

Gazette Project

Interview with

Robert McCord
Little Rock, Arkansas,
20 October 2000

Interviewer: Jerry McConnell

Jerry McConnell: All right, would you state your name please?

Robert McCord: My name is Robert S. McCord, M-C-C-O-R-D.

JM: You understand, of course, that this is an interview for the Oral History project for the University of Arkansas on the *Arkansas Gazette*.

RM: Yes, I do.

JM: Let's start by just going over briefly your background before you got to the *Gazette*. You had been --- and you can amend this if you want to --- owner and publisher of the *North Little Rock Times*.

RM: That is right.

JM: And a former editor of the *Arkansas Democrat*?

RM: Executive editor of the *Arkansas Democrat*.

JM: Would you explain how you wound up, and when, at the *Arkansas Gazette*?

RM: I had started out working at the *Democrat* when I was a kid in high school, so when I finished the army and college and graduate school, I came back to the *Democrat* to work. I worked there until I bought the *North Little Rock Times*. Then when August Engel died, who was the publisher of the *Democrat*, they asked me to come back as a stockholder as the editor of the editorial page, so I

did. I stayed there ten years. The last three years I was there, the newspaper was owned by Walter Hussman. Walter began several things that I didn't agree with to try to keep the afternoon newspapers successful — fewer people in the newsroom, neighborhood news in individual tabloids, lower pay and removing all unions. As you know, Jerry, the afternoon papers were dying in America by the multitudes. We were trying everything we knew to do even before Hussman bought the newspaper. When he bought it, he became even more alarmed, and we tried even more things, some of which I simply didn't agree with. And he finally got to the point where he was going to give away free classified ads in 1978 and become a morning newspaper. At that point I just decided I would leave. So I did in December. I didn't really have another job. I was doing a television show on AETN called "McCord's Arkansas," so I devoted more time to that than I could while I was at the *Democrat*. I did some freelance writing. So for three years I didn't really have a full time job. In 1981 Hugh Patterson, the *Arkansas Gazette's* publisher, hired Bill McIlwain, former editor of the *Washington Star*, to come down and remodel — I guess that is the right word — the *Gazette* because he was already feeling the pressure from Walter Hussman and the things he was doing at the *Democrat*. McIlwain was a very good newspaper man, to come down and sort of revitalize the *Gazette*. He got hold of me and asked if I would be interested in coming to the *Gazette* to create an op-ed page. McIlwain said that he had done a lot of research about the *Gazette* and had determined that it was the only metropolitan daily newspaper in the country that did not have an op-ed page.

Well, that tells you just how Democratic the *Gazette* was; they didn't want anybody else's opinion from the other side of its political aisle. So I said to him that I was amazed that he would even propose such a thing as that. I said, "Have you talked this over with Hugh Patterson?" He said, "Oh yes, Hugh Patterson is very much in favor of it. If anybody is going to do it, you are going to do it." So I thought about it for a while, and I decided that I would do it, that it would be fun. So that is how I wound up --- I went there in December, in 1981. I thought the bricks might probably fall out of the wall when I walked in the door that day, but they didn't. However, there was quite a bit of interesting chitchat around about somebody who had spent his life at the *Democrat* suddenly coming to work as an associate editor of the *Gazette*.

JM: How long were you there before Gannett bought the paper?

RM: The paper was bought in June 1986. So I had been there five years.

JM: Can you talk a little bit about how the paper operated in the first five years you were there, while the Pattersons, et al., still owned the newspaper, what you might have noticed as far as competition with the *Democrat*?

RM: Hugh Patterson told me that he wanted me to help win the newspaper war because I had worked for Walter Hussman for three years and supposedly knew all of his ins and outs. I said, "Well, I will be glad to advise." Months went by, and he never asked me anything. So, finally, I went down to his office one day and told him I wanted to take him to lunch. I said, "You know, we never have talked about . . ." He said, "Oh well, we have got this "newspaper war" under control,

and Walter is not going to last another six months. We are just doing fine.” I told him I knew he thought that, but that all indications to me are just the opposite. I told him he should copy the free classifieds, “against the door” delivery and all the other things that Walter was doing. It seemed to me you have to fight fire with fire.” He said, “Bob, no, that is not the . . .” Well, I pestered him some more, and we had lunch at least one other time. Leon Reed, the long-time circulation manager, was the one who was advising Hugh. He and Hugh were very close, and I liked him, too. I had known him for years. We went to lunch, the three of us. I started in again on what I thought they ought to do. I thought we ought to give prizes and give free papers away to get circulation. I tried to anticipate the next step Walter was going to take. Finally, I said, “You know, I think we ought to go back and think about a joint-operating agreement so we can keep the two newspapers alive.” Well, they just laughed at that. They just said, “No, no. Bob, you worry about things that we have under control.” I said, “Well, it doesn’t indicate that we have. The figures don’t indicate that we have.” “Well, we know, but he is going to run out of money. We just don’t have to worry about that. We are going to win this war.” So that was kind of the way it was. The management at the paper, Jerry, I think was pretty much as it was when you were there. One of the worst mistakes, in my opinion, was firing McIlwain. He got to stay there only one year. He is one the of the best newspaper men that I ever worked for or ever will. Everybody in the industry sort of agreed with that except the people at the *Arkansas Gazette*. They were clannish and didn’t want an

outsider coming in there and being the boss. Carrick, Hugh's son, and long-time employees like Bill Shelton hated him. And they saw to it that he didn't stay. Of course, there's no way to prove it, but I have sometimes thought that if McIlwain had stayed, things might have ended in another way — a joint operating agreement or maybe even the defeat of the *Democrat*. McIlwain redesigned the paper, made it look much better. He also hired some more people, and they were good people. He made the paper livelier than it had been. The op-ed page was really his idea. Many at the paper resented it. Since the paper had always been a liberal, Democratic newspaper, they didn't like people with other opinions writing on the op-ed page. I would very carefully select a columnist, a national or a local one, that disagreed with what the *Gazette's* editorials were saying. I was never sure it was even really popular with Hugh, although Hugh never complained. He and McIlwain had decided both sides of argument had to be heard. Of course, he was the one that I answered to, so I never worried.

JM: You mentioned the joint operating agreement. Hadn't there been a previous effort at a joint operating agreement? Can you tell me what you know about that?

RM: While I was still at the *Democrat*, Walter talked to Hugh, and Hugh had quickly dismissed the idea. He was naturally resentful of the Hussman chain moving into *Gazette* territory and turning the *Democrat* into a morning paper. In my last months of the *Democrat* I had said this to Walter: "I am not going to do this if you don't want me to, but I have known Hugh Patterson for a long time, and I will go out and talk to him about the possibility of a joint operation." Walter, at that

time, would have resumed afternoon publication and allow the *Gazette* to be the Sunday newspaper. Hussman said okay, so I went out to Hugh's house. Of course, he was very cordial to me as he has always been. He and I had been among those who worked to create a chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists in Little Rock. "Bob," he said, "I am just not going to do that. This young man came to town with his daddy's money, and he thinks he is going to win. I don't think he will. The way they came up here, I don't feel obligated to bail him out now." I said, "Well, you know what the end of it is going to be." He answered, "Yes, I know what the end of it is going to be. We are going to win." Of course, it would be easy to look back and say, "Well, maybe that would have worked, maintaining two dailies in Little Rock." But if you look around the country today you see these joint operating agreements are not surviving. Only a very few. And frankly, and I don't know how much longer the situation would have survived here. People are no longer reading newspapers as they used to.

JM: Typically, though, it is usually the afternoon paper that goes out of existence.

RM: Oh, sure. The world has changed. When they deliver the afternoon paper, no one is home to read it. The wife is working. They are both working. Many are satisfied with the day's news on the 6 p.m. TV news programs.

JM: What can you say about the *Gazette's* suing the *Democrat*?

RM: As you know, it was the *Gazette* in federal court sued the *Democrat* for violations of trade. The free classifieds. The "all you can eat" program, which was a novelty that few people had ever heard of before that. That deal that, if on

January 1, the big and preferred advertisers would pay the paper a lot of money, say, \$50,000, they were entitled to run advertisements any day of the year without more cost. So instead of paying \$8 an inch they — at least five of the biggest advertisers — could pay as little as \$1 an inch. So the *Gazette*'s lawyers came up here from Houston and collected a couple of million in trying that lawsuit. That policy was largely responsible for Dillard's taking its advertising out of the *Gazette* and running it all on the *Democrat*.

JM: The jury's decision was that there was no restraint of trade?

RM: Yes. There were five charges. They found the *Democrat* not guilty of any of them. The jury was out just a matter of minutes. That must have been the moment that the *Gazette* owners decided to sell the paper. Patterson never discussed it with me, but obviously if he and his family were going to salvage anything, they would have to sell it before the *Democrat* actually became the paper with the largest circulation. At this point the *Democrat* was ahead a tiny bit on Sunday and close even to becoming the *Gazette*'s equal on weekdays.

JM: This may be on the record somewhere else, but my recollection is that Mr. Heiskell, and later the Pattersons when they took it over, didn't have much of an income other than the *Gazette*.

RM: I think that's right, which for the business of journalism is important. It allows people working on the newspaper to report the truth about any company or any person without having to be censored or ignored.

RM: The *Gazette* was putting out the same newspaper day after day that it usually had

without ever considering what the *Democrat* was doing or the changes in Arkansas in the 1980s. The economy was bad and people saved money by not subscribing to two daily papers. Then, too, Arkansas was beginning to turn more Republican. We had elected Reagan. We even voted for Nixon, and then we even voted for Bush. We elected Frank White as governor, a Republican, defeating Clinton's try at a second term. The state was becoming more and more conservative, and, except for a few columns on our op-ed page, there wasn't anything conservative or Republican in the *Arkansas Gazette*. It was Democratic with a capital D just as it always had been. The *Arkansas Democrat's* editor was Bob Starr, who had always disliked the *Gazette*. The story is that this happened because the *Gazette* wouldn't put Starr's byline on Associated Press stories that he wrote that the *Gazette* printed. For the *Democrat* he wrote a daily column filled with name-calling and criticism of the *Gazette* and those who worked there. People like to read that sort of thing. If the *Gazette* wrote a story one way, the *Democrat* always wrote theirs another way. And, of course, there was one major reason so many preferred the *Democrat* — the free classified ads. You will remember that before Hugh Patterson hired McIlwain, the *Gazette* didn't even have a TV magazine. I think we were probably the only metropolitan newspaper left without one, and, of course, the *Democrat* had one and it was popular.

JM: Tell me something about the change in ownership to Gannett and how that transpired.

RM: Well, it was really interesting. About that time Gannett owned about eighty newspapers. They were so afraid that people were saying that they were buying papers so that they could tell Americans what to think that they would not even come to the meetings of the *Gazette*'s editorial board — or their other papers' boards, for that matter. They stayed away from opinion writing.

JM: How did you find out about the sale to Gannett, and how did that transpire as far as what you know about it?

RM: Well, after the result of the lawsuit, it was not a surprise that the paper was sold, but it was a surprise that it was sold to Gannett. The thing that I remember most about it is that we got the call to come down to the newsroom, and there they all were. Al Neuharth, with his hands in his pockets, talking on a P.A. system and promising that the *Gazette* would win the newspaper war. That is when he talked about Gannett — how many newspapers they owned, what they were worth. He put it this way, "We have got deep pockets, and you don't have to worry about the survival of the *Arkansas Gazette*." You know, I think most of the people in the room — although they hated to see the Pattersons leave — sort of believed what he said. I was highly skeptical of all that from the very beginning, but I knew a little bit more about the Gannett operation, I guess, than most people did, so I never had any high hopes, but I never dreamed it would be as bad as it was. I just couldn't believe they would take a newspaper, the oldest newspaper west of the Mississippi, and turn it upside down like they did. It was quite a surprise that they sold it to Gannett. We had been hoping that the Knight-Ridder people might

buy it because they had this great reputation. And Hugh did, as I understand it, talk to the Knight-Ridder people. None of us working stiffs were in on it at all.

JM: Tell me a little about what Gannett did for the newspaper. How did they operate? What kind of changes did they make?

RM: The first person that they brought in there was Walker Lundy, who had been fired from several good newspapers, including the last one, which was the *Fort Worth Star Telegram*. He was just sitting down there without a job. He was still at the newspaper, but had been told to leave. I never knew how Bill Malone, who was the publisher — the Gannett publisher — I never knew how he got so infatuated with Walker Lundy, but he did. And he brought him up here. Walker was an experienced newspaper man and had worked on a lot of good newspapers, but had unusual ideast the newspaper. He thought we ought to be a regional newspaper. He would send reporters out to places in Texas and Oklahoma to cover stories, which bewildered all of us. Then he was a great believer in polls. He would tell journeymen reporters who should be out covering things of some importance to go through telephone books and call people to ask their opinions about things. We would run column after column of that kind of crap. Then he made that famous statement to the staff: “Government news is boring, boring. We have got too much. That is all you ever write, and we are going to quit all that.” And he did. He cut the staffs that were at city hall, at the courthouse and at the Capitol. He got them to writing silly feature stories and all kinds of weird things that had never appeared in the *Gazette* ever. People were looking at the newspaper and

saying, “What is this? What is happening?” They didn’t recognize anything about it. The first thing that probably hurt us was the change of design by McIlwain because, you know, people really don’t like abrupt changes. McIlwain’s changes, although not nearly as bizarre as Gannett’s, were a shock. And he did it almost all at once, which I thought at the time was very bold. That hurt us a little. Then when Gannett came along, there were more changes. The placement and the play of stories were totally different from what the old *Gazette* would ever have done. You know, one of the reasons that we lost the Dillard’s account was because of one of Mr. Dillard’s grandsons. He and a bunch of boys got into trouble out in West Little Rock, just wild kids tearing up people’s lawns. What did we do with the story? We put the thing on the front page of the newspaper. Played it all out of proportion. Walker had a habit of playing a lot of things out of proportion. It was just an unbelievable situation. Finally, I had a pretty good rapport with Bill Malone. Bill Malone was originally from Arkansas. Gannett sent him down here to be the publisher because of that. I was impressed by that. But he was a circulator, not a publisher. He had been a very high executive in the circulation department of the corporate Gannett organization. He had earned his role because he had done a good job at several cities where they had terrible times getting up the circulation, but he was a circulator, not a publisher. He did a fair job, and he was cognizant of the community. He went out into the business community and talked to people. I took him to a lot of places and introduced him to people that I had known around here all my life.

Malone made an effort, but his real mistake was to bring Walker Lundy here. Finally, he wised up to that and knew something was wrong. So, suddenly, Walker Lundy left, and we had a guy named Keith Moyers. Keith was better, but at that point it was too late. He was easier to get along with and was a better newspaper man. It was just too late.

JM: Had the *Democrat* been building circulation and the *Gazette* losing during that time?

RM: Yes. It never got, you know, terribly below, but it was below. As I said, because of the economic position, that had a lot to do with that, too, but the free classifieds had a lot to do with it. Many people read those for amusement. I could never understand that, but they did.

JM: The *Democrat* was still giving away free classifieds?

RM: Oh, yes. They still do to some extent.

JM: Did Gannett try any promotions after it arrived?

RM: No. At least not any suited to Little Rock. Their first one was a cruise on the *Queen Elizabeth*. Twelve people signed up. They added the TV book, a travel section, and a pro/con Q & A page in the Sunday paper. They did add some things, but none that made money or readers.

JM: What was happening in the sports department at that time?

RM: As you know, of course, in 1989 or 1990, Orville Henry, the state's most popular sports columnist, left the paper. Toward the end, the relationship even with the Pattersons and Orville deteriorated. They did not like him moving to Fayetteville

in the first instance. After all those years, they just didn't want to look him in the eye and say, "Orville, you can't do that." So he went. From there on, I think the sports department sort of deteriorated. There were a lot of people who left shortly after Gannett came along. Bill Lewis was one. He hated what it was doing to the paper. Bill Lewis was a very popular writer in this town. You know he did music, drama, the arts. He had a real following.

JM: Can you talk a little bit about the end of the *Gazette* and how that transpired and the way it happened and the way everybody found out about it?

RM: The publisher, the fellow who really drove the *Gazette* into the ground, was a fellow named Craig Moon. The first publisher, Bill Malone, I thought, was — I won't say he was doing a good job, but he was doing as good as he could. We weren't making much progress, but I think it was too late. I suspect that the die was already cast before Gannett came along. Bill Malone was a good person and was liked in the community. All of a sudden, they jerked him out of here. They gave him some job upstairs, and later they transferred him to Monroe, Louisiana, and now he is retired from Gannett. But they brought in this guy, Craig Moon. You see, a lot was going on in Arlington, Virginia. The management — Neuharth retired and took over the Gannett Foundation. John Curley, who had been a participant in buying the *Gazette* and had been in Little Rock several times trying to solve the paper's problems. Curley had a board that was not used to newspapers losing money. Hartford was a place where they also lost a lot of money, but it had not happened yet. They sent Moon down here. Moon first got

to be famous with Curley because he was selling a lot of ads in Florida. Somebody promoted him to Gannett's Cincinnati paper whose problem was that it was right on the border with Ohio, Kentucky, and those newspapers were selling more advertising in Cincinnati than the Cincinnati paper was. Well, Moon went and turned that around. He made that newspaper into a real moneymaker, and he ran the Kentucky papers virtually out of Cincinnati. So his big reward was being named the publisher by Mr. Curley, and he was sent to Little Rock. Moon was the poorest example of a publisher that I have ever encountered. He had no contact with the community. He did not lift one finger to ingratiate himself with the movers and shakers in this town, the advertisers, the politicians, or the people of the county.

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JM: Go into a little bit more detail about how he affected the operation of the *Gazette*.

RM: Corporate Gannett had been working for sometime on something they called "Project 2000." They thought that the news departments of their newspapers should have a thorough going over and make all kinds of changes. So they sent us books. Each department had one that told how we should change what we were doing and to get with the national program of the Gannett newspapers. All of this meant mostly that we had to have study groups. They would go out and interview just the man on the street. Most of these people, I always thought, were people who didn't even read newspapers, but they would ask them, "What would you

like to see in the newspaper? Would you like to see more stories about movie stars or about NATO?” You can imagine the kind of answers they got. It was just, I thought, so idiotic. Well, Mr. Moon insisted that this be done, and we had to make the changes in the paper accordingly. The news department just had a fit. I mean, it was just ridiculous. But what really happened, I think, was that Craig, while not a good publisher, was pretty smart when it came to taking care of Craig — so he sized all this up after about six months, and he said, “Uh-oh. This isn’t going to work.” So he gets on the phone with Mr. Curley and tells him, “John, it’s too late. The thing won’t go. We got to get out of Little Rock.” Meanwhile, this board that Curley had inherited from Allen Neuharth — composed of all of Neuharth’s friends — were saying to Curley, “What is happening in Little Rock? We can’t keep pouring money into that!” They were not used to that. But that is what I think brought it to an end. That might have been a grave mistake. Walter Hussman said himself, you know, that he was literally scared to death when Gannett bought the newspaper because of billions of dollars. He admitted that he was running out of money and didn’t know how much longer he could keep on. So, you know, I think we might have been close to winning, but Mr. Moon didn’t see it that way. What was Mr. Moon thinking about? Mr. Moon was thinking about his career with Gannett not about the *Arkansas Gazette*. That is the last thing that he was thinking about. So one day I was walking in the building. And out comes Mr. Moon, a bit overly dressed, and carrying a briefcase with him that was about this thick. I never saw him with a briefcase before. I said, “Craig, I

need to talk to you about something.” I have even forgotten what it was, but he said, “Well, you talk to someone else about it. I am leaving town for a few days. You talk to somebody else.” That was the last time Mr. Moon was ever in that building. Of course, typical of Gannett style, he told no one. I guess maybe he told his secretary, but nobody else knew it. He was on his way to Nashville, Tennessee, to become the publisher of the *Nashville Tennessean* and also the manager of the biggest *USA Today* printing plant that they had. You are talking about a promotion. I mean, there is no telling how much money he makes over there. In a few days, we were instructed that a fellow by the name of Maurice “Moe” Hickey — everybody called him Moe — was coming to town as the new publisher. Well, I had heard of Moe Hickey. He had been the editor of the *Denver Post* and other big newspapers and had done a good job. He had a good reputation. I thought, “My God, could this be our savior?” Everybody else on the paper, almost without exception, thought this was just more of the same, but I didn’t because I wanted so badly to get rid of Moon and get somebody who really knew what they were doing. This guy Hickey knew what he was doing. He saw me for a total sucker. He took me to lunch. I said, “What are you doing here?” He said, “I am here to save this newspaper.” I believed him. We had a party for him at my house, invited forty of the town’s movers and shakers. My wife took his wife all over town showing her houses and everything. Well, they decided they weren’t going to buy a house for a while. They were just going to live in a condominium. Did I know anyplace where they could rent furniture for this

condominium? I said, “Well, Doug Brandon is one of our best customers.” We called Doug, a personal friend, and Doug said, “Sure, whatever he wants. Tell him to come out here and pick it out.” Doug was one of the biggest boosters of the *Gazette* that the *Gazette* ever had. Hickey and his wife went out there and picked out all this stuff. Doug hauled it to their condo and didn’t charge him a penny. Doug said, “You can use it as long as you want to. Just take care of it, and we will pick it up when you buy your house.” Well, Hickey then wanted a meeting of businessmen, so I arranged two of those. Hell, some days I didn’t do anything but arrange things for him to go to. I believed everything he said. We went out to dinner a half a dozen times and talked about the paper. I had been in the business a long time, and it didn’t take very long for me to figure that this guy really knew what he is talking about. But the truth was that he was sent in here to shut this newspaper down. People like Ernie Dumas and, I think, Max Brantley and a few other people around here suspected that all along. I think Jerry Dhonau suspected it, but I never did. Right up till the last minute, I thought he was fighting to save the paper. He made a lot of changes — good changes. They all made sense. He took an interest in the editorial pages. He laughed at “Prospect 2000.” He behaved like a publisher ought to behave. Well, the rumors started all around that something bad was about to happen. I still didn’t believe it. I had taken off to Memphis because Memphis had just elected the first black mayor that they had ever had, and I thought that was an important thing, not just for Memphis but for this part of the country, so I went to Memphis to interview the

mayor. I made some pictures, color pictures. See, by then we were deep into color and doing a great job of it, too. They had installed this new press in a new building on the east side of town, I don't know what it cost. No telling. I mean, we had the latest of everything, the latest printing presses, the latest inserting machine, all made in Switzerland and flown to Little Rock. We were putting out a beautiful newspaper. All of the cheap stuff had really stopped. Well, I went to Memphis, and I interviewed the mayor. It was after eight-thirty or nine o'clock at night before I finished, and I didn't want to drive back to Little Rock, so I rented a hotel room. I had my laptop computer, and I went up and started writing the story. I finished it about one o'clock in the morning. So early the next morning I called the office. The editorial department secretary said, "Mr. McCord, you better get back here. Something has happened." I said, "What do you mean?" She said, "We don't know what it is. Something has happened. Jerry Dhonau just told me that he thinks that paper is going to fold." I got in the car and drove like hell and came back to Little Rock. I spent most of the afternoon transferring from my laptop into the computer because I was going to try to run the story and pictures on Sunday. There was so much tension in the building. If you had struck a match, you would have started a fire. There was that much tension in the building. It beat everything I had ever seen. Jerry kept insisting that Hickey had come here to shut the door of the *Gazette*. I said, "Jerry, I still don't think so." Jerry said, "Bob, you have been wrong about it all along." Well, we got through the day okay, but the next day was when the worst came. There was going to be a

meeting at 1:30 p.m. Everyone went, of course, and you know what happened. Hickey walked in, and, I timed it, talked for twenty-seven seconds. He said, “The paper has been sold, and the *Arkansas Democrat* will take it over today.” That’s about all he said in his twenty-seven-second speech, ending with, “If there are any other questions, you can take it up with the personnel director, who will now take over this meeting.” He walked out of the room through one-hundred fifty people crammed in there and then downstairs where he had a limousine waiting for him. He had already cleaned out the condominium days before. He got into the car, went to the airport, and never came back to Little Rock, Arkansas. So this poor woman, Barbara Carter, the personnel director, presided and told us that at 3:30 that afternoon the *Democrat* was going to take over the paper. So I went back upstairs, knowing that the Sunday paper was still going to have to come out. Of course, you react to the thing that you have been brought up to do and that was to always get the damn paper out. So I opened up the computer to work on my Memphis story, and the computer wouldn’t open up. They had shut down the computers. My story was lost. The film had been thrown away. I had to call the mayor of Memphis that night and tell him what had happened. We had about three hours to get out of the building. The *Democrat* actually sent private police over there to supervise. A little later in the evening, about 4:30, Bob Starr, the *Democrat* editor, himself came wandering through the building. His aide, Meredith Oakley, also came wandering through the building. And they tell me — I didn’t see this — but they tell me Meredith and Starr were going through

wastebaskets to see what stuff we were throwing away and gathering it up to take it back and read it at the *Democrat*.

JM: Tell me about the next day's newspaper. Didn't you first think that probably the *Gazette* would publish one more edition?

RM: That is what really hurt everybody's feelings. Jerry Dhonau, the day I got back from Memphis, when he came in my office to say it was all over, said, "I want you to look at this." He showed me a farewell editorial he had written. I said, "Jerry, I wouldn't put that in the paper. I just don't think that is going to go over." He said, "I think I am going to do it." Of course, I wasn't his boss, and he wasn't mine, so all I could do was just suggest. By that time, you know, Jim Powell had retired about three years before, and Jerry was the editorial page editor. So I went in to see Ernie. I said, "You ought to talk to Jerry." He said, "No, Bob, I think he ought to run the editorial. This may be the last edition." He said, "At least if we are not going to get another paper out — and we may not — then I think we ought to at least tell people what we think of this newspaper we have." Jerry sent it down to Hickey. He never responded in any way. There was neither a yes nor a no or anything. So we did get an editorial in the day of the shutdown, but no story or anything else.

JM: It talked about the paper being sold?

RM: Yes, and a little bit about the history of the newspaper. It was all Jerry's doing. He was the only one who could have done that.

JM: But you did not publish the next day's newspaper?

RM: No. And, you know, Ernie was in the middle of writing a long piece for some magazine article on his computer. It was lost when they were cut off, so he needed to write it all over again. The next day he tried to get into the building to get the clippings of his own columns, but the guards wouldn't let him in. They said, "Well, you will have to get on the phone and call the *Democrat* because we can't let you in the building." So Ernie called and asked, "Who do I talk to?" Finally, of course, he got Mr. Starr. Mr. Starr said, "Hell, no, you are not going to get in the library" and hung up the phone. Well, a few people I think did — Jerry managed to get back in, and I think maybe Ernie got into his office again, but the rank and file people were not allowed to get back in. Nobody got in the library, nobody, which was just ridiculous. It was just so petty. I will tell you another story, too. Mr. Moon, having been in Florida at one time, knew that there was this red-hot circulation manager on one of their papers. I don't remember which one it was. He was a young fellow who had four kids. Moon called him up and said, "I want you up here in Little Rock next week." But the man protested, saying, "I have been here all my life." But Moon made him come. So they paid his moving expenses from Florida. He came two months before the shut down and bought a house. He was a nice young man and knew how to improve circulation, too. The day of the end, the names of several people in the building, maybe five or six, were put on a list of people who were going to be taken care of. So this circulation director found out about it and went up to Moe's office. The secretary said, "He is very busy." This is, of course, about a hour before that

awful announcement. He said, "I am not even going to sit down. I am just going to open the door. Is that all right?" She said, "Yes, I guess so." So he opened the door, and Moe was sitting at the desk. He said, "Moe, I am not going to bother you now, but I want to know when those of us on the list are going to find out what to do?" Moe looked at him and said, "What list?" The man said, "Well, to tell us Gannett people where we are going." He said, "There is no list." And he said, "You wouldn't be on it anyway." This kid had moved lock, stock and barrel and didn't have a job. That is how tough they played that game. I just happened to run into him after the announcement, and told me that story. I couldn't believe it. He kept saying he said, "If there was, you wouldn't be on it." And it turned out that there was a list. There were three or four people [on it]. The comptroller got a big job out in Nevada.

JM: Didn't the staff originally plan to put out a newspaper the next day? Think they would get to put out one more newspaper?

RM: They hoped that they could — tried to reason with people. Even after Hickey left. I think they even made some phone calls to the *Democrat*. See, Max had organized this group, which I wasn't a member of, to try to get some businessmen to try to save the paper. They had sensed that this was what Hickey was doing, but I didn't believe it, so I didn't get invited to participate in that. They talked to some people, and some people said, "Well, if we had more time, maybe we could do something," but they didn't.

JM: You remember anything more about the relationship between the *Democrat* and

the *Gazette* insofar as personnel?

RM: Well, Starr had made this announcement. In fact, I think he put it in one of his columns that no one would ever be hired from the *Gazette* after the newspaper war was over. I think he even said that in a column, but I know he verbally said that because many people told me that he did. I guess that became the policy because Hussman felt so indebted to Starr. And there is no question that he played a big role in their winning the newspaper war. There is no doubt about it. He deserved much of the credit. Walter lived up to it because the only two journalists who went to work for him were Richard Allin and Charlie Allbright, both columnists. The reason was because they had the good sense to get Gannett to sign a contract with them, so when Walter bought the paper, their contracts came with it. Of course, he wanted them anyway because they were very popular. So, for the longest time, they were the only two people who went to work out of some seven hundred *Gazette* employees.

JM: Later on, after Starr resigned as managing editor, they hired others like Jerry Jones, Leroy Donald, Jim Bailey and others.

RM: Yes, there were quite a few.

JM: What was the atmosphere like the last day in the newsroom?

RM: It was terrible. It wasn't crying like you might think. It was wrought with people hollering and cursing at each other, you know, saying, "Well, goddamn, look at this," and "Wouldn't you know this is what they would do?" It was just bitterness. We heard about *Gazette* people who had showed up in emergency

rooms because of too much drinking and deep depression. You could have stopped ten people on the street and said, “Do you think the *Arkansas Gazette* will ever go out of business?” There wouldn’t have been one of them who would have ever said yes. Do you think?

JM: I don’t think anybody expected it.

RM: Liked or not liked, it was an institution in this state, and its closure was just unbelievable. Particularly in the way that it happened, too. I found out that Moe Hickey had shut down newspapers in two other cities. The reason for secrecy was that they didn’t want any other bidders fouling up the deal. The story was that they paid him one million dollars for that four months that he was here. That was the story. He did a beautiful job of it because he sure fooled a lot of people.

JM: Gannett didn’t have a lot of experience in running competing newspapers in the past, did they?

RM: No. They had mostly small papers that had no opposition. Neuharth got onto this binge of buying bigger, competitive papers — Des Moines, Louisville, Little Rock. He wanted some prestige-type newspapers, you know. He got into that, and it was all his idea. I have been told by other Gannett people that I have consequently met that his board was even against that. But, of course, he was such a powerful figure that he did whatever he wanted to do.

JM: Let’s go back a little bit and touch on your prior experience before getting to the *Gazette*. You started out in the newspaper business in the ninth grade or something like that?

RM: I was fifteen and World War II was going on. All the men had gone to war, you know. All the photographers they had at the afternoon paper one man who had only had one lung, and two women, and in those days, there were places women photographers and reporters just couldn't go.

JM: That is the *Democrat* you are talking about?

RM: That is the *Democrat*. I went up there one day with some pictures. I was making pictures of the football teams, and what have you, for the school annual. I would take a picture up there, and they would buy it. They would pay me a dollar. Orville Henry at the *Gazette* bought some from me, too. I went up to the *Democrat* one day and seventy-year-old city editor said, "Son, would you like to come up here and make some pictures on the weekend for us?" I said, "Well, yes." So that is how it happened. I would work after school, on Saturdays and sometimes on Sundays. Of course, you know, I had been making pictures as a kid all my life. My dad had bought a really good camera for me, and I had a darkroom in my house. I was a pretty good photographer for a fifteen-year-old kid. Of course, I couldn't drive a car, so my dad, bless his heart, would get up at six o'clock in the morning and take me to work. When I reached sixteen I would rent a car. Later I worked as a reporter in the summers. A guy named Bill Shirley was one of the first to come back after the war, and he stuck his head in the door one day and said, "Well, son, I am back," so that was the end of my sports career, so I went back to the newsroom. When I went off to college at Fayetteville, I was the *Democrat's* correspondent up there and made all the sports

pictures. I was the editor of the student newspaper, the *Traveler*, in 1950-1951.

After I graduated I went back to work at the *Democrat* for about two months, and then I was drafted into the army and put out G.I. newspapers for two years during the Korean War. Then I took the G.I. Bill and went to graduate school at Columbia in New York. Then I went back to the *Democrat* and became the editor of its *Sunday Magazine*. The *Democrat's* editor, Ed Liske, a fine old man, found out the magazine editor was being unethical. He was getting his haircuts and groceries free by putting the barbers and grocery men in the Inquiring Reporter every week. Liske hated to fire anyone, but he asked me if I would take it over. All I really wanted was to be a reporter. "Well," Liske said, "Just run the magazine for a while, and we will get somebody else." Well, I put out the magazine and also wrote stories for the paper — the last being stories about the desegregation crisis at Central High School in 1957.

JM: But then you went to, you bought the *North Little Rock Times*.

RM: Yes, and I did that for ten years. Mr. Engel died, and Marcus George, Engel's nephew, asked me to come back to the *Democrat* as editor of the editorial page.

JM: Marcus George?

RM: Marcus George --- to go on the board of directors and to buy some stock and to be the associate editor of the paper, which for him meant editorial page because he despised doing that. He didn't want to have to deal with Karr Shannon, so all that got pushed off on me, but, anyway, that is my career.

JM: One other thing, you were always active in Sigma Delta Chi, now known as the

Society of Professional Journalists.

RM: Yes, we started this chapter in Little Rock in 1961. The Society had two mail goals — a Freedom of Information Act in every state and the marking of the historic sites of American journalism. In 1966, we marked the *Arkansas Gazette* for being the oldest newspaper west of the Mississippi River. Later on, I became the regional director, and in 1976, I became national president.

JM: How long were you at the *Democrat* the second time?

RM: For six years I was associate editor of the paper. Then because like all afternoon papers, it was dropping in circulation and income, so George and Berry sold the paper to the Hussman family in March 1974. The Hussmans had sent us the final papers, and the three of us gathered to sign the papers in Berry's office, and then George and I went upstairs to our offices. My office was next to George's, who was the editor, and I went in there and found him packing. "What are you doing?" I asked. He said, "I am getting out of here." I was surprised, and I said, "Marcus, what about tomorrow's paper?" Marcus said, "That's his [Hussman's] problem." Of course, "his" wasn't anywhere around. I helped him carry his stuff out, and Marcus said, "I guess it's up to you." And I said, "I guess somebody has to do it." Berry stayed as a publisher, but I got the paper out. Hussman never called for four or five days, so we chugged along. Finally, the senior Hussman called about five days later. I barely knew the man. I was one of the few newspapermen in Arkansas who had never worked on the six small Hussman dailies. Mr. Hussman said he had appreciated my getting the paper out. I told

him that as long as I was on the payroll, I would get it out. Then I asked him about the whereabouts of his son, who we knew was going to be the publisher — a deal he worked out with his father. He said he was on a trip. A few days later, Walter, Jr., showed up and officially made me the executive editor of the paper. He was only twenty-seven years old. But in winning the newspaper war, you have to say that he knew what he was doing.

JM: Okay, very good. Well, I guess we better bring this to a close. You have something else you want to add?

RM: Let me correct something here. The date of the sale to Gannett was October, 1986.

JM: October. Do you know what day in October?

RM: No, I don't.

JM: October, 1986.

RM: 1986. I said it was 1985, but it was October, 1986. Do you want me to spell some of these names?

JM: It probably would be helpful, yes.

RM: Yes, I think we ought to. Bill McIlwain was M-C-I-L-W-A-I-N, very peculiar spelling. Carrick Patterson has got two r's. C-A-R-R-I-C-K. Walker Lundy, W-A-L-K-E-R, last name, L-U-N-D-Y. Craig Moon, C-R-A-I-G. Maurice, M-A-U-R-I-C-E. Moe, M-O-E, Hickey, H-I-C-K-E-Y. I wish we could remember the name of that lawyer. Bill, he was such a nice guy. I mean the judge.

JM: The judge? I will think of it on the way home. You worked on the other side of

the equation of the *Gazette* for a number of years.

[End of interview]