

Gazette Project

Interview with
Harry King
Little Rock, Arkansas,
8 June 2001

Interviewer: Jerry McConnell

Jerry McConnell: Okay, your name is Harry King.

Harry King: That is correct.

JM: Do we have your permission to tape this interview about the history of the
Arkansas Gazette?

HK: Absolutely.

JM: Harry, let's start, what do you do now?

HK: I am the sports editor for AP [Associated Press] in Arkansas. I also run the day-to-day news operation, three, four, sometimes five days a week. I work under a news editor and bureau chief.

JM: How many years have you been with the AP?

HK: Closing in now on thirty-five.

JM: Is that right?

HK: Yes.

JM: So how many years have you had this particular job as sports editor?

HK: Oh, Lord, over twenty years. It kind of evolved. Ed Shearer was here and left. I don't think anybody else wanted it.

JM: So you have been with the AP for about thirty-five years?

HK: That's right.

JM: What did you do before that?

HK: I worked for the *Arkansas Gazette*.

JM: What did you do at the *Arkansas Gazette*?

HK: I was in the sports department, where I probably learned more than I ever learned in school.

JM: How long did you work at the *Gazette*?

HK: A couple of years, almost three.

JM: How did you get started?

HK: It probably was an unfair advantage. My brother-in-law was an editor and suggested that if I put on a suit, I might be able to get a real job.

JM: Did you work as a part-timer or a full-timer?

HK: A part-timer. I remember not having the benefits and so forth.

JM: You were doing . . . ?

HK: The old fishing report.

JM: You weren't just doing Friday nights?

HK: No. I was thirty-five hours or something like that.

JM: That way they didn't have to pay you.

HK: That's right.

JM: You called up docks and got the fishing reports for that day?

HK: And junior high football and other things.

JM: You covered football during the football season and basketball?

HK: Yes. I started out doing junior high football, and they were trying to call Boris

Malczycki, whose family did not speak very good English. They had pretty good teams. I had been trying to get something out of this family, and where Boris was was always a treat. You almost wished they would lose a couple of times so that you would not have to mess with it.

JM: What year was that?

HK: It would have been 1962 or 1963. It was 1963, I think. I left in 1966, so that would be right.

JM: Did you go into full time before you left?

HK: Right after a few months, it seemed like. It wasn't very long.

JM: What did you do after you were full time?

HK: I did some high school football. I actually got to go to an AIC [Arkansas Intercollegiate Conference] game, which scared the hell out of me. Anyway, I did go. Mostly high school stuff and some golf. Orville [Henry] was looking for someone to do golf. I could at least get the ball airborne, so I think he thought that made me qualified.

JM: That was more than I could do.

HK: [Bill] Simmons once wrote that somebody chipped the ball a hundred and eighty yards.

JM: Yes, I have seen those kind of errors. There was some guy from the AP who had somebody hit an infield triple. I just happened to read the wire. I finally convinced him that it was impossible to hit an infield triple. It must have been an error or something. At any rate, we got that taken care of. Who was on the

Gazette sports staff at that time?

HK: Orville was banging away with two fingers and a coke sitting over there. [I guess they were six-and-a-half-ounce bottles.?] He could really crank that stuff out. Jim Bailey, Jerry McConnell, people who—I don't mean to embarrass you, but people who really knew how to put a story together. I know that is kind of awkward for me to talk about you and Bailey and people. I probably learned more there than I ever learned at UALR.

JM: Who else was on staff then?

HK: Chuck Miller, Eddie Best, and several people that I crossed paths with who, oddly, ended up at AP. Robert Shaw was about a year ahead of me. Bill Simmons had been through there. My brother-in-law actually worked there, Bill Rutherford, who still talks about his days at the *Gazette*.

JM: Were Robert and Bill still there?

HK: I think that Bill had already moved on, and Robert was moving to Cityside. Boy, he could tell you more about that.

JM: But they— as I recollect, Bill and Robert started out—They started out as Friday night football guys.

HK: Yes, they might have.

JM: They recruited them out of North Little Rock High School. You went to North Little Rock High School, right?

HK: Yes.

JM: How old were you when you took that job?

HK: I must have been twenty-one.

JM: Had you been to college?

HK: Yes, I was going to school.

JM: Where were you going?

HK: I was still going to school.

JM: UALR?

HK: Right, just like everybody else. Eight o'clock classes were not a lot of fun.

JM: Not when you work until midnight.

HK: Yes. Not a lot of fun.

JM: What do you remember about that time at the *Gazette*? Does anything stand out in your memory?

HK: I guess that I was so wide-eyed that I was pretty confined to the sports department. I couldn't believe people could turn out stories as rapidly as they did. I mentioned going to that AIC game and being scared to death. I remember calling, and Bailey answered the phone. I said, "Jim, I just don't know what to say." He said, "Just tell me what happened." So I told him what happened. He said, "I will take care of it." I got up the next day, and I had this wonderfully written story. I had no idea where that thing came from. I remember listening to you and Bailey—I thought I knew something about sports. I was twenty to twenty-one years old. I thought I knew something. I remember listening to you guys doing trivia, what would now be called trivia quizzes with each other. People today would not get any of them right. You would get eight out of ten right.

JM: That was the way that we built up our information and background. He would ask me questions about stuff I did not know, and I would ask him questions about things he didn't know.

HK: The other thing is I would sit there after I had been there a year or two and curse you. You would be on the phone with the track coach at Crossett. You'd say, "Harry, take this information." You would sit there and have a twenty-five minute conversation with the guy.

JM: I enjoyed getting those guys on the phone and talking to them.

HK: But you knew all of those people. I wound up covering North Little Rock, I guess, because of my background. I remember this huge—I thought this was really something. I was going to get to go on the road. We got on a damn school bus and drove to Blytheville for a football game. You remember other things that are kind of odd, I guess. I remember listening to a Razorback game because Orville and everybody else was gone. If it was a big ball game or something, I remember going out on Third Street and throwing a football up and down Third Street at halftime. There are strange things that come back to you.

JM: Who was the coach at North Little Rock?

HK: I guess that Ken Stephens had gotten there. They were actually pretty decent.

JM: He was probably a little bit more exciting to interview, too. What were your top assignments or your most challenging assignment?

HK: Orville was trying to be nice and give me an opportunity to do some things. It seems like I went to Cherokee Village or one of those golf developments. I don't

think I had ever flown on a small plane. He sent me on a little private plane. I did a piece on the golf course up there. I did the state tournament, which was in Hot Springs. It might have been the first night that I had ever gotten to overnight someplace. Ellen and I stayed over. That same motel is still over there on Central. It was just a dump. I remember getting up and was real excited about seeing my by-line. It was by "Happy King." [Laughter] I still think it got changed in the city.

JM: I used to go over there to the PGA tournament.

HK: Oh, yes. I got to do that.

JM: The only thing I hated about it was that bad road.

HK: Orville and I went to Memphis, and I got to see Jack Nicklaus play. He was my hero. He was playing with Jerry Barber, who couldn't hit it as far as I could. Barber juts beat his brains out. Nicklaus shot seventy-one, and Barber made every putt under fifty feet. He just beat his brains out. I remember going there for that Hot Springs thing [tournament]—I can't remember. You know, it might have been Dave Stockton. I walked with somebody. The guy was playing pretty good, and I picked him up at seven or eight. I walked with somebody, and I went through the whole round. I was making notes and everything. Honest to God, we got through it, and the guy shot something like sixty-six. Finally, this guy said, "How long was it?" "About twelve feet." Yes, it was really odd that we had been through that whole thing. I don't think there was any media walking the golf course. The Hot Springs Country Club—all those hills! It was great. I thought it

was fun.

JM: The hard part of it was—you know about it better than I do. If you picked the wrong guy, then he could go out there and he may shoot seventy-three, and somebody has already shot a sixty-five. Then you are trying to figure out what happened.

HK: Golf is pretty impossible to cover. I guess if you could do it—well, with a T.V. now you could do it.

JM: How many times did you get injured?

HK: [Laughter] I knew we were going to get to that part. Orville actually issued an edict: Anybody that got hurt playing could be fined. It wasn't always me. I was on crutches two or three different times.

JM: Playing touch football?

HK: Yes. And we played softball out there at UALR. I think it was Robert who said, "The birds stopped singing," when Bob Hiesler and I ran together—no, Darrell Mack and I ran together, chasing a pop fly out over second.

JM: That was a pretty good collision.

HK: I knocked James Thompson over a fence out there at Allsopp Park. He was lying there at the bottom of the fence, and he was half conscious. "James, throw us the football." Portis got three or four stitches in his mouth. Lightfoot cracked a rib or something.

JM: Didn't Ernie Dumas do something?

HK: He still blames me for—We were playing out at UALR, and he had his arm raised

to throw the ball, and I hit him up under his ribs. It punctured his lung. It actually punctured his lung.

JM: It was kind of funny, too, in a way.

HK: Maybe you have opened up some floodgates. It was kind of some odd things that I remember. We used to play cards right there in the newsroom. Late on Friday nights, after Friday night football. Boy, you think back on some of these things. We played the game to where you have two cards, and you try to get in between them.

JM: It is called several names. "Between the Sheets" is one name. The other name is "Red Dog."

HK: I remember that we were playing for quarters. Somebody would miss and someone would yell. Before you knew it, there was eighteen or twenty dollars in the pot. Somebody went for the whole thing and missed, and then there was forty dollars—Nobody who was playing could cover the forty dollars. People got four or five dollars at a time. Nobody playing had forty dollars.

JM: When Billy Mitchell came in and we were playing cards, were you there? Billy Mitchell came in, and we were playing late at night like that. We didn't respond alertly enough to him, and he called the management the next day. They put out an edict. I think we were playing Canasta. I can remember some of the people in that game. Pat Best was in the game. She was working the telephones. She was waiting for Eddie to get off work. At that time he was still working to put out the paper. Pat and a couple of others of us would be playing Canasta. Billy came up

there one day, and it must have been 11:30 at night. I don't know why he was there at 11:30 anyway. Then the edict came down that we couldn't play cards. Anything else that you particularly recall about your *Gazette* experience?

HK: The other thing that comes to mind—I am not sure that I want to talk about this.

JM: Isn't it odd the things you remember? What was your general impression of the *Gazette* operation at the time? The sports operation and then as you later on got more experience with other operations? How would you compare what the *Gazette* was doing?

HK: Back then I thought it was the only newspaper around. I thought it was far superior. Certainly, now the *Democrat* is a much better paper than it was. I felt at that time there was no comparison. Better staff, better written, better reporting, all those things that somehow flipped around over the years. More conscientious—something along that line—more caring. I had worked part-time at the *Democrat* before I came to the *Gazette*. I was answering the phone. I was working the switchboard, calling kids and saying, “Hey, you forgot to throw a paper somewhere.” They were always downtrodden. Looking back, somehow all of that evolved. It is amazing. Just sitting in that sports—I know this sounds kind of condescending—just listening to you or Orville or Bailey, or somebody doing interviews—the way to do them and the way to follow up and all that—You really do learn more than you ever would out of a book. I know that sounds trite. We used to talk about that at times.

JM: I remember one time, Eddie Abel—do you remember Eddie Abel? He had a lot of

trouble putting stories together. Orville said, “Eddie, you just sit there next to Jim Bailey. You just watch Jim and watch how he puts the story together and how he organizes it. How he writes the leads and everything.”

HK: This is years after I had left that Bailey said something you could always count on were my golf stories being at least eighteen paragraphs. I guess that I had a funny look on my face. He said, “You got a lead on another ‘number one.’” [Laughter]

JM: What Bailey told Abel was, “Now, what you do is to go out to the ball game. Write yourself a lead and write a summary on what happened in the ball game. Then you go back and pick up how it transpired.” You may remember this. He went out and covered Catholic High and Carlisle one night. He came back, and he sat there. He wrote his lead, the first paragraph. The second paragraph began, “On the opening kick off . . .” [Laughter] He really began at the beginning. I remember another time that he came in, and he sat there fifteen minutes and never wrote a line. He was sitting next to Bailey, and Bailey said, “What’s the matter?” He said, “I just can’t get it started.” He said, “What do you want to say? What happened?” He told him in thirty words or so what happened. Bailey ripped off about two paragraphs right away. Eddie looked at him and said, “Why can’t I do that? That is exactly what I wanted to say.” Orville used to tell people that, too. He used to tell me this. I would come in from a ball game really excited about what I would say—It was a dramatic game or something like that—I would start telling Orville, and Orville would say, “Jerry, don’t tell me. Just write it down, and tell it just like you told me.”

HK: I bet I heard that a hundred times.

JM: When you tell me and you are excited about it, you are telling me the thing that most sticks in your mind, and that is your lead.

HK: I don't know how many times I have done something like that in our newsroom. Somebody will come in and say, "Boy, I can't get started." A guy called me yesterday—we are doing a piece on undercover drugs by the highway department and drug raids. A guy called me yesterday and said, "I have been out here working, and they are crawling under trucks." He got back in there and said, "How am I going to . . .?" He told me just yesterday, "They are crawling under the trucks and have some pictures." I thought, "Fine, just put down what you told me yesterday." That has come up more and more. Whatever has excited you will excite the reader. It sounds so simple, but we all get caught up in making it fit and to be something else.

JM: We often want to make it more than it is. Why did you leave the *Gazette*? What were the circumstances surrounding your leaving?

HK: The fact that I was starving to death might have something to do with it. Actually, Orville encouraged me. He didn't run me off, I don't mean that. He kept saying, "Is this really what you want to do the rest of your life?" I had an opportunity to take an AP test and did pretty well. In fact, it is funny how Robert Shaw reappears in all of this. Shaw was in St. Louis, and my mother lived in St. Louis. He said, "Sometime when you are here visiting her, just come on by and take the test." They made a job offer. I think as much as I would have liked to

stay here and write sports all of my life, I think Orville made it pretty clear that this is a little bit better deal here.

JM: I can imagine.

HK: I had no idea what AP was about though. You know, I was in the *Gazette* newsroom, and that was kind of nice. We would be desperate for the paper to come out. We would get the 10:15 [p.m.] paper out, and we didn't know what we were playing catch-up on.

JM: So you went to work for the AP here in Little Rock?

HK: That is kind of odd because most people don't go to work in their hometown. I am thinking about our newsroom out in California: two University of Missouri graduates, two LSU [Louisiana State University] graduates.

JM: They tend to move you around quite a little bit. I don't know if this is a fair question. Over the years that you have sat here at the AP and you could see what was going on in the newspaper business in Little Rock, when did you begin to see real changes in the *Democrat* and the *Gazette*?

HK: I know that the changes were subtle because I had worked for [John Robert] Starr for a long time, when he was bureau chief at AP. I knew what he was doing over there [at the *Democrat*]. I know some people might find this hard to believe. He taught me a lot of things about being fair. He was a fair journalist. I know his job was different from this. Finally, when Orville went over there, it dawned on me that this had really gone the other way. Here was a guy who was the *Arkansas Gazette* for so many years. All of a sudden, he was not at the *Arkansas Gazette*.

JM: That was after Gannett had bought out the *Gazette*?

HK: Yes.

JM: Yes, that was a shock to me, and I think I may have said this in the interview with me. Orville had come to me at one time when I was working for him at the *Gazette*—you know I had been there several years—Orville said, “Jerry, if you ever want to be a sports editor yourself, you had better go somewhere else because I will never leave the *Gazette*. I love my job. I wouldn’t leave my job at the *Gazette* for *Sports Illustrated*. I love this job. I have always been here. This is the only job that I have ever wanted.” After having said that and then to leave, you knew that something dramatic had happened.

HK: More than I could ever believe. It seemed to me, Jerry, and maybe this is an unfair thing to say. We weren’t at the *Gazette* anymore. We had our own office and everything. I wasn’t around the people. There was an almost certain arrogance at the *Gazette* that the *Democrat* “will never pass us up. We will always be the *Arkansas Gazette*. We are always here”—All of a sudden, they looked up and were behind. That might be overstated. Like I said, I wasn’t there every day with them. I got that impression.

JM: I had that impression at times, too.

HK: I think it was Shelton who told me—Boy, I wish that I could repeat this exactly. This was years after I left. The *Democrat* had a story about Nolan Richardson having a cross burned in his yard. The *Gazette* had brought Shelton—I think it was Shelton—back in kind of a consultant kind of thing: What are we doing and what

aren't we doing, so forth and so on. He went back to the sports department and said, "What are you going to do to match it?" Somebody told him, "I have no idea what you are talking about." This was their competition, and they were kind of unaware of anything they were doing.

JM: Is that when you began to see major differences in the *Gazette* after Gannett took over, or had you noticed some before that?

HK: I think there were some before that. Yes, there were some pretty dramatic changes after that. Just in the way that they approached stories.

JM: Before Gannett bought them out, in your opinion, had the *Gazette* begun to go downhill in some areas?

HK: I am not sure I am qualified to say it, but again, my brother-in-law was one of the important people. Personally, I think he would probably tell you that. If he were here today, I think he would probably tell you that. Maybe they had slipped some. I think *Gazette* people thought the *Democrat* made all of these tries over the years, and this was just another one.

JM: Yes, I understand. There were a lot of people who came out of the *Gazette* at that time in the sports department. They moved on to bigger and better things. I remember particularly—I don't know if you remember anyone in particular—I remember you and Bill Simmons, Robert Shaw. . . .

HK: Not Frank Allen—Dickie Allen.

JM: Anything else in particular that you remember about that time in working for the *Gazette*? Circumstances, how they operated?

HK: I think that I was oblivious to some of that. I just thought we wrote stories, and that was all there was to it.

JM: Then you went home.

HK: The stories came from somewhere, and somebody would say, "Here, take this dictation."

JM: You guys had Friday night football.

HK: We had stuff stacked up six or eight deep. I remember being scared to death of Mr. Nelson, the managing editor.

JM: A.R. Nelson?

HK: Yes. I don't know how else to put it but scared to death. I was hoping he didn't know who I was.

JM: Was Mary Grace there? Was she the telephone operator?

HK: Yes.

JM: Friday night operation, that was quite a deal.

HK: Yes, you would get those notes backed up. Five or six ball games. You thought you would never get through, but you always got through. Who was it? I am trying to think. Was it Bailey? When we thought the *Democrat* was stealing our stories . . .

JM: That was me.

HK: Do you remember that?

JM: Oh, yes, that was in basketball. What got me was that we were doing all the work during the district tournament season. We had every district tournament primed

to call us and give us all the scores for that night. Then the next day the *Democrat* would run the same thing we had, and the same way we had it. They were just clipping our scores. I started writing in some fake scores by doing it from some district, say, in North Arkansas, that was first edition territory. They wouldn't see it in the first edition. I would do it for the city edition because I knew the *Democrat* would see it. I would put in something like "Strawberry - 43, Pleasant Plains - 30." There wasn't such a thing as Strawberry or Pleasant Plains. They picked it up for about two or three days, and somebody apparently tipped them off on it. I know they had to start reading those things every day. I got that idea, actually, from the *Kansas City Star* and the *Kansas City Times*. They had the same situation, and one of them, one day in their college basketball stories, had printed this: "The South - 65, Will Rise Again - 43." [Laughter] The other paper picked it right on up. I think that it [?] good information there.

Anything else that you can think of that highlights that time?

HK: They all seem to revolve around food.

JM: Well, you did need to eat. Those hours were bad hours. I am sure you were three to midnight.

HK: Yes, absolutely. James Thompson took me home about half the time.

[End of Interview]