

Gazette Project

Interview with

Scott Morris
Fayetteville, Arkansas,
2 March 2001

Interviewer: Roy Reed

Roy Reed: This is Scott Morris and Roy Reed on March 2, 2001. Scott, do we have your permission to tape this interview and turn it over to the university library?

Scott Morris: Yes.

RR: Good. Start from the beginning, and tell me who you are.

SM: Who am I? Well, I was first a general assignment reporter for the *Gazette* and later covered the State Capitol and politics. I worked there from May of 1987 to October of 1991 when the *Gazette* was sold and closed. Before that I did an internship in the summer of 1986. Three months of internship before the paper was sold to Gannett.

RR: Where were you born?

SM: Actually in a hospital in El Dorado, Arkansas. I grew up in Smackover, which is about twelve miles north of there.

RR: Your parents?

SM: My mother was born, or rather, grew up in Little Rock. My father grew up in Smackover.

RR: Who are they?

SM: Kerry Morris is my father. My mother is Nell.

RR: When were you born?

SM: January 10, 1965.

RR: What school? Smackover?

SM: Yes.

RR: When did you get interested in newspaper work?

SM: I don't know if I can remember exactly the specific time. I grew up reading the newspaper. In fact, I grew up reading Orville Henry's account of the Razorbacks. The long, long stories that ran on Sundays and Mondays that no newspaper in their right mind would print today. I gobbled up every word. Of course, before that was the funny pages, the comics. I have always loved to read and always wanted to write. At some point it occurred to me --- it may have even been my mother who pointed it out to me --- that I could write and get paid for it if I worked for a newspaper. She may have done this because her father sold advertising for a radio station that was located in the *Gazette* building. She used to go down there. At some point I realized it would be a good thing to do.

RR: Did either of your parents do anything related to journalism?

SM: No. My father was an independent oil producer in south Arkansas. My mother got her degree in home economics education from the U of A. They both graduated from the University of Arkansas.

RR: Then you came up here to the university to study journalism? What year did you graduate?

SM: May of 1987.

RR: You used to work for me.

SM: That's right. You had written a letter asking me to run the reporting lab my senior year. I did that.

RR: Did any of your classmates end up working for the *Gazette*?

SM: There were certainly people that I knew here. Chris Osher, for one, did an internship there. I don't know if Chris actually worked for the paper, but he did an internship. Scott Maple, of course, worked for the *Gazette*.

RR: Isn't he in Springfield now?

SM: No, he was. He is now working in Little Rock for Acxiom. He and Jon Portis were at one time sharing an office or were across the hall from each other.

RR: I had not heard where he had landed. I thought he was still in Springfield.

SM: I don't remember anybody else. There may have been. Off the top of my head, I do not recall anybody else.

RR: What did you do when you got started at the *Gazette*?

SM: At that time the *Gazette* was expanding as part of the newspaper war. Jon Portis needed another person, on an entry level, sort of a clerk's job. It was a little more than that. I did some small reporting by phone. Sort of a glorified clerk's job.

RR: Obituaries?

SM: I did some of that. We had an Arkansas page. I don't know if you remember. It was inside the B section as I recall. The idea was that they would have little short stories from as many counties as possible. I think there was one piece of art in the middle of the page. I took dictations from a series of stringers, and

the bureau reporters contributed. I did obits.

RR: And then from there?

SM: At some point, I became a reporter. This has been so long ago. I think I had to go to the city desk to become a full-fledged reporter. One reason I am having trouble recollecting was that we reorganized so many times in my short tenure at the *Gazette* that it is hard to remember what I did where. For a while, no distinction was made between reporters assigned to the state desk and reporters assigned to the city desk. There was a pool of reporters, and I was a general assignment reporter in that pool. I covered the Wrightsville City Council and the Maumelle City Council. A lot of little night meetings that reporters got stuck with. I had a shift that ran from one o'clock p.m. until nine or ten. I worked Sunday nights on the desk. At some point I was the last person on the news side except for the police reporter on Sunday nights. I was at the desk for a while. Thank God nothing ever happened. I never actually made any decisions or did anything. The cops reporters were Wayne Jordan and Rob Mortitz. Usually the news editor --- - usually by the end of the night, the news editor had gone home, and the only other people in the building would be the assistant news editor and whoever was left holding down the copy desk.

RR: You were sitting on the city desk answering phones?

SM: Yes. I came in about three p.m on Sundays. The assistant city editor was in charge on Sundays. She came in about eleven o'clock or so. I was on from three until twelve or twelve-thirty. Just whenever the last deadline passed.

RR: You were alone on the desk for some period of time? Do you remember anything ever happening?

SM: No. As I said, it was fortunate that nothing ever did because I was so green. There was an older lady who used to call. On Sunday nights she would call and ask what day it was and what time it was. She was terribly lonely, you could tell. I don't know if she actually knew or not, but I always told her. I always expected to hear from her. There might have been a police report or two that happened at that time when you still ran the local police beat in the paper every day.

RR: One of your predecessors in that job on Sunday nights got beat up by an editor one night when he was on the desk.

SM: Who was that?

RR: Ray Moseley.

SM: How did that happen? He attacked him and knocked him unconscious?

RR: Nothing that dramatic. You didn't have anything like that?

SM: Nothing like that.

RR: After you did some general assignment reporting, by then Gannett had bought the paper.

SM: By the time that I actually went to work full-time, Gannett had already purchased it. I started full-time in May of 1987, right after college, a few weeks after I graduated. Carrick Patterson was still the editor. Mr. Malone was the publisher.

RR: Bill Malone?

SM: Bill Malone, right.

RR: Tell me about your progress. Did you stay in that job?

SM: Well, I did for some period. As you know, the Pulaski County school situation had been the major story for a long, long time. Both papers covered it because it always figured high in our readership surveys. We covered anything that had to do with the schools. We had one education reporter when I went to work there. Sometimes two school boards would meet on the same night, and obviously he couldn't cover them both. Sometimes he would need help if the federal court had ruled in the desegregation case or something. I sort of started becoming a backup education reporter. Later they hired a second education reporter. As part of that, when I was helping out, I got to cover school board meetings. I covered some federal court decisions or helped the primary education reporter cover federal court decisions pertaining to the case. I've always had an interest in education and educational policies. The history of the Little Rock school case has always been something that has interested me. I ended up doing a lot of education work. The reporter, a very remarkable reporter, David Davies, now teaches journalism at Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg.

RR: One of our old students?

SM: Right. A very good reporter, calm, competent, thorough. He went to graduate school. I think that was somewhere in 1988. Actually, I have to back up. At some point Walker Lundy became editor of the paper. One of the things he wanted to do, because education was a big interest for our readers, was to

spend more time on higher education. Since I had been doing some public school stuff, I applied for the job and became the higher ed reporter. I sort of got out of the general assignment pool and covered higher ed for a while. Then when David left to go to graduate school, I became the lead education reporter.

RR: How long were you at the *Gazette*?

SM: From May of 1987 until October of 1991.

RR: Until . . .

SM: Until the paper closed, yes.

RR: You were still the lead education reporter?

SM: No, sir. Again, I apologize. I think I was the education reporter for about a year. It seemed like twenty years. It was just a crushing beat, a lot, a lot of work. At some point, Scott Van Laningham's wife went to work for Governor [Bill] Clinton. Kathy Van Laningham became the educational liaison for Governor Clinton. Scott Van Laningham had been the state capitol bureau chief for the *Gazette*. The editors decided, rightly, of course, he couldn't cover the governor while his wife worked for him. They moved Scott to city hall. There were other shufflings going on. Numerically, I replaced Scott at the bureau. At that time, Mark Oswald was the bureau chief. The first legislative session that I covered was back in 1989. We sent a ton of people out there again because of the war. I was low man on the totem pole. Theoretically, I was concentrating on education, although I did whatever came up. When Scott's wife went to work for the governor, I had some experience

with the capitol. I applied for the capitol bureau job and numerically replaced Scott Van Laningham.

RR: Were there others besides you and Mark Oswald?

SM: At one time, jumping ahead, at one time I said that I was the most supervised reporter in the history of the *Arkansas Gazette*. John Brummett was our political columnist. He had some sort of --- well, let me back up. Max Brantley was by then assistant managing editor. He took a big interest in the capitol. John Brummett was our political editor. He had some kind of a supervisory role, and James Meriwether was the political editor.

RR: He was on the capitol beat, too?

SM: Yes, he was the political editor. He did reporting but also did all the editing of the political stories. Mark Oswald was the bureau chief. I had many, many bosses.

RR: I am sitting here thinking how different it was when you worked the capitol beat than when I worked it in the late 1950s and early 1960s. At any one time there were two of us. Ernie Valachovic, or me, or Ernie Dumas. During the legislative sessions they would send down [one or two more reporters]. That was pretty much it. I can't imagine all of this. What happened, do you think, that caused the management to decide to increase the number?

SM: The competition with the *Arkansas Democrat* had to be and was a factor in every decision made. It determined how we used resources and personnel. The last legislative session that I covered, which would have been 1991, I only covered two full regular sessions, we put out a special tabloid section.

We inserted a special legislative tab that folded inside the paper. At that time we had --- Brantley was writing a column. Mr. McCord was writing a column. Bob Lancaster was writing a column. They all ran in the tab. I covered the Arkansas House of Representatives. Michael Arbanas covered the Arkansas Senate. Mark Oswald was sort of floating through the halls. James Meriwether was there. I don't remember if James did much reporting. I think he primarily coordinated the coverage. Somebody had to with that many reporters covering the story. From time to time if an environmental issue came up, they would truck out the environmental reporter. Sometimes there was not enough room in the newsroom in the capitol, that little room that you are familiar with. The *Democrat* felt obligated to match us person for person. The tab required a lot of people to generate a lot of stuff. Why did they decide to allocate so much money? I think by that point, the Gannett editors realized how important state government is in Arkansas. So many of the decisions are made in Little Rock. It sort of convinced the Gannett folks that people really cared about what happened. They decided that we were going to have more inches every day on the legislature than the *Democrat*, and we did. I lost a lot of weight and skipped a lot of meals. We had early deadlines as a consequence of having the tab. We had to get the copy in really early.

RR: What was the burning issue of the legislature during your time?

SM: One that most consumed us would have been the settlement of the Pulaski County School Desegregation suit. Governor Clinton, as we know now but

didn't know then, wanted to run for president. He wanted the lawsuit taken care of. He wanted it off the table before he ran. He didn't want it to be used against him. I think we had three special sessions to get it all settled.

RR: Why did he think it would be used against him?

SM: Certainly, he has always run strong in the African-American community. He knew that he would need their votes in the national campaign just as he would need them in a statewide campaign. I don't think he wanted that ongoing litigation to be out there to be used against him. It was important to him that the state admit liability, which it had not done in the past. In return for which, the state paid some amount of money to the three school districts in Pulaski County --- about \$119 million, I think..

RR: That settlement went through the legislature in 1991?

SM: We were done before 1991. Seems like we messed with this in 1989 and 1990. It went on for a long time. I think there were three --- maybe it started in a regular session in 1989, and then we had two special sessions.

RR: Were there other issues that you remembered?

SM: Because my interest was education that was the one that I spent the most time on. There were some environmental laws passed. I dealt with that as it came through the house. I was not an expert on that subject. There were always --- Clinton's tax package had gone through in 1983. I don't remember any major tax increases. There was a tax cut in 1991. Again, he probably wanted that for political reasons. It was used against him in a campaign that he raised taxes. Most of them were the little fees. He did cut taxes. There was an

effort by the Good Suit Club, whose membership included Don Tyson, Charles Morgan, and Charlie Murphy, to improve higher education. After they got the corporate income tax cut, that was their first objective. That sailed through. They had a harder time trying to reform higher ed. Eventually they got frustrated with the political process and went away. At the time that I covered the legislature, it was still overwhelmingly Democratic. A friend of mine who is a Republican says that the Republican Party could meet in a telephone booth at that time. The legislature was still run on the old seniority system, which you are familiar with. When I first started, Knox Nelson and Max Howell were still in power, although they were getting old and a little feeble. There was all of that going on, and Nick Wilson was already very powerful and fighting with the governor from time to time. During the time that I was there, in fact before the session of 1991, there was the first real attempt to curb Nick Wilson's power by Vic Snyder and other members of the senate, including David Malone of Fayetteville and others.

RR: Could you describe the capitol pressroom for me?

SM: A small, box-like room right off the east entrance of the capitol. It is probably not much bigger than this room, would you say?

RR: Just a little bigger than, say, probably 20' x 20' --- 25' at the most.

SM: Probably the same desks were there when you were there. Years and years of dust. The other thing that had been ongoing forever were the exploits of our Secretary of State, Bill McCuen. The reason that I bring that up is that we used to laugh about not leaving anything important in the newsroom. We

shared this tiny little room with the *Arkansas Democrat* reporters, with the Associated Press reporters. There were also a couple of independent reporters housed in it from time to time. The radio network was there during legislative sessions. You would not leave anything anyway, but we used to joke that McCuen probably came there at night and went through all the drawers to find out what we were working on. It was very a small and uncomfortable room. I never worked there in terms of writing because it was too small. I couldn't think. I did my writing in the well of the house. I went in the house before the legislators convened and wrote my stories there.

RR: Portable typewriter or computer?

SM: No, we used a little Radio Shack [TRS-180]. "Trash 180s" we called them. I don't know who came up with the term. They were not very high tech, but they were indestructible. We had a fixed computer in the pressroom. You could use it to transmit your stories to the office, but I would sit in the well and type my stories on my Trash 180 and send them while the house was in session.

RR: I would say that was an enormous technical improvement over my term there. You could use a laptop because they were silent. There was no way that we could have had a typewriter up there. It would distract from the proceeding.

SM: As you know, the efficiency of the proceedings depend on how good the Speaker of the House is. The first thirty or forty minutes of the day is a waste of time. Therefore, there is no need to pay attention. I could and did move two or three stories before the house was ready to conduct real business.

Once you sort of understood what was going on, it wasn't really necessary to pay attention all the time anyway.

RR: You would write and send two or three stories in a matter of how long?

SM: Well, what they would be were the stories from the committee meetings of the morning. Depending on how important the material was, they might be very, very short. These were not complex stories. I might send two or three in an hour or an hour and a half.

RR: I find that people who do not know anything about newspapers and reporting are always astonished at the number of words that reporters can turn out in a period of time. That's why I wanted to make it clear that we are talking about two or three separate stories. They might be short. I am sure that your students in your English composition would probably call you a liar. To say that you could write that many stories in that amount of time. Did the pressroom have just one desk for the *Gazette*?

SM: I think there were two together that made an "L" in one corner.

RR: The *Democrat* had a like arrangement?

SM: The *Democrat* reporters, for whatever reason, they worked and stayed in the pressroom. Even when the Legislature was not in session. I think it was because their newsroom at the *Democrat* building was crowded. Typically, the *Gazette* reporters would go back to our main office to write. Although, even there the terminals became precious around deadline. You might have to go around to Features or Sports to find a computer that wasn't being used. It was still a better environment to work in than the capitol. This happened

primarily at the end of the day during a Legislative session or during non-session times. All of the reporters covering the capitol moved stories out of the capitol during working hours.

RR: By the time that you were there, the *Democrat* had become a morning newspaper?

SM: Right.

RR: During my time they were an afternoon paper. There was always that peculiar twist of competition, trying to make sure a story didn't leak out until your time cycle came up.

SM: Of course, the competition was still relevant. I can remember avoiding *Democrat* reporters. I didn't want them to see where I was or what office I was going into. I remember once that a *Democrat* reporter --- -he was new to the capitol --- -and we were covering a committee meeting. I think it was an Arkansas House Revenue Tax Committee meeting. He thought the Arkansas Senate Revenue and Tax Committee was meeting at the same time. I told him, no, they meet on alternate days because they have the same staff. They can't meet at the same time. He didn't believe me. He went upstairs to the third floor to make sure the senate committee wasn't meeting without him. He came back in about ten minutes, sheepishly, and sat down next to me. I told him, "There are a lot of things I am not going to tell you, but I will not lie to you."

RR: The main thing we had to worry about was George Douthit, the *Democrat's* long time capitol reporter. He was in thick with Governor Faubus and all of

the Faubus administration. They would feed George the best story of the day. They wanted it in the *Democrat* first to punish the *Gazette*. They were always on the outs. It would peeve them all the way around when Valachovic, who was a terrific reporter for us, would still manage to beat them. About fifty percent of the time he would manage to beat them on some good story. Old George would sulk around about that. People do not understand how real competition is between rival news organizations.

SM: I guess this was the only head-to-head competition that I have been involved in. As I have said before, and I mean it, I would wake up in the morning terrified to find out if I had been beaten or not. Until I saw the *Democrat*, I couldn't really be calm about it.

RR: So you would read the *Democrat* first?

SM: I could never bring myself to subscribe to the *Democrat*, but I always read it the moment I got to the *Gazette* office.

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

[RR: Do you remember getting beat by them?]

SM: I know that I got beat from time to time. I don't remember getting beaten in such a way that I feared for my job.

RR: Do you remember beating them?

SM: You know it is odd. The competition took up so much time and energy. I don't remember so much beating them on a story that they had no clue about. Although the business about Nick Wilson was a scoop, something that we

were tipped to.

RR: You mean. . .

SM: That the senate was going to cut into his authority.

RR: Right.

SM: What gave me great satisfaction, and probably most readers did not notice and most editors did not notice, is that we consistently did a better job of writing and presenting the news. Even if the *Democrat* had the story, it would be clearer and better organized and easier to understand in our paper. I had never felt like we were out written, if that is even possible to compare. Again, I am sure that I beat them from time to time in little ways. I am sure that they beat me from time to time in little ways. There were so many reporters, almost on top of each other, that if they saw you going into the governor's office, they would be right in behind you. When Brummett came out to the capitol, everybody got nervous because they knew he was up to something. I never saw him taking notes. I never knew quite what he was up to.

RR: How important was writing? Where does writing fit in the business of newspaper?

SM: If you are asking me for my opinion, I would say it was the most important thing. If you were asking my bosses, I am not sure. I am not sure they would have the same definition of writing that I would have. Some of this gets into the business of working for Gannett. I was taught here by you, and Bob Douglas, and others, that the most important thing is to get it right. Also to get it clearly, tell it clearly. Do the work for the reader so that he or she didn't

have to do it over their coffee and try to figure out what the heck I was talking about. I remember getting a call once. I remember this because it stood out so well. I got plenty of calls and complaints. An elderly woman called me one time. She didn't know me from Adam. She called the newsroom and asked for me by name. She told me that she was a retired English teacher. She just wanted to tell me, "Your story today was as clear as it could be. It was so good I wanted to call and tell you." I have always remembered that. I don't know and can't remember what the story was. I took pride in trying to be as clear as I could.

RR: A call like that would make a reporter's day, week, month.

SM: It sort of offset a call that I got at 7 a.m. one Saturday from Say McIntosh, screaming at me about something that I had written about him. I should say, I do think most of the editors valued good writing in general. Especially those editors who had been at the *Gazette* before Gannett. I do think they valued it. One thing you said to us in class that I have never forgotten is that good writing comes out of good reporting. It doesn't matter if you are a wonderful writer and you don't know what you are talking about. You can't report it.

RR: I forgot that I said that, but I do believe that.

SM: As much emphasis as I put on writing, it is not separate or divorced from the hard labor of reporting.

RR: Tell me about the end of the paper.

SM: It is a hard subject for me, even now. This October will be ten years. Where do you want to start?

RR: I will let you decide. Tell me the story.

SM: The story --- I don't come in at the beginning of the story, of course. Other people have and will talk about the lawsuit the *Gazette* filed against the *Democrat*, the whole history of the competition. I will leave that for the people who were there and know it better than I do. As I say, I did my internship at the *Gazette* while it was still owned by the Patterson family. There were rumors. I was working for the state desk during one part of the summer I spent there. At one point we got a letter from the editor to limit our long distance phone calls. In a sense, if the reporters couldn't travel --- and they didn't want you traveling much because they had to pay you mileage --- and if we couldn't make phone calls, we pretty much should go home. At any event, there were rumors. I knew that when I came back to the university for my senior year. Then the paper was sold to Gannett. We all knew, if anybody was paying attention at all, that the competition had entered a new phase. We were probably at the end of the game for somebody, although we all hoped it wasn't true. I certainly would not have wanted the *Democrat* to close, either. When I went back to the paper in May of 1987, there was a certain level of tension. There was speculation that Carrick would be relieved as editor. We had a Gannett editor publisher, Mr. Malone. He was a sort of mild-mannered, as far as publishers being able to be mild-mannered. He was a native Arkansan. He was nice and kind of grandfatherly. He was not threatening on the surface. Still there was great uncertainty and tension. There was always a low level of tension and sometimes it escalated to a high level. I didn't realize

until after the paper had closed how much there had been on a daily basis, nor the effect that it had on me. We all knew. We went through a series of editors and publishers. Carrick was replaced by Walker Lundy. Lundy was the editor when I became the higher ed reporter and then went on to the capitol. He had a different idea about journalism than I did. What he did to the *Gazette* is not my idea of journalism.

RR: In short, would you call it Gannett's view of journalism?

SM: Yes, sir. They had a system. I guess most large companies do, maybe in any field. They have a system and a way they do business. When they buy a local company they go in and impose that system. They had every right to do so, every legal right. It was not suited to our readership, I firmly believe. I don't know if a different editor could have made a difference. I can't judge that. I know efforts were made to keep the *Gazette* in its traditional role or form. They did not succeed in large measure. It was too late. We went through a series --- it is almost comical. There was a series of rapid oscillations in the way that we did our job. We organized and reorganized in, what seemed, every other month. People had new jobs and new responsibilities. It was a constant sense of unease. The presentation of the news changed to the *U.S.A. Today* format for a period. There was a period when we were not allowed to jump stories off page one. It was a radical change for the *Arkansas Gazette* even at that time. We no longer wrote forty-inch stories. It was impossible to begin to summarize what had happened in the school case the day before in a six-inch story if there was any development at all. There were outlandishly

large headlines over ridiculous stories, intended to attract readers to buy the paper out of the box. That was not to appeal to our long-time subscribers but to the people who might buy it out of the box. There were headlines designed to be read from a car stopped at a stoplight. I remember my favorite was something along the line of “Visitors From Outer Space.” It was about a meteorite. You couldn’t tell that from the headline. Some farmer found a meteorite in his field, and we put it under a headline like “Visitors From Outer Space In Arkansas.” All of this caused great consternation among the traditionalists at the *Gazette*. There were some things that needed to be done. They added color, of course. Stories, in many cases, needed to be livened up. The *Gazette*’s old style was somewhat ossified. I think there was some truth to that. There was some really bad writing. Sometimes there would be no news hole, sometimes there would be so much space for news that we could not, or almost couldn’t, fill it. We had to write everything that moved in order to fill it. Two weeks later we would be back to writing six-inch stories. I guess what I am trying to do is give you a feel of the atmosphere that prevailed most of the time that I was there.

RR: That might explain why the paper failed.

SM: I think so. I have thought about this a great deal. I have, more or less, come to the conclusion that, ultimately, it failed due to mistakes on the business side rather than a decline in the quality of the journalism. It was exacerbated by the kind of journalism that we did, which I feel had some alienating effect towards our readers. I think we lost our standing to be the voice that we

needed to be. We trivialized what we were doing. At least we seemed to. I think the people who were working for the *Gazette* tried very hard to do the best they could under very difficult circumstances. But our trivial treatment of the news cost us our moral standing, in some sense.

RR: Is that what alienated the readers, or was it something else?

SM: I think it just made it possible for them to --- I may be stretching here. I may be going off --- I think the other thing that occurred, such as when we wrote about Dillard's Department Store's tax problems and about Mr. Dillard's grandson joyriding in somebody's yard, when we wrote about the school case in great detail, it made it possible for them to accuse us of fomenting discord and disharmony. I don't think we have an obligation to cover up anything or to preserve any false harmony. I just think we alienated people in so many ways that it made us vulnerable.

RR: I have been thinking about the Dillard's Department Store pulling those ads. It had to have been a major financial blow.

SM: Even those in the newsroom who had a hard time balancing their own checkbooks knew that it was serious business. It was our largest single account.

RR: What about the last days? Can you remember how it went during the last several days?

SM: Yes. This is sort of bound up when Clinton first ran for the presidency. I was on the capitol beat. I helped to cover his announcement in October at the Old State House Convention Center. It was a beautiful day. I will never forget. It

was a beautiful fall afternoon, and the skies were faultlessly blue. During this period he was preparing to run for the presidency and I was looking forward to the opportunity to help cover a presidential campaign. Rumors about the *Gazette* had escalated substantially. I believe that I am right about this --- Channel 11 had the first report. We had all gathered around the TV in the newsroom to see the report on Channel 11 about rumors that the *Gazette* was sold or was up for sale. Joe Quinn did the story, as I recall. It turned out that it was based on the father of a carrier who said he had been told that the paper was going to be sold. When we found out who the source was, we laughed. Nervously, perhaps. We were pretty sure that we were not going to find out from a father of one of our young carriers. But the rumors had escalated and persisted.

RR: Right.

SM: Governor Clinton had promised that when he ran for re-election, he would serve out his term. If he ran for president in 1992, he would obviously not complete his last term in office. In order to secure his political base and to prepare himself for a run at the White House, he made a tour of Arkansas. It was to ask permission from the voters to leave the governor's office early. We called it Bill Clinton's Magical Mystery Tour because there were no reporters on the tour, and so there was no way to know what they told him. At the end of the tour, it was announced that he was going to conclude with a celebratory rally at the Capitol Hotel. He would announce that the voters had released him from his pledge and freed him to seek the White House. It was

scheduled for the early evening, I don't remember the exact time. It was after working hours, 6:00 or 6:30. I was sent to cover this event. The Capitol Hotel is right up the street from the *Gazette*. I walked over a little early to see who was there and what was going on. I ran into Skip Rutherford, a long-time friend of the governor, in the bar. Rutherford told me that the *Gazette* was going to be sold and shut down. He had been a source of mine during the school case. He had been the president of the school board, and I had a history with him. I knew when he told me that, he had told me the truth. I think I can say that the only time I ever drank on the job was that night. I promptly ordered a drink at the Capitol Bar, and I had one while I waited on the governor to get back. I called the newsroom. My memory is not as good on this as it should be, for a lot of reasons. I waited for the governor to get there and covered the event. I went home and wrote it up. I think I then went and drank some more. Nothing happened for a certain period of time. I don't remember for how long. The rumors persisted. At some point along the way, I caught wind of a rumor that there was someone with substantial resources who was interested in buying the *Gazette* so that it would not fall into Walter Hussman's hands. I don't think I was the first one to hear it. I probably heard it from another reporter or editor of the paper. In any event, I knew this rumor was different. Governor Clinton declared his candidacy formally in October. The first weekend after he declared, he traveled to Dallas to meet with the Jewish Lobby. I was sent down with him to cover that meeting. I was in a hotel in Dallas. While I was in the lobby of the hotel, I recognized Harry

Thomason, the TV producer from Arkansas and a long time friend of the governor's. I cannot remember if I heard his name or not in connection with rumors about the *Gazette*. I knew he was from Arkansas and had an interest in Arkansas. He had a TV program set in Evening Shade, Arkansas. I knew that he had affection for the state. I went up to him and introduced myself. I said, "I am a reporter from the *Gazette*. I want you to know, seriously, we are not long for this world unless something is done to save the *Gazette*. If you are interested at all --- I know that there are others, I don't know them at all, who are interested in buying the *Gazette*. We could certainly find out and put you together with them if you are interested." He expressed an interest. He was pretty enthusiastic about it. He gave me some hope. I went back to Little Rock and a small group of us formed: Max Brantley, Ernie Dumas, Scott Van Laningham, Michael Arbanas, and Anne Farris sort of took part. She was busy with her children. This sort of rump group came together. I don't think I am leaving anybody out.

RR: We should mention that Anne was just recently widowed.

SM: Right. She was recently widowed and had two small children. She loved the *Gazette* as much as any of us. She was very helpful and courageous.

RR: The daughter of John Herbers, an old colleague of mine.

SM: At some point we got together. I told Max at some point what I had heard. It turned out that someone discovered that the rumor that had been going around was indeed referring to Harry Thomason. I did not find a new investor; I had found the one. It turned out to be a significant problem.

RR: You mean that he had been interested before you saw him in Dallas?

SM: Right. He was the one that I had heard about, without knowing he was the one. We got together and began to talk about ways that we could possibly purchase the *Gazette*. We talked about an employee stock option plan. I think my whole role in this whole thing was to get a lump in my throat and to say that we have to do something. Some of the smarter people tried to figure something out. We floated the idea of an ESOP. We contacted Mr. Thomason. He, at his own expense, flew to Little Rock. He met with the *Gazette* employees down at the Arkansas State Convention Center. Time was getting on, and it was becoming more and more clear. The other media had full reports. Apparently we were approaching a sale and closure. We held a rally for the *Gazette*, on the street, on Louisiana Street there beside the paper. Various staff members spoke. Mr. Thomason met with the staff at the Convention Center. We tried to find another investor. He did not have the wherewithall to do it on his own. We called anybody and everybody that we knew, every favor that we thought we could ask. Shamelessly and abandoning all journalistic objectivity. It suddenly became clear that it was going to become irrelevant if we did not do something soon. We arranged a meeting at the Capitol Hotel between Mr. Thomason and Win Rockefeller, son of the Republican governor who defeated Faubus and who is now the Lieutenant Governor. Certainly he had the resources. I doubt now that he was ever really seriously interested, for whatever reason. We got a lawyer, Jack Lavey, to try and intervene in court in an attempt to slow down the sale

on the grounds that it was better to preserve two newspaper voices than one.

[End of Tape 1, Side 2]

[Beginning of Tape 2, Side 1]

RR: You were talking about you had gotten a lawyer, Jack Lavey.

SM: A long-time labor lawyer in Little Rock, seeking to slow down the sale of the *Gazette* and to give us time to find a “white knight,” if you will, someone to come in with sufficient capital to join with Harry Thomason to try and save some version of the *Gazette*. At this point, Walter Smiley, who is the founder of the company then called Systematics, which is now part of the Alltel Company. It was a bank data-processing company. Mr. Smiley had been involved in numerous civic projects and was a considerable leader in the community. We brought him in to look at the books to try to determine if it was a financially viable thing, if the *Gazette* could be made to fly in any recognizable form. We spent several very tense days in which I did very little journalism. I spent a lot of time in lawyers’ offices and on the phone. I think I called you and others trying to find anybody that might know anyone, who might be interested in trying to save this newspaper. Max Brantley was our spokesman and did good work in that role. He was a real rock for a lot of us at that time. A lot was going on during this time period. We were getting calls from *The New York Times*. Alex Jones was writing the story. There had been several newspaper closings during this period. I guess the *Dallas Times Herald* had closed. I think they closed shortly before we did. I don’t remember exactly when. It was part of the Bush recession. There were a lot

of mergers in all fields. Newspapers were not doing particularly well. It seems like there was another newspaper that had closed. I can't remember now. Do you recall?

RR: It seems that you are right. I can't come up with it.

SM: It may have closed after we did, but there were several. There were a string of them. It was not a good time for newspapers. We, of course, had been losing money. We had spent an enormous amount of money on various and sundry projects that didn't work out. Both newspapers were basically giving the paper away. If you once walked by the building, you were going to have a subscription for the rest of your life. You couldn't possibly lose the subscription.

RR: Let me ask a question that you made me think of. During all the discussions of how to finance or take over the paper, do you remember if anybody talked to Bill Dillard or anybody at Dillard's about the possibility of reinstating his advertising if this should work out?

SM: I am not sure if that occurred. To be honest, I can't recall. I know that our next- to-last publisher, Craig Moon, was the publisher when we lost the Dillard's account. Maybe it happened right before, maybe that is why they brought him in. To be honest, I don't recall. He made a big push. He said once in a staff meeting that he expected to get it back. That was why he was there. It seemed that maybe we lost it right before he got there. He was sort of a younger fellow. Slicker, much slicker, than Mr. Malone. He was a rising star in the company. He was going to get the Dillard's account back. I

vaguely remember some story of some disastrous meeting that he had with a Dillard executive. I am not a good source on that. I know that it went badly.

RR: You have to wonder whether there was a change of attitude at Dillard's about the *Arkansas Gazette*, if he got up one morning and it was under new management. His old enemies had gone, or was he so committed to his plan of action that he would not come back under any circumstances?

SM: There were at least two versions of why he quit. One was that we had written about their tax troubles with the IRS. We had written about his grandson escapading in the car. The other was that Walter Hussman had gone to Dillard's and shown them that, even though they were the *Gazette's* largest account, they were not getting any kind of breaks in ad rates from the *Gazette*. I am not on the business side of journalism, but I understand there is a standard practice of giving your biggest advertisers some sort of a discount. All of those were reasons to withdraw the advertising. It certainly, and it seems to me if new management that understood the business community of Little Rock, and understood how to talk to business people of Little Rock without offending them and condescending to them, had come to him and said that we would give you a discount due to the amount of business that you do with us. It might have been talked about. I can't imagine that in the ideal world that he would not have wanted to advertise in the paper that had the largest circulation.

RR: And the upscale paper.

SM: Yes, the upscale paper with all the high-dollar and high-income people who

would frequent his store.

RR: I didn't mean to interrupt. Go ahead and tell about how it came to a close.

You were about to that point.

SM: We were trying to find some way to salvage the *Gazette* in whatever form. It became time, at one point, to talk about the possibility of a greatly reduced *Gazette*. Perhaps giving up statewide circulation in order to make the dollars work. I remember having a conversation --- personally difficult for me because people in the newsroom knew that I was involved in the effort to try and find some solution. I ended up sort of campaigning for the idea that we among the staff should try to save the paper. I remember having some uncomfortable conversations with older members of the staff who complained about the loss of retirement benefits, severance packages that were substantial for a time in their lives when they couldn't get another job or didn't want to think about getting another job. I had a conversation with Pat Carrithers, who was the wire editor, a man that I respected a great deal and a great news man. I was trying to convince him that this was the thing to do. I didn't succeed. He loved the *Gazette* with all of his heart, I don't mean that. It would not have been a good financial thing for him. He personally would be better off to take whatever severance that he got. It was a difficult time, and I didn't sleep much. I don't think any of us did. My emotions were going up and down like a yo-yo. We would get little victories, and they would last about ten minutes. Reality would come crashing down once again. I remember speaking to Alex Jones from *The New York Times* and describing to him what we were going to

do. I was very hopeful and optimistic. I was very young and stupid. I was trying to sell him on the idea that this was viable. I thought if we could get a story with *The New York Times*, then we would have some hope. Someone might read it and be moved to invest. I remember him telling me very gently that I was barking up a tree. There was realistically no reason to expect that this paper could be saved. Very quickly, it became apparent that Mr. Smiley -- I hesitate to give the numbers because I will have them wrong --- it seems like that he told us that the last year the *Gazette* was open, we were scheduled to lose something like --- you may have heard this before --- something like \$30 or \$35 million. They made a budget correction and an adjustment in the middle of the year. We only were going to lose \$30 million. Mr. Smiley, in effect said that without a substantial emotional involvement, such as Harry Thomason had, no one is going to make a cold hearted business decision to invest in this operation. Even in a reduced form. We had a meeting in Jack Lavey's office, I believe it was, those who were in the group on this. Anne was there and Max was there. Scott was there, and I don't know who else. Ernie was there, I am sure. Somebody, maybe Jack, maybe one of us, suggested that Jack should approach Mr. Hussman with the idea of a [Joint Operating Agreement.] I remember reacting very negatively to that because I said, correctly, but foolishly, "He has no incentive. There is no reason for him to do that. He's won, and if we fail here --- " Being young and stupid, I didn't want us to give up what dignity we had. I thought it would be a cost to our dignity to go to him and offer this thing, which he had offered to Mr.

Patterson, which had been rejected and had sent us on this course to begin with. The older and wiser heads prevailed. They said that we owe it to the people of the *Gazette* to try. No one thought it would succeed but we had to make one last pitch. So they did and, of course, we were turned down.

RR: Right.

SM: I traveled with Bill Clinton once more. Here we were expected to close at any moment, and I was out traveling with the governor. I went to Asheville, North Carolina. The governor was speaking to some group there. There were several Democratic candidates there as I recall. Right before the weekend that the paper closed, there I was spending Gannett's money. It wasn't cheap to get to Asheville from Little Rock by plane. There I was. I came back, and the rumors had escalated. On the *Gazette's* final day, we had been running a series of stories. The final story read, "Buyout and Employee Effort Fails," or something like that.

RR: Who wrote that story?

SM: I want to say Lamar James, but I am not sure. It was not one of us. I can't swear that. I was in the newsroom. I had gone to the features department for some reason. It was not my usual place to be in the morning. I think that I am right about this. The features section produced their pages early in the day. Somebody came up from production while I was over there and said, "They took our boards away, our pages away." I went back around to the other side of the building and told the people who sat next to me in the newsroom. I said, "They have taken the features pages up. I think this is it." Word spread

and, of course, work pretty much stopped.

RR: They meaning who?

SM: You know, I honestly do not know who did it. I don't know who physically took possession of them.

RR: The *Democrat's* people, you think?

SM: I am guessing. I don't know whether the Gannett people came down or --- I don't know. At the moment, I didn't really care. Maybe I knew at the time.

RR: Meaning these pages. . .

SM: These pages are not going to be printed. It wasn't the page maker kind of format that they use now. The fact that they took up the features pages meant that we weren't going to have a paper tomorrow. So I circled back around, and word spread, and people brought out a bottle. We called everybody in and work pretty much stopped. I remember Marilyn Moyer, who was the wife of the last Gannett editor [Keith Moyer], sat next to me. She had been hired as a writing coach. She was pleasant enough in a Gannett sort of way. I had never been prone to keep my mouth shut when I should. I think she knew what I thought of the company and what was going on, maybe even what I thought of her husband. I remember vividly when I said that the features page had been taken up that her face turned white. At that moment I thought maybe she had a glimmer of what was going on. She was in no danger financially. She and her husband were Gannett stars, and they were going to have a job. She actually seemed to be hurt and shocked. I thought at that moment that maybe they really didn't --- we assumed that the Gannett editors

knew. We assumed that they were the enemy. I think, probably, they didn't know. I think maybe only the publisher and maybe the general manager knew what the timetable was.

RR: What was it that you said to her?

SM: She overheard me say that they had taken up the page proofs.

RR: So even she was shocked?

SM: Even she was shocked, at least, that it was going to occur then. I am trying to remember --- I think they eventually turned off our computers. We had stopped working by then, and the day sort of dragged on. They brought in somebody, and there was a microphone on a portable podium. Older *Gazette* people were telling stories.

RR: Do you remember one of those older people?

SM: Leroy Donald, I think. I am sure that Max talked. I don't remember if Mr. Rutherford, Bill Rutherford, if he said anything or not. I think some of the people from features spoke. I don't remember if Pat Carrithers spoke. He probably didn't. We all sat around and talked. I remember that for years there under the state desk there was this unopened beer can. Probably some beer that isn't even made anymore. Someone joked about it being the emergency beer. The beer of last resort. I think someone probably finally opened it and it was rancid. Jan Cottingham's husband, or someone, brought some bottles of liquor in. I don't know if Jan's husband, Omar Green, did that or not. People were pouring paper cups of booze, hugging, talking, and crying. In some ways it was almost a relief because the stress and tension had

been so high. Just to know, even as awful as it was, that it was final. This was it. During the period that we were trying to save the paper, we got phone calls from people all over the state saying how terrible they thought it would be if the *Gazette* closed. My mother told me that there was an elderly lady who lived across the street from us, a widow. She came over to my mother's house and said, "Can I send them some money?"

RR: You said a while ago that it wasn't until it was all over that you realized how much stress and how much the emotional cost had been for you. What happened after that?

SM: The paper closed, of course. We all had to leave the building under the eyes of a security guy. We turned in our computers and keys. Those who had keys did. We boxed up what personal effects we had and walked out under the eyes of hired security guards. We left the building for the last time. I think I walked out with Anne Farris. I knew a part of my life was over, a substantial part. There was a candlelight vigil that night there on the street in front of the building. After it was over, Gannett provided some counseling. They had somebody come and do career counseling to help you deal with the trauma and to find a new job. I went to one session and left. It was a waste of my time. I was too angry and bitter to hear it, if they did have anything worthwhile to say. Mainly what happened for me was there was a sudden cessation of activity. I had been working at a high, feverish pitch for a long time. Suddenly it was over. Suddenly I realized that I had been living with a certain level of abnormal stress, even for the newspaper business. That was

reinforced later when I got a job in a one-newspaper town, and it didn't even seem like work. There was no comparison. It wasn't nearly as much fun and not nearly as challenging. It was more like a nine-to-five job than what I thought newspaper work was like. I realized what a feverish pitch we had all been working in. You sort of became used to it. You became accustomed to waking up with your stomach tied in knots and going to bed with your stomach tied in knots and being able to sleep with a certain amount of tension. This goes back before the rumors. The tension began with just the competition and the pressure to meet the *Democrat* at every turn and to beat them if you could. It got worse as we neared the closing of the paper.

RR: You have no way of knowing, I am sure. Is it your assumption that most of the people in the newsroom were under the same stress?

SM: I imagine. In one form or another. Many of us would go out to drink after work. I drank more then than at any other time of my life. It was mainly because you couldn't go home like that at the end of the day. You had to decompress. The only people who knew what you were going through were the people going through it, too. One of my friends said it was like being in a foxhole for four or five years. My point is because we spent a lot of time in the newspaper, we talked about the news and our work endlessly.

RR: And your bosses.

SM: And our bosses and how awful the editors are. We don't have many subjects. We just plumbed the one very deeply. I knew that much of what I was feeling was shared. I knew people reacted in different ways.

RR: I guess that you did not do any work for a while.

SM: No, I didn't. I drew unemployment, which I never thought I would do, but I did.

RR: Did you start looking for work?

SM: I started looking for work. I sent out thirty or forty letters. It was a bad time. We were in a recession, or coming out of one, I guess. It had not really hit us yet. The newspaper business was in fairly bad shape. I told myself that maybe I was such a poor candidate. Everybody had difficulty. The copy editors had an easier time, I think, because there is always work for the copy editors.

RR: You got on with. . .

SM: I got on with the Myrtle Beach *Sun-News*, a little Knight-Ridder paper in South Carolina. I think we had a circulation of about 40,000 or roughly somewhere in there. I went with—not intentionally—I went with a woman that I had been dating, Janet Patton. She had been a copy editor for the *Gazette*. She got a copy editing job—actually, it was a couple of months before I did—at Myrtle Beach. I came as a reporter.

RR: Where is she now?

SM: She is at the *Lexington Herald Leader* with Knight-Ridder. She left Myrtle Beach after less than a year. I was only there about eleven months.

RR: What was your job there?

SM: I started out in the Georgetown Bureau. Georgetown is in a county immediately south of Myrtle Beach. Myrtle Beach is in Horry County.

Georgetown is a—I think there is a paper mill there. I started in our bureau there and then came in to the main office where I did some higher education reporting. Coastal Carolina College was affiliated with South Carolina University. While I was there, it in was a big push to separate from the University of South Carolina. I wrote a big series about that. I had some experience with higher ed. Eventually, they brought me in to cover county government in Horry County, the main center of most of our circulation. I didn't stay there long. I got, in fact, through your offices, a job with the Mobile, Alabama, paper covering the Capitol in Montgomery. I left when that was offered to me because I wanted to get back to covering a state capitol.

RR: You stayed there for how many years?

SM: In Mobile?

RR: In Montgomery.

SM: I went there, I think, in February of 1993 and left after the election in 1994. It was just over a year and a half.

RR: That is when you came back here?

SM: I came back to Arkansas, actually moved back to Little Rock. All my life I had wanted to write fiction. I couldn't do it and cover the capitol. It was just too much work. Mobile was a one-newspaper town. There were two papers in Birmingham. It was a friendly competition, nothing like Little Rock. There was competition covering the capitol among the Mobile, Birmingham, and Huntsville papers. It was a great job. I enjoyed it very much. At that time the Mobile newspaper was making considerable improvements. I got my

friend, Mike Arbanas, an interview down there. He took the job, but I decided that I wanted to try to write fiction. If I didn't try, sooner or later, I would never do it. I came back to Little Rock in December of 1994.

RR: Lived there. . .

SM: Lived there until August of 1998 when I came here to go to graduate school in the creative writing program of the University of Arkansas. I saved up some money, so I could work on a novel. I did that for about nine months, and then I got really nervous and antsy. A friend of mine, a former *Gazette* colleague, needed some help. He now works for the cooperative extension service. In fact, it is Lamar James. He got me a part-time job there in the communications department. I did that for awhile. Then a friend, Max Parker — she's Max Heuer now, she married the lawyer Sam Heuer — asked me to come work for her in the governor's office. Max had been a reporter at the *Arkansas Democrat*, and at some point late in the newspaper war the *Gazette* started hiring the *Democrat's* best people. Max came over and worked with us, and she was at the *Gazette* when it closed. She then joined Clinton's presidential campaign, and after he got elected she became press secretary to Jim Guy Tucker. Tucker was the Democratic lieutenant governor who succeeded Clinton as governor. The Whitewater Special Prosecutor, Ken Starr, indicted Tucker in hopes of getting him to testify against Clinton. Tucker's trial was coming up in the winter of 1996, so Max called me and told me she needed someone she could trust and asked if I would take a job as an assistant press secretary. I was so outraged by what I considered to be Ken

Starr's abuse of his office, and so morally offended by the miscarriages that I thought were being perpetrated by the press, that I wanted to pick a side and get into the fight in whatever capacity I could. So I went to work for Governor Tucker shortly before his trial began. He was ultimately convicted and resigned in June of 1996. At that time, I was offered a job by the director of the Department of Finance and Administration. A man by the name of Richard Weiss. He was a very capable man in government, a good public servant. A man I had covered as a reporter and whom I respected. He sort of created a job for me. I worked in his chief economist's office where I wrote some speeches and helped prepare reports and things like that. Then they asked me to temporarily fill a vacancy in the state Revenue Department, in something called the Taxpayer Assistance Office. I went over there, and that was an experience. You were deep, deep in the bureaucracy at that point. My job was to be an advocate for taxpayers who needed help dealing with the agency or who owed back taxes, that sort of thing. I actually enjoyed it because it involved knocking heads with bureaucrats; in that way it was a little like reporting. I applied for the job on a permanent basis, but I didn't get it because I wasn't technically qualified for the position. About that time I was approached by Bynum Gibson, a former legislator who was chairman of the state Democratic Party. He had been a progressive member of the Arkansas House, had handled Clinton's environmental package in 1991 among other things. A very smart lawyer and a good politician. He had been Jim Guy Tucker's choice to lead the party, but after Tucker left the governor's office

there was a power struggle over control of the state party. When he approached me, Bynum had recently won a difficult and painful election to retain the chairmanship — by defeating Vaughn McQuary, the Pulaski County Democratic chairman. Bynum wanted someone to help him communicate with the members of the party and the public and the press, and to help watch his back along the way. I agreed to do that and stayed through one election cycle. In the spring of 1998, Bynum resigned to run for a judgeship in southeast Arkansas, and Vaughn McQuary won the special election to replace him. I and the rest of the staff resigned to allow Mr. McQuary to pick his own team. That was in May of 1998. I had already planned to come to school here at the university in the fall. Bynum's term would have been up in August of that year anyway, and I knew I would probably be out of a job at that point.

RR: You have had a more varied career than most any reporter that I have ever known.

SM: I say that I have closed a newspaper, driven a governor out of office, and the chairman of the Democratic party.

RR: Do you want to say anything about the novel that you are working on?

SM: Oh no, it is in a box somewhere in the attic. I think it is not very good. I may go back to it someday.

RR: Here you have a graduate assistantship teaching English Composition and working on your own writings.

SM: Taking graduate level courses in the English Department.

RR: Do you have a new novel going or are you writing short stories?

SM: Short stories—my thesis will be a collection of short stories. That is sort of what the workshop program is designed to promote. Although it is possible to work on a novel, it is just hard.

RR: Let me guess: does your subject have anything to do with politics?

SM: Well, I have tried that. I have written a lot of stories with politics in them, and they haven't turned out too well. My thesis is a collection of short stories based on the oil boom that took place in my hometown in the 1920s.

Smackover went from a community of probably fewer than 100 to something like 20,000 almost overnight after oil was discovered. For a while the

Smackover oil field was one of the most productive oil fields in the country.

My grandfather, my father's father, came to Smackover because of the boom and eventually wound up owning several wells that my father inherited and

operated until he sold them and retired. There is now a state museum in

Union County commemorating the boom and the oil industry. It has a

wonderful collection of oral histories, and I have been using them very loosely as the basis for some fiction.

RR: Have you ever come across an oral history by a man named R. L. Pendelton?

SM: No, but I will look for him.

RR: He is my father-in-law. He is in there somewhere. They interviewed him.

SM: I will look for that. I have a stack of them at home. I don't have that one.

RR: I will tell you how to recognize his voice. He sounds just like Earl Long. If you can remember Uncle Earl. What was it about the *Gazette* that made it special?

SM: It was a newspaper I grew up reading. I don't remember ever taking the *Democrat* when I was a child. I don't remember it being in my house, I guess, because my parents grew up reading the *Gazette*. As I say, as trivial as it may be, I am sure that my first real connection with the newspaper was through Orville Henry's sports column. Over time as I developed a political sense and some trifling historical sense as a kid, I believe I began to understand its role as an institution in this state. I don't know if you are asking me personally or to the state.

RR: Both.

SM: To me, I began to realize at the defining moment in Arkansas history, it was on the right side. It demonstrated courage through the people who ran the institution, who worked as reporters and editors and publishers. I became aware somehow by osmosis. I became wrapped up in that tradition, and I came, of course, here as an undergraduate to major in journalism. You and Bob Douglas and other *Gazette* people were enormously influential in what I thought journalism should be. I don't think I had any notion what it should be. I knew that you wrote for the newspaper. I didn't really know what it meant to be a journalist. You two taught me that. You are not responsible for my failings, but any strengths that I have, I am sure it was from what I have been taught here. I was trained in that tradition. I closely identify with and became — if it hasn't always been, it gradually became the job that I have always wanted. I was fortunate enough to get an internship there and reconfirmed that I met really outstanding people that I saw working there.

Very dedicated journalists, people who were good at what they did; funny, gutsy, interesting. They knew things that I didn't know, I learned something everyday. I was more interested and engaged in what I was doing. Probably more so than I had ever been. I knew that I wanted to go back even though I knew it was going to be a difficult situation. In terms of the state, I think it was so important. I hesitate to say this because it will sound self-serving, and it shouldn't be. I had nothing to do with its importance to the state. That was before I got there, and my being there has been no contribution whatsoever. I think in a state that is capital poor, poorly educated, and subject to all the outrages of racism, the worst version of fundamentalist religions, and it seemed at times aggressively anti-learning or education, at the risk of sounding corny, I think it [the *Gazette*] was an important beacon of light. I always felt a responsibility when I wrote for it that I never felt anywhere else. I always tried to do the best that I could. I felt that I had a special obligation to live up to that. I felt that I should live up to what the people before me had done. I talked to a friend and former *Gazette* colleague recently --- I don't know how you measure the impact of a newspaper. I don't know if any more jobs were created or any more children educated. I don't know if it was with the most progressive government. Maybe it means all of those things. I couldn't prove it. I don't think Arkansas is a better place without it. In some ways it may be a worse place, in some fashion.

RR: Do you see an obvious political impact since the death of the paper? Or is that too simplistic?

SM: No, not too simplistic.

RR: Maybe we were headed in a new political direction anyway.

SM: This idea is not original with me, but I agree with it. The entire South has been going Republican for a long time. Lyndon Johnson predicted it. When I moved to South Carolina, I was shocked at how Republican it was and how aggressively Republican it was. This is the idea that is not original to me but with which I agree: Bill Clinton cast such a large shadow for so long, in some ways bad, and in some ways good. Bill Clinton kept this state firmly Democratic. I think it may have gone Republican sooner—I think the *Gazette* had something to do with it. I think probably the *Gazette* made it possible for moderate to outright liberal politicians to survive in some sense. I don't mean by that that we had to be cheerleaders outside the editorial page for Dale Bumpers, David Pryor, or Bill Alexander, or any of those people. They were treated fairly and allowed to articulate the visions that might not have been all that popular with their constituents.

RR: There was that editorial page.

SM: There was the editorial page. There is nothing comparable to it now in this state, nothing with the platform to articulate those ideas in that considered way. In some form or fashion, there has been some political impact. I think Arkansas might have had some more Republicans anyway, but the trend might have been softened somewhat if the *Gazette* had survived.

RR: Scott, can you think of anything else that we haven't talked about that needs to be said?

SM: For whatever it is worth — I have said this before — I have never worked for any place with such good people. People who are so dedicated to what they are doing. It was an experience that I will always treasure.

RR: Thank you.

[End of Interview]