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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with

Leslie Newell Peacock
Little Rock, Arkansas
6 June 2005

Interviewer: Mel White

Mel White: Okay, hello everyone. This is Mel White. I'm doing an interview for the [Pryor] Center for [Arkansas] Oral and Visual History about the history of the *Arkansas Democrat* newspaper. And I'm talking today to Leslie Peacock, Leslie Newell Peacock. This is June 6, 2005. Leslie, I need to know if you understand that this is an interview that will be used by the [Pryor] Center for [Arkansas] Oral and Visual History, and that you'll be part of the archives at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, and will also be on the Internet so the public can see it. Do you understand all that?

Leslie Newell Peacock: Yes, I do.

MW: Excellent, excellent. Leslie and I worked together back in the 1970s at the *Democrat*, so we have some of the same memories—what's left in our elderly brains.

LP: I remember that you wrote a TV column saying, "There's nothing good on tonight, so—but I read this great book, and you ought to read it, too." [Laughter]

MW: Well, bringing the subject back to Leslie Peacock—they want us to talk first about your life and your family and how you entered this world and made your way.

LP: Really?

MW: Sort of a regular *Pilgrim's Progress* here, so let's start . . .

LP: Do I have to give the year I was born?

MW: Yes.

LP: Yes. Oh, boy!

MW: I'm just following these rules as they were given to me.

LP: Okay, I'm going to do it real fast. I was born in 1952.

MW: A spring chicken.

LP: In Little Rock.

MW: And your parents' names were?

LP: Alice and Robert Newell.

MW: What was your mother's maiden name?

LP: Henry.

MW: Okay.

LP: I went to public school, and then I went to college.

MW: And that public school would be what?

LP: I went to—well, I graduated from Hall High—Forest Park, Pulaski Heights, Hall High. [I] can't imagine that anybody would find any of this interesting. Then I went to Bennington College in Bennington, Vermont, where I got a degree in art. So I came home . . .

MW: Art who? No, I'm just kidding.

LP: So I came home, then I went to California for a while, then I broke up with that boyfriend, and I came home again. [I] went to New York for a while, broke up with that same boyfriend all over again, and came back to Arkansas. I didn't have

any idea of how to get a job, so my mother said, “Well, why don’t you take a job at the paper?”

MW: This would have been what year, I wonder?

LP: 1976. [Laughs] And that would be almost thirty years ago. I went to the *Gazette*, and they wouldn’t hire me, obviously, because I was a graduate with a degree in art. And they didn’t really hire a lot of women, I think. So I went to the *Democrat*, and Jerry McConnell was the editor.

MW: Managing editor.

LP: Managing editor, that’s right. He looked at my résumé, and he called my references, one of which was my graphic arts teacher at Bennington, Richard Haas. Jerry said, “He told me, ‘I don’t know anything about how she’ll be as a journalist, but she did pretty well at etching.’” And on the basis of that . . .

MW: Etching?

LP: Etching, yes.

MW: That would be incising pictures into what?

LP: Metal.

MW: Into metal? Oh.

LP: He was my graphics teacher.

MW: So you were hired in . . .

LP: I was hired in 1976.

MW: I thought you were there when I was there at first, but that’s . . .

LP: No, you weren't there when I got there. [Editor's Note: Upon review of interview, Ms. Peacock thinks that Mel White may have been at the *Democrat* at this time.]

MW: And your position was?

LP: I worked on the copy desk, and Patsy McKown was—whatever you called a person who was in charge of the copy desk.

MW: Slot man.

LP: The slot man. That's right. She was in the slot. Patti Cox was also on the copy desk. And the people I remember working there were—A. L. May was there, Rod Lorenzen, you, Patrick—Ralph Patrick.

MW: Ralph Patrick was the city . . .

LP: He became city editor. I don't know what he was doing when I was there because he was kind of moved over, so I guess he must have changed jobs to become city editor. Who was the guy who was bald and his wife was named Amanda?

MW: Bill and Amanda Husted.

LP: Bill and Amanda Husted. Amanda was the wire editor, which they called “telegraph editor” at the *Gazette*, but at the *Democrat* it was wire editor.

MW: This was after the Hussmans had bought the paper.

LP: It was right after, I think. Pretty much. I mean, I don't remember when they took over, but we were still an afternoon paper.

MW: Yes.

LP: Yes. You had to get there at 2:00 in the morning on Mondays, if you were the wire editor, and un-jam the [paper] AP [Associated Press] machine and ask them

to resend every bit of it all over again because no one came in on Sundays. [The] Sunday paper was put out Saturday night.

MW: Late Saturday night.

LP: Right, so that was a huge mess.

MW: So sometimes you were the wire editor on Monday morning?

LP: Yes, I was the wire editor—I was the assistant wire editor after some period of time, after I learned what I was doing.

MW: So just to set the big picture . . .

LP: And Mara [Leveritt] . . .

MW: Was she on the copy desk?

LP: No. You know, I think she may have just moved into reporting. She was covering the schools.

MW: So this would be Margaret Arnold.

LP: Margaret Arnold.

MW: Now, Mara Leveritt.

LP: Right.

MW: By this time, Walter Hussman Jr. had bought the *Democrat*.

LP: Right. Bob McCord . . .

MW: Bob McCord was the executive editor.

LP: . . .was the executive editor. Jerry McConnell was the managing editor, and the city desk . . .

MW: Ralph Patrick. Was Larry Gordon still there?

LP: Yes, Larry Gordon was there, and his bride-to-be.

MW: Carol.

LP: Carol was there. And David Terrell was there.

MW: Yes.

LP: Funny how those three names came together like that.

MW: Who was that woman that David dated for awhile? Connie Hoxie. Was she there?

LP: Yes. What woman did you say earlier? I was thinking of Connie when you said . . .

MW: Oh, I asked about Sheila Daniel. Remember Sheila?

LP: Yes, right, but just now—didn't you just say a woman's name? How much wine have *you* had? I've only had a sip.

MW: I've had two sips.

LP: Okay, Larry Gordon and Connie Hoxie got married, right?

MW: No, not—okay, this is going to be a soap opera here.

LP: Right. It was thirty years ago. What do they want? What do they expect?

[Laughter]

MW: Larry Gordon was married to Carol Gordon, but then Carol—three people from the *Democrat* went to the *Chicago Tribune*.

LP: Okay. I did not know Carol Gordon.

MW: Sheila Daniel, Carol Gordon, and, I think, Mike, who was the slot man before Patsy, because that's when I was there.

LP: Right.

MW: Mike Kirkendall, I think was his name.

LP: They were all gone. David Terrell was dating Connie Hoxie.

MW: Right.

LP: He dumped her, and to get him back, she married Larry Gordon.

MW: I had forgotten that.

LP: It was a *disaster*. Everybody knew why she was doing it.

MW: Larry had some substance problems, I believe.

LP: So did she.

MW: And . . .

LP: And they're both expired.

MW: They're deceased?

LP: That's right.

MW: I remember reading—picking up the paper—probably the *Gazette*, I would imagine—some years later, and seeing a little bitty deal on page 14B or something that said that someone had been found dead, and it was Larry Gordon, who had been the night manager at a Roadrunner service station. And I believe, that he, as they say, must have drunk himself to death.

LP: Right.

MW: And Connie Hoxie died in Austin, Texas, some years later.

LP: Right. She went to law school. [Editor's Note: Connie Hoxie earned a doctoral degree in journalism.]

MW: Well, moving on to cheerier topics . . . [Laughs]

LP: Yes. Yes.

MW: Let's talk about—and since this is part of history and posterity and all that, let's talk about—again, before we get into specifics, let's talk generally. The news was on the second floor of the building at . . .

LP: It was on the second floor of the building that's on Fifth [Street], right across the street from what was then Stephens, [Inc. headquarters].

MW: Scott—Capitol and Scott?

LP: Right. Capitol and Scott. And what I remember about that place was how loud it was when you had never been there, and how you totally forgot that once you've worked there, with the AP machines just banging away constantly. There were four machines echoing inside their boxes [tall wooden cases], and there were people screaming, and I just—the noise was deafening. And there were no ashtrays. You put your cigarettes out on the floor with your shoe. Ashtrays just weren't used. You know, I actually remember quite a bit from back then.

MW: That's what we're here for.

LP: It had the first computer system [for a newspaper] didn't it? It had something called DEC computers, and they had a scanner. It was pretty old-fashioned.

MW: It was new-fashioned for then.

LP: They still spiked your hard copy from the AP, and you edited on paper, and you handed it to Patsy, and she would okay or rewrite your headline. Then you would take it to the computer and find it [in the computer queue] because the AP was also running into the computer, but for some reason, you didn't edit it initially on the computer.

MW: I think it may have been because there weren't enough computers to go around.

LP: Well, I don't know what you would do with it, otherwise, because you didn't yell, "Copy!" and hand it [to] someone. No one was typesetting it. Or maybe it was because you had to share, and then you would get your turn at the computer, and then you would do your stories.

MW: See, in those days—that's when I was being a reporter or a columnist or something, and we all had identical IBM Selectrics [electric typewriters]. We would write our stories on these Selectrics, and then we would feed these . . .

LP: Feed them into the scanner.

MW: . . . into the scanner, which was programmed to recognize the specific type. Then they would be on the computer for the copy desk, or whoever, to mess with.

LP: That's right. How did we then—did we get a hard copy from you guys to write headlines on your story?

MW: There's a long . . .

LP: I don't know how we would have found it.

MW: Transcriber, please note there's a long silence here where we try to remember what's going on. [Laughter] Okay, the computer . . .

LP: There were four computer terminals for the copy desk.

MW: Yes, and we'd go over and . . .

LP: And we had about six employees at a time.

MW: Yes. There was a U-shaped desk, a horseshoe-shaped desk that was maybe—I don't know, fifteen or twenty feet long. And the slot man—as they say, "slot person"—sat in the middle of this U and passed out the stories to the copy editors who were running around the desk

LP: Around the desk with spikes.

MW: Right.

LP: Sharp, tall spikes for the copy feed.

MW: When we would finish, you'd go over to the computer, and you could type your own headline in on the computer.

LP: Yes, and you had to type in the commands for it, too.

MW: Yes, yes.

LP: You had to type in bold-face, and you had to type in italics—you had to do all the commands manually. But it could count the headline for you.

MW: Yes, and you could cheat a little bit.

LP: Right, you could cheat a little bit.

MW: You could tell it to do, like 103—squeeze 3%, or whatever.

LP: Yes, right. God, yes.

MW: And when it came out, the slot person would take a look at it and say, “Eh-eh, no.”

LP: [Laughter] You never worked on the copy desk, though, did you?

MW: Oh, yes, before you were there.

LP: Oh, you did? Oh, my God.

MW: Oh, yes.

LP: I always just thought you were one of the famous writers.

MW: Yes, right. Talk about—one of the nice things about the *Democrat* was that it gave chances—Jerry McConnell gave chances to folks like me and you, who had no experience and were able to learn on the job.

LP: That's right.

MW: What was that like for you?

LP: That's right, that's right, and there was great camaraderie at the *Democrat* because it was so dreadful getting up so early in the morning to get there, so everyone got along pretty well. And Patsy McKown was really an excellent editor and headline writer. She was a really great teacher.

MW: She was funny; she was very sarcastic.

LP: Very sarcastic.

MW: And wouldn't mind telling you if you made a mistake, but she did it in a kind of funny, elbow-in-the-ribs way.

LP: Right, well, she could piss you off, but once you got into her favor, she would be nice to you in that sarcastic kind of way. Right. And the photographer—oh, God, I wish I could remember his name. He was sort of an oddball, too—tall, dark, quiet, and sarcastic, with a kind of an elegant name that I can't remember.

MW: There was—well, there was more than one. A youngish guy?

LP: No. He had dark hair and he was tall.

MW: There was a guy named Lee Crum.

LP: No, it wasn't Lee.

MW: And there was a guy named Robert Ike Thomas.

LP: That's who it was, Robert Ike Thomas.

MW: Yes, I did not remember him at all.

LP: Right, he was good. And the—you know, they let everyone learn how to do it. I didn't know one thing, and they hired me anyway. And you learned a lot, and

because it was kind of grueling—I would get up, come in, and find my clothes were on backwards or inside-out because I would dress by the light of a little [stove] fire, so, you know, it was early in the morning.

MW: [Laughter]

LP: I almost got stopped, going to work, by a cop. He said, “What are you doing out [at] this time?”

MW: Really? [Laughs]

LP: “I’m going to work.” [Laughs]

MW: I never had to go in that early. The earliest I ever had to go in was probably 5:30 [a.m.].

LP: Yes, you had the 5:30 shift.

MW: And some people came in at 6:30.

LP: Right, right.

MW: I think there were people coming in later, but they had to stay until 3:00 [p.m.] or 4:00, whereas if you went in at 6:30, you went home about 2:30.

LP: That’s right, that’s right. And you could start drinking then.

MW: Yes.

LP: [Laughter] Yes, and you would fight over the schedules and who got weekends off and—because, you know, everybody would try to switch around. Since I was only twenty-two or twenty-three, I guess—whatever I was—twenty-four. You know. I still hadn’t quite gotten used to the idea that work came first. I thought it was sort of cheating me in my life. And you had parties to go to. All your friends were going to these normal events, and you’d be working on Saturday night when

everyone's friends were getting married and having parties—and there you'd be on Christmas and Thanksgiving, working on the copy desk.

MW: So you started off as one of the rim people—on the rim, as they say.

LP: Right, I was on the rim.

MW: And eventually they made you—you had to be the . . .

LP: I was assistant—I did the slot. I did it, I worked as a slot man, and I worked in the—I did assistant wire. Yes.

MW: Which were the worst hours of all.

LP: Which were the worst, because you had to be there at 2:00 on Monday morning so you could tell the AP to resend everything and get everything that was jammed from the computers. [You had to] decide what should go there—make your decisions on what was real [news], and you would make the briefs, cutting the international briefs to size.

MW: I didn't ever do that.

LP: And the thought today, that I was twenty-four years old and I was deciding what people should read about—what was happening in the Soviet Union or—it's just mind-boggling.

MW: Well, that was the down-side of the *Democrat*, which was a lot of us got a chance to be in a newspaper and learn, but we didn't have the institutional memory that the *Gazette* had, and the experience.

LP: That's right. There were no old, wise-heads around, really.

MW: Obviously, Jerry was an older wise-head and Bob McCord was an older wise-head.

LP: Yes, but they weren't . . .

MW: They weren't up there in the pits with us.

LP: They weren't involved, really. They had other stuff to do.

MW: Yes, McCord was running the editorial pages and all that.

LP: Yes, right. I remember Bob Sallee was there and Scudder—James Scudder.

MW: James Scudder, right. He was a good writer.

LP: He was very colorful. He covered the trial of Porter Rodgers.

MW: Oh, the Searcy doctor who . . .

LP: Yes. He killed his wife because he was having an affair?

MW: Do we need to say [that he] “allegedly” killed his wife, or was he actually convicted?

LP: I think he was, and his famous quote—Scudder—I think that really sold the paper. Scudder could report on what had happened in the courtroom, it would get in the paper, and people could read it in the afternoon.

MW: The same day.

LP: Right. Because it was such an unbelievable trial. One of his things he said [or it may have been hearsay] on the stand—Dr. Rodgers [said], “I was hungry for Peggy Hale.” You know, I can't even remember anything, but I can remember that, “I was always hungry for Peggy Hale.” His own lawyer, according to Scudder, said that, really, Dr. Rodgers was out of it, that his brain was rattling in his head like a dried walnut. [Laughter] Very colorful. Scudder also did the reporting on, I guess, the guy who killed everybody in Dover.

MW: Gene . . .

LP: Simmons.

MW: Simmons. Yes.

MW: Simmons. Gene Simmons, right. [Editor's note: Ronald Gene Simmons murdered fourteen members of his family and two non-relatives in Russellville, Arkansas, in December of 1987. He was executed in 1990.] Yes. And described him in this really weird—talked about how his hands were white and fat and pudgy. I mean, that's just—he just described the strangest stuff.

MW: Did you edit his things? Is that why you remember them so well, or did you just read them?

LP: I remember them so well because my boyfriend at the time was so wrapped up in the court, and he would—he was always reciting these stories. After we read them, he would also bring them up [to] places and recite them.

MW: There were some colorful trials in those days.

LP: Yes. Yes. In fact, I think that trial was before I went to the *Democrat*. I just remember it from reading it. I was not actually working on it. I was not covering the Porter Rodgers trial.

MW: Because I remember Porter Rodgers was—see I covered for the federal courts for a while, which was a job that I did. I was the federal court reporter for the *Democrat* for a while. And I remember Porter Rodgers was sentenced to the federal hospital in Springfield, Missouri . . .

LP: Oh, yes.

MW: . . . because he was a white-collar criminal, I suppose.

LP: Right. So, I don't think anyone dared edit Scudder's copy. And no one dared edit Al May's copy, but I did once, and he called me at home to let me have it.

MW: Really?

LP: Yes.

MW: I don't remember Al May. What did he write about?

LP: He was the Capitol reporter.

MW: Oh, really?

LP: Yes, then he went to North Carolina or someplace. But if we worked in the slot, and on the rim, we ran up and down the circular staircase all day long to the people who worked in the composing room upstairs and helped them get the paper out.

MW: Really?

LP: Yes, up and down all day long, and told them where to cut stories.

MW: Now this was right—this was the era when—this was right at the cusp of changing over from . . .

LP: Linotype.

MW: Right—to all computer-set type.

LP: Right, right

MW: Which put a lot of people out of work in the composing room, and they did not like it. They could have done it much . . .

LP: Right, and they had tried to unionize, too, had they not—and lost?

MW: I don't remember that exactly, but there was much resentment up on the third floor, where the composing room people were [upset?] over this new computerization which was taking away their jobs.

LP: That's right. I'm sure.

MW: And there was never—even before that, the relationship between the copy desk and the printers was not that happy because you were always telling them what to do, making them do things over again and making them work.

LP: But I got along with a lot of them great.

MW: You did?

LP: Yes.

MW: Do you know why?

LP: I don't know, I just kidded around with them. I mean, I enjoyed working with them. You know, when you got to go up there, you were just standing around watching them put the page together. You weren't slugging away at trying to write a headline.

MW: But at some point, the story would be two inches too long, or whatever, and you'd have to tell them . . .

LP: Right, and if you were Ralph Patrick, you'd be twenty feet away, and you'd say, "Cut it right there."

MW: Oh, really? [Laughter]

LP: He didn't even look. And Eric Harrison was on the copy desk—he became fixated on—do you remember those fillers that came over from the AP [that]

would just be one sentence, and you would stick them in at the bottom of a column to make things even up?

MW: Okay.

LP: One filler said, “Some tigers are very hungry.” That doesn’t sound right. It had to do with hungry tigers. And once he saw it, he became fixated because it was so absurd, and he put it in the paper every chance he got . . .

MW: [Laughter]

LP: . . . until, I think, Patsy, made him stop it. But you would find it almost every day. “Some tigers are very hungry.”

MW: Ralph Patrick went on [to] the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.

LP: He started *The Arkansan*, and came back . . .

MW: Oh, that’s right, he went there.

LP: Remember? He started *The Arkansan*, lost all his money, and came back to the *Democrat*. [Editor’s Note: Ms. Peacock thinks that Mr. Patrick moved to Atlanta after the magazine he started, *The Arkansan*, folded.]

MW: Oh, okay, I forgot that.

LP: And that’s when he—I believe this is right—that’s when he changed desks, and I don’t know what his job was, but I do remember that I was working on the wire desk and his desk was next to mine. I liked him. He was very funny.

MW: He was a good guy. And I think that those people had to be—and by “those people” I mean the higher-ups—they had to be tolerant of us beginners—the [people in their] twenties and early-twenties because, frankly, I don’t know what you got paid, but they paid nothing.

LP: Oh, I know what I got paid. I got paid something like—well, I think the highest I ever got paid there was \$12,000, and my Christmas bonus one year was \$12.

[Laughter] It was \$12.50.

MW: But you could probably buy a bottle of—Chivas Regal was \$12 in those days, you know?

LP: Yes! Right, right. [Laughter]

MW: I eventually got mine up to \$149.50 a week. I don't know what that was per year, but it was only about \$8,000 or \$9,000, I guess.

LP: Oh, really? Maybe that \$12,000 is exaggerated in my mind. Maybe it was only \$8,000.

MW: Or maybe I was the victim of reverse discrimination.

LP: I got hired at the *Gazette* for sixteen [\$16,000], so—I can't remember, it's all so long ago. I had two stints of the *Democrat*.

MW: Oh, I didn't know that. Let's go back then. You went there in 1976?

LP: Yes

MW: How long were you there the first time?

LP: Until 1980, I think, or 1979.

MW: Oh, gosh.

LP: And I quit, and then I just couldn't ever find another job I liked. I was just really sick of the hours, and, you know—immature—just—for other reasons. After a couple of years of that, I suppose—maybe a year—I called Lyndon Finney [who was probably the assistant managing editor] and said, “Lyndon, can I come back to work?” He said, “Yes.”

MW: At the *Democrat*?

LP: Yes. I called him from Buster's [restaurant] and said, "Can I come back to work?" He said "Sure, come on in tomorrow."

MW: Oh, really?

LP: Yes.

MW: Did you work on the *Gazette* in-between?

LP: I didn't do *anything* in between.

MW: Hey, nice work if you can get it.

LP: I just was like a lost soul. I was a secretary for a bit to earn some money, but I just didn't know what to do, so I went back to the *Democrat*.

MW: What year was that?

LP: That would have been 1980—I worked for [Governor Bill] Clinton's [first administration] in-between for a little bit, 1981 or 1982—I think this is right. This is all so fuzzy, I can't remember, it's all in there somewhere. But by the time I went back, John Robert Starr was managing editor. When I left, McConnell was managing editor. When I went back, Starr was managing editor.

MW: So you did have some contact with Starr?

LP: Yes, did I ever. The rim was gone and the copy desk was then in the middle of the room. And Greg Adams was in the—was the slot man, the news editor—I don't know. We were still dropping our cigarettes on the floor, but almost everybody had a computer. There was no more paper.

MW: And what was Lyndon Finney? You said when you called Lyndon Finney—what was he in those days?

LP: [The] first time I was there, I don't know what he was, but he was the guy—you know, on several occasions the computer system went totally down.

MW: Yes, often.

LP: Once, the only way you could get a newspaper out was to reprint the same paper. Just send it out again, so the advertisers could—so they could say, “Well, we ran your ad.” But it was the same paper that had run the day before.

MW: Oh, God! [Laughs]

LP: And another time we actually tried to set type and make the scanner work, and it was just a total disaster. I mean, if one of those copies is around today, you could probably take to Book Guys and get a million bucks for it. It was just a complete disaster. Type this big, and type that big [Ms. Peacock makes gestures to indicate big and small sizes], stories beginning and ending—I mean, you might as well have written it out by hand. I remember thinking at [the] time it was like working for the “Prowling Panther,” which was the ninth grade column I wrote at Pulaski Heights Junior High School.

MW: We basically skipped that part of your career.

LP: Oh, yes, right. [The name of the Pulaski Heights Junior High School newspaper] was the *Tip Top Times*.

MW: Pulaski Heights *Junior High*?

LP: Yes.

MW: And you were actually already a columnist in those days.

LP: I actually had a writing block, so I drew my column. I drew little faces of who was together and illustrated it.

MW: Who was dating whom? It was a gossip column?

LP: Yes. The “Prowling Panther.”

MW: Oh, you prowled around and saw things?

LP: Yes, [I] let people know who hooked up with whom.

MW: Oh, I didn’t think [we] said “hooked-up” in those days.

LP: No. We didn’t say, “dating,” which is what they say now.

MW: “Going with?”

LP: “Going with.” Right. And not “going out with,” either.

[End Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 1]

MW: Okay, this is side two of the interview with Leslie Peacock. June 6, 2005, over and out, Roger Wilco, blah-blah-blah.

LP: Also at the *Democrat*, there was a tension among the staff for not agreeing with the editorial views of the paper. At least there was on the rim. And there was an editorialist whose name I can’t remember, who once wrote a column. He said, “I’ve never read this book, but I know it’s trash.”

MW: That wouldn’t have been David Hawkins, would it?

LP: That’s who it was.

MW: Yes, I had some run-ins with David Hawkins, too.

LP: He was a self-righteous, holier-than-thou kind of guy, but, you know, it was pornographic, and the artist was . . .

MW: The editorial cartoonist?

LP: Yes.

MW: The older guy, Jon Kennedy?

LP: Yes, Jon Kennedy.

MW: Yes. There were picture policies in those days, and actually today could be considered [].

LP: Yes, that's right. You know Patsy McKown really was mad at me during [my initial job] interview, and she never told me why, but I think what I must have told her was that my parents quit taking the *Democrat* when the 1957 Little Rock Central High School Integration Crisis was going on. It was a segregationist paper. It was embarrassing to know that and to be part of that paper for that reason, which is the reason why I got fired by Starr.

MW: Okay, your second time around . . .

LP: Right, second time around . . .

MW: Wasn't lovelier the second time around.

LP: With Greg Adams, and more computerized—and John Robert Starr was in charge and he was so critical—hyper-critical of everybody. He would put a note on the wall called “Random Thoughts.” And in “Random Thoughts” he just trashed everything he had read in the paper—who did what wrong. That's just the kind of personality he had. He was just not a friendly editor. All he would tell you is how bad you got it. He called us in—he called the copy desk in for some meeting at some point, and I don't why. Maybe he didn't think we were editing copy well enough, or choosing our stories well enough, or that our headlines reflected what he wanted to reflect. But he went on and on about how the paper had put Steve Clark [former attorney general of Arkansas] in office, and he was proud of that.

And the paper would continue to do things like put people in office because of what we knew and how we reported. So he was not my favorite person. He also used the term “wetback” [in a talk] to the copy desk, and there was a Hispanic woman [on the rim] whose parents actually had slipped into the United States. So I was a—you know, I worked there, I had a great time there, and I really liked the people that I worked with, but I never was proud. When I worked at the *Gazette* I was so proud to work there because I had always wanted to work there. I was really proud to be associated with it—even with Gannett—just because I thought it was a real paper.

MW: Yes, let’s talk about that a little bit. There was certainly—when I was there, there was always this sense, I think, that we all knew we were working for the red-headed stepchild of the Little Rock newspaper [business], and the *Gazette* was this institution with this amazing history, and we . . .

LP: It was progressive, and the *Democrat* was just—editorial stands were unbelievable.

MW: But even on sort of a technical newspaper level, the *Gazette* was better. There was an inferiority complex, I believe.

LP: Yes, I think it remains today. I still think—maybe everything has changed because they’ve got new staff—but I still think that they feel they have a chip on their shoulder which they express to the *Times*, as if little, weekly *Times* were still the Arkansas . . .

MW: Let’s interject here that Leslie now is a writer/editor for the *Arkansas Times*, a weekly journal in Little Rock of arts, politics, culture, et cetera, et cetera. Right?

LP: That's right.

MW: And several former *Gazette* star writers are at the *Times* now. Some.

LP: Some. Right. It used to be all—it was all [former] *Gazette* [writers] at first, and they moved to a weekly when the *Democrat* bought the *Gazette* assets in 1991.

MW: Right. We'll move to that later. When I was covering stories for the *Democrat*—I always felt the *Gazette* person was the real deal, and I was just kind of a pretender because I didn't know what I was doing, which was actually true.

LP: Well, yes, and the *Gazette* person usually had more experience and was getting paid more, and you knew that. They had this long line of history and honor and the Pulitzer [Prize] behind them, so, yes, that weighed on people. It certainly weighed on me.

MW: And even though there was some slight advantage in that as an afternoon paper you could get today's news in today, the honest-to-God truth was you had to have the news in by—I don't know—11:00 [a.m.] or something.

LP: Yes, for the first edition. The second edition turned at 11:00, and the city edition turned at 2:00 [p.m.] There was a late edition that got the latest stock market [figures] in, so it must have [turned] at 5:00 [p.m.] How did we do that—change the front page to get the stocks in?

MW: I don't remember. They would—yes—quite often, the latest—the last edition was only a matter of changing a couple of stories, obviously. If the world ended or something—an assassination—obviously, they could tear up more.

LP: Right, right.

MW: But there was not that much difference between the—anyway, it wasn't like you could get all of today's news in. The *Gazette* people had more time [to] write their stories quite often because the day was over at 5:00. They'd go back to the office, and they had hours to write their stories.

LP: Right. Plus, TV news was much better then, I think, and people learned a lot of stuff from watching local news that they wanted to know about what had happened during the day. I don't think that's true [laughs] anymore because of . . .

MW: They cover car crashes and . . .

LP: Right, and it was not that. It was boring, and the camera stayed in one place, and the newscasters talked in[to] the camera, but, really, you found out what you needed to know, mostly.

MW: So, in addition to us feeling like we were young and inexperienced, didn't know what we were doing . . .

LP: Second-class.

MW: Second-class—there was almost a sense of irrelevancy, too, in that we could only tell half the story.

LP: Right

MW: We had to tell the story as it . . .

LP: . . . as it was happening. . .

MW: At noon.

LP: Right. And that was it.

MW: What did you do the second time you went to the *Democrat*?

LP: I worked on the copy desk.

MW: On the copy desk again?

LP: Yes, yes. I worked on the copy desk, and I may have also become the wire editor again. I think I probably did. But we were a morning paper by then.

MW: Oh, really?

LP: Yes. I think when Starr first took over we made the switch.

MW: I didn't realize that had happened then. And again, we're talking about . . .

LP: Yes, my mind is so blank, but this was thirty years ago.

MW: 1978, 1979, 1980. Somewhere in there. [Editor's Note: The Democrat switched to morning publication in 1979.]

LP: Yes. In there somewhere. Because [Bill] Clinton lost [the gubernatorial election]. [Frank] White was happy about that. That was another terrible . . .

MW: White was happy or Starr was happy?

LP: Starr was happy. "White was happy?" [Laughs]

MW: Yes, Bill Clinton lost to Frank White in 1980 in the governor's race.

LP: Right, so that's when I must have gone back, because I had worked in the legislative session for Clinton briefly, doing paperwork and stuff. So on that second time around, Frank White was in office. And my brother, Frank, had been appointed and was serving on the Public Service Commission [PSC], but his appointment had never been ratified by the [state] Senate because they just hadn't met.

MW: We're talking about Frank Newell?

LP: [We're] talking about Frank Newell. Right. When Frank White came in, he was the big utility guy. Utilities put him in [office], if you'll remember that. Joe Ford, [head of] Alltel—the PSC then actually had a lot of regulatory power because all the utility companies were local.

MW: And Bill Clinton made a lot of rich people mad in his first term—and ordinary middle class people, too, because he tried to do so many . . .

LP: Cubans and car tags. Yes, he was so . . .

MW: He brought in a lot of really young people who did not play the game, and they made a lot of people mad, so he lost to this sort of buffoonish, half-bright guy named Frank White in 1980.

LP: Who signed the Creation Science Act without reading it—he said he didn't. So when Frank White came into the office, the PSC only had three commissioners. Each commissioner had to be approved by the Senate. The *Gazette* noted that my brother would have his senator—and your senator has to put you up—and my brother's senator was Joe Ford.

MW: Yes! Who was, a . . .

LP: Head of—what was Alltel called then?

MW: It used to be called Allied Telephone Company a long, long time ago.

LP: Yes, I think it would have been called Allied then. I don't think it was big and fancy yet. And Joe Ford, of course, was not going to bring Frank's name up [before the Senate]. The legislative session was going on, and the *Gazette* started reporting it. They started reporting how there was a public service commissioner that the utilities didn't want, and that he was in limbo because his senator was Joe

Ford. They were reporting it on the front page because, I guess, they wanted [to show] sort of a shameful influence [of] the utilities on the PSC, trying to grab power. My brother was always kind of amused by it because he didn't think of himself as an environmentalist, and they kept describing him as a consumerist and an environmentalist, whatever that meant. I don't know what it meant.

MW: Could you give us a *Reader's Digest* version of your brother's background before he got nominated for the Public Service Commission?

LP: He was a lawyer and worked for Clinton. He was on Clinton's staff [in the attorney general's [AG's] office and Clinton appointed him to the Public Service Commission. He went to Columbia Law School and came back to work with Kaplan and Hollingsworth. He worked in the AG's office for a while.

MW: The attorney general's office.

LP: Yes, right. So this was on the front page every day. And at the *Democrat*—there was a reporter whose name is lost in the sands of time—he was really having a hard time getting it because it was required that you really have a lot of background in how things happened in the senate, the people, political influences with contributors to Frank White, how the PSC works—and he was really having trouble with the story—reporting it. I mean, if they had assigned it to me, I would have been in the same boat. So while the *Gazette* was running it on the front page—long story—the *Democrat* was running maybe four inches back in the B section [and] that didn't make a lot of sense. And this guy—he was a nice guy—he was coming up to me saying, “You've got to help me find your brother so I can talk to him.” And I said, “Well, his phone number is in the phone book.” You

know, I didn't have any magic way to help this guy. He was at the end of his rope and looking for some way to understand this story without copying the *Gazette*. Frank made this really amusing—Frank finally just quit, because it was just such, making such a . . .

MW: You mean he withdrew his name from the nomination?

LP: He just resigned from the commission. I mean, he was already a member. He had already ruled.

MW: Oh, oh, oh . . .

LP: He'd been on the commission for ages.

MW: So he just hadn't been confirmed, or whatever?

LP: Right, he just hadn't been confirmed

MW: Oh, okay, so he was already . . .

LP: Oh, yes, he'd been serving for a while.

MW: There must be some law that says if you're not acted on, you can serve temporarily.

LP: That's right, until your—and then your senator puts your name up for confirmation [when the legislature returns].

MW: Oh, I see, I see.

LP: So Frank finally quit and said, "If I ran the world, and it was a perfect world, I would not resign. But it's not a perfect world, and I'm tired of all this stuff."

[Laughs] We were at a party. As you remember in the old days, we had many, many parties. The reporters and copy desk [staff] would get together, and because I was not loyal to the paper at the party—I was making fun of the

Democrat coverage. I wasn't—it wasn't that I was making fun of the reporter, it was just—I was saying, "You see, the *Gazette* really gets it. We really don't."

And at that time, the newspaper war was on. It had just really begun. I mean, the people running the place really thought, "Okay, we're going to take them on."

MW: Let's—maybe we should . . .

LP: That's why it was a daily paper.

MW: Okay, let's stop for just a little bit of background. The *Democrat* had always been the stepchild to the *Gazette*. Walter Hussman, Jr. came in with lots and lots and lots and lots of money and many things happened, but the upshot was he decided to take on the *Gazette*, *mano a mano* [a Spanish term that means hand-to-hand combat]. He brought in this man—we've mentioned John Robert Starr—to be the managing editor.

LP: Right, who was the perfect person to bring on because he was a Faubus [Orval Eugene Faubus, governor of Arkansas from 1955 to 1967] person when he was working for the AP, so he was the perfect counterpoint to the *Gazette*.

MW: Philosophically . . .

LP: Philosophically and personally. He had a personal thing about the *Gazette*.

MW: And he was aggressively—he was an aggressive person. [Laughs]

LP: He was an asshole! [Laughs] He was a total . .

MW: Yes, he was an asshole.

LP: Yes, right, he was.

MW: He was managing editor at this time, and there was just—in the editorial pages of the *Democrat*, there was constant sniping at the *Gazette* and attacking the *Gazette*

all the time. And Starr wrote a column which he used to vilify anyone and everyone whom he did not agree with.

LP: Right.

MW: And this is the man you're talking about now.

LP: Right, that's the man I'm talking about now. He's the man who held a meeting with a copy desk that I found so offensive. And he did interfere in the copy. If things weren't reported the way he wanted them reported—and maybe this is true of all editors—he would stick his hand in and change the way it was done. He's not here to defend himself, but I don't think he'd argue.

MW: Okay, I'm sorry to interrupt, but let's go back. You were at a party where you were making these observations about. . .

LP: I was at a party and I was making these observations, and [we were] in the newspaper war, and I said, "I hope the *Gazette* wins." And Alison LaGrossa, who I had befriended and had done things for—she was a young thing—I think she was mad, anyway, because she was a real defender of Steve Clark. Boy, I hope I'm remembering this right. And at that party—my date for the party, who was a lawyer, had learned some things about Steve Clark that he thought were unsavory and he wanted Alison LaGrossa to go after him, and Alison LaGrossa kind of liked Steve Clark. So I think she was mad, anyway, because of our—you know, we were all friends—she'd been to our house—and all this stuff. . .

MW: Let us interject here that Steve Clark was the attorney general.

LP: He was the attorney general.

MW: He was eventually convicted of using public funds for all kinds of expensive dinners, trips, and golf tournaments, and I don't know what all . . .

LP: Right, much later, of course.

MW: Yes, much later, but he—I don't know if he actually went to jail or not, but he lost his law license and . . .

LP: Well, he lost his law license and . . .

MW: . . .was convicted of a felony

LP: Yes, right.

MW: So this is the person we're talking about.

LP: Right. What I said was obviously a firing offense—I was disloyal to the people who were paying my paycheck. It was one of these drunken brawls, you know. Everyone was acting out. I mean, I don't think there was ever a *Democrat* party that wasn't a drunken brawl. So I got fired the next day. Starr called me in. [Of] course, Si Dunn had to make all the copy desk go into the morgue [the newspaper's library] so they wouldn't be there. I came in and he [Dunn] said, "I'm sorry, but you're fired." And I said, "Huh?" He said, "I'm sorry, but Starr wants you fired." And I said, "Well I'm going to talk to him." He said, "No, you can't go talk to Starr!" So I just marched into Starr's office. . .

MW: Si Dunn was telling you this.

LP: Yes, and I said, "What for? What are you firing me for?" And he said, "You're a traitor and you're a spy."

MW: A spy?

LP: Yes. I don't know what that was about.

MW: Here we have [] music going, “Dum-da-dum dum!”

LP: [Laughs] “You’re a traitor and a spy!” I said, “What are you talking about?” And he said, “Well, I don’t have to explain myself to you.” And I said, “But—” He said, “I will not have anyone working here who is not loyal to this paper and believes in this paper and supports this paper, and thinks it’s better than the other one.” And I said, “Well, you might be losing some employees!” [Laughter] And I left, and that ended my career at the *Democrat*.

MW: This would have been maybe—what 1982, 1983—something like that?

LP: 1982. Something like that. Yes. And Jan Cottingham had come on—who I’m sure someone is interviewing—she was on the copy desk. She married Omar Greene in Starr’s office on television, for some reason, I’m not sure why. But it was televised—Starr wanted it televised. She was great. She came in and I trained her, which was kind of a joke because she was a perfect copy editor and rose to great heights at the *Gazette* and then [at] the *Dallas Morning News* later on. But she was really angry [when I was fired] and threw a huge party, a going-away party for me. Everybody came. It was another drunken brawl, and we had arm wrestling and dancing on the tables. You may recall how we acted back then when we were young and could drink a lot.

MW: And our hearts were gay, so to speak.

LP: And our hearts were—yes, right. She got in[to] big trouble for having that party. But she was too good for Starr to get rid of, but he never gave her another pay raise. Every time he—you know, the incremental way he would get me back.

MW: Because she had given you a going-away party?

LP: Because she had given me a going-away party. And he put a sign up, you know, “Random [Thoughts],” the next day saying that he was ashamed of the people who had gone to the party, and he wanted to know who had gone to the party, and wanted people to name names.

MW: I guess I don’t . . .

LP: She didn’t tell me until years later, really, until we were both working at the *Arkansas Times*, where she went after the *Dallas Morning News*, because she was homesick. She came back to Arkansas to work at the *Arkansas Times*. She had never, ever, ever gotten another penny from him. But she went to the *Gazette*, for the editor and the city editor. And that’s the story of the *Democrat*.

MW: Let’s, for posterity’s sake, let’s catch up with your career since then. You went to the *Gazette* pretty soon after that?

LP: No, no, the *Gazette*—I foolishly went straight to the *Gazette* after being fired, you know, with anger and tears in my eyes. I went into Bob Douglas’s office and said, “I’ve just been fired because I’ve been accused of spying for your paper. I haven’t been spying for your paper, but I would like to work here.” And he said, “Sorry”—it’s a long story about why he didn’t want me working there, but he did not like the man I was dating, and that would have to do with—do you remember the police chief?

MW: What a tangled web we weave.

LP: What a tangled web.

MW: When we start pulling at romantic threads, and when romance meets politics meets. . .

LP: Well, my boyfriend was on the outs with the editor, but—and everybody really thought Bob [Douglas] was a great guy. Is he still alive?

MW: I don't know.

LP: I don't either. But I met him once the first time I was fired—only once, and he showed me around, and maybe two or three years later I saw him at a New Year's Eve party at Mike Trimble's house. He said, "Do you know who I am?" And I thought, "Oh, Bob Douglas," but it scared me the way he said it, and it was midnight, and I didn't say anything. He said, "A good reporter would remember my name." I thought, "That is the most gratuitous slap in the face." And if I had been who I am today, I would've kicked him the—I would've let him have it.

MW: [Laughs] Are you going to take . . .

LP: Yes, I just stood there like a bunny rabbit, you know.

MW: You should have said, "You just have a very forgettable face."

LP: Why me? I should've said, "Well, who the hell are you and why does anyone care who you are?" But it was so ugly and so out of nowhere, that from then on, every time people started singing the praises of Bob Douglas, I said, "I hate him. I hate the son of a bitch."

MW: But you did eventually get a . . .

LP: I did eventually go [to work at the *Gazette*]. At first I went to the *North Little Rock Times* and was managing editor there. Then I got a master's degree [in journalism], and in doing so, I got to know Bill Rutherford—[*Arkansas Gazette* editor—news editor].

MW: At Fayetteville?

LP: At Little Rock.

MW: At Little Rock? Okay.

LP: Rutherford decided I was okay, and hired me, and, I guess—what's his name [Douglas] was gone. And he hired me during the legislative session to work on the copy desk—you know, they were always taking on extra hours at the *Gazette*. He hired me temporarily, then features hired me.

MW: Features hired you to be a copy editor?

LP: Yes, to be a copy editor.

MW: Oh, they had their own separate copy editor?

LP: Yes, tons of copy editors in features at the *Gazette*.

MW: Sorry, I didn't know.

LP: Tons, tons. One for every writer, and, boy, did they need it. Then I was state desk, and I worked—and I was assistant state editor when I—I worked on Sundays with Max Brantley as the city editor—a great, great wonderful job. I was editor when Say MacIntosh punched out the white segregationist candidate for the governor—the one who had sixteen children [and] was from up north [Arkansas]. I loved the *Gazette*. I loved every minute of it.

MW: Were you there when the *Gazette* closed its doors?

LP: Yes. I had just had a baby, and while I was having the baby, the news was on television.

MW: Oh, you weren't in the office, you were . . .

LP: I was . . .

MW: Recuperating?

LP: I was in the hospital.

MW: Oh, in the—oh, oh.

LP: And the news broke about—you know, it was like a scoop that the paper—that Gannett was selling. It wasn't confirmed for some time. A newsboy heard it and broke the news. It wasn't confirmed, but everyone knew in their heart of hearts that it was coming.

MW: How old is Hannah now?

LP: She's going to be fourteen in August.

MW: So would that make it 1991?

LP: It was 1991. I was off to take care of her, and I would call Kate Marymont, city editor, and say "Hey, I want to work before the paper closes. I can't not go back to work, I can't not . . ."

[End of Tape 1, Side 2]

[Beginning of Tape 2, Side 1]

MW: We just had to change tapes. You were talking about [how] you were in the hospital giving birth to your lovely daughter, Hannah . . .

LP: Right.

MW: . . .in 1991, and you said you wanted to go back to work at the *Gazette*.

LP: People were coming up to my room like this [gestures sad looks] "Congratulations." Max was, like, so blown away; he knew what was going on. He knew it was true, just knew it. So Kate called me, and she said, "You'd better come in today, because I think this is it." So I took my child into work.

MW: Your newborn?

LP: Yes, and sat down at my computer, and—whoop! Everything went away. It was too late.

MW: Wow.

LP: There she was [the baby], and then all hell broke loose. You know, they surrounded the buildings. The *Democrat* had guards surround the buildings so we wouldn't take anything away. People went out and got booze and made speeches and it was about 7,000 degrees in the newsroom.

MW: Now you're with the *Arkansas Times*, which, as we mentioned earlier, is a weekly tabloid newspaper to help pick up the—what do you pick up when someone throws it down? Pick up the . . .

LP: Gauntlet? Gantlet? Gauntlet?

MW: It sort of took over where the *Gazette* left off. [Laughs]

LP: Right, right, right. Yes, because they thought people would want to have that editorial voice in opposition to the *Democrat*.

MW: And what is your position there? Are you a . . .

LP: I am the managing editor.

MW: You are the managing editor?

LP: I am the managing editor.

MW: I didn't know that. Well.

LP: A title of such significance. [Laughs] And Max Brantley is the editor. He had been an editor at the *Gazette*. He hired me.

MW: We have just covered the real facts here. Anything else you want to say about the *Democrat*: your experience at the *Democrat*, your perception of the *Democrat*, *Democrat* people? Any anecdotes we've skipped over?

LP: I wish I could remember more. I mean, it was very intense because I was so young. The personal stuff I remember so intensely because we all hung out together. You know, we worked at weird hours and then you stayed with all your pals. Jerry Bokamper was on the rim and is now a movie reviewer for the *Dallas Morning News*. Ed Gray went from there to the *Gazette*, did he not?

MW: This is after my time. I don't remember.

LP: Yes, yes, yes. Well.

MW: So, did we cover it?

LP: Yes, I think we're done. I think that's it.

MW: Well, thank you, Leslie, very much.

LP: Thank you, Mel. And thank you!

MW: All you people out there, in Internet-land.

[Laughter]

[End of Interview]

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