

Gazette Project

Interview with

Mark Oswald,
Santa Fe, New Mexico
20 September 2001

Interviewer: Ernest Dumas

Ernest Dumas: This is Ernie Dumas, and this is July 20, 2001. We're in Santa Fe, New Mexico, at the home of Mark Oswald, a great reporter for the *Arkansas Gazette* for a number of years and, before that, at the *Arkansas Democrat*. And now, Mark, what's your title with the *Albuquerque Journal*?

Mark Oswald: I'm the editor of the Journal North of the *Albuquerque Journal*.

ED: Mark moved to New Mexico after the closing of the *Gazette* in 1991. Mark, first of all, we signed the form, but I need you to also consent orally to the use of your interview and the transcription of it for research purposes at the University of Arkansas. You understand that it will be open to the public for whatever purposes it can be used, and you consent to that?

MO: Yes, I consent. That's fine.

ED: Mark, let's start off with your birth. Where were you born?

MO: Born in Little Rock in 1953, in the old St. Vincent's [Hospital], which was down there not far from the State Capitol. In the same room when I was born was Matt Morrison, who went on to play for the Razorbacks.

ED: Who were your parents?

MO: Hilda and Oscar Oswald. They were first generation. Their parents were from Austria and Germany. They were born up in the Arkansas River Valley in the Morrilton/Atkins area. My mother's maiden name was Maus, M-A-U-S.

ED: What did your dad do?

MO: My dad was a pharmacist. He worked, basically, his whole life after he got of college. He went to the old Little Rock College, I guess it was called back then, and his whole life, basically, he worked at a pharmacy. It was called Webb's Pharmacy at Twenty-Third and Arch Street downtown, and he probably worked there for fifty years. He was never an owner or anything, but he was a pharmacist there. And when I was growing up, I met all kinds of people who had been through that drugstore. I worked as a soda jerk there in high school. I still think that may have been my all-time favorite job, as a soda jerk at that old drugstore.

ED: You were the youngest child, right? How many of you?

MO: Youngest of seven kids. I have one sister, and I had five brothers — one of them is now deceased — and I was the youngest.

ED: So you grew up there in what neighborhood?

MO: When I was born, we lived on Summit Street, which is now being cleared away to make room for an expansion of the Arkansas Children's Hospital, not far from the Capitol. Then I grew up on Taylor Street, which is near Twelfth and Fair Park, kind of in the area of the zoo, and War Memorial Stadium was about a mile away when we were there. We would walk over there and sneak into the Razorback games [by climbing] over the fence when the guards weren't looking.

ED: You went to school where?

MO: I went to Catholic schools all my life — I graduated from Catholic High. Then I had a checkered college career. I went one year to Notre Dame out of Catholic High. The second year I went on an exchange program associated with Notre Dame to a university in France, and then the last two years I went to the University of Texas, where I got a journalism degree.

ED: How did you get into journalism? Did you get interested in it in high school?

MO: Yes, I worked on a high school paper, you know, that wasn't very serious. It was just kind of fun. I did some sports stuff and some attempts at humor, and then, I guess to be honest, I was kind of in that sort of post-Watergate thing. Watergate was going on when I was in France as a sophomore in college, so I missed all those famous televised hearings and everything that everybody talks about that were major events, but I was following it in the news when I was over there in France. And then the [] when I got back. But I guess I was in that crowd that really — that Watergate thing kind of attracted a lot of people to journalism. I was just probably in that.

ED: But writing — you were interested in writing?

MO: Yes, I kind of always wanted to be a writer.

ED: English was a favorite class, I guess?

MO: Yes. The one thing I'll say about Catholic High for sure is that it had really good English teachers. I mean, all four years I was there, I thought I had people who really made you write a whole lot. They [also] made you read a whole lot, and that was really good because I've just seen its importance from my own kid now, Oscar, who's fourteen. I think it's only in the last year that he's had to string

more than one sentence together at a time. I've got to hand it to those English teachers back at Catholic High. They were really good and got me into it.

ED: Were you interested in journalism when you went to Notre Dame? Why did you go to Notre Dame?

MO: It was that sort of Catholic High thing.

ED: Notre Dame is the place to go, right?

MO: The place to go, and I got a scholarship. I went there, and then I went to France. You know, it was early seventies, and decided I was tired of going to all-male Catholic schools. I lucked out and was able to get in-state tuition to go to Texas. I looked around, and they had a big journalism school, and a big daily paper there, the *Daily Texan*. That sort of attracted me. So that's why I went there.

ED: You went to Texas to pursue journalism?

MO: Right, and it was good. The *Daily Texan*, at the time, was actually, in a lot of corners, more well thought of than the daily paper in Austin, which I think, these days, is a lot better than it was then. Reporters from the *Daily Texan* would cover city hall and the legislature and were scooping the daily paper on some stuff.

ED: What did you do? You worked on the *Daily Texan* when you were . . .

MO: I did some news stuff, and I did some arts and entertainment stuff. I did two years of that there, and between my junior and senior year, I got an internship — it was just a summer job back then — at the *Arkansas Democrat*. I remember Jerry McConnell was the managing editor then, and I thought he was a pretty good guy. I'm just looking now at what newspapers around here let interns do. The *Democrat* then was struggling. It was the afternoon paper that was dying — didn't have very many reporters, and some were people on vacation. Two weeks

after I was there, I was going to school board meetings and city council meetings, and they just threw me into the fire, which was really good.

ED: I guess this was in the latter stages before the Hussmans bought the paper. They were really struggling and just had a handful of reporters.

MO: And I came back there after my senior year and took a job. In that period, which would have been 1975, 1976, as far as news reporters, I think we had five or six. It was a skeleton crew.

ED: You interned there between your junior and senior years at Texas?

MO: Yes, then I came back when I graduated. Ralph Patrick was the city editor then.

ED: And Bob McCord was the editor-in-chief?

MO: Yes, I guess he was the editor-in-chief, and wasn't he doing the editorials, too?

ED: I think he was. I don't know what his title would have been, but it would probably be editor, but he was actually in charge in of the editorials.

MO: I remember just a couple of characters. Bob Sallee was the police reporter, kind of a character.

ED: George Douthit was still at the State Capitol?

MO: Yes, he was at the State Capitol. Who was the kind of hippy, long-haired guy who was covering city hall when I got there after I'd been there a year a half?

ED: Was it Arlen Fields?

MO: No, it wasn't Arlen Fields. Because I remember — what was funny about him, he was this kind of hippy guy and he ended up being the flack for the Chamber of Commerce.

ED: Oh, yes. Roger Armbrust.

MO: That's it. That's it. So it was an interesting group of people, and Ralph moved up to something, and then who was the guy that became the city editor after that? He was another . . .

ED: Was it Tucker Steinmetz?

MO: No, it was another long-haired guy who ended up later working for the *National Enquirer*. What was his name? I should have done some research here. But he was a really good writer, and he became the city editor after Ralph Patrick wasn't. But it was an interesting group of people over there.

ED: I guess Gene Foreman had put that group together.

MO: Right. He wasn't there when I was there.

ED: He had already moved on to Long Island, *Newsday*, and then to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

MO: Right. Right.

ED: So you came back, and what were your assignments at the *Democrat*?

MO: I did the basic thing. To start with, I was a GA [general assignment reporter]. I remember doing features, a whole lot of movie features, and then, but pretty quickly, it seemed like within about a year, I was covering City Hall. I did cops, and features. It was an afternoon paper, so you had that early-morning craziness. We rotated the really earliest person. Someone had to be there about 4:30 or 5:00, and you would look at the *Gazette*, hit the wire, and then see what happened and try to gin up stuff and hit the deadlines by 9:30 or 10:00 in the morning. If you went to cover a night meeting, you'd usually just wait and come in at 5:00 or 7:00 in the morning to write it up for the afternoon deadline.

ED: What was it like? Here you were, as you say, the *Democrat* was struggling. By that time, they had a considerably reduced staff, and you were competing against the *Gazette*, which was not overstaffed but had a considerably larger and older staff. You had the other problem of being an afternoon paper and everything happening in the afternoon. Was that frustrating competitively?

MO: I don't know that it was frustrating. It was all new and just so cool to be able to do it. Bob Stover was who I was competing against at the *Gazette*.

ED: He was the city hall reporter for the *Gazette*?

MO: Right. And I guess in contrast to later years when I was at the *Gazette*, and we were into this full-bore newspaper-war thing, Stover and I were really good buddies. I remember we would ride out to the airport commission meetings at the airport from city hall together in Stover's MG convertible.

ED: It was competition, but it really wasn't a newspaper war because on all the beats, your competitor on the other paper was a good friend. You wanted to beat him but it was not . . .

MO: Right. I remember Stover and I — we even had this — we're both baseball fans, and there's this baseball game you play with cards called "At the Baseball." They probably don't do it anymore now that there's computers, but every year they'd put out a new edition of the cards that were based on the real statistics of the real players. You'd hold a draft and draft teams, and there was a board and dice involved. But the probabilities were based on the real players. Stover and I and two or three people had this "At the Baseball" league. At breaks at city hall, we were playing "At the Baseball" in the pressroom.

ED: In the latter stages, if that had been going on, John Robert Starr would have fired you.

MO: Right. Right.

ED: Consorting with the enemy.

MO: I've been telling people out here in New Mexico — my staff are mostly people who are thirty or younger, and they seem to hang out with the reporters and everybody from the other paper — I just tell them, "This is not the way it was at my last stop during the newspaper war." Stover was so good. He was also just a really good writer, and he was killing me. But considering where I was, just starting out, I didn't feel like I was doing that poorly, and I think my employers understood that, to some degree.

ED: Well, he was a veteran. He had been at city hall, by that time, for a few years because he'd been covering it, I guess probably, since Jimmy Jones.

MO: Right. It was Jimmy Jones and then Stover.

ED: Jones left sometime in the early 1970s probably. So who was the city manager? Jack Meriwether was no longer the city manager at that time.

MO: No. Meriwether had left. It was a guy who looked the part of the corporate bureaucrat. What was his name? McMullen or something.

ED: Yes. Carlton McMullen.

MO: Yes. Carlton McMullen, I think, was the city manager, and then Charles Bussey was around. I'm trying to think about who was in the mayor's chair when I first got over there. Sandy Keith was on the city board. As I said, there were some characters. Les Hollingsworth, I think, had just gotten elected for the first time.

ED: Haco Boyd, was he in there?

MO: No, I think Haco was gone. I think Hollingsworth, Sandy Keith, and Charles Bussey were basically there forever from when I first started covering for the *Democrat*, and when I later went to the *Gazette* and started covering city hall. Those three guys were basically there the whole time.

ED: You started at the *Democrat* as a full-time reporter of what year when you graduated?

MO: It must have been the summer of 1975.

ED: And so after a short period as general assignment, you were city hall, and then were you at city hall when you went to the *Gazette*?

MO: Yes, I went to the *Gazette* after three years. It must have been in 1978.

ED: How did it happen that you went to the *Gazette*?

MO: There was an opening. Actually, Ernie, I think you had something to do with it because I was, by that time, going out with Ruth, and Mamie Ruth, her mother, knew you. I think through Mamie Ruth you put in a word with Bill Shelton or something for a GA job that was at the *Gazette*.

ED: Bob Douglas was the managing editor?

MO: Yes, Douglas was the managing editor. So Shelton and Douglas — but I think when I went over there who I talked to was Shelton because I remember the one thing he wanted me to do — I told him I couldn't type very well — he wanted me to take a typing class, so I think I actually did for a month.

ED: You took a typing class?

MO: Yes, I took a typing class.

ED: Where did you do that?

MO: It must have been at some community college or something offering a night class.
So I took a typing class for about a month, but it never really came up again.

ED: Had you ever taken typing?

MO: No, I was the classic kind of just make it up as I went along.

ED: Are you still a hunt-and-peck typist?

MO: Yes, but now we have the computers, and they're forgiving. When I started at the *Democrat*, there was this weird halfway-between system where we had electric typewriters, and we'd type it out, and then they'd paste it all together then run it through something that would computerize it.

ED: I never understood that system.

MO: It was a short-lived system. By the time I got to the *Gazette*, though, it was all computerized.

ED: The *Gazette* skipped that system. It went straight to computers.

MO: I was never a good typist. I'm still not. I can type notes real fast when talking to people, but as soon as I get through, I have to go back and clean them up. But it hasn't seemed to be much of a problem.

ED: But Shelton hired you in spite of the fact that you were not a good typist?

MO: Yes, typing seemed to be thing he was most worried about, but we got through that after a month or two.

ED: So what was your assignment at the *Gazette*?

MO: It was a GA, and I believe the first thing I did was to be a cops reporter on Sunday and Monday when Lamar — was it Lamar James?

ED: Lamar James.

MO: [He] was the regular cop reporter. He worked Tuesday through Saturday. So I was cops on his two days off on Sunday and Monday, and then I was a GA the other three days. I'd come in at 4:00 on Sunday and Monday and work until midnight. You're the last guy on the desk, actually. The assistant city editor would go home. Even after I just started working there, part of your job was to look at the wire late, just to make sure nothing came over. Actually, I enjoyed that, having some cops, some GA. I liked that schedule, too. You'd get off at 7:00 or something whenever you got through on Thursday, and you didn't have to come back until 4:00 on Sunday. It was like having almost three days off.

ED: When you were working general assignment, you went to work in the mornings? When I did general assignment, I'd either go to work at 12:30 or 2:30 p.m.

MO: No. When did we come in the morning? We were supposed to be there at nine or so. I guess that was about when we came in, around nine.

ED: I never had that good of an assignment. Usually Shelton had me coming in at 2:30 p.m.

MO: The first story I had a byline on had something to do with Parkview High School. It would be shocking, I think, to the people who work for me now that you didn't get a byline for every story. Shelton wouldn't give you a byline unless he liked it, I guess.

ED: Sometimes we thought he'd give you a byline because he didn't like it, and he wanted you to . . .

MO: Make sure everybody knew you wrote it.

ED: Yes. But sometimes he could be awfully stingy with bylines, and you might go a couple of months without a byline if Shelton decided that you were not performing properly.

MO: It must have been some kind of incident, maybe a break-in, or something, happened at Parkview that I wrote a story about. That was my first byline. It didn't take that long. A couple of weeks after I'd been there or something.

ED: Tell me about Bill Shelton. What were impressions of the city editor of the *Gazette*?

MO: Today they would say he was "old school." I still think he was probably the best city editor I ever worked for, although unlike this day and age of personnel manager, he never came over and said, "Good job," and patted you on the back, "Let's talk about this story," and all this stuff.

ED: He never talked to you about a story, did he? He'd send you a note about it.

MO: He'd send you a note. Probably other people you've interviewed have probably mentioned this, but the worst one was just a note with the story from the other paper in your box with the note that just said, "Why we not have?"

ED: We've all gotten those.

MO: "Why we not have?"

ED: "Why we not have?"

MO: I've got to say, though, as a copy editor, I'm still amazed. I think that's sort of a lost art. Shelton could take your copy and cut a third out it or more, and you wouldn't know what was missing. I've never really seen anybody able to do that anymore, and I think that's one way journalism has changed. The people who rework copy catch the errors, and they may change the lead, but that whole idea

of being able to reshape a story or shorten it without losing much is something that's missing. I remember him sitting up there at that front desk and occasionally slamming the phone down after a call from somebody he didn't want to have to deal with. Initially, I was scared of him, but I guess as you got to know him, you just knew he was going to get pissed off if you messed up or something, but you kind of liked him, too.

ED: Everybody was convinced he didn't like them.

MO: Right.

ED: Everybody knew he didn't like them. Shelton has always been mystified by that reputation.

MO: It's a different world now. You're supposed to have all this communication and meetings, and all this stuff about stories and what you're doing every day and have staff meetings. That wasn't the management style with Shelton around.

ED: There was a level of communication. When you were on a beat, you called in and told him what you were going to have that day, and he might ask you a question or two about it, but that's about it. He might give your story back to you after you've written it and just say, "This is full of holes, and . . ."

MO: Yes. One of my Shelton stories was that I was still on GA, and they were having these brown-bag lunches at the library there at Seventh and Louisiana. We would always just have these little announcements in the paper about who was giving a talk about what at the library at the noon luncheons. One day, the brown-bag lunch was about disco dancing. This is 1978. This was at the height of the disco era, and it's sort of a big fad. Shelton gave me an assignment to cover this lunch meeting about disco dancing, and so I came back and wrote a feature story. We

were all sitting around on the floor with lunch, and this guy was pulling people out of the crowd showing them how to do the “bump” and all this stuff from the disco era. I came back and wrote what I hoped was sort of a funny story, and I turned it in. Have I ever told you this story? Shelton comes over to my desk and — [he] was totally deadpan — and says, “What is disco?” That was it. He was just like, “What is disco?” and I go, “Well, it’s kind of two things. It’s this music that’s really repetitive that people like to dance to, and it’s also the place you go to dance.” He said, “Okay.” Then he just started walking around the newsroom, and everybody he walked up to he asked, “What is disco?” There were all sorts of variations on what I had said, you know. Some people would say, “This music sucks.” “It’s terrible music.” He went around and got at least ten or fifteen opinions on just what is disco. He wouldn’t elaborate or anything, just, “What is disco?” Then he wrote a sidebar to my story. He hadn’t heard of disco up to this point, and so he said, “What is disco?” He went back to the Greek root, you know, a discus. I can’t remember what it is, maybe just the disk, and then that made it to records, and then maybe that’s how it became disco. Then he said, “Some people said it’s this. Some people say it’s that.” It was like a little ten- or twelve-inch humorous sidebar on “What is Disco?” I guess, for the readers who hadn’t caught on to the fad, you know, “What is Disco?” I’ll always remember Shelton walking around and going, “What is disco?”

ED: Well, that was one of his attributes. Shelton’s experience was limited culturally, and so he always wanted things explained so that everybody could understand them. Nothing was going to be in the paper that anybody would be mystified about.

MO: Well, do you remember this? It happened before I got there, but it was another musical thing. It was a clipping. When someone would join the *Gazette*, someone would have to go back to the library — this was back when everything was in a paper library instead of being on computer — and pull this clip out and talk about it. There was a hit song in the 1970s. It was a Motown group. The group was the Undisputed Truth, and the hit song was “Smiling Faces Sometimes Tell Lies.” It was sort of a message song about how politicians court the black vote, or whatever, and then turn their backs once they’re elected. The chorus was “Smiling faces sometimes tell lies. Beware of the [handshake and the] pat on the back. It just might hold you back,” or something like that. I guess Shelton was driving in to work one day and heard this song, and the article was written. I guess he hadn’t been listening to the radio for many years through the 1960s, when a lot of political stuff had made it into music. So he commissioned this article, or maybe wrote the article. It was all about this one song called, “Smiling Faces Sometimes Tell Lies.” It quoted all the lyrics, and it got some DJ to talk about it a little bit. It was written with this amazement that a rhythm and blues group was putting this out on the radio. We liked to pull that out when we were telling Shelton stories.

ED: Do you know any other Shelton stories?

MO: I’m trying to think. I’m thinking of just all the funny stuff. One news story showed you how he was the classical news guy. Who was the guy who dressed up like a — the Chicago guy who killed all those kids who dressed like a clown? What was his name? Buried them under his house.

ED: I can’t remember.

MO: I can't remember his name now. If I heard it, I would recognize it immediately, but his business was renovating or fixing up drugstores. Gacy, John Wayne Gacy is his name. When the case hit the news, it was the biggest thing in news for a while. Some guy who ran a drugstore up in the Heights [a Little Rock neighborhood] called. I can't remember which drugstore it was. He called the paper and said, "This Gacy was here within the last six months, and he fixed up my drugstore." I went and talked to the guy, and it wasn't that great of a story except that Gacy had been in Little Rock. He was just this normal guy, and he had a couple of people with him, and they fixed up the store and left. Kind of scary to think about it now, you know, that he was hanging around here. That was just a really standard kind of story, but we held the story for a week because Shelton wanted some absolute proof that Gacy had been there. He didn't have a receipt with Gacy's name on it, but he finally came up with a business card and let me have it, and Shelton decided that was good enough. Then we ran the story. These days, you probably just would have put it in the next day.

ED: Not Shelton. There was never a rumor that ever got in the paper. Nothing remotely resembling a rumor would make it into the *Arkansas Gazette*. A lot of things get into the paper now that you would have never gotten into the paper then.

MO: All this stuff about "sources close to." I don't think we even thought about putting that stuff in the paper. Just one other funny story. He lived up there next to Allsopp Park, and he kept up with birds. I was still covering City Hall, but apparently every spring or summer, there were tons of whippoorwills [birds] in Allsopp Park. One summer, there weren't any whippoorwills, and he really

wanted a story about why there weren't any whippoorwills in Allsopp Park. I made two or three calls, and I couldn't find anybody to talk about this.

Everybody said, "Well, you know, I guess they just didn't show up. Sometimes they go —" I couldn't get a definitive story, but he kept giving me notes about the whippoorwill thing. That song "My Blue Heaven" starts off with some lines about "When whippoorwills call —" I can't remember how it goes now. But "My Blue Heaven" starts off with a verse about whippoorwills, and we were all singing it in my corner of the newsroom. But, finally, I got somebody who, I think, actually turned out to be a former newspaper reporter. He may have been working for the *Arkansas Times* at the time — I forget his name now. He was a bird nut, kind of Audubon Society guy or something. I finally tracked him down, and he did some checking around. They go to Mexico during the winters, and every few years, when they're doing the big migration back, they run into a hurricane or something. Whole hordes of them just get wiped out, and that's probably the best explanation. So I finally turned in this ten-inch story, and I couldn't resist it. I remember as a lead, I put in the opening verse of "My Blue Heaven," but that's not how it came out in the paper. It got cut out, and Shelton had a lead about "Where are the whippoorwills in Allsopp Park?"

ED: Yes. He didn't want to fool around with any of that clever stuff. He wanted to get straight to the story.

MO: I think it took me a month to get this ten-inch whippoorwill story.

ED: Well, everybody had gathered stories like that, Shelton's hang-up over little things in the community, nature or something that he doesn't understand that he wants to get answers to.

MO: Right. Right. But I still tell people about him as a city editor and, just sort of a news editor, how good he was.

ED: What about Max Brantley? He came along later. He replaced Shelton, I guess, as city editor later.

MO: Things kind of happened fast there. Max was city editor, then Gannett came along, and people started getting moved around a lot. Max was passionate about everything. I was covering City Hall by then. Stover had become . . .

ED: State editor or business editor?

MO: Business editor, I think. After I was at the *Gazette* probably for a couple years — maybe four years or so, I moved over to City Hall. Max was the one who would be totally fired up. If the city council was discussing some zoning issue and it looked like they were crumbling to the developers' interest or something, he would get fired up and come over and want a story elaborating on it. Sort of the opposite of Shelton in that he really wanted to get involved and talk to you a lot more about what was going on. But, yes, Max was good to work for, too.

ED: And opposite of Shelton?

MO: Yes. Max wore his feelings on his sleeve on every issue. Then when the newspaper war got started in full glory, Max was leading the troops. He'd be the one running down the opposition and firing us up.

ED: Max was made for competition. He loved it and wanted to beat their asses every day, rub their noses in it, and didn't like to get beat at all.

MO: This is a tangent. Remember how crazy it got there for a while? Both papers were doing it — running the stories they had that the other one didn't, and then

listing these three-inch stories on the sewer committee meetings and all that stuff?
That was how wild it got.

ED: Max was making lists.

MO: Nowadays, everybody says, “No, we don’t want to cover meetings.” It’s totally different. I’m trying to think of some stuff that maybe he got involved in while I was covering City Hall, or just kind of what he was interested in. I don’t know. I covered City Hall for [about], five or six years, and it seems like the last three or so years, people had enough confidence in me that I was ginning up most stuff on my own. I was over there doing my thing.

ED: Did you consider City Hall your province? You “owned” City Hall? You had a proprietary feeling about the place?

MO: Yes. People just don’t do this anymore. I remember going to every planning commission meeting. They’d start at two o’clock in the afternoon and get through at 6:00 or 7:00 in the evening, and so you got to know everybody on the planning commission. You got to know most of the people on the board of adjustment. You knew the ones who were pro-development, the ones who were in the middle, and the ones who were the antis. After a while you felt like it was just your oyster. You were a part of the whole scene. There was some funny stuff over there. They were choosing the civil service commission, which, I guess, included a city board member, as they call it. Les Hollingsworth was on there, and, you know, he was the rabble-rouser, the black member of the council, as opposed to Charles Bussey, who was the “Establishment.” It was over in the convention center area across the street from City Hall, and we had the press crowd, me and the *Democrat* reporter, and it seems like maybe a TV reporter. At

that time, there were actually radio news reporters, a very rare breed these days. We were sitting outside the door, and someone noticed that there was about an inch gap between the bottom of the door and the floor. The radio reporter could put a microphone down there, and you could listen to the earphone on their monitor. You could hear everything that was going on, and we debated it for about two minutes. Then we just decided to listen to the whole thing. I don't know if the other newspaper reporter did it, but I just put in all kinds of stuff we heard them say. The next day, they had a cop sitting outside the door. The things I really remember covering were the development and planning commission stuff, whether they were going to let a McDonald's and a Burger King go in on Markham Street and start all this commercial development. Then the whole spread of Little Rock to the west. They had sort of a liberal planning director, who was always trying to do these cool, "plannerly," controlled-growth things. He would always get slapped down in the end. The sad thing was in the end, he ended up working for the developers.

ED: He sold out altogether. Why not?

MO: One time Charles Bussey one time came in and, for Christmas, gave me a fifth of Chivas Regal. I felt bad about it for three weeks. He wouldn't let me leave the room unless I carried this whiskey out with me. I still feel bad about it. I just gave it away as soon as I walked out of the building. Why did Bussey give me this twenty-dollar bottle of whiskey? He was such a character. He used to tell stories about the 1960s, and how he was always feeling picked on, and he was never respected by the *Gazette* and all this stuff. We'd always have these editorials because he was always mixed up in something, some public housing on

the east side that he would be making some money off, or somebody he knew would be making money off it. That really made him mad. He would talk about how he saved Little Rock in the 1960s, when the radicals had come into town after Martin Luther King, Jr. had been shot, or some other big event, and he put a few of them up against the wall with a pistol in their face and told them to go somewhere else if they wanted to raise hell and, basically, saved the town. There are probably nuggets of truth to some of it, but . . .

ED: Some of it.

MO: . . . it was stuff I could never really get in the newspaper, but I'd sit in that office for a long time and hear him talk.

ED: So you were at City Hall for four or five years, right? Until . . .

MO: Five or six, probably.

ED: . . . about when?

MO: Late 1980s. I want to say it was like 1988 that I went over to the Capitol.

ED: How did that happen? You were . . . ?

MO: Something happened. Who left?

ED: Did [John] Brummett leave?

MO: Yes, I guess Brummett stopped being a regular reporter and went to be a columnist. I think that must have been the trigger, and I went out there. I was there with John Reed and Bob Wells. I think it was the three of us. Maybe James Meriwether was already there. At the height of the newspaper war there in 1988, 1989, we had, like, five people. Reed and Wells both bailed out at different points there — but me, and Meriwether, and Scott . . .

ED: Scott Morris?

MO: Scott Morris.

ED: Did Scott Van Laningham go out there?

MO: Yes, Scott Van Laningham was around. God, you know, during the session we'd have you and a couple of other columnists all on the grounds.

ED: Keith Moyer, who was the last editor sent in by Gannett, and who is now, as of a couple of weeks ago, the publisher of the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, to our amazement, ordered up a big special section.

MO: Yes, we had a tab every day.

ED: It was a tabloid section on the legislature every day.

MO: It was [about] ten or twelve pages, maybe?

ED: Yes, something like that.

MO: Tab-sized pages.

ED: It was all staff written. At one point, we counted. There were eleven of us out there. Of course, I was on the editorial page, but I was dispatched out there to write a column. Max Brantley, who was the city editor, came out and fiddled around out there and wrote a column, too.

MO: And then the other column was . . .

ED: Bob Lancaster wrote a humorous, snide column every day, so we had the three of us writing columns.

MO: And we had at least five reporters. Oh, yes, Arbanas was out there.

ED: Mike Arbanas.

MO: Now an Eastern Orthodox priest. There was hardly room in that press room. We had so many people, and the *Democrat* had so many people. We had to make room for AP [Associated Press] and the *Commercial Appeal* [Memphis]. You

had to turn sideways to get between the desks. To keep the *Democrat* from hearing what we were saying, we'd get under the desk to talk when we were trying to tell the city desk what we had. That was crazy. We would cover every committee meeting and write up what they did and then cover the floor sessions and then scout around for enterprise stuff. Try not to just do meetings, but we tried to cover all the meetings, too.

ED: We covered all the meetings. I didn't cover any of them. I was just writing an editorial opinion piece every day.

MO: That was intense. I only did that State Capitol beat for three years before the *Gazette* closed, so I guess the most memorable things were the politics. We covered [Bill] Clinton's last governor's race. By the time he was getting ready to run for president, it was just amazing the money that was available. I flew to Stanford once to cover a Clinton speech, and I have a funny story [attached to it on mine?]. Somehow my airplane ticket was either . . .

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

MO: I totally freaked out. I remember thinking, "What the hell am I going to do?" This is only probably about a month or two before the paper closed. I bought another ticket, and the paper paid for it. Buying a ticket on the day of travel, you know, to fly back from San Francisco to Little Rock was like \$600 or \$700. I may be exaggerating. It seemed like it was at least \$500.

ED: I suspect it was.

MO: I just said, "I really screwed up." At that point, I think they knew the end was near. No one really gave me too much crap. What's another \$500 after losing

\$20 million, you know? Covering Clinton gave me major fame when I came to New Mexico because he got elected president four months after I was here.

ED: Talk a little bit about the Gannett era. 1986 was when Gannett bought the *Arkansas Gazette*. What did you think when they bought it? What was your feeling about it, relief or horror?

MO: I guess I was in the horror category. I think we all thought we really lost something when we weren't the old independent business, the oldest business in Arkansas, in existence since before Arkansas was a state. Now we were just part of this chain. We had all held *USA Today* and the color and the short stories in total disdain. That was not a marriage made in heaven. I've got to say, looking back on it, that we were too high-brow, you know. We thought a color picture on the front page was some sort of violation of journalistic ethics. That was overboard. Who was that guy that we brought in for less than a year from the *Washington Star*?

ED: Bill McIlwain.

MO: Maybe if they had let McIlwain do some of these things before Gannett got there, it might have been a little easier. We were too high brow, but I still don't have any fond memories of Gannett and their efforts to Gannett-ize the paper. Except for this one guy, whose name I can't even remember now, who was sort an assistant editor, who kind of worked on investigative stuff and projects. He never worked with me. That's why I can't remember his name. He seemed to have some sense. You remember that guy? He had a desk over to the side. What was his name? He wasn't there that long.

ED: Oh, wasn't he the managing editor for a while there?

MO: He might have been the managing editor. I don't know.

ED: He'd won a Pulitzer Prize with Gannett.

MO: He seemed to be pretty good.

ED: And really liked the *Gazette* and wanted the *Gazette* to be the *Gazette*. John Hanchette.

MO: Yes.

ED: Walker Lundy hated him. Lundy was the editor.

MO: Well, I got the impression that Lundy and then Keith Moyer, both, didn't like me. One of the younger reporters who was in favor told me that Moyer didn't like me because, every once in a while, I'd eat corn nuts in the newsroom. The crunching and stuff with those crunchy corn nuts he didn't like or something. That just seemed to sum up the whole regime. You know, it didn't really matter. I was stylistically improper or something. I don't know. It was really a hard time. There were rumors of a hit list of ten or twelve veterans they wanted to get rid of.

ED: Max Brantley, by the way, in my interview, confirms some of that. He told me the names of people that Lundy wanted fired. Lundy gave him a list of people he wanted fired and kept pressing him to fire people up until the day Lundy was fired himself. Max, I think, thought that had Lundy not been fired, he would have been fired in short order because of his refusal to fire veteran reporters. But I don't remember your name being on the list. It could have been since you were a veteran reporter.

MO: I just did not like the whole corporate culture. Everybody who seemed to come in had an agenda to go to some bigger paper, especially those, I guess, who had not grown up in Arkansas, grown up with the paper. This is where we wanted to be,

and we resented that the goal was to get to Washington to work with *USA Today* or someplace else. What was really bad, I guess, for the paper was that it was sort of an “us against them” while we were trying to put out a paper.

ED: You had the old timers and then you had what we called, I guess, “Gannett-oids” who came in . . .

MO: Right. Right.

ED: Including some younger ones who were not bad. Some young people came in that they hired.

MO: I remember one. Who was that woman from Grosse Pointe that we all were amused about, but who became the darling of the editors? And she’d write these features . . .

ED: Phoebe Wall?.

MO: I remember you couldn’t help but like Phoebe just because she was just so out there. She was the darling of the editors. I’d be covering my City Hall stuff, trying to write about zoning issues and stuff. I go out to the Capitol, and it was right when Bill McCuen [the Arkansas secretary of state] was doing some of his wildest stuff. He had that motorcycle movie [*Stone Cold*] made, using the Capitol as the replacement for the [Alabama State Capitol], or was it the U.S. government? Anyway, the Capitol’s in the movie. It gets blown up, and there are motorcycle guys running up and down the Capitol steps. I got to cover the premiere, and I wrote a story that everybody thought was pretty funny. Phoebe came up to me after the story appeared and asked me if I really wrote it. It was just so funny because that kind of summed up that whole Gannett thing, you

know? They pigeonholed us a certain way, and the fact you could actually write an amusing story about something kind of blew their minds.

ED: The reason they loved Phoebe was that she would write five-word leads.

MO: Yes, those five-word leads. That was the deal.

ED: Just a little short phrase, which, of course, anybody could do, but Lundy loved that, and so did Keith Moyer. They thought that was great writing.

MO: Yes, I remember that short-lead thing. Max got around that once by letting in a five-word lead that was really a partial sentence, and then it went into the rest of it. It wasn't even good English, but it served the function of getting the five-word lead. We were laughing about that. That was just sort of a miserable situation. They had no idea what an institution the *Gazette* was, and there should have been a way to modernize the *Gazette* without losing that institutional quality. Looking back on it, we veterans were too high brow in doing things the way things had been done for twenty years, and the paper could have been modernized and more aggressive with investigative reporting instead of being a newspaper of record, things like that. But, boy, that was a rough period. The worst thing that happened on a daily story basis — it was another McCuen story — was when he headed out on that West Coast tour with those two young women on his staff.

ED: Rhonda and Candy.

MO: Rhonda and Candy. I couldn't get anything out of McCuen's staff about what the hell was going on. McCuen, the secretary of state had disappeared, and the staff won't say where he is. Maybe there was some election contest, or there was some business to be taken care of, and no one knew where McCuen was. So I wrote a story, and Moyer wouldn't run it because we did not have any kind of real

response from McCuen. Of course, it was on the front page of the *Democrat* the next day, and that sucked. The woman who wrote that, I guess — what's her name? She eventually came over and worked for us. A young woman. Her name was Max.

ED: Max Parker.

MO: Parker. She had the good details that I didn't have. Somehow, she tracked down McCuen to the El Rancho in Gallup, New Mexico, and found out that he stayed in the Ronald Reagan suite. It's in Gallup, and they used to make old Westerns out there, so they had different rooms. I've since visited it, since I live in New Mexico, and they have the rooms named — there's the John Wayne room and the Ronald Reagan room and Henry Fonda. I finally visited it, and I got a postcard there, and I sent it to McCuen. I finally got to see the El Rancho, and I actually saw the Ronald Reagan suite and all this stuff and sent it to him. He sent me back a note that said something like — it was sort of good natured — but he said he was glad I wasn't in Arkansas anymore. Those people from Gannett thought they were all such geniuses because they'd made money in non-competitive markets, and I just don't think they knew what the hell to do in Arkansas. Maybe there was not a whole lot to do, but they didn't do very well.

ED: Well, I gathered it really was a new experience for them because in every other community where they had a paper, there was no competition. It was a monopoly each place, and why they bought the *Gazette*, I don't know, looking back. Why did they buy the *Gazette*?

MO: Was it sort of a vanity thing to get this old institution and show that they weren't just cheap and lightweight or something?

ED: I think it might have been Alan Neuharth. Maybe Hugh Patterson did a job on him. The *Gazette* did have a great reputation. It won two Pulitzer Prizes in 1957, and it had a reputation as one of the two or three great Southern newspapers. He probably looked at it and said, “Well, here’s this little pipsqueak of a publisher on the other side, and with our great resources, we can go in there and squash him. And Gannett will own the *Arkansas Gazette*.” I guess that’s how he did it. Then, of course, Neuharth left, and after about two years he was no longer CEO [Chief Executive Officer] of Gannett. He later told somebody that had he remained as head of Gannett, he would have never sold the *Gazette*. I don’t know whether that’s true or not, but that’s what he says.

MO: I never heard that. That’s interesting.

ED: I think he told Max that, or somebody . . .

MO: Maybe the newspaper war had been lost when we lost the predatory-pricing lawsuit, but who knows?

ED: Anybody else of the Gannett or the old *Gazette* group that you have any particular fond recollections about or any colorful characters?

MO: The thing I remember about the *Gazette* when I got over there, you know, late 1970s and early 1980s, was how good the copy desk was. Harvey — what was his last name? The guy from New York?

ED: Harvey Cooper.

MO: Harvey Cooper. All these guys over there were these old pros.

ED: Were John Fleming and Ray Kornegay still there then?

MO: I don’t remember those names.

ED: Those were two old guys who were on the copy desk.

MO: They were there all night and seemed to really know what they were doing. The copy desk was really the rock of the newspaper. They were the back up and the guys in control, and they really knew what they were doing. By the end, it sort of flipped around, where you put people on the copy desk who were much younger, and it was sort of the opposite. Instead having the most experienced and best guys over there, it was a whole different sort of quality. Maybe newspapers just don't do that anymore. I mean, the hours are terrible, and you never get out from behind a desk. Not a lot of people want to do it, but for some reason, in that era, you had all these brilliant guys over there. Any other kinds of characters or anything? Max, in his own way, was a character. When I was doing police beat and he was probably assistant city editor. Max, and I, and Ruth, after we got off work at about 11:00, drove to Sims Barbecue because we wanted some barbecue. For some reason, when we got there, it looked like it was closed. We sent Ruth to the door, and the guy came to the door with a semi-automatic weapon in his hand. Ruth, on her feet, made up a story about us being from out-of-town, and we had to have some Sims Barbecue. And he sold us a slab of ribs, and we went home happy.

ED: Max, of course, was a legendary eater, a gourmand.

MO: What else?

ED: Max, I guess, is just kind of a dominant figure wherever he is, partly because of his size and appearance and voice.

MO: Well, looking back on it, since he played a prominent role in the newsroom and the Gannett thing, he was probably in a really tough position. He was an editor, and then he was a columnist, and he really loved the *Gazette* and hated the

Democrat, but he was sort of in between us on the staff and the higher-ups at Gannett. He was in a funny position at that point.

ED: He was a central figure, I think, in all of it because he held the paper together because everyone, including Gannett guys, had a lot of respect for Max. He worked hard. He wrote a lot. He knew the community. He was a good editor because he knew what had to be done. He was extremely competitive and wanted to beat the crap out of the *Democrat* every day, so the Gannett people were impressed by Max. They couldn't put out the paper, and he could. Yet he kind of was the protector, I think, of the staff because had it not been for Max, probably ten or twelve, probably nearly the whole staff, would have been fired. It really would have been a bloody spectacle.

MO: Wayne was a character.

ED: Wayne Jordan, a police reporter and, occasionally, investigative reporter.

MO: He was a raconteur when you were around there late at night.

ED: We had a good interview, by the way, with Wayne. It was a good, long interview.

MO: Right. Just a little flashback since I've been out here. It's funny just having grown up in Arkansas with Clinton as governor most of my adult life. Then he's president, and he just loves to come to New Mexico. While he was president, he must have come here eight or nine times. He and Hillary [Rodham Clinton] came a couple of times. It was like they couldn't stay away. They just loved New Mexico. It's one western state that's sort of a toss-up state. It's only got five electoral votes, but it's one the Democrats can win, so maybe that's why they message it. But he liked to come out here. It was right after the Monica Lewinsky thing broke. It was his first trip out of Washington, and he comes out

to do this tour of Los Alamos. They've got this new super computer going up there. It's built to simulate nuclear explosions, as I recall, but they can do all kinds of other stuff. From the size of them, they look like computers from the old 1950s black and white shows. They're so big, but I guess that makes them this much more powerful. So I'm covering for the *New Mexican*, and we go up there. They're showing him what this thing can do, and they're trying to explain that it can simulate all these accidents that can occur around nuclear weapons. They're showing him this little visual screen, and they flip up this front page from the *Arkansas Gazette* from sometime around 1981, the time someone dropped a wrench down the missile silo and an explosion blew the warhead about two football-field lengths across some cow pasture. It was just weird to see the *Arkansas Gazette* flipped up there. It was funny. Every time I covered him, I tried to get close enough to go say hello and introduce myself. He even did this kind of town hall thing between Santa Fe and Albuquerque, and it was under this tent. It was set up with bales of hay, and regular people got to ask him questions. It was really small, and I was ten feet from him. I was just going to go up and say, "Hello." The secret service guys let all the regular people go up and talk, but if you had a notebook, you couldn't get close to him, so I never got to say, "Hi." I remember my co-workers, John Reed and Bob Wells. I think they were two of the people who were made the most miserable by the whole thing and just bailed out.

ED: As kind of a final thing, let's talk a little bit about the *Gazette* in a general way. You have worked now for four daily newspapers, the *Democrat*, the *Gazette*, the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, the *Albuquerque Journal*, and you've known reporters

from many other newspapers. Was there something different about the *Gazette* as a newspaper, as an employer?

MO: There was something about the *Gazette* that I've never felt in any of the other places. Maybe it's just the history of it, and maybe it was just a particular kind of group feeling, or whatever you want to call it, that it was important for the *Gazette* to be there in Arkansas and to do what it did. I don't know. That's important at any newspaper, but somehow we just felt like we were a particularly special institution in that state. That if we didn't do things, like certain kinds of news stories, they wouldn't get told. I'm not sure if, anywhere else I've been, I've felt that way, that without that newspaper, things would be different. I still run into people. Tipper Gore [wife of Al Gore, who was vice-president in Bill Clinton's presidential administration] came to Santa Fe. They had this bogus press availability where three TV reporters got to go in for ten minutes, and then three print reporters got to go in. Us three print reporters were waiting outside the door to go. We each were going to get to ask Tipper one question. This woman was there. Her son or daughter worked for Gore in Washington on the vice president's staff, and it turns out that she's a native of Arkansas. Her mother was there, and they were going to get to go say "Hi" to Tipper just because of this connection. The mother's from DeQueen, and we started talking. She heard I was with the *Gazette*, and she just went on for ten minutes about the Arkansas *Gazette* and just how sad she was it was not there anymore and what a loss it was and things have never been the same. This is probably about a seventy-year-old woman, and I just don't think you'd hear that about a lot of newspapers. I cried the day we closed. My son was at daycare, which was the Montessori School at

21st and Main, in an old house there, and there was another parent who came up to me and said he wanted to thank us for what we'd done over the years. That was when I lost it. I didn't do it any other time, this guy coming up and just saying how much he appreciated what we meant to the state and the city and all that. I just lost it right there. I just don't think I would feel the same about any place else I've worked. I think they've all been good papers in their ways. They had positives about them, and they all do good stuff, but there was a special institution in Arkansas. The old gray *Gazette*. I grew up thinking that was the way a newspaper was supposed to look and read and still do, I guess.

ED: Well, I do, too. A few papers have some resemblance of the *Gazette*, and I say, "Okay. This is a real newspaper. This is what a newspaper is supposed to look like and feel like."

MO: It's just different. That newspaper war was just so intense, too. I mean, it's hard to get people to understand. There's a guy who works at our paper now, Mike Stewart, who worked at the *Democrat*. I don't think the photographers quite felt the same way about it as the reporters did. Talking to Stewart, he'll ask me about different *Gazette* photographers he was friends with, and I'm kind of surprised, you know, because we were not keeping company with the *Democrat* reporters back then.

ED: Okay. Mark, this has been good. Thanks. You don't have any last remarks?

MO: No. I guess that's about it.

ED: Okay.

[End of Interview]