

Gazette Project

Interview with

Paul Johnson,
Little Rock, Arkansas,
29 November 2000

Interviewer: Jerol Garrison

Jerol Garrison: This is Jerol Garrison, and I am interviewing Paul Johnson at the Little Rock Public Library. Paul, this interview is part of an oral history project being conducted by the University of Arkansas Center for Oral and Visual History. The Center will transcribe the interview, and you will have an opportunity to review the transcript and make changes before the document goes into the archives of the library in Fayetteville. At the library, people interested in Arkansas history will be able to review the transcript. The aim of these interviews is to shed some light on what kind of newspaper the *Arkansas Gazette* was. Before we go on any further, Paul, I would like for you to indicate whether you are willing for the Center of Oral and Visual History to conduct this interview for the archives and to keep the interview on file for persons interested in Arkansas history.

Paul Johnson: Yes, I am.

JG: Good, I have a little form here. If you do not mind signing it, I would appreciate it. Well, let the record show that Paul has read the form and signed it. We will

proceed with the interview. Please describe, Paul, the period that you worked for the *Gazette* and what your duties were.

PJ: I began work for the *Gazette* late in 1966 as a copy editor of the news desk. I continued to work uninterrupted there until the newspaper closed in October of 1991. The various jobs that I held included assistant news editor under Bob Douglas and Bill Rutherford. Around 1975, I want to say, Carrick Patterson, created the features section, which he called "Omnibus." He selected Bill Lewis and myself to actually create the section from the ground up. Bill was placed in charge --- for awhile, there were only the two of us up on the third floor, working on ideas and brainstorming what we envisioned this section might be like. Bill was nominally in charge of the writers, and I was nominally in charge of getting it edited and put together and down to the printers for each edition. That section went through a lot of changes, and Bill returned to his writing duties, and there were successions of several people who took over as editor, including Carrick for a time. After awhile --- and I am not sure certain how many years it was. It may have been three or four years --- I took over writing and created a daily television column. Martha Douglas had been doing sort of a TV column that mainly consisted of what would be on television that evening. What Carrick had in mind for me to do was to get into more commentary and analysis and criticism of television on a daily basis. The column ran seven days a week. I later started doing some movie reviews, and at the time the paper closed, I was still writing the television column. Around 1979, on my own time, I began writing a column

about recreational running called the “Gallomping Gourmand.” It was a purely personal column about my experiences of losing weight and running for recreation and health purposes. That column kept running up until the paper closed. I had a fairly varied career at the *Gazette*.

JG: I remember those columns, “Gallomping Gourmand.” [Laughter]

PJ: That thing became one of the most popular columns in the paper. Everything else I wrote, I always tried not to personalize the column. That one was purely personal and was just mainly my experiences of going out and running, the people I met and got to know and things that happened to me.

JG: Fun things about running.

PJ: Fun things, if you can find anything fun about running. [Laughter] It was fun to do, and I met a lot of great people over the ten to twelve years that the column ran.

JG: Do you still run?

PJ: I am back to running. I went through about a ten-year period when I didn’t do much and gained a huge amount of weight back. Just about a year ago, in 1999, November of 1999, I went back to walking a little bit. I started paying closer attention to what I eat, and I have lost about 158 pounds since then. It is sort of like the old “Gallomper” back in the saddle. [Laughter] The running column was something. It was never ever part of my official job at the *Gazette*. It was always something I did for fun and I don’t think I was ever paid for doing it. I did it and they ran it. If I had quit doing it, I don’t think they would have cut my salary.

[Laughter]

JG: Paul, what do you remember about the *Gazette* newsroom? Could you tell me something about the noise and the smell and the dress habits?

PJ: The thing that I think that all of us who were there in that era remember is the old wooden floor. Parquet. I guess it was oak. It seemed impervious to wear. The smell was --- Bob Douglas and I were both tremendous cigar smokers at that time. Each afternoon at about 4:30, Bob and I would send a copy boy out. There was a tobacco shop on the ground floor of one of the banks there on Louisiana Street, I guess. He would buy ten cigars for Bob and ten for me, and over the course of the evening, we would smoke those ten cigars. [Laughter] Of course, everybody would flick their ashes on the floor. Nobody had ash trays. The noise up there near the news desk was of that belt that they had, a conveyer belt that was used to carry the copy back to the Linotype machines in those days. Over a long period of time, I guess we became impervious to it. That thing made quite a racket with the pulleys and all that were required to make it run.

JG: When you were sending a piece of the copy back to the back shop, you just stuck it between the two layers of the belt and away it went.

PJ: That's right. It went up and around and then came back through and made a turn and went to the back shop, and there was always, late at night, a great search for a copy that had fallen off this belt. It was possible for it to fall off in places where you would never be able to easily locate it. It would fall down between machines back there in the back shop or at a place where it went through a wall. It could

fall down between the wall. I remember many nights Bob Douglas would come out and ask, "Where's that story?" Somebody would say, "Well, it went out at 7:00." Then there would be this huge search where this piece of copy had fallen off the belt. That belt stayed there for a long time, until the computers came around 1972. They may have even used it for a little while after we computerized the newsroom. I remember Ray Kornegay sat next to that belt, the nearest one to the belt on the copy desk. He suffered in silence for a long time. One night the belt stopped, and it had a habit of breaking because it was in constant motion from early morning until early the next morning. This rubber belt had somehow broken, Ray pulled out a big pocket knife and cut out about a six-foot section of that rubber belt. [Laughter] It was out of pure frustration. He wanted to demobilize it forever. [Laughter]

JG: Was it a rubber belt?

PJ: Yes, it was rubber, but it had wire embedded in it like a tire tread that kept it tough. [Laughter] That was the predominate noise. There was always someone hollering, "Copy," to get one of the copy boys --- That's not a sexist statement because they were all young boys at that time --- to come pick up copy off the spike and carry it to the back shop or to carry it from the city desk over to the news desk.

JG: The copy boys carried copy, and you also had the belt.

PJ: The copy boys would move it around inside the newsroom. The belt was mainly a one-way trip to the back shop.

JG: The back shop is where the linotype machines were. The operators converted the copy to hot slugs.

PJ: Hot lead, yes. I think by the time that I got there, they had hired a room full of fast, accurate typists who would actually take the copy and produce perforated yellow tape. That yellow paper tape was then fed into the Linotype machines to enable them to work much faster than a human operator could sit there and type it.

JG: There was a lot of cigarette smoke in the newsroom?

PJ: I think almost everybody smoked at that time, either cigars or cigarettes. I don't recall it being oppressive or offensive. I'm sure it didn't do any of us any good to sit in there with all those people. I think almost all of the reporters smoked, and virtually everybody on the copy desk smoked cigarettes or cigars.

JG: Do you remember Mr. J. N. Heiskell?

PJ: I remember Mr. Heiskell with a great sense of awe. By the time that I arrived, Mr. Heiskell was already an elderly man. He made infrequent personal appearances in the news room, especially when I first began working there. My shift was 4:30 in the afternoon until the paper got out, and we didn't have any real hard or fast deadlines. Generally, Mr. Heiskell had probably gone home most day's. I can remember him coming into the newsroom with a marked up page that he had torn out of that day's paper, and it always had the same note on there. He would draw a circle with a pencil or a grease pencil around some headline or phrase that he thought was inaccurate or just didn't like. It always had the note

out in the margin, “Who did this? J. N. H.” [Laughter]

JG: Who would he give that to?

PJ: Generally, he would hand that to Bob Douglas. Bob was the, I think Bob’s official title was night managing editor by the time I came there. Although he was, or what we would think of as, news editor, in charge of selecting what stories went where and making sure the paper got out on time or as close to a time that we ever got it out in those days. Mr. Heiskell --- I was a grown man, I was 25 years old when I came to the *Gazette*. I had been working on newspapers for several years, and I wasn’t easily awed or impressed by anyone. But I was always in awe of Mr. Heiskell. I can still remember his high-pitched voice and the way he spoke and the absolute quiet that would come over the newsroom when he would come in there. Even though, by that time, not any of us younger people in the news room had a daily association with Mr. Heiskell, we knew exactly who he was and we knew why he was an important man, not only in journalism, but in Arkansas history. We all had a kind of reverence for him and for who he was, even though there were a lot of jokes about Mr. Heiskell and his idiosyncrasies about style and spelling of certain things.

JG: Can you remember any of those idiosyncrasies?

PJ: I remember that when I came in 1966, he had just abandoned a rule that required them to spell “Tokio.” Mr. Heiskell had insisted that the correct spelling of a long period of dry weather was “drouth.” I think the Associated Press Style Book had it, and virtually every other newspaper spelled it “drought.” There were a lot

of those kind of rules. For instance, Mr. Heiskell believed that someone with a surname “Von somebody” was with a lower case, but if it was Van Rensaeller, then the Van would be upper case, but Ludwig van Beethoven, the “v” would be lower case. There was no, as far as I was able to discern, there was no real reason for some of the things we did that way. We always capitalized the titles of royalty. The Queen of England was just known as “The Queen.” The “q” was upper case. The President, we would call “Mr.” in second reference. At that time it was Mr. Nixon. The same way with clergy - they received the honorific of “Mr.” in second reference. I think we always used “Mr.” in obituaries when someone had passed away. Their obituary would refer to them as “Mr. Johnson” or “Mr. Smith.” A lot of those were things that other papers didn’t do, but it made us understand that the paper we worked for was different than a lot of papers. We were kind of proud that we didn’t follow the herd on some style and spelling rules.

JG: Do you remember anything that was ever left out of the paper because it was a very sensitive news article, or someone walked in and said, “We don’t want to cover that,” or did everything go into the paper?

PJ: By the time that it arrived over there where I was, that decision had already been made, generally by Bill Shelton. I am certain that Bill had his own way of determining what was news and what wasn’t. That was another thing about the *Gazette* in those days. Most of the guys who had been through the firestorm of desegregation had moved on by then, although were some who were left, but a lot

of them had gone, and to take their places the *Gazette* had a lot of young journalists. By young, I am saying, in their 20s, and I was one of them. Ernie Dumas came about that time, Mike Trimble, Doug Smith, John Woodruff, all came to the newspaper in that time. Richard Portis had come and was working on the news desk. There were a lot of us who were quite young, but we knew that the paper we worked for was better than almost any paper we knew of. That colored the way we looked at what was news and what wasn't. It gave us a certain confidence, and you might even say hubris, in saying if we thought it was important, then it was important. If the collective *Gazette*, meaning the editors and the people who worked there, looked at an issue or an event and determined it probably was inconsequential, then we were pretty confident that it was inconsequential. That also led to a feeling of animosity from people who did not like the *Gazette* because they thought we were arrogant and knew everything. I think perhaps we did think we knew everything. [Laughter] It was a great time to be in journalism in Arkansas. The Faubus era was still kind of going on. He was still trying to make comebacks on the scene. Jim Johnson was active in those years. There were a lot of what we thought were honorable battles to be fought. I think we all understood that we were working at a place that had been the center of a huge journalistic firestorm. Those of us who came there in the mid-60s were still living in the gun smoke of '57-'59, I guess, although there was never any physical danger to us as there had been for the folks who were there in the Central High School crisis. We knew enough folks who had been there, like Bill Lewis,

and other people. We respected that you guys were pretty young then, too.

[Laughter] We respected what had happened and the way that Bill Shelton and Bob Douglas and Bill Rutherford and those people had handled themselves. I think the original question was, “Did I ever know of anything that we deemed not worthy of coverage or was left out?”

JG: Did you ever see an article that had gone all the way to the back shop and then got killed in the back shop?

PJ: I never saw that myself. As I say, the decision on an article had generally been made by Bill Shelton and Bob Douglas by the time I was aware an article either existed or had a potential for existing. There was a determination that we didn't think it was newsworthy. I never saw --- and I never knew of Hugh Patterson or J. N. Heiskell ordering a story that had already been written and produced be pulled back or taken out of the paper. We lived in what I now realize was an air of unreality. I don't think there were very many papers that had an absolute fire wall between the business office and the editorial function as it existed at the *Gazette*. I didn't understand how lucky we had been until later in my life when I saw newspapers where that separation didn't exist and where business decisions governed how things were covered or if they were covered or if they were not covered. I think that we all took it for granted that Bob Douglas, A. R. Nelson, Bill Shelton, and J. O. Powell, and those men were pretty much free to cover the news as they saw fit.

JG: A. R. Nelson was the managing editor?

PJ: Right. He may have had a different title by the time I got there because Bill Shelton was day managing editor and Bob Douglas was night managing editor, so maybe Nelson was just managing editor. I am not sure. I know that Mr. Heiskell was just the editor.

JG: For seventy years.

PJ: Yes. [Laughter]

JG: In those early years you worked on the copy desk.

PG: Yes.

JG: When did you change to this third-floor position where you were putting out the "Omnibus" section?

PJ: I am thinking that was around 1976, and that date could be wrong. My memory fades. It seems it was around 1976 that Carrick came. Until that time if there were features written, they were generally run in the run of the news pages. Carrick decided to establish a separate section that moved the comics and the Ann Landers column and the medical advice column --- I think it was Dr. Van Dellen - and to consolidate all those sorts of things along with locally written feature type stories and syndicated features.

JG: Was the "Omnibus" section and every day section?

PJ: I think we ran every day. It may have been that it didn't run on Monday because they didn't have anybody down there to put it together on Sunday. So they would run the comics in the back of the state section, the "B" section.

JG: So I suppose this "Omnibus" was designed to provide some lighter reading for

readers in view of the competition that was arriving in the newspaper world.

PJ: That's right, exactly. I think some of the bigger newspapers had established sections, and maybe the *Washington Post* had their "Style" section by then. Newspapers around the country were starting to put together feature sections. It was a kind of new idea. It wasn't universally welcome within the *Gazette*. I think there were people --- probably Bill Shelton, among others --- that thought it was a frivolous thing to devote "x" amount of space every day to feature material, although it wasn't all frivolous material. It was sometimes news covered from a feature angle. Sometimes it had very substantial substance to it. It wasn't universally welcomed by the people at the *Gazette* who were hard core newsmen that thought it was probably a waste of time and newsprint to put that stuff out every day.

JG: How many years did you work on the "Omnibus" section?

PJ: Well, "Omnibus" became just "Features" after three or four years. I think Hugh Patterson didn't particularly like the name "Omnibus." Eventually, we just named it "The Features Section." I worked there from 1976-1991, when the newspaper folded.

JG: You were editing copy and writing headlines?

PJ: Right. I did that for probably five of those years, and then Carrick asked me if I would do a daily column. It was a lot of writing. It took up two full columns down one side of one of the feature papers. It was probably 35 to 40 inches of writing every day about television and its impact and influence on the way we

lived, commentary, analysis, criticism of television, both locally and on a national level.

JG: You also told about some of the programs that were coming up?

PJ: Yes, occasionally I would preview something that I thought was especially good or especially bad. I would mix that in with commentary about the state of the industry as a whole.

JG: The *Gazette* also carried a television guide, right?

PJ: Yes, we pretty much carried, just like the *Democrat-Gazette* does now, a daily listing of what is on for that day, and once a week there is a little magazine insert in the Sunday paper that lists what is on all week. It marked a maturing of newspapers' understanding of the importance of television to their readers. For a long time newspapers kind of ignored television. Then they had folks like Martha Douglas, who put out an entire page every day of listing what was on television and wrote a sort of "best bets" compilation of what was worth watching that day. Martha almost never engaged in commentary and criticism about what was going on. When she left the paper, that was the change. Carrick envisioned that the column would become more of commentary, analysis and criticism of television and radio to a certain extent, but mainly television.

JG: That was what your column was?

PJ: Right. Also, I reviewed movies. Ralph Patterson was the movie reviewer. At that time the movie studios would pay for people to travel to Hollywood to see previews of important movies and interview the people who were in them. But

Ralph refused to fly on airplanes but still thought it was important that the *Gazette* have that sort of material. He asked me, “You’re not afraid to fly. Do you want to go out there and do this?” I started out doing one or two a year and, gradually, after Ralph left, I did the movie reviews alone for several years. Then a young fellow named Jerry Bokamper came to work there and helped out with the movie reviews.

JG: When you made that trip out to California in place of Ralph Patterson, you did that once or twice a year, too?

PJ: It started out that way, but it finally got to where after they learned we were interested in doing that, there were more offers to go to those than we could possibly accept. I would have had to be gone all the time. I know that most papers now don’t allow their people to accept those free trips on the notion that you can’t help but be influenced by the fact that they flew you out there and put you up in a hotel and fed you and put you in contact with Harrison Ford and other people. I understood in my own mind at the time, and I still understand, that it probably is not a healthy thing. I also thought at the time that I was pretty open-minded and didn’t mind saying if a movie was bad or sub par. But I understand why newspapers think it is a bad idea. It probably was a bad idea.

JG: It did give you an opportunity to talk to the stars face to face.

PJ: Oh yes, it was pretty neat. It was a good job to have.

JG: What have you been doing since the *Gazette* closed in 1991?

PJ: I was unemployed for about three months. Then I went to work for Ben Combs,

who owns an advertising agency here in Little Rock. Ben and I went to junior high school and high school together in Hot Springs. By just fortuitous circumstance, at the time the *Gazette* closed, Ben's ad agency won the contract to be the agency for Hot Springs tourism. Ben gave me a job doing public relations mainly for Hot Springs, although I worked for a lot of other clients while I worked for Ben. I stayed there for five years. After that I went to work --- actually, I stayed there seven years --- I went to work for Jonathan Portis and Stacy Pittman, who had a small public relations agency here in Little Rock. I did that for almost a year. That agency was purchased by Cranford, Johnson, Robinson, Woods, and I worked there very briefly. I decided to form my own one person company and continue to do public relations, with Hot Springs remaining my main client right now and a whole lot of smaller accounts. I have been doing public relations almost nine years.

JG: What is the name of your company?

PJ: Paul Johnson Associates.

JG: Do you operate it out of your home?

PJ: I operate out of my home. I have converted my son's bedroom into an office. It seems to work pretty well for me.

JG: What is the address of your home and business?

PJ: 1300 Twin Lakes Drive, Little Rock.

JG: Were you born in Hot Springs?

PJ: I was born in Hot Springs seven days after Pearl Harbor in 1941. I grew up there

and graduated high school there five years ahead of Bill Clinton. I returned there after I went to college at Texas A & M. I worked for the newspaper in Hot Springs. I am married to a woman who was born and raised in Hot Springs. My daughter was born in Hot Springs. We were married in Hot Springs. It is fun to be able to work for your old hometown.

JG: So you have two children?

PJ: I have a daughter named Melissa, who is a first grade teacher in El Dorado. I have a son named David, who is a computer help desk manager for Tyson Foods in Springdale. I have four grandchildren, two for each kid. I am still married to the same woman after thirty-nine years.

JG: Her name is . . .

PJ: Judith Johnson. She works as a branch manager, the Fletcher branch, of the Little Rock library out on Buchanan Street.

JG: What was it like after Gannett purchased the *Gazette* in 1986? Did you notice any changes in the *Gazette* operation?

PJ: The changes started almost immediately. I think the first indication that a lot of us got that things were not going to be exactly the way they always had been was almost immediately after Gannett took over the paper, the editor, named Walker Lundy, came around --- and I came into work one day and there was an AP Style Book on my desk and there was a note that said to start using this. That was really kind of a major departure for those of us who had taken a certain amount of pride in the fact *Gazette* didn't do things the way that every other newspaper in

the United States did it. All of a sudden, we were going to look --- essentially, as far as the way we wrote, it was going to be exactly like every newspaper in the United States. Maybe *The New York Times* still has some idiosyncratic style rules that they keep. But most of them had gone to that AP Style, and there is nothing wrong with it. It is just that we had a certain amount of pride in the fact that we did do things a little bit differently. Immediately, that was an indicator to me that even though they had said, like most big companies do when they take over somebody, “Don’t worry, things aren’t going to change. You guys have been doing a great job. We would be crazy to change the way you are doing it. You are successful.” I think right about then we started to think, “Yes, this is not going to last much longer.” Certainly, shortly after that the way the paper was deciding to cover news began to change. The people in the community could tell it had changed. For instance, I remember they ran a huge color photograph of the UALR Trojan cheerleaders in Lycra uniforms on the front page. It was immediately branded “cheesecake journalism” by folks on the inside and on the outside of the paper. There were other changes. People who had been doing their jobs for many years or a generation were replaced by people from outside of Arkansas. They weren’t bad people, but they had no real understanding of Little Rock or Arkansas. They had no institutional memory of why the *Gazette* was an important institution. The Central High School crisis that had been the annealing fire for the *Gazette* was something many of them had no idea that it had ever happened, much less that it had happened to the people who were working there

with them. For awhile, it was kind of funny that young reporters would be brought in from outside and they would say, “Did something happen here in 1957?” We would say, “Yes, something happened here in ’57.” Or they would say, “Why haven’t we had any stories about this guy named Faubus?” It was a traumatic time for those of us who had been there for awhile. I am sure that it was even more traumatic for the people like Bill Shelton and Pat Carithers, who had been there for years before I even came. Those two guys stick in my mind as two courageous guys who --- even when the Gannett people became very insistent and a bit pushy about the things they were doing at the paper, Bill and Pat never hesitated to say exactly what was on their mind about the way the news was covered and presented. Bill, especially, suffered for it. He was given a series of increasingly less responsible jobs. I think at one time he was working on the copy desk at the *Gazette*. This was painful for people like me to see a man that I had considered an icon in American journalism, not just Arkansas journalism, editing copy for folks who had no real respect for him or for his history.

JG: Pat Carithers was the wire editor.

PJ: Telegraph editor, wire editor, and one of the best at it that ever was, I guess.

JG: Bill Shelton was the . . .

PJ: Day managing editor, but actually was city editor. This is what I always thought of Bill as, even though he had the title of day managing editor. He was in fact the city editor.

JG: Did you sit in the slot in those early years that you were there, at the copy desk?

PJ: Yes, I was assistant news editor for three or four years. After Bob Douglas became executive editor --- I guess, was his title --- Bill Rutherford became news editor. A guy named Gary Drury and I shared assistant news slotman duties. I did that for quite --- what seemed like three or four years.

JG: Until you went to work on the "Omnibus."

PJ: Right.

JG: Let me go back. I kind of chopped that up a little bit there. I think this is a good time to turn the tape over.

PJ: Go right ahead.

[End of Tape 1, - Side 1]

[Beginning of Side 2, Tape 1]

JG: Let's discuss what was happening at the *Gazette* in the closing months and weeks at the very end in 1991, when the *Gazette* closed down.

PJ: All through that summer of 1991, there had been an uneasy feeling in the staff that perhaps these guys weren't winning the newspaper war. I think earlier that year -- I am not sure of the date --- the *Democrat* had matched the *Gazette* on Sunday circulation. It was obvious that what was going on couldn't continue forever because they were selling the paper for \$10.00 a year for a subscription and advertising was \$1.00 an inch at both of the papers. It became obvious to us that somebody had to give. Something had to give in this competition because they were both bleeding money, just hemorrhaging money. It seems to me, like in September, Joe Quinn, who was a news anchor on Channel 11, came on the

news and said he had been told by a reliable source that the *Arkansas Gazette* had been sold. I immediately jumped on the phone, and the first person that I could think to call was Max Brantley. I said, "That can't be true." Max said, "I am hearing that it is true, that the *Gazette* has been sold and the buyer is Walter Hussman." I said, "Man, that is just incredible. I thought we were winning." [Laughter] So did everybody else. We knew we were putting out a superior product. We always felt like our reporters and photographers and editors were better at their jobs than the people they competed against. The next day or so, there was this long series of denials from the Gannett people. They would say, "Oh, don't pay any attention to that. That's not true. Just keep doing your job. We are going to win this thing. We have spent all of this money. You don't think a big company like Gannett would cave in to a single guy like Walter Hussman." Even though we wanted to believe that, we started thinking, "This is not good." Then the publisher that Gannett had sent there went incommunicado. Nobody could get in to see him. Nobody knew. . .

JG: His name was?

PJ: Bill Malone. Then all at once, Bill Malone was gone, and they had a guy named Moon, who was brought in to be publisher. No one ever saw him. We knew there was a guy named Moon who was publisher of the paper, but he was never around. No one could get in to see him on important questions, and he was just generally unavailable. We knew that this guy had been sent in to preside over the death of the *Gazette*. Gradually, through that fall, we figured this newspaper is

done for unless something happens. Ernie Dumas and Max Brantley, and other folks in the newsroom began a campaign to go to prominent people in the community who had access to money. They went to Witt Stephens, Walter Smiley, and there was great hope at one time that Walter Smiley, who had founded Systematics, which is now Altel Information Services, could be the guy who was going to step forward and put together a financial package involving himself and other prominent people that would bail us out and get us independent from Gannett. If Gannett was intent on selling the paper, would they consider selling it to these people rather than Walter Hussman? Unbeknownst to any of us, the deal had been done way back in the summertime. We had been lied to all of that time by Gannett executives who swore that the *Gazette* was not going to be sold, wasn't going to close. In fact, we were going to prevail. Gradually, the overtures to Witt Stephens and Walter Smiley came to no good end. They looked at the books and saw how much money had been thrown into this war with Walter Hussman. They said, "There is no way we could pay off that debt and continue to put out a newspaper." Then it was a matter of we know we are done for; what do we do? We were getting no truthful communications from the Gannett people. They were just saying, "We insist this is not going to happen. Just keep coming to work. Your paychecks are going to keep coming. Everything is fine!" But we knew differently. Along about October, the first couple of weeks in October, rumors started going through the paper that it could happen any day. People started taking their personal effects home from the office. I carried all the things

that I had accumulated in that long period of time in the office. We kept coming to work, and then on that Friday afternoon, actually on Friday morning, I was sitting at my desk writing Tuesday's television column, the computer screen froze up. That wasn't too unusual for computers to lock up in those days. I went out, and everyone was saying, "Mine is locked up, too. I don't know what is going on." Then some people came in who weren't *Gazette* people and said, "Just stay away from the computers." I think there were folks downstairs who were having the weekend edition pasted up and that evening's paper, Friday evening's paper, they were still working on it that afternoon. They called us all and said there would be a staff meeting at a certain time, 12:00 o'clock or something like that. We all gathered, and a combination of sadness and sort of just nervous hilarity prevailed. Leroy Donald got up on a desk and started talking about the old days and telling stories. Other people would stand up and recall things that had happened over the years. There was a lot of nervousness and a certain amount of anger involved. Standing in the newsroom waiting for somebody to come and talk to us. Then we were told that the meeting had been delayed. We all went away, and it seemed like an hour or so later we were told to reassemble in the newsroom. We went in there and --- I don't know the fellow's name. It could have been Paul Smith from the *Democrat* --- got up and announced the newspaper had closed and had been purchased by the *Democrat* and that we were all ordered to get out of the building immediately. There were guards that we had never seen before with pistols on their hips herding us out. They said, "Don't go back to

your office. Leave right now. Don't take anything with you. You will receive a notice on when you can come back and pick up your things." It was a real surreal feeling. You have had it happen to you in various times of your life where things are happening and you think, "Is this really happening?" We all left the building. Some people were laughing, but I was crying. I was interviewed by a reporter from Channel 7 with tears in my eyes. I went home. My wife was at home, and she was crying. It had been on the news by then. It was the equivalent of a close family member passing away. We received notice that there was going to be a candlelight vigil that night in the street in front of the *Gazette*. We went down there and there were hundreds of people. I remember Sid McMath, talking, eulogizing the newspaper. We all went home, and I guess it was within a week we got notice on when to come and get our last paycheck and severance pay. They sent a notice that we could come down on this day and this time, and someone would escort you back to your office and observe you as you cleaned out your desk. I did not have much left in my office at that time. I got everything that I needed in a small box. There were two *Democrat* employees standing there watching me. I was pretty resentful that they would think I would steal something. It was a traumatic time, not only for those of us who were there, but for people all over the state. It was like the passing of a friend.

JG: You mentioned you talked to Max Brantley and his title would have been. . .

PJ: Max, I think, at one time had been city editor. It seems to me he was then writing a political column that John Brummett had written until John defected to the

Democrat right toward the end of the *Gazette's* life.

JG: Ernie Dumas was. . .

PJ: Ernie was writing editorials by that time. He and Jerry Dhonau were editorial writers, and so was Doug Smith.

JG: I guess the title for the fellows who wrote editorials was associate editors.

PJ: Associate editors, yes. Jerry may have been editor of the editorial page at that time. I think Jim Powell had retired.

JG: I believe you are right. Paul, I want to thank you for this very interesting interview.

PJ: I enjoyed it, and I am really pleased to have been included in the project. I am really to and read all of this stuff once you get it all compiled.

JG: We will get you a transcript for you to read before it goes in the archives.

PJ: I am talking about the other people's stuff.

[End of Interview]