

Gazette Project

Interview with

Bob Lancaster,
Little Rock, Arkansas,
5 May 2000

Interviewer: Bob McCord

Bob McCord: This is Bob Lancaster and Bob McCord, and I'm going to read this to you,
Bob. I'm supposed to read this sentence. All I need to do now is for you
to tell me your name. Say your name.

Bob Lancaster: My name is Bob Lancaster.

BM: And indicate that you are willing to give the Center permission to use this tape
after it has been edited.

BL: I do.

BM: Agreeable. [Laughs] All right. Good.

BL: I am totally agreeable.

BM: All right. Your hometown was where?

BL: Sheridan.

BM: Sheridan. You actually were born in Grant County?

BL: I was born two miles east of Sheridan on the Redfield road.

BM: And your date of birth was?

BL: December 12, 1943.

BM: 1943. You worked at the *Gazette* two times?

BL: Two different times.

BM: Two different times. When was the first time?

BL: The first time was in 1973 to 1974.

BM: Was that after you came back from a Nieman Fellowship at Harvard?

BL: After I came back from Harvard, yes. Bob Douglas had just taken over as managing editor of the *Gazette*, and I was working for the *Democrat*. He wrote me while I was at Harvard telling me that he had just taken over, and one of the first things he wanted to do was revive the old “Arkansas Traveler” column, which, when Ernie Deane had left the *Gazette*, had been abandoned. He told me that if I were to come over to the *Gazette* when I got back to Little Rock, he would let me do that column — Do it any way I wanted to. So, soon after I came back, I did that.

BM: Didn’t you come back to the *Democrat*, though, for a while?

BL: I did.

BM: I thought that was the deal, wasn’t it? That you were supposed to return to the paper when you received the Nieman.

BL: That was one of the requirements of the Nieman Fellowship.

BM: So you went to the *Gazette* in 1973?

BL: Yes, 1973, and I did the “Arkansas Traveler” column then for about a year.

BM: Were they not running the column at all then?

BL: No, it had been since — I mean, Ernie Deane invented the “Arkansas Traveler” column, I guess back in the 1940s. And he had written it for many years and then

retired in the middle 1960s. And when he retired, they retired the column. And Bob was interested in getting a more traveling-around, what's-going-on type of column in the paper.

BM: Was Richard Allin writing the "Our Town" column then?

BL: Yes, he was.

BM: You just started writing that column when you went to the *Gazette*? I was thinking that you were first a reporter.

BL: No, I was not a reporter there. And I wasn't ever much of one anywhere. It's just a talent I don't have. I can write opinion, and I can write other kinds of things, but I just have no talent as a reporter. Too shy.

BM: You stayed how long?

BL: A little over a year.

BM: And then what did you do?

BL: I went to the *Philadelphia Inquirer* to write a similar column there.

BM: And you stayed up there how long?

BL: Nearly four years.

BM: And came back here?

BL: Came back here mainly just to come back. I wanted to write some books, which I eventually did. You were at the *Democrat* then, and you talked me into writing an occasional column at the *Democrat*.

BM: We used to run them on the front page.

BL: Yes. It started off at the legislative session, and you had me come and write a few

pieces about that. That turned into something somewhat semi-regular, and I did that for a while. But then you got Bob Starr in at the *Democrat*, and when that happened I said, “Adios.” [Laughs] Ralph Patrick, the city editor, left to run the *Arkansan* magazine, and I left with him. We both knew too much about Bob Starr to be able to work for him in good conscience.

BM: Okay. And then you worked on the *Arkansan*? That was the name of it, wasn't it, the *Arkansan*?

BL: *Arkansan* magazine, yes.

BM: Yes. And then when it shut down?

BL: After it shut down, I wrote a couple of books. And then Alan Leveritt called me in 1983 and told me that Bill Terry, the first and only editor of the *Arkansas Times*, which at that time was a monthly magazine, was retiring, and he wanted to know if I was interested in being the editor of the *Arkansas Times*, which had been the *Arkansan*'s rival. And I wasn't doing anything else, so I said, “Okay.” We had a good time. We made the magazine into something classy and beautiful. Something the state of Arkansas could be proud of.

BM: Well, when was your second stint at the *Gazette*?

BL: I was editor of the *Arkansas Times* for seven years. Keith Moyer called me up one day and asked me if I would consider coming over to the *Gazette*, to write a column about the legislature that was about to start again. I think this was in 1990. There were some things going on at the *Arkansas Times* then that I didn't particularly like, so I went over, wrote the legislative column, and that turned into

a regular column situation until the *Gazette* itself shut down.

BM: You were there, like me, on the last day?

BL: Yes.

BM: You were there only a short time that second time?

BL: About a year.

BM: So, after that, you did some more freelance writing and then you came back to the *Times*. When did you come back to the *Arkansas Times*?

BL: It was about eight months after the *Gazette* closed. But, in the meantime, as soon as Max Brantley became the editor of the *Arkansas Times*, just after the *Gazette* shut down, he got me to write a weekly column for the *Times*. I was not a *Times* employee; this was a freelance deal. But then after a few months, I came back full time.

BM: What did the *Gazette* do that other newspapers didn't do that made it an institution, the leading paper of the state? What do you think it was?

BL: Well, the *Gazette* was here before Arkansas was, and it had always been the intellectual focus of Arkansas. Everything that Arkansans thought and believed and practiced, both politically and socially, found its way into the *Gazette* in the 19th century and on into the 20th century. It was the conscience of Arkansas. And I think that had to do more with its stature as an opinion organ than as a news gatherer. Its opinions were always interesting to people all over the state because of its statewide concept. It's the same concept that John Barnhill brought to the University of Arkansas football program. That is, everybody in the state would

get behind one institution — athletically, it was the Razorbacks; journalistically, it was the *Gazette*.

BM: Don't you think that it probably was the *Gazette* that was responsible for Arkansas at one time being the most Democratic, state in the Union?

BL: Probably. But *Gazette* editors ran the gamut of political allegiance. I mean, there were Whig editors; there were loco-foco editors; there were Know-Nothing editors. In the first World War there was a senator from Arkansas, Senator William F. Kirby, who was one of the leading opponents of the United States entering World War I. And so for a time there, we had a pacifist *Arkansas Gazette* at a time when that was very, very much looked down on. A precursor of Senator [J. William] Fulbright.

BM: This senator got his ideas out of the *Gazette* apparently?

BL: I would think so.

BM: But was he a Democrat?

BL: He was. So was President [Woodrow] Wilson, whom he opposed. So was President [Lyndon B.] Johnson, whose war Senator Fulbright opposed.

BM: Your first real newspaper job was at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*, right?

BL: I started there as the long sportswriter when I was nineteen years old.

BM: All right. So when you were at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*, was it an ambition of yours to work on the *Arkansas Gazette*? Did you admire it to that extent?

BL: Eventually, that became an ambition because it was the best paper in this part of the country. It was the prestige journalism organization in the South, I guess. I

eventually got to know some mighty good people who worked there. And I did hanker to show my stuff in their exalted venue.

BM: Was it the editorial content of the paper that attracted you to it, or was it the whole works at the *Gazette* — the news coverage, its looks and everything else?

BL: I think I probably bought into the *Gazette* legend — kind of like everybody else did. Before I actually came to the *Gazette*, when I really got interested in it, the *Gazette* had developed an editorial page that had Jerry Neil and Pat Owens, among others, writing the editorials. At that time, I guess, it was probably the best editorial page in the world. Really.

BM: Had Harry Ashmore already left?

BL: Ashmore was gone. Jim Powell was the editorial page editor, and he was obviously the weakest member of that staff as far as pure writing talent. Owens and Neil were as good editorial writers as ever lived. And at that time they had a young guy who was contributing editorials every bit as good as theirs— a very much underrated editorial writer.

BM: Who was it?

BL: It was Carrick Patterson.

BM: Is that right?

BL: A true fact.

BM: Well, that's a surprise. Was he even working at the paper then?

BL: Yes. He was in some sort of floating capacity, I'm not sure what. But he did some awfully good editorial work. And he held his own with those other great

writers.

BM: So you did admire the *Gazette* as a nineteen-year-old reporter in his first job down in Pine Bluff?

BL: I did. I had attended Southern State College at Magnolia for a while, and I wrote letters to the editor of the *Gazette* from down there.

BM: Oh, you did?

BL: Yes. I had a pen name, and I used to get all these old guys all stirred up asking them all kinds of large, philosophical questions. Mr. H.E. Harvey, Sam Faubus, and people like that, they liked to respond to them. So that's sort of how I originally got interested in the newspaper. I did edit the college paper at Magnolia and learned a little something about journalism then from a great old journalism professor who had worked on the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Kansas City Star*. He had known Ernest Hemingway. His name was J. Stanley Hipp. I don't know if you ever knew . . .

BM: I met him once, yes. He was very impressive.

BL: I just loved him. He's the one who prodded me into this profession if anybody did. He and George Tanner, the campus Wesley Foundation director, one of the brightest minds ever to come out of Arkansas.

BM: You were, of course, a Nieman Fellow, and ninety percent of them win that honor at small newspapers from their states and then go back for the required period of time. But then they go to the big-city newspapers, big magazines or television stations. Were you tempted to do that when you finished at Harvard?

BL: Well, I was. I almost went to the *St. Petersburg Times*. They called me to write editorials down there. I took the family down there and stayed two weeks, sort of made a little vacation out of it. I was tempted, but being a Floridian wasn't in my destiny. I'm just hopelessly, incurably Arkie.

BM: Everybody I know was astounded when you left Philadelphia to come back to Arkansas. But you got tired of Philadelphia, didn't you?

BL: Well, I really liked Philadelphia. I just had to make a decision up there. I had done columns, four or five a week, for several years and that sort of wears you out. I got a job offer from *The New York Times* that represented a crucial point for me. I could pursue a big-time journalism career. Or I could say, "Well, I had this ambition to do certain things in journalism, and I've done them now. And now I'm ready to do something else." What I really wanted to do was learn how to write better. I didn't know what to do. So I pretty much packed up and came home for a while just to see what would happen, to write a book or two. I had two little kids at that time, too, and the financial challenge was considerable. But we finally decided to just stay and see what happened. And we've been here ever since.

BM: Eventually, you went back to the *Gazette*. Did you notice that it was a different *Gazette* from the one you worked at previously?

BL: It was not the same paper. It was not even like working at the same newspaper. When I was there the first time, I worked on the third floor. And at that time investigative journalism was a big deal. This was in 1973, 1974, and 1975, when

Watergate was going on.

BM: Yes.

BL: And the *Gazette* had an investigative reporting team. It was Jimmy Jones and Tucker Steinmetz, and they worked on the third floor, up there away from the newsroom. I went over there to revive the “Arkansas Traveler” column, and they stuck me up there in a room with those guys. It was a lot of fun to see them do what they did. They were both really good investigative reporters, and they did a lot of good work in the short time that they did that.

BM: Yes, they did. But when you went there in the 1980s, the atmosphere was even more different, wasn't it?

BL: Yes, it was. The first time, the *Gazette* had the feeling of a local place. I mean, it was a Little Rock place, and the people in there were people you could talk to, have a drink with, or tell stories with. When I went back in the last period of the *Gazette*, it had a pretty cold, institutional feel. I never established any new friendships or felt like one of the crew. For instance, Keith Moyers and his wife, Marilyn — I worked with both of them. In fact, they were about the only ones I worked with. They were really good to me, really helpful and accommodating, but they weren't local people in that old sense. They weren't home folks.

BM: Did you think the paper was as good a newspaper then as it had been in the past when you worked there?

BL: I'm really not a good judge. I just know what I like, and I liked the old one. I liked the old one editorially and I liked the new one, too. I didn't see much

wrong with it. Everybody complaining about how bad it was and how arrogant it was and how Gannett had tried to make it look like *USA Today* and all. But none of that bothered me. I thought it was still pretty good — still clearly superior to the *Democrat*. With first-rate journalists like you and Ernie Dumas and Doug Smith, and great editors like Max Brantley.

BM: Did you have any idea that the paper was going to go out of business and shut down?

BL: No, I was really shocked. I came to work one day about a week before that happened, and I heard the rumor. I remember laughing about it and mentioning to Max Brantley — I said, “You’re not going to believe what I heard, this rumor.” And he said, “Well, it may be right.” I really was astonished.

BM: Well, you were like all the rest of us: you never thought the *Gazette* could go out of business. Don’t you imagine that everybody in Arkansas pretty much had that same idea? [Laughs]

BL: I suppose I thought that the *Gazette* would go on forever.

BM: Well, in the newspaper war, the *Democrat* made a lot of changes — a bigger news hole, et cetera — to do as well as they did. And that was a surprise, wasn’t it? That they created the news hole?

BL: Well, I think all that’s irrelevant. I think there are only one or two facts about the newspaper war that mattered at all.

BM: What are those?

BL: One was that you had, on the one hand, a publisher who was willing to spend any

amount of money, to destroy any of his holdings and his own bank account, and go out and beg on the street if he needed to in order to destroy the other paper.

And on the other side, you had a newspaper company that had no sense of its own publication's history. It was not willing to lose money forever just to be able to stay alive. And when you have that kind of ferocity on one side and that kind of indifference on the other side, then it's obvious who's going to win. Could it have turned out any other way? I don't think any improvements at either paper would have made much difference.

BM: What if, at the very beginning, when Gannett first bought the paper, it had done things differently?

BL: I'm sure the changes they made made good business sense to them. And, really, how can you fight free want ads? Gannett was criticized over the length of news articles or the kinds of photographs they're using, and stuff like that. I just never thought any of that had anything to do with the outcome.

BM: So, almost no matter what Gannett had done, it probably was destined to lose against an opponent like Walter Hussman?

BL: I think so. You got a berserker on one side and a bottom-line wuss on the other. Who's going to win?

BM: Well, it's been ten years now. Do you think the state's suffered as a result of what's happened here? We have a one-newspaper town.

BL: Of course, we have. We have a one-newspaper town, and I don't think it's a very good newspaper. I think it was David Pryor who one time said, "The only

difference between Arkansas and Mississippi is the *Arkansas Gazette*.” And that’s a concise summary of what it was that we lost.

BM: Is it the politics of its editorial section that makes you think it’s not a very good newspaper, or is it just the whole thing?

BL: Well, I don’t know. I go other places and read newspapers, and they’re just so entertaining and edifying, and I come home and I read the *Democrat-Gazette*, and it’s just not. [Laughs] So I don’t know how to answer that.

BM: It seems as though it’s the whole package though that bothers you?

BL: I worked with Paul Greenberg [in Pine Bluff] for years. I love him like a brother, but I don’t like his editorial policy. I don’t agree with most of his editorial positions. Now, if I did, I might have a higher opinion of the paper. I don’t know.

BM: Well, the *Democrat-Gazette* has spread out now. It considers itself a big player now in northwest Arkansas, and it seems to be growing, according to its circulation figures.

BL: I don’t care about a paper’s circulation or its financial situation. They just aren’t standards by which you judge whether a newspaper is any good.

BM: Is what happened in 1957, the *Gazette* winning these two Pulitzer Prizes for its coverage of that crisis, is that, in your opinion, the highlight of the *Gazette*’s existence? Is that the thing that everybody’s going to remember the old *Gazette* by?

BL: Well, I don’t know. I’m not very good at anticipating history. But that was

certainly one of the nice chapters in American journalism. Because of the quality and integrity of their editorial product then, the paper was a lot better later on because good people wanted to work for it. I think it was better in the 1960s and even in the 1970s than it was in the 1950s. Some of the best writers in the world worked over there. And it showed.

BM: Yes, you don't see that now in our local newspaper.

BL: Well, no, and I think it's gone the other way. There's a term the historian James McGregor Burns coined, called "mucker pose." You struck the "mucker pose" when you tried to appear stupider and tougher and more abrupt than you really are. It's just a pose, you see, for people who know better. They want to show they're rough, tough sons-of-bitches, too, and I fear that's how the *Democrat* has gone in the last twenty-five years. Bob Starr was the mucker pose personified.

BM: Is that happening in journalism all around the country? That it's gotten to be more of an entertainment thing?

BL: Just like TV, we've gone more and more to these peacock columnists and commentators and opinion writers. And that's too bad. Most of them have a very short life span — or most of us, I should say. And after a very short time we've pretty much said what we need to say and then it becomes repetitious. The energy and spirit tends to disappear, and we become polarized and preachy. We rail at each other from opposite sides. All heat and no light, and really not much heat.

BM: Are you worried about journalism getting worse in this country?

BL: Well, I don't see how it could get a lot worse than it is now. [Laughter] I think it will continue to have bright spots. They may get a little dimmer all the time, but it hasn't been too long that we really had good newspapers in this country. I guess it wasn't until early in the 20th century that there really was such a thing.

BM: You're as much a historian as you are a journalist. It just seems to me that our history, the state's records aren't being kept because of the loss of the *Gazette* to the *Democrat*.

BL: Yes. We don't have a newspaper of record anymore. The *Gazette* did serve that purpose, although there were long lapses when it didn't do it either. We really do need such a paper. And I guess we probably never will have one again. And we'll wind up with a different kind of history as a result.

BM: I don't like the paid obituaries. You can put in or leave out anything you want to there because they are written by friends or relatives, not journalists.

BL: Well, the fact is, all of our Arkansas history books up until about 1950 were written that way, too. They always had a section in the back with biographies of different people, and those were paid for. They were written by the people that they were written about, and that's how the historians financed the publication of the work. All of our early history was bought and paid for.

BM: Well, is there anything about the *Gazette* or about newspapers that we haven't talked about?

BL: I can't think of anything. I enjoyed working at the *Gazette*. I almost went to work there in the late 1960s, when A.R. Nelson was the managing editor. I came

up from Pine Bluff and interviewed with him once. This would have been in, probably, 1967. Came up and interviewed with him and talked to Bill Shelton, who was his right arm at that time, and thought I had been hired. Ernie Dumas called me and told me I had, and I talked to Shelton and he understood that I had, too. And he had some projects lined up for me to do when I got there. I kept waiting to hear from Nelson, but I never heard from him. A week went by and two weeks went by and then the third week I was finally able to get in touch with him, and I said, "Well, you know, you haven't told me when I'm supposed to report for work." [Laughs] And he said, "Well, you know, I've been thinking about that. I'm just going to have to let you know when we can work it all out." And I never heard anything more from him. He apparently forgot about it once he had talked to me. So I nearly went to work there a long time before I did go to work there. I'm sort of glad I didn't get the job. [Laughs]

BM: When you first went to the *Gazette*, were you kind of a prodigy of Bill Shelton's?

BL: No. Like I say, when I first went there, Bill Shelton and Bob Douglas had assumed joint managing editor status. And it was Douglas who hired me. And they had sort of divided up the turf.

BM: Oh, yes.

BL: So I worked for Bob Douglas when I was doing the "Arkansas Traveler" column. I turned in the column to him every day and he read it. When I just couldn't do one, I would call up and apologize, and he'd tell me not to worry about it. He was the first editor I worked for who had that kind of attitude, and I really

appreciated it [laughs] because I wrote a pretty long column. And the kind of columns I wrote were actual in-the-field kind of things.

BM: Oh, yes.

BL: And doing four and five of them a week was . . .

BM: That's backbreaking.

BL: Sometimes [laughs] it just didn't work. That's one thing I always admired about Paul Greenberg. He was the most prolific writer I ever saw. He'd write all the editorials for the *Pine Bluff Commercial* seven days a week. And he'd write a column once or twice a week. And he would write editorials that he would have to throw away because he didn't have a place for them. I'm such a parsimonious writer that I admire such productive capacity immensely.

[End of Interview]