and I don't have an idea of what I'm supposed to ask you." It was a very sad start.

DB: Did you get a byline right away?

MH: I got a byline really soon because they were hiring a lot of people and giving them a chance.

DB: This was between your sophomore and junior years?

MH: I did that two summers in a row. I didn't ask the *Gazette* [for a job] the next summer because the *Democrat* had hired me, and John Robert Starr hauled me in

at the end of the summer. I was always kind of trembling in front of him because he scared everybody to death and he wrote those mean notes about people's performance, and he said [something] to the effect of, "You had a good summer. You're the only intern I've ever given a raise," and I had not even noticed it. [Laughs] It must have been a nickel, I don't know. After my junior year, I came back to Little Rock and did another internship. And by now, I'm on fire, I'm ready to go, I'm thinking, "This is great."

DB: And then you graduated . . .

MH: In 1982, which was a bad year for the economy. Interest rates had been up around twenty or twenty-one percent at that stage. Jobs were hard to come by. I thought I wanted a journalism job pretty badly, but if I needed to get a PR [public relations] job, I was thinking about that, too. I didn't know what would happen with this English major, art history minor. But as it turns out, the *Democrat* was offering me a full-time job in the summer of 1982, to which I said "no" and caused much consternation in my house because I wanted to go off with my girlfriends and live in the [Colorado] Rockies for the summer and work at a gift store. So I turned it down --- said, "Thank you so much. I might talk to you later." But I was also cooking up an idea to interview in Charlotte and the East Coast. All my friends were on the East Coast. I didn't want to be back in Little Rock, where I knew no one. I went off and lived in Estes Park. And that summer of 1982 Fall River dam burst. And it washed through the town, a ten- or twelve-foot wall of water washed through the downtown. It killed campers in a

campground above Estes Park, and, thinking like a journalist, I thought, “I need to do a first-personer.” And we had no phone. We lived on minimum wage and ate generic macaroni and cheese and drank generic beer, but had a great time. We had to use the pay phone. So I called in a first-personer piece about what I saw in downtown Estes Park.

DB: Were you downtown when this happened?

MH: No, we were living at Trout Haven on the Big Thompson River, so it was a beautiful day. And I was the one who got the news because I turned on the radio as I always did, and they said the water is down to eight feet in downtown Estes Park. And I’m thinking – I’m waking up – “Surely this is wrong.” There was no evidence where we lived. We walked the mile into town. We were a little bit too flippant about the whole thing because we didn’t like our bad jobs in the gift store — “Well, I hope that gift store’s gone.” Then we walked down there, and we felt terrible. It was just devastating. I mean, you saw children’s toys going by and horses’ saddles and record albums. I don’t remember how many people died. But, clearly, a lot of people’s belongings and homes were screwed up. So I phoned it in. Then I called my parents sometime later and — for some reason, my piece appeared on the op-ed page.

DB: You called the *Democrat*?

MH: Yes. And my mother said, “You didn’t tell us you were going to take a job there.” I said, “I haven’t.” And they read the top of the intro to my piece, and it said, “She will be joining our staff in the fall,” which was completely made up.

A complete lie. Turned out to be true in the end. They just tagged it that I was going to be joining their staff.

DB: They say John Robert Starr was a very confident man.

MH: So that's what happened. After my Estes Park foray, I interviewed on the East Coast, and the funny thing is I ended up working eventually for the *Charlotte Observer*, but when they talked to me, all they were talking about were bureau jobs, and I thought, "Well, I've worked in the capitol city of Arkansas, I can certainly do better than Rock Hill, South Carolina." And so I ended up Little Rock, starting out at the *Arkansas Democrat* in August or September of 1982.

DB: What was your first assignment there?

MH: General assignment.

DB: And how long were you at the *Democrat*?

MH: Until March of 1984, and then I went to the *Tampa Tribune*, to a bureau because several Arkansas people went out to Florida. There was a big newspaper war going on there, the *Tampa Tribune* was hiring people from all over the country. Their state desk I think had about seventy-five people. I left after about a year and a half. Oh, and I had a stint at the *Democrat* as the "Action and Answers" gal. I was trying to put it out of my mind. It was a short stint. They put it as "we want to make you famous." I ended up in the fall of 1983 being asked to go to the Capitol, and I did so reluctantly. They said, "Would you go fill in over there and help cover the special session on education?" And Bill Clinton was there. I was thinking, "I'm twenty-three years old. This is way out of my league, but they

want me to go, so I'll go." And I was saying, "You promise me I can come back if I don't like it?" And they said, "Yes, but you'll probably like it." And I did. It was really exciting. But the problem is when I went to the *Tampa Tribune* bureau, then I was covering the Homosassa Springs Water District after having covered Bill Clinton and the legislature, so those were a pretty miserable seven months. There were many turning points, but one was when the city council debated whether to rent a manatee costume. That's when I called back to Arkansas, and I was friends with people at those papers. And John Brummett was checking around for me, too, and they said, "Yes, we want to hire you."

DB: And that was the *Gazette*?

MH: The *Gazette*. And it was a big deal because I had been told to get hired at the *Gazette*, you really needed to have five years. And so I was really thrilled because I didn't even come close to having five years yet.

DB: They knew you.

MH: They knew me. And other people who were veterans at the *Gazette* were putting in a good word for me.

DB: How did you meet John Brummett?

MH: The Capitol. When I was on the capitol beat for the *Democrat*. And we had gotten to know each other. At the Farkleberry Follies, I met *Gazette* people there.

DB: So you found there was a lot of interaction between the *Democrat* and *Gazette* staffs?

MH: At the level of reporter and editor. The staff you knew. I felt like I had friends in

both places. I definitely felt that way. But I do remember as a young reporter in the summers trying to ask questions when I was out on a news assignment, and I admit, I was as green as the grass, and I would tell people I was from the *Democrat*, and they would visibly sniff or turn away. The difference in respect the two papers received at least in that day was palpable. I remember thinking, “Gosh, why can’t they be nicer? I’m just a college kid.” But I think because it was such a young staff, a lot of inaccuracies got in the paper, and the people in positions of power in Little Rock just didn’t want to waste time. I know when I went to the *Gazette*, I was treated a lot better on the street. Just getting stories.

DB: When you started at the *Gazette*, what year was that?

MH: October of 1984. I was hired as a general assignment reporter. My hope, though, was to get back to the capitol. It was a really exciting time because I had gone from the manatee festival discussion, and I was in Little Rock and I think the first day back in town, going to work, I didn’t cover this, but it seems [Democratic presidential candidate] Geraldine Ferraro came into town. It was a big deal. I was thinking, “Wow, finally, there’s some action going on.” Also, I’d been told in Florida by the state editor, “You can’t go back to Arkansas. It will ruin your career.”

DB: Famous last words.

MH: Famous last words.

DB: Do you remember the gentleman’s name?

MH: Yes, I do [laughing]. I do remember his name. Bill Handy did warn me it would

be a real big mistake to go to, of all places, Arkansas. I think it wasn't. Five weeks into my job on general assignment at the *Gazette*, Bill Shelton, who was the city editor, flat top gray hair, steel-faced — everyone was scared of him, it seemed like to me. I certainly was. He barked at me to come over to his desk, and I was trembling like I used to be in front of John Robert Starr. He said, "Are you interested in that state capitol opening?" And I said, "Yes, sir, Mr. Shelton, I sure am." And he said, "Good. Start Monday."

DB: Just like that?

MH: Yes. And so five weeks later, I was on the capitol beat, with the *Gazette*. A dream come true. And that's about all we ever said about it. "Good. Start Monday."

DB: Just like that. Make a decision, and go with it.

MH: I think he was city editor. Eventually, Max [Brantley] was the person I would talk to all the time.

DB: Yes. I didn't start there till 1985, and I think Max had just become the city editor.

MH: Because Bill Shelton had retired.

DB: He retired before I got there, but everybody talked about him with great awe.

MH: And respect. He'd been around for the civil rights days, still sitting in the same seat, I think. And the joke about Bill Shelton was — he hates the telephone. He had to be on it all day, but he hated it.

DB: Who was the managing editor when you were there?

MH: David Petty.

DB: And was Carrick [Patterson] the editor?

MH: Yes.

DB: Did you have much dealing with them?

MH: No, I didn't know people at that level very much. I just felt like the youngest, greenest reporter and couldn't believe my good fortune to be there, twenty-four and assigned to the state capitol for the *Gazette*. I just couldn't believe it.

DB: Who else did you work with at that time?

MH: Brummett. And he became this guardian. He was this crusty, curmudgeonly, underneath-heart-of-gold friend. And he definitely took care of me and helped me along. And made it look so easy and I was killing myself. I also worked at that time with John Obrecht, who was covering that horrible beat, the Grand Gulf Nuclear Power Plant. [It] was the story that we all hated and would never go away, but John Obrecht lived and breathed it. He knew every twist of every screw in that case. And I loved Bob Wells. Bob had gone to law school. He was an Arkie who loved the *Gazette* but also liked to smoke and complain. And I have run into him because we both lived in Raleigh for a while. He was still reading the *Arkansas Times* online, trying to keep up with Arkansas news because he missed it. And it's the great tragedy that the *Gazette's* dead.

DB: Were most of the people you worked with from Arkansas?

MH: Seemed like it, yes. Obrecht wasn't. But they were usually people who had pretty long ties to Arkansas. There was an interesting thing going on at that time. There'd been this Oberlin influx. Tom Hamburger had come through. Usually

Oberlin grads would go to Pine Bluff briefly and then come up to the *Gazette*. So Tom Hamburger came in. We didn't really overlap. He went off to the Washington bureau. Carol Matlack and I overlapped. And she followed Tom to the Washington bureau. And I followed Carol to the Washington bureau. And I was just on the phone to Tom Hamburger's projects editor, who had been the projects editor forming the team in Minneapolis, and he said, "There has been no better reporter I have ever seen than Tom." And I was really proud because Tom had come through Arkansas. And Arkansas took such a beating in the presidential campaigns. And I always felt it was unfair because there had really been some good journalists who had worked hard and believed in what they did and could dig up information all over the place. I was pleased to hear John Ullmann up in Minnesota refer to him — and he runs the World Press Institute now — and he said that Tom Hamburger was the best he'd ever seen.

DB: When you were on the Capitol beat, you were young, working on this staff — what did you guys do for fun? Was there a lot of socializing?

MH: Oh, yes. I'm sorry to say, there was a lot of drinking. You know how Little Rock is. It's funny that I grew to really, really like it. And I realized that it was because, there, people just made their own fun. You had friends who could play music, and they'd get together and play music, and the parties — there were always parties to go to. It doesn't seem that way in newsrooms anymore, but maybe that's just because I'm 41. We would go to the International Bazaar, which was a little Middle Eastern restaurant downtown, and we called it the Bee-

Zaar. It became such a hangout, a watering hole for *Gazette* people. Kelly Quinn, who at one time was my roommate, was a photographer at the *Gazette*. We have a picture of all these people from the *Gazette* who would come there and drink and eat and that became our table, our spot. Eventually, Brummett and William Green and I would go drinking at the Capitol Hotel when they fixed that up, and we would drink these giant elephant beers. I shouldn't have this in the oral history project. It's really not my best moment.

DB: We'd be very disappointed if you didn't.

MH: I have to think, when I hear stories of people older than I who talk about the old days in the newspaper business, I feel like I understand because I saw it at the *Democrat*. I mean, I saw people with bottles in their desks, and [they were] unbelievable smokers. My clothes were always rank with cigarette smoke.

DB: You could smoke in the newsroom then.

MH: Oh, yes. That was the *Democrat*. The *Gazette*, still the same kind of thing. I didn't see bottles in drawers, but people smoked and they partied. There were some times I would say — because it was really a lot of work — the hours were just killer — sometimes I'd just say, "Let's go to Memphis." We'd get in a car and haul out on a Friday night and just go to Memphis, to the Antennae Club — to the Peabody, hang out in the lobby. Then drive back. After drinking, unfortunately.

DB: Memphis was, what, two hours away?

MH: It was the happiest two hours. You could get there, and it was good ribs and good

times.

DB: Didn't some just pile in a car and go to New Orleans for the weekend?

MH: Yes, I knew some who did. I didn't. That was some serious business.

Sometimes we'd canoe. We'd go up in the mountains and we'd canoe. That was fun. But people were really, really serious about their work

DB: So you're saying they worked hard, but they also played hard?

MH: Yes. Like Michael Haddigan was a good friend of mine and Peggy Harris. They got married eventually. But Haddigan — he was just a bird dog for stories. He loved to get the stories. And he was doing serious investigating of survivalist groups. He knew more about it, I suspect, than anybody in the country. And he dug in hard on that Mena airport, the questions about Iran-Contra, the Arkansas connection. Michael was working hard on it. We worked with good people.

DB: What were some of your favorite stories that you worked on?

MH: I don't think that today that's a big clip file I'd want to go through, because as a state capitol reporter, I had a beat that was highly valued at the *Gazette* because it was the state capitol. We were a statewide newspaper, so the pressure was always on us. I think the editors read our copy more closely, and we were the ones who got "why we not have?" — those were the famous Max Brantley yellow rain notes that would be in your box — "why we not have?" — because the *Democrat* had something or even just a paragraph, because that was the kind of newspaper war it was. If you didn't have the right quote or you missed a paragraph of background that would have been helpful — "why we not have?" would show up

in your box. Oh, we hated that so much. And I do think that we felt — and anybody else on another beat could probably argue with me — but I do feel like the Maxes and David Pettys, just the general tenor at the *Gazette*, was that was the beat that the editors watched the most. And the pressure was hardest on us. And we had to get everything. I have not met other reporters in other states who did the same job who had to suck up every piece of information about every bill filed and pretty much put it all in the paper, which is not answering your question. So a lot of my stories were a bill moving, not anything that was really a glamorous piece of work. I think one of the stories I was proudest of, but wished I'd had tougher editing — because I had good sources at the *Gazette*, and I covered Health and Human Services, and people really told me a lot of things. I found out through a good source to check the documents and I would see that low-income elderly people, who were supposed to get help with their heating bills, weren't getting that. That the EOA, the Employment Opportunity Agency, which was a little community action agency in Arkansas, in Little Rock — the director was running an operation in which the money was being siphoned off to for-profit enterprises from non-profit enterprises. So my sense of young outrage: elderly people are not getting their money, and it's hot in Arkansas! And it's cold in the winter, and there are these little houses where the wind blows through. And I got the story. And eventually the EOA, which had 100 employees, was shut down. Dean Goldsby was out of a job, but he came back to run against Bill Clinton for governor in 1986. The feds were supposedly looking into it because

there were obviously problems with the finances, but apparently the records were so bad they couldn't build a case. I got kicked out of meetings. I worked with William Green on that. And I think I remember Bob McCord — it was a day that really hurt — saying, “It's good work, but it's just really too hard to read in the paper.” Because the *Gazette* was the paper of record, we wrote everything. We put it all in there. So when I wrote about the Employment Opportunity Agency, a little agency that was supposed to help poor people and managed to not send the money properly to the poorest people, I wrote things like “The EOA, which has the EAA — ” I had alphabet soup all the way through. I know now that Bob McCord was right. That I did not make it easy on the reader. I always thought in retrospect that the *Gazette* was just an amazing place where reporters covered all the trees, and covered the trees well, but never stepped away to write about the forest. I fault myself for this, too, because I didn't really have the techniques to write those kinds of big-picture stories. I was worried about this senate bill moving.

DB: Instead of stepping back and doing a bigger piece about that topic?

MH: Yes. But we had all the information. We put it all in the paper. One time, when Bill Clinton introduced his economic development package, which was a big step, Brummett and I worked on that announcement. And a very close friend of mine who was visiting from the *St. Pete Times* read that story the next day. I was real proud because I had just started my job and I had this double byline with Brummett. And he goes “Oh, my God, you have a lead with seventy-five

words?” And I didn’t know there was anything wrong with that. And we really did have a seventy-five word lead. Other stories I liked: covering Clinton was really exciting because he was so smart and charismatic. And people would say, “Isn’t he going to run for president?” And I’d say, “Maybe, but he certainly would never win.” I covered Tommy Robinson in Washington, and I remember a great moment was when my colleague, who had a pretty good relationship with Tommy — Tommy always liked Rex Nelson a lot — and I was always “from the liberal paper.” I got a call about 4:00 in the afternoon, and they said, “Tommy’s going to the White House tomorrow to become a Republican. He’s going to change his party.” I panicked. I was just freaking. And I chased that story so hard because I did not want to be beat. That was the way we lived in that newspaper war. I had such good sources on the Hill, who liked me, that when I ran to the House floor, just trying to find John Paul Hammerschmidt, the person at the door said he had just stepped off into the House members’ elevator, and I defied all rules and jumped onto the elevator — thanks to the people talking into their wristwatches — “There he goes. He’s just now going to the elevator” — helping me. And so the next day, I had the story and the *Democrat* had a copyrighted story. But the *Gazette* had the story, so they were embarrassed.

DB: They just knew you weren’t going to have it.

MH: That’s right. It was great. Tommy had given Rex an exclusive interview, but I had it from other sources.

DB: When did you go to the Washington bureau?

MH: April of 1987. It was a month after Dale Bumpers said he wouldn't run, and Clinton was thinking of getting in. So I was traveling a lot with Clinton in the Northeast, listening to him make speeches. After Gary Hart got out, it looked like Clinton was going to get in.

DB: What was that like, traveling with Clinton?

MH: He was completely like a rock and roll star when he'd go into places. He always knew people and connected with them. I could see him take a little paper napkin and whisper to aides, and I think he was just getting a sense of "Okay, there's Jim" from whatever time he'd met him, and he would write just a few cryptic notes with his left hand and then he'd deliver this barn-burner speech and usually the same one, and we always joked in the press corps about the same old pig joke. There was some three-legged pig joke he told all over the place. But he would just so carefully insert the names of these people, and they'd just light up wherever he went, so they would follow him anywhere. And I saw it time and again. The only time I saw something that was like a crash speech event was at the Homestead, a fancy place in Virginia, where all these business executives from around the country had this very exclusive convention and the head of the Democratic Party was traveling with Clinton — and Clinton also spoke better in the evening. He's just not a morning person. This was a morning speech, and Lib Carlisle introduced Clinton, and it was one of those introductions, you could see people in the room wincing because Lib was saying, "We've got this rocket ship and Bill Clinton's going to be the captain of our rocket ship to take us to new

heights,” and it was really corny. Clinton looked horrified, and he gave one of the worst speeches I ever heard him give. And what was interesting was this was a crowd of people who had money. And you could just see him suffer. He probably would not admit it, but anybody who heard Lib’s introduction would have said, “Uh-oh. We’re in big trouble.” I wish I could be more specific about some of the stories I did because I did all sorts of them. A lot of them are just stories that at the time were really exciting because you beat the *Democrat*.

DB: So that was the big thing you were going for, to beat the *Democrat*?

MH: Beat the *Democrat*. Get people to tell you things. But I really do think that I had developed a very strong sourcing in agencies. I still even hear from some of those people in Arkansas today. They trusted me and would tell me stuff. And I had a special place in my heart, still do, for kids and for the elderly. So those were the things I was checking on.

DB: Tell me about some of the characters who were at the *Gazette* with you.

MH: Brummett. Mr. Smooth Walker, Smoother Talker. Sometimes he would just saunter in, late — I don’t know what kind of hours he kept — he’d just saunter in to a committee hearing room, lean over and ask a few questions, and saunter out and then fire off a story in five minutes. He was a former sportswriter. That was a character. All over town — Buster’s, they knew him, and at the Afterthought, they knew him. He knew every legislator. He could get them. It just wasn’t hard. They were going to tell him anything because his sourcing was so good. And he had a million good stories. William Green was a great features character.

He had very funny things. He would scream out to you, “Hunker in the bunker!” and “It’s your world, baby, I’m just living in it.” He’d scream a lot of things to Michael Haddigan. And he was always saying funny things to Jerry Jones, too, teasing him, in a good way. And Carol Griffie, I think about her. She probably would not like to be called a character, but she was one of the most intense reporters I’ve ever seen. She lived it. It seemed to me she had two dogs — and they were bulldogs — and if I’m remembering correctly, this would be her attitude toward every story. She was going to bulldog the story until she got that story. And she was so on the Environmental Protection Agency, the pollution control agency. That woman had a system where she would tell you how many trade magazines you should be reading and how many newsletters, and she actually did all those things she told other journalists to do. And you didn’t want to make her mad, either. You listened to her.

DB: There were very few women in the newsroom. Did you find that when you were with other women who worked in the newsroom, that you bonded automatically? Was there any kind of support system?

MH: There was no support system. There was no organization. There really wasn’t time for anything like that. We were all just killing ourselves. And there were so few of us. There was Peggy Harris, and Carol, who eventually left, and Brenda. And then Brenda went on the desk. And Anne Farris, who was a big pal of mine, came. I didn’t know her before, but we became big pals. But it was clearly a guy’s club. I found that the guys, for the most part, treated me like a little sister,

in a way. And I don't mean that in a bad way, I mean that as in I was twenty-four years old. I had so much to learn. And they had fifteen or twenty years of experience. And like I said, I was from the sheltered, middle-class Southern Baptist family. So I was almost always wide-eyed about everything. I was shocked and appalled and outraged.

DB: Were they protective of you? Did they warn you about things they thought you needed to know?

MH: Yes. They were good about that. And frankly, the legislature was just such a gauntlet for a young woman to be running through. There was just, time and again, weird stuff that would happen over there. Like you'd have one legislator who was in AA [Alcoholics Anonymous], bringing his biggest squashes and produce into a committee meeting and then plop down with a big kiss right on my cheek. I'm trying to cover the thing, thinking, "Oh, boy, is this part of the job?" Because I was so young, I didn't understand. I didn't put these folks in the paper when I should have. They were just out of line so many times. But I thought, "Oh, well, that's what you have to put up with. It's such a guy's world over here." And there really weren't that many women. Deborah Mathis, was from TV. There were a few TV reporters around. But there really were not that many women covering the legislature and it was just outrageous, some of the stuff they said and did. I remember Senator Knox Nelson blocking my way to get into the senate. He wouldn't let me through.

DB: Why?

MH: He said “you’re going to have to give me a kiss and come sit beside me,” which I didn’t do. But it was that kind of thing all the time. And in my case, I would laugh and move on.

DB: If you’d have challenged them, they wouldn’t have helped you out.

MH: No. But I always had people telling me stuff because I kind of laughed it off. But it took growing up and getting older to understand hey, that was way out of line and those people should have been busted in the newspaper.

DB: They’d never get away with it today.

MH: No. You hope. But I think if I’d had other women to talk to about this, who maybe were more veteran. And I probably should have talked to Carol. They would have said, “No way, you can’t put up with that.” I think that’s where it’s helpful to have more women around in higher positions, who can say, “That’s just not right.” It was quite an adventure covering the Arkansas Legislature all the time.

DB: Did you find Washington to be more professional?

MH: Oh yes. It was very much different, the environment.

DB: How did you like that job, compared to covering the state government?

MH: I remember going up there being so afraid that that job was way too big. In fact, I had encouraged my friend from the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* to apply. Carol Matlack was going to quit. She just had a very strong reaction about Gannett. She could not bear to work for Gannett. She said “I can’t move into the *USA Today* building and work for that kind of company.” I was the optimist, thinking,

“Good, this will mean more for the newsroom money and we can win the newspaper war. We don’t have to be like *USA Today*.”

DB: Did you apply for the job or did they approach you?

MH: Well I was asking other people to apply, and they said, “Why don’t you apply?” And I’d say, “Because I could never get that job. I’m not ready for that job.” But my friends were talking me into it, and I did, and lo and behold, Max Brantley picked me and said, “You’re going.” And I just thought, “What have I done?”

DB: What was it like knowing you were moving to Washington?

MH: I stood in the kitchen with my roommate at the time — we lived over in Hillcrest, in a really great, stone apartment building. Our apartment was not 2,000 square feet, but 1,400 square feet — it was just wonderful. We had fun little parties. She was a photographer — Kelly Quinn — I just think the world of her. I stood in the kitchen. I remember thinking it was the best move ever because Gannett was paying for the packing. All I had to do was stand in the kitchen while people packed around me. I had a cup of coffee, [and] I was crying and crying. I couldn’t stop crying. I was thinking, “What have I done? I love Little Rock. I love the *Gazette*, and I’m going up to Washington and I’m going to fail.”

DB: So you’d say you had mixed feelings about taking this job?

MH: Yes. It was scary to follow Carol. Carol and Tom were excellent reporters. It was very intimidating to walk into that. And also Carol had had to move our whole office — she’d moved all the boxes and all the files — she was deep into Iran-Contra stuff, and I was thinking, “What am I going to do with that?” And so

I was going to have to be our first person in Gannett News Service's offices. Try to establish that the *Gazette* was still independent and maybe "IN" GNS but not "OF" GNS. My first job was to answer to my editors back in Little Rock. I was sitting amidst all the other reporters, whereas the *Louisville Courier Journal* folks, their paper had been bought too, they had their own office, separated from the newsroom. It seems to me the *Des Moines [Register]* people weren't even in there. They kept their offices elsewhere. Detroit had offices elsewhere. So I had to keep the flag up for us. That was also part of the trepidation I had.

DB: Who did you answer to in Little Rock?

MH: I would talk to Max, and Bob Stover, and Jonathan Portis, who was a doll. He was a sweet, wonderful, gentle editor. I think Portis was just a dear, dear person.

DB: What was your first day like when you got to Washington?

MH: I got to stay in the Gannett corporate apartment. It was nice to have a place to go. It was right there by the newspaper. I walked into the newsroom. I had to sit by the editor, and he took me for a secretary. I was unpacking boxes Carol had left, and I didn't have my final place where I was going to be. I had an amazing view of the monuments. You could walk around the newsroom and see across the Potomac [River]. I would just think I was in some movie — "This couldn't be real." That's when I was talking to friends back in Little Rock, I don't know what day, but certainly a lot during that time, and they told me, "Take it a day at a time, you'll be fine, you can do this." It was real important to have that kind of support.

DB: Who would you say was your main support?

MH: Brummett was always so good. Scott Stroud was wonderful. William Green.

Anne Farris believed in me. It was just a really wonderful group of people.

DB: Where they telling you about the consternation that was going on in the newsroom? Every time Gannett made a decision — what the front page was going to look like, when they went to color — there was always lots of angst.

MH: There was. I got a lot of that, but I was always on the run for stories. I think I was removed greatly from that. And I didn't get to come back hardly at all. I had to come back to write about Blytheville Air Force Base, and I had to come back to write about Pine Bluff and the arsenal. And I loved to go back. In fact, I ended up getting a job in Lexington partly because I did an arsenal story where I started out in a beauty parlor in Pine Bluff and my editor who hired me in Lexington loved that. He loves beauty parlor chat — especially about chemical weapons. He thought that was odd. Those were the stories I liked, where I got a longer period to write them. And I had to cover Miss America. That was one of those Gannett decisions, where people went, "Oh, no." I remember people in Senator Bumpers' office were really aghast and appalled, seems like the senator weighed in on it, too. He said, "How could you leave? We're right in the middle of the budget negotiations, and you're going to leave?" And I said, "Yes, the guy in the Pacific Northwest has said Miss Arkansas is going to win by the computer analysis." And Walker Lundy said get up there. I'm one of the few people you'll get to meet who had to spend days on end in Atlantic City in a bed that had a

paddlewheel for a headboard. And it was just, eye-rolling. [Laughs] As an intern, I'd covered Miss Arkansas, so I had really moved up in the world! I'd covered somebody who ended up being one of Clinton's paramours. When I was an intern covering the Miss Arkansas pageant, and I remember thinking, "Wow, she says she wants to be a corporate lawyer. That's really nice." Our Miss Arkansas did not do well, and she was not pleasant to be around by the end of the week. It was one of those stories, I did have a reporter's notebook where I dutifully, tongue-in-cheek, reported "here are some of the people who are competing. One said the greatest moment in her life had been sitting in every seat in the Kennedy Center so she could say she had sat in the same seat as her hero, Ronald Reagan. And one's hobby was collecting refrigerator magnets. And one's hobby was collecting Care Bears." I would send dispatches like that.

DB: And they got in the paper?

MH: Yes, they did. And anybody who knew me would know I was laughing about that. Look at the kind of stuff we have to put in the paper. They also sent me to a story that was really probably one of the biggest stories that I worked on in that period. It was a real test for me. It was 1988. A young Arkansas woman had gone off to art school, to Pratt Institute in New York. It was her very first week and she was coming home from her waitressing job to Brooklyn, not a very great neighborhood, and a mugger came up to her. And as any Arkansas person would do, she wanted to hold onto her purse. She tried to fight back. And she was shot and killed right there in the middle of the street. I had to go up to New York to

write that piece. It was a big story in *Newsday*. You know, girl comes to the big city, she's only been here a week, she fights back, but she doesn't know the ways of the big city. This was a really bad time in New York and Washington. Crack [cocaine] was on the streets, and on the move, and all sorts of bad stuff was going down. So I go up to write the story about this young woman, and I could pretty much do whatever I wanted. I had to go find the police officers who investigated her murder. I was staying in Manhattan and I took the subway — I wanted to walk her route, which I did, so I could notice everything along the way — and then figured out which was the precinct where the guys were who were investigating her murder. So I end up there. And they are great. They're giving me all kinds of information. And I'm not normally a police reporter, so I don't know what I'm doing exactly. I'm doing the best I can at getting every detail I can and every report I can. And when the interview was about over, it was getting dark, and I said, "I need to get on the subway. And they said, "Oh, no, you are not taking the subway." I think they were loving my accent, they were totally "Brooklynese" cops. One was Irish and one was Italian. One was tall and one was short. It was right out of Central Casting. And they said, "We don't want another Arkansas woman dead. We're not telling you how to get to the subway." And I said, "I'm fine, it's not going to be a problem." And they would not tell me. So we walked out and there were these unmarked cars, and we're in this really bad section of Flatbush, and the Italian and the Irish cop put me in some old beat-up car and drove me back to the hotel in Manhattan. So it was a

big adventure. I think we learned something from that story because the family didn't want to talk anymore about the death, if I remember the details correctly, so it turned out to be a real shock when they opened the paper. They learned things from my story that they didn't know. I reported things — little details about the murder, and the fact that she didn't die instantly, that they didn't know. I think, in a sense, and especially knowing what I know now, the ethical thing would have been to say we are running this story on this date so they'd know. Apparently it was just very painful for them. And I was really proud of the story because I'd worked really hard on it. But I think it caused them a lot of unnecessary pain. It was really a bad time, I'm not diminishing the fact that I was a naïve congressional reporter out of her element on the mean streets of Flatbush.

DB: Where did you live in D.C.?

MH: I lived in Northwest, up Connecticut.

DB: Did you like living there?

MH: Loved it.

DB: Was the press corps there as socially active as you were, say, in Little Rock?

MH: It was different. I was a member of the National Press Club. There's a great story about some Washington correspondent, who was a big drinker, sometime in the 1970s, I think. Not exactly the most productive reporter. They sent him, as the *Gazette* always did, to the conventions. The rumor is that this reporter got out to one of the conventions and the editors kept waiting for him to call in with a

story and they finally got a message to him. And he sent back a message: “Nothing here our angle.” I don’t know if it’s true, but I love that story, that a *Gazette* reporter would be so audacious as to say, “Nothing here our angle.”

There was a Bob Douglas story that was a legend, and I don’t know if it’s true because I never found out from him. That one of the reporters was saying, when I got hired here, Bob Douglas would be asked, “What’s the policy here about drinking at lunch?” And he would answer, “It’s required.” I loved living in Washington. I hung around with a lot of people who did other things — environmentalists and lawyers. I didn’t do as much socially with the press corps. But I was serving early on a regional reporter’s association board, but I only got to serve for a short time because I ended up going off to Lexington. I was there [D.C.] for two and a half years. The first year, I was covering Clinton a lot, at the beginning. And I was on this amazing learning curve. It is just so steep. All the stuff you read in your social studies textbook about appropriations and authorizations all of the sudden becomes — you’ve got to understand this to write and explain it to people. That was a tough first year. But by the second year, I was feeling more confident. I was doing other stories. I was breaking that stuff on Tommy Robinson. I was doing a lot on campaign financing. I was coming on. I was feeling a lot stronger and understanding the system. But I got the offer. John Carroll, the editor of the *Lexington Herald Leader* — he’s a great editor. Some months before, they had flown me out to interview to be — and probably nobody at the *Gazette* knew this — night city editor in Lexington. Well, I had no

editing experience whatsoever. I had no real interest in being an editor. But it was a Knight-Ridder paper and in those days, Knight-Ridder was a great destination. So I went out and took the test and talked to them. And I came in second. They hired somebody who was a city editor in Virginia. And I [thought], “That was nice. I’m glad I took the test, and I met some nice people.” David, the editorial page editor, had been advertising nationally for a writer and couldn’t find the right person. And he started talking to people in the newsroom: “Is there someone you wish you had hired in the last year that you didn’t?” They gave him my folder. And that’s where he saw the Pine Bluff beauty shop story about nerve gas. He gets on the phone. And also Scott Stroud from the *Gazette* was working there then, and Scott was talking me up. So David and John flew me out. It was an unusual editorial page because it was totally irreverent, completely liberal, completely nuts, in a good way. I had a job offer before I even flew back. I knew immediately, “I want this job.” I never in my life thought I’d be an editorial writer, had no interest, thought you had to be really, really old and finished. I thought, in my twenties, “Oh, my gosh, it’s going to take me years to get to that level of experience, and I certainly will never know enough to do that job.” But something in my heart just said, “I’ve got to go work for these people and I’ve got to try it.” At twenty-nine, “I certainly have plenty of time to turn around if I don’t like it.” And so I went. And people at the *Gazette* did not take it well. It was bad. In the end, it was, “You always have a job if you want to come back,” but what was interesting at the time, the split was so obvious between old *Gazett*

and the new people. And John Hanchette was there, and I liked John, because I had worked with him up at GNS and he was a very well-liked investigative reporter. He was M.E. And I ended up telling him. And Max was really mad at me because I told Them, with a capital T, instead of him. Eventually, he was fine, and when I went back to Arkansas to visit, he told me if I wanted to come back, I should. I was flattered that he still wanted me to come back. Because I still missed the *Gazette*. I missed working with those folks. But it felt like I'd betrayed them or something, and I didn't mean that at all.

DB: What year was this?

MH: It was the fall of 1989.

DB: Where were you when the *Gazette* folded?

MH: I was in Lexington. I had been keeping up with it because people like Michael Arbanis, who was a sweetheart, and Adam Weintraub, who was a fighter, and Anne Farris — all these folks I still heard from. The battle was on. There was all this angst. I still knew what was going on about the disappointments. All of the sudden, things were not looking good. I don't know what's going to happen. People all of the sudden started talking like, "We could be in big trouble." But I was deep into my project at that time, on domestic violence. But I have my "Save the *Gazette*" button still to this day, and I still have my little T-shirts and I will always keep them, because that's the place where I got my first taste of journalism. And that is the place that I will always say, had incredible talent. In that room, the people who had come through there — I used, in fact, stories from

the *Gazette* times last month when I was teaching in Indonesia, teaching journalism. I was there for two weeks. I worked with a professor of ethics and he and I did journalism seminars in different parts of the country. And in Indonesia, you have a press that became free in 1998. They're learning how to be a free press. The government had censored, there had been prior restraint. Now the government has backed off, but what you have are unruly mobs and factions in the street. And when people print things the readers don't like, the readers get upset. And in some cases, the journalists are being beaten, in some cases, they're being killed. One guy couldn't come to the seminar because he was in hiding. One of my sessions in the seminar was to discuss: "We're not telling you that we're perfect in the U.S." Not long ago, we had, in the South, editors who faced the same kinds of questions. What kind of paper are we going to be? Are we going to print racist propaganda in Mississippi like they did when the Sovereignty Commission tried to plant it in the big papers, or are we going to be like the *Arkansas Gazette*? And I read to them from Harry Ashmore's memoir about how he had to carry a gun.

DB: Were they surprised?

MH: Yes. About the *Gazette*, and its reputation. I was lucky in Washington to meet Harry Ashmore. And I have a copy of his autobiography. I go through this and I find these wonderful passages about what that was like to be in Little Rock. And how that newspaper faced bomb threats, and he had threats against his life, and his family's life, and this paper proudly did what we know is the right thing.

They printed the truth even though society could hardly bear it. One time, I was told by a senator, and I won't say who it is because I would get in trouble, he said I've decided that the difference between Arkansas and Mississippi is the *Arkansas Gazette*. Which I thought was a very powerful quote. Because even though in Mississippi, you had small-paper editors who were so brave and did the courageous thing, the biggest papers that would be the equivalent to the *Gazette*, had to come back in the 1980s and write a headline that said we were wrong, wrong, wrong, and apologize for what they did. I was trying to pose this dilemma, this question, to these editors in Indonesia: How do you want to be remembered? And I hope that that story from the *Gazette* and what Harry Ashmore said about how he went about his routine business, covering the news, fully and truthfully, how he did it despite all the trouble. And I told them the story about Bill Shelton, about the white mother who came into the newsroom and said, "I want to see the editor, I want to see who lets this stuff in the paper." And Shelton, so the story goes, said to her, "I'm the city editor." And she reached over the desk and slapped his cheek. And he turned his other cheek toward her. And when she was done, he just went back to his typewriter.

DB: Is that true, or is that a myth?

MH: That's the story. On the night of his retirement, because there was so little to-do made about Bill Shelton, several showed up at his house with Bombay gin, which we heard was his favorite, and that was the most time I'd spent with Bill Shelton. It was almost scary to go to his house, but he seemed to really appreciate it. Here

he'd been through the wars there. And there was no big party. Apparently he didn't want one. No big goodbye. But he loved gin and tonics, and he could make perfect ones, so we brought him some Bombay gin and he was very touched.

DB: Let's go through what you've done since you left Lexington . . .

MH: I was in Lexington from the fall of 1989. I started the project that won the Pulitzer [Prize] — I started the reporting on that in April, six months after I got there. And I will stress that in my jobs in editorial departments I keep on reporting. And so, again I say, I learned these reporting skills in Arkansas, that I couldn't give up. I couldn't just be an editorial writer and spout off an opinion, I needed to have some basis, so I used all this reporting technique. I started this project six months after I got there, and we published the first piece in December of 1990. And I wrote editorials about domestic violence all the next year. And in 1992, it won the Pulitzer. In 1992, I did a two-month fellowship in Germany. In 1993-94, I was at Harvard on a Nieman fellowship. Again, I never imagined I would get to do one of those. It was a gift. Totally a gift. To know people from all over the world. And I was from the smallest newspaper. So I guess going back to Arkansas hadn't ruined my career after all. After the Nieman, I went across the country in my car with my college roommate. Came back, had a job offer the first day back, in Lexington. I didn't take that one. I had a lot of calls. The head of Knight-Ridder had been talking to me about going to Tallahassee to run the editorial page. But the great thing about this career has been being able to

go where I felt were the right places. And I wanted to go home, to North Carolina. So they made a job for me. I went to the *Charlotte Observer*, as associate editor, which meant I wrote editorials and columns. That was in the fall of 1994. I stayed in Charlotte for two years. Went to their Raleigh bureau for awhile. Then in the fall of 1998, here I come to Austin, to be deputy editorial page editor.

DB: What brought you here?

MH: Rich Oppel brought me here. Rich had tried to hire me twice before. The third time was the charm. I originally turned it down, and they said, "What would it take?" And I told them, and they said, "Okay." I was surprised, and I came on down. And that's what I've done, for two and a half years, until I took on this new job. I put together a team of reporters and run projects and help do enterprise stories, and I'll be in charge of training. It's another very scary job. They say they want me to do it, so I'm going to learn how to do it.

[End of Interview]