

Gazette Project

Interview with

Richard Portis
Little Rock, Arkansas,
6 September 2000

Interviewer: Roy Reed

Roy Reed: Okay, this is Richard Portis and Roy Reed on September 6, 2000, in Little Rock. Richard, state your full name.

Richard Portis: Richard Palmer Portis.

RR: And do we have your permission to record this and turn it over to the university library?

RP: Yes.

RR: Okay. Start at the beginning, will you, and tell me when and where you were born and to whom.

RP: I was born in Mount Holly, Arkansas, July 13, 1944, to Samuel Palmer and Alice Waddell Portis.

RR: Waddell is W-A-D-D-E-L-L? Okay.

RP: The English pronounced it "waddle," and when they moved over here, they fancied it up to "Waddell." Dad was a school superintendent there. Moved to Hamburg when I was three years old. Grew up there. Graduated from high school in Hamburg High School. Went to the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville after graduation for a year and a half. Dropped out of college.

RR: Why?

RP: It was right at the beginning of the hippie era, and I really don't have a good reason for dropping out, I just didn't want to go to class at that time. I just decided I didn't want to be in college, so I went home.

RR: About what year would that have been?

RP: It'd have been 1964.

RR: 1964.

RP: So I went home, had a full scholarship too, National Merit Scholarship, big disappointment to everybody. Decided I'd have to have a job, so Bob Fisher was the editor of the *Crossett News Observer*, a local newspaper that was about fifteen miles from Hamburg, and so he gave me a job. I'd never done any writing before. I read newspapers, but I never had any training or much interest in it. But since my brother had been a journalist and my mother wrote a column for the local newspaper at Hamburg, she thought it'd be a good idea if I tried it. So Bob hired me at fifty dollars a week to write some stuff for him, and I kind of enjoyed it.

RR: What kind of stuff did you write?

RP: Well, I covered the — the first thing I did, my first assignment, was I covered the Kiwanis Club meeting. But then I was kind of — I was a smart aleck, nineteen years old and pretty much a jerk, started writing kind of funny stuff, but looking back on it I kind of cringe. But there was a story that the big Georgia Pacific paper mill there at Crossett — one of their products was toilet paper, and the toilet paper that didn't meet Georgia Pacific's high standards was dumping it in this big pit and, apparently, people were going out there and getting it. So I went out —

somebody told me about it — went out and wrote a story about people raiding the toilet paper pit for free toilet paper. And I guess it was kind of funny, but Bob Lancaster — he was also nineteen years old and he was state editor at the *Pine Bluff Commercial* at that time — he read it because he read the exchange papers, and he thought it was pretty good and wanted to know if I wanted to work up there. I had worked for the *News Observer*, the Crossett paper, for about six weeks. So I went from Crossett's weekly in a meteoric rise to the *Pine Bluff Commercial* for seventy dollars a week. I was their southeast Arkansas bureau chief. They decided they were going to branch out and have bureaus, the *Pine Bluff Commercial*, the man on the scene, and I had a house trailer there at Monticello and a little green Volkswagen that the Freeman brothers, the owners of the *Commercial*, lent their staff. And Bob Lancaster was the state editor, and I was the southeast Arkansas bureau chief. Had my own typewriter and supply of paper, that cheap, yellowish paper that you use, and I cruised around southeast Arkansas: McGehee and Dermott, Monticello, Hamburg, Crossett, Fordyce. And I didn't do that very long, maybe four or five months. Gene Foreman was my managing editor, and he was a great guy to work for. He would also — he cut me a lot of slack about writing in an eccentric way and not editing stuff. So I did that for a few months, and then Leroy Donald called me. He was the state editor at the *Gazette* and offered me a job at the *Arkansas Gazette*. So, after a few months at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*, I went on up there and was making seventy-five — I think he raised me to eighty a week. Five dollars more. And I complained to him

about that. Actually what I did — I'd worked for him for about a month. I said, "What about a raise around here?@ He said, "Man, you came up here pretty high anyway." So, "Oh, okay, all right." So, I did that. That was 1965, and that was my first job at the *Gazette*, which I really enjoyed. The state desk.

RR: Doing what for Leroy?

RP: Well, I was just working on the state desk. I was doing a lot of rewrite. You take stuff over the phones from correspondents, stringers out in the state, and he would have a budget and something would happen out in the state, occasionally go out and actually cover something, but I would say eighty percent of our work was on the telephone.

RR: Including obituaries?

RP: Obituaries. Now, I didn't do that very long. We had a guy that they paid even less. You know, they usually had a high school guy or somebody like that, and I was barely out of high school, but at least I had about a year and a half of college. So they had some seventeen-year-old guy who they could pay forty dollars a week to write the obituaries. So I didn't have to do much of that, but I did some of it.

RR: But we covered everything in the state as I recall.

RP: Yes. The *Gazette* was the state newspaper.

RR: What kind of stories particularly do you remember from those early days?

RP: Well, of course, the routine stuff. The political stuff, disasters, tornadoes. We had a big tornado at Conway I remember when I was there, and I got to cover that on the scene. Ku Klux Klan rally — I covered one at around 1965 or 1966.

RR: Where was that?

RP: Hamburg.

RR: Back home?

RP: Back home, yes.

RR: Did you know that there was a Klan in Hamburg?

RP: No, I had no idea. I guess it was around, this was probably, it may have been 1965. It was either 1965 1966, because it was when Shelton — who was the guy Shelton, the Grand Wizard, Grand Dragon from Alabama?

RR: Yes, I knew him. I want to say Bill.

RP: It may be William. Anyway, Shelton, he started to gather a lot of branches of the Klan. He started a group in south Arkansas, and I think most of their strength was in Union County around El Dorado because they had another rally over there, and I actually got to interview him.

RR: He was about half smart as I remember.

RP: Yes, and he was kind of slick, too. Shelton, he didn't act like he was going to stick a knife in me right when talking to him. Of course, I was trying to be friendly with the guy. He had some thugs hanging around him, but Shelton himself knew that I was working for the *Arkansas Gazette*, and he knew exactly where we stood.

RR: Did you know any of the Klansmen in your hometown?

RP: There was one guy that I knew the family. I can't remember the name. But my mother wrote a weekly column for the *Ashley County Leader* at that time, and after the rally my mother, who was a very conservative Old South lady, wrote a kind of a blistering thing about the rally. Not so much that it was a racial thing, although that was in there, too, but that they would be burning a cross because her daddy was a Methodist preacher, and she thought this burning the symbol of Christianity was blasphemous. Well, after she wrote that column, she and my dad started getting these anonymous calls, people throwing rocks at the house, things like that. And Daddy knew who it was.

RP: It didn't seem to bother him very much, but Robert Shelton — Robert Shelton, yeah, that's him. And I think it was the Knights, the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan — a Mississippi group — Shelton was an Alabaman.

RR: Tuscaloosa, I reckon.

RP: He was a tire salesman, I remember, or he had a tire dealership or something. He might have been with the United Klan. I remember Jimmy Jones, who later became state editor, may have been the managing editor at the *Texarkana Gazette* at that time. He was one of our stringers. He would call stories in to our from southwest Arkansas. The worst duty was, and a lot of this was rewrite, but you didn't have any kind of high-tech stuff. We didn't even have any earphones. You'd just hold the telephone up to your ear with your shoulder and type. Old Ernie Deane would call his stuff in, "Arkansas Traveler." He was a mean old

bastard. I never did know him very well. I know you guys ended up at the University [of Arkansas, Fayetteville], and you were legends at the *Gazette*, but to me he was a jerk. There were two old farts at the *Gazette* at that time and one of them was Ernie Deane, and the other was Joe Wirges. Ernie Deane was an asshole just the way he treated me on the telephone, and Joe Wirges went out of his way to be kind and nice to every little rookie who came in like me. Joe would remember your first name the first day you were there, but Ernie would call up with these damn stories about some new water tank or something down at McGehee. He'd be going on, and I'd say, "Could you say that again?" And he'd say, "Well, I'm not going to say it twice." Just that kind of stuff. So I always hated to rewrite Ernie's stuff.

RR: These weren't his "Traveler" columns, were they? Or were they?

RP: Yes.

RR: Okay.

RP: He would go out occasionally. We didn't have that duty very often, so I think most of the time he would come back into the office and write them, but occasionally he would phone them in.

RR: I have to interrupt and tell a story about Ernie Deane writing letters to the editor, under different names ordinarily. He'd take an assumed name and send them to the *Democrat* and criticize the *Democrat*, but one letter was published under his own name, and it was a complaint on truck drivers and how they treated other people on the highway. And it was a rip-roaring letter, just taking the hide off

truckers as a class, and he wound it up with this sentence, “And if I ever again encounter a truck that says Tex and Maxine on the driver’s door, I aim to stop it and cane the hell out of Tex or Maxine as the case may be.”

RP: Well, you know, in another context I’m sure I would have liked Ernie, but here I was this guy, this clerk actually, and I had a pretty high opinion of myself, too, and I felt he was being abusive to me over the telephone. It may have just been one time, but that’s all it took.

RR: You said Jimmy was the *Gazette* stringer in Texarkana?

RP: Yes.

RR: While he was state editor down there?

RP: I kind of think he might have been the managing editor.

RR: Oh, really?

RP: Yes. Old Jake Mehaffy probably retired about that time, and he might have been. He wrote a column for them for years. Until he died last year, he still occasionally would write one, but I know I covered Lyndon Johnson’s trip to Texarkana in 1964 for the *Pine Bluff Commercial*, and Jake was still working there, because he was a friend of Lyndon Johnson. I don’t remember if Jimmy was there or not, but I remember Johnson arriving. But Jimmy was, I think, the managing editor. But still the Texarkana writers had to supplement their income stringing for the *Gazette*, getting paid a nickel a line or whatever.

RR: It sounds like you got out around the state some.

RP: Yes. Leroy was pretty good. The state desk at the *Gazette* was always kind of a stepchild. It wasn't really held in high regard, even though we did try to cover the whole state. The most talented writers and reporters didn't end up there. It was probably one step above the police beat. Anyone who was pretty good would end up on the city desk with Shelton.

RR: How long did you stay on the state desk?

RP: I was on the state desk for about a year, and I got my draft notice. This was the early part of the Vietnam War, and I wasn't married and I was out of college. No rabbit hole at all. They were going to get my ass. So, luckily, like Dan Quayle, I got in the Army Reserve, which turned out to be a really fun experience because it was a public information detachment — a thirteen-man unit. It was all a bunch of newspaper guys. Ernie Dumas was in it, Mike Trimble. Gene Foreman was the commander of it for a while, Major Foreman. Anyway, I had to go off to basic training for six months. I went and told Mr. [A.R.] Nelson. Mr. Nelson was always really nice to me, too. I said, "Look, I know I haven't been working here very long, but I was fixing to get drafted and had to join the Reserves, and I'm going to be gone six months." "No problem. Come back when you get out." So I had a week to report or something. Well, I went home, and this was back to Hamburg to stay with my mother and daddy, and this was the same time that Buddy had quit. Buddy is Charles Portis, my older brother. He had quit the *New York Herald Tribune* and had written a novel, his first novel, *Norwood*, and he was kind of waiting around, and he didn't have a job either. He'd moved back

home, too. So Buddy and I were both living at home with no job, and Jonathan, my younger brother, who later worked for the *Gazette* as state editor, was probably sixteen or seventeen and yet he was the only one working. He had a job working for Daddy as a janitor's helper at school. And Buddy and I were bumming cigarettes off him and borrowing money from Jonathan to buy cigarettes. But then it turned out, after I was home for a couple of weeks, I got this thing from the Army. You know how they are. It said, "Well, you're going to have to wait a couple of months. We can't take you right now." So I said, "I can't do this," so I called Mr. Nelson. I said, "Look, can I have my job back?" So he said yes, and let me come back till I was ready to go. They were always really nice to me. Mr. Nelson, I was always kind of scared of him. He was kind of a stern fellow.

RR: He was too quiet.

RP: Yes, he was. He was quiet, and you never knew what he expected. When I came back from active duty, I wrote Mr. Nelson a letter from San Antonio at Fort Sam Houston. And I worked on the Army newspaper there. It was great news, too. San Antonio is a great town. We had an Army car we could use. The only thing was there was no money. We got paid about seventy bucks a month, but I wrote Mr. Nelson I would be getting out in six months and I would like to have a job back at the *Gazette*, but I wanted to be on the copy desk and a hundred dollars a week. So I got a letter back from him. He said, "I think we can work out this

copy desk. I think that will be all right, and we'll talk about the money later." So when I came back to work, I was on the copy desk.

RR: Did he give you the hundred a week?

RP: Yes, he did. He sure did. I didn't ask him about it. It just appeared on my check.

RR: Oh, okay. How many years did you work on the copy desk?

RP: I worked full-time from 1966 until about 1968, and a half of 1969, is when I went back to college and finished up my pre-med work at Conway at UCA. That took about two years, and then I went to medical school. I guess it was 1968, because I went to medical school in 1970. But I worked part-time in between going to school and all that through 1970. And even in medical school, my first couple of years, they would let me come back and work at night.

RR: So you were actually one of the senior men on the copy desk?

RP: Well, yes, I guess. Because there was a good bit of turnover, and for a while, yes, I was. George Carter was senior to me. Gary Drury was senior to me, and we had old Ray Kornegay. Paul Johnson was my junior, but he was a lot better than me. Bill Rutherford was a slot man, really. He would occasionally do some rim work, but Douglas, of course, was always in the slot. But then there were some younger guys who passed through. Copy editors were still like printers at that time. They were still kind of a transient, kind of drift in from North Carolina. Sit down and start writing headlines.

RR: They were always in great demand.

RP: Yes.

RR: A good copy editor.

RP: I liked being the copy editor. I know it's not very glamorous, but I always enjoyed doing it.

RR: Well, tell me then, what would you do?

RP: Well, as you know, I don't understand how they do it now. I know they now have computers at their own desks. But there was a big horseshoe-shaped copy desk, and in the middle of it was a slot and all around the outside was called the rim, and everyone had his number-one pencils and a typewriter and in the middle of the slot there was a big basket, an in-and out-basket. The slot man, who was the news editor, would put the raw copy from the reporters or wire services on the top, and the person, copy editor on the rim, would pick one up, and he would have on the top listed what size headline and sometimes about whether they needed to be cut down. And you would go through and edit, as an editor does — that is, for grammar and style — and then write a headline. It could be done, being a copy editor could be done without any effort at all or with some effort, it depends on you. You could just go through — we called it hooking paragraphs — if you were really in a hurry.

RR: Hooking paragraphs?

RP: Yes. You actually put a pencil and made an L. We called it hooking paragraphs. The L, the hook, means a paragraph.

RR: Oh, I know what you are talking about.

RP: Yes, we called it hooking. So you could just hook — you know, the raw copy comes over without, but you always marked — even if it's indented in the copy, you still hook it.

RR: First printed word in the paragraph gets an L.

RP: Gets an L under it. That means the paragraph starts there, even though it's indented by the writer.

RR: So you could get away with just doing that if you were lazy?

RP: You could, you could do it and then write a headline and stick it back in the . . .

RR: How much grammar correction was necessary day in and day out?

RP: Very little grammar correction at the *Gazette*. There was more spelling correction than grammar. Most of the writers at the *Gazette* were instinctive or educated grammarians. But, oddly enough, some of the best writers were awful spellers. Mike Trimble, probably one of the best writers who ever came through the *Gazette*, couldn't spell. Oh, he could spell, but I mean you had to really watch his spelling.

RR: I've heard that about [Charles] Allbright, too.

RP: I've heard it about Allbright. I didn't get to edit his stuff, and I don't know who did. Douglas has always stated that Allbright was a bad speller, but Trimble, he would really butcher them.

RR: That's odd about Trimble because his mother was an English teacher.

RP: I know. But spelling is sort of a different part of the brain.

RR: It is. But so was Allbright's mother.

RP: That's right, yes.

RR: Your mother, was she a teacher?

RP: She was a high school graduate, a very literate person.

RR: She didn't teach?

RP: Now, when she was in her late teens, she kept school.

RR: Okay, kept school, that's what they said back then?

RP: Yes, that's what they called it back then. I think she taught like elementary grades and maybe junior high.

RR: I was wondering where you learned grammar?

RP: Just doing it, I guess, but maybe it was — she was a stickler on grammar.

RR: She was a writer?

RP: She was a writer, and she would correct us. But in high school we had good English teachers in high school, Hamburg High School, Mrs. Etheridge and Mrs. Mary Evans and then I had — I took French in high school for four years, ninth through the twelfth grade, and that's the time when you learn all the romance languages and the actual structure, and it all kind of clicked for me then. And we diagramed sentences and so on. It just sort of came natural for me.

RR: A copy editor really needs to be good at grammar, and I'd put that above almost any other quality. You were a copy editor. I never was. What is the most important thing in editing?

RP: Well, to me, as an editor it was just does the story make sense. Of course, the grammar was important, and style to a certain extent, because Mr. [J.N.] Heiskell

had his quirks and Mr. Nelson did, too, about certain stylistic things. The *Gazette* never had a style book. It was an informal thing that Douglas and some people had put together, but it was never actually official. But anyway, going back to your question, I think my job is to take a story and make it understandable. With some people you didn't have to do anything, but then some of the better reporters who'd go out and really dig up a story would write these dense, long sentences with multiple semicolons and things where you had to refer back to antecedents and things like this. I could chop that stuff up and make it make more sense and more readable.

RR: That's a rare skill to be able to do that. Bill Lewis told me yesterday — here's one of the fastest writers on the *Gazette*, worked there for thirty-three years — he told me yesterday that he always had trouble writing sentences [that were] too long.

RP: Well, he was the one I was talking about. And there's no question about it. He could, Bill Lewis, could cover anything. You could send him to something, and he had a knowledge about it. He had a broad knowledge of stuff. He could crank it out quickly, but he could not stop a sentence and put a period on it. He would just go on deep into clauses and semicolons and things like that. But he was still — not meaning he was not a bad writer because he did have a pleasant style, but when he started getting into that, you would kind of have to chop it up a little bit there. I think that would — now, the local *Gazette* people generally were better writers than the stuff we got from the wire service, especially. We had UPI [United Press International] back then, and UPI had its own style, which was

pretty bad. It was kind of corny. I think Bill Whitworth called it a “corny kind of brightness.” They were trying to be funny, but they really weren’t, sort of like *Time* magazine is now. It was like they anticipated dumbing stuff down by thirty years. You know how you read stuff now. But you really had to work UPI’s stuff, and we didn’t use a lot of it for that reason.

RR: How many wire services did the *Gazette* use?

RP: Well, it started off with UPI. When I first started working, it was UPI and AP [Associated Press]. And then we got Reuters. When I was there, we got Reuters and *New York Times*. I don’t think *The New York Times* — we may have had *The New York Times* when I was there, when I first came on, but I don’t think so. I know Reuters came on after I went to work there. I’m not sure of Agence France-
Presse, if we had that or not. I may be imagining that, or it might have been incorporated in.

RR: Where does the hyphen go in that?

RP: France and then dash P-R-E-S-S-E. What other services are there?

RR: Well, nowadays there is the *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times* service and *Tribune*, *Chicago Tribune* service. Two or three other major papers put out, but back then *The New York Times* service was just getting going about that time.

RP: I remember when Reuters came on, because we used it a lot. I think Pat Carrithers liked it. He was the wire editor. And Rutherford liked it. We were running more Reuters stuff than AP, I think, and I know we got some letters from

them that we were only one of the few papers that actually appreciated their work. Reuters was good, at that time, anyway.

RR: The Brits know how to write, too.

RP: Yes. And the *New York Times*, too, of course.

RR: So you were a copy editor for four or five years on account of your hard time and all that. You mentioned a couple of other copy editors who were on there at the same time, George Carter and Gary Drury. Who were some of the others?

RP: Ray Kornegay. Old Ray was an old guy and copy editor. He was probably — well, I'm fifty-six now, and I guess Ray was probably — I was nineteen when I went to work for the *Gazette* and twenty-one when I went to the copy desk, but Ray was probably in his fifties, and he seemed like he was ancient. He'd been around. He worked for a lot of newspapers in Texas. I know he worked for — which Houston paper went under? The *Post*?

RR: *Post*.

RP: *Post*. He worked for the *Post*. And he worked for some smaller papers there. And there was Leon Hatch. Remember Leon Hatch?

RR: Sure do.

RP: Leon was also probably in his fifties when I went to work there, and he was a journeyman copy editor, too. And Leon, he had worked at the *Democrat* and the *Gazette*, and he was a great source of Little Rock lore. He knew all the old families in Little Rock. He was sort of our institutional memory on the copy desk. If somebody wrote a story about some family or somebody, the Treadways

or something like that, he would know whose uncle was this and that, and he was a great resource just for that reason. I remember one time, Leon had this problem, he always looked like he felt bad. He drank, periodically boozed it up, but one time I wrote a cut line on some guy who was at some Rotary Club meeting or something.

RR: Picture caption?

RP: Right, a caption under a picture. They were always very difficult to write. At the *Gazette* we had to write not only — nowadays, most of them are just a little paragraph, but at that time the style there was a little headline over the caption and then a paragraph. So the little headline above the paragraph, which describes what's going on, had to be a headline. And it's usually some dull picture of a guy, Governor [Orval] Faubus behind a podium or something, and I wrote in the cut line that said, "Governor Faubus makes a point at the Rotary club." Leon looked at it, and he said, "Don't ever say that. In the first place, you don't know if he is making a point or not. It's really just stupid and trite." He said, "You can think of something better than that." I never wrote anybody made a point from then on. Leon knew his business.

RR: Was he a bachelor?

RP: Yes, I think so. I think he was at that time. I think he was a "grass widow." I think everyone attributed Leon's unhappiness to a failed marriage or something. I remember something about that.

RR: You ever go into the little building outside of the paper?

RP: No, no. Occasionally we would take a break and go down to Brunswick Billiards, have a beer during our lunch break. Leon would be there, but he wouldn't drink with anybody else. He was always by himself, or he had some old pool-shooting buddies back there. He didn't hang out with the *Gazette* people.

RR: How about Kornegay?

RP: Kornegay was a really straight-laced guy.

RR: Well, who on the desk would have been your beer drinking buddies?

RP: George Carter, Gary Drury, a guy named Ray White. I think he was on the copy desk for a while. Paul Johnson was a great friend, but not much of a drinker.

RR: Ray White is now with the *Democrat*?

RP: Yes. He's their art guy. Ray might not have actually been on the desk. I may be a little confused, because he was in my Reserve unit, too. Ray is their graphic design whatever they call it.

RR: Did you all allow any reporters to come drink beer with you?

RP: Oh, yes. They might not have liked us, but we didn't have feuds or anything. Now, George Carter had a temper, and he would concentrate his ire. He'd get mad. He didn't like the guy working on police beat. He always hated to work his stories. He'd sit there and just gripe and growl, "Oh, that son of a bitch, why did he say that?" I remember one time this guy, he said the cops had "thrown out a dragnet" for somebody — geez, we don't write like that here at the *Gazette*. There was somebody else, too. Oh, Mike Barrier was on the copy desk. Barrier was an attorney. He went to law school and passed the bar and decided he didn't

want to become a lawyer. There's a lot more of than now then there was back then, but that was kind of a novelty at that time. But he was on the copy desk and Mike — I don't know what he's doing now. He edited a comic magazine for a while. He was interested in early Disney comic books.

RR: Did he have a brother named Chris?

RP: Chris, yes.

RR: Was he at the *Gazette*, too?

RP: No, I don't think Chris ever worked at the *Gazette*. Chris would write letters to the editor a lot, pretty funny ones. I haven't seen him in years, but I knew Chris.

RR: Who were the main reporters at the time you were on the desk?

RP: Jerol?

RR: Jerol Garrison?

RP: Yes, Jerol Garrison. Bill Lewis. Bill was the most versatile reporter at the *Gazette*. He could write about anything, I mean medicine, art, music, food, movie review, politics, sewage issues. I mean anything. If you sent Bill Lewis out on a story he'd get it. Jerol was the federal beat reporter. Ernie Dumas. I think Ernie was general assignment city reporter at that time. Richard Allin was state capitol reporter. No, Ernie was the state capitol. Richard Allin was state capitol reporter for a while before he started writing his column. There was an odd named Jack Baker who was there briefly. Jack was a really smart guy and a pretty good writer, but he was a Bolshevik, even by *Gazette* standards. He never quite fit in. I think he's a professor out at UALR or something now. Jack, like a lot of us, had

pretenses at being a writer, but he didn't — he wasn't subtle enough about it to not let everyone get on his case. He never was really too popular there.

RR: Who was the inspiration for the character Ray Midge in *Dog of the South*?

RP: I think Buddy just came up with that. He never has told me.

RR: Wasn't he a *Gazette* guy? Didn't he work at the *Gazette*?

RP: No. There was a guy named Ray, if it's the one I'm thinking about, one of these gypsies that come in. I think his first name was Ray. I can't think of the last name. Kind of a mysterious character who didn't have much to say, but he wasn't like the guy in the book — Midge.

RR: But in the book, my memory of it is that Ray Midge was a newspaper man. Is that not right?

RP: Yes. Ray Midge. There were two copy desk guys in the book. Ray Midge was the protagonist of *Dog of the South*, and the other guy on the copy desk with him, Guy Dupree, ran off with Ray Midge's wife, Norma. But Guy Dupree was this paranoid guy who was writing letters that he was going to kill the president and that sort of thing and, apparently, just went off his rocker. But Ray was just this obsessive compulsive fellow who — overly neat, but I don't think — because Buddy would never have known anybody much on the copy desk, really.

RR: Well, there was a guy who might be the one you were describing a while ago, who was really odd. He was on the copy desk for a period.

RP: Was he there when you were there?

RR: About the time I left, yes. And I had it in my head that something I heard, or something, that Buddy sort of had this guy in mind when he created that character.

RP: Well, I don't know.

RR: I asked Buddy about it, and he said he didn't think so. Didn't have anybody in mind.

RP: I think he chose the name Midge because a midge is an obnoxious little insignificant insect. There was a guy on the copy desk named Ray [not Kornegay], but he wouldn't fit either one of those characters. He wasn't malignant enough to be Guy Dupree and he wasn't prim enough to be Ray Midge. George Carter had the idea when this Ray in question came in that he was a narc for some reason. But nobody on the copy desk did any kind of drugs anyway. George got the idea, I think he called him "The Narc," because he was quiet and didn't say anything. He worked there about six months and left. He was an odd-looking fellow and hardly ever said anything. He would just get the stories out of the copy desk and write the headlines and put them in the box. He did open and close his desk drawer a lot. That aroused our suspicions.

RR: I guess George Stroud had left the paper when you went to work?

RP: Yes. Now, I knew his brother Bill when I worked for the *Pine Bluff Commercial*. He was the editor of the McGehee paper, and we were kind of friends because I would go visit all the local weekly papers, but I didn't know Joe or George. Once a year, Mr. Heiskell would call the copy editors in. Did you hear about this?

Douglas told me it was tradition. I'm not sure it was, but he would call us all into his office and just have a little chat. I dreaded the first one. Douglas said, "Don't worry about it. He doesn't know who you are or anything." But Mr. Heiskell died in 1972, at a hundred years old, so in the mid-1960s he would have been in his mid-nineties. I remember him sitting behind that desk, and it seemed like every time I saw him, he was reading the *Commercial Appeal*. But he was sitting back there, reading the *Commercial Appeal* and I sat down at his desk and he asked me my name and he said, "Do you have any questions or anything about the *Gazette* style or anything like that?" I said, "No, sir." And he said, "Well, there are two things that make news and people want to read about. One of them is big money made fast and the other is sex. And, of course, in the *Gazette* we're not going to be able to write a lot of sex stories." And then he just sort of drifted on off. This anecdote has no real point or anything except I thought it was a little odd. And he didn't go on and suggest we try to drum up more stories about big money being made fast. And that was it. He just sort of dismissed me, I said. "Yes, sir." He didn't have any tips or anything or any complaints. Occasionally, Mr. Nelson would have a marked up paper with red circles on it, "Who did this?"

RR: So you went back to medical school or back to pre-med. What year would that have been?

RP: In 1968, about the middle of 1968.

RR: Did you drive back and forth from Conway?

RP: I did for a while. Then we moved up to Conway, and then I drove back and forth.

RR: Were you married by then?

RP: Yes.

RR: And then you went to medical school here in Little Rock.

RP: Right.

RR: I don't guess you had the time to work the paper?

RP: Occasionally. The first two years I would work — somebody would get sick or something. Work with the *Gazette* was at night. So I would fill in occasionally on the copy desk, but Friday nights, Orville Henry let Mike Trimble and me work the Friday night football games. We'd take them over the phone with coaches and people calling in high school football games. Trimble and I got in trouble with Orville about that. Orville was a good guy. Like anybody he takes his own department pretty seriously, and we were, again, smart alecks, and we decided that not only did we write the stories — the way the set up was it's Friday evening, all the high school games would be played at the same time, so you had to have a lot of people to answer the phones. Usually, coaches would call these stories in and sometimes it would be a stringer or a kid, and you take the story and write a headline and kind of clean it up. So Trimble and I decided that we would write "bops" on every headline.

RR: B-O-P-S?

RP: B-O-P-S. Like "Crossett Bops El Dorado in Triple A Duel." And we did that, and somebody caught on, though it got to the first edition I think. Somebody caught it — a printer or somebody, who came back and made us change it.

RR: How many headlines did you have?

RP: Oh, it would be about twenty or something. Even little tiny ones. It would go anywhere from the bigger schools that would have two- or three-column headlines down to the little one-column schools. Trimble started this, and he would insert nicknames for players, too. I was mainly Trimble's henchman.

RR: Make them up?

RP: Make them up, yes, like a Jerry "Juggernaut" Jones and things like that. And Orville, though he didn't seem to get mad about it, he did talk to us about it. He said, "You know, I know what you're doing here, and we can't have this. I appreciate you boys helping us out here." So we said, "Okay, well, we won't do it anymore." And we didn't. In looking back on it, it was kind of stupid and wasn't the thing to do because Orville was — I think he paid us fifty bucks for one night's work, which was then a lot of money, and he was doing us a favor and we were kind of arrogant guys from the newsroom.

RR: Hell, we didn't get anything for doing it.

RP: You didn't?

RR: Back when I was there. We had to do it on a Friday night. All of the reporters had to go back.

RP: I don't know how that would have changed. It doesn't sound like something the *Gazette* would have volunteered to do. Yes, Orville paid us pretty good.

RR: Was that the extent of your sports writing?

RP: That's it. Well, at the *Gazette*. At the *Pine Bluff Commercial* I had to, as southeast Arkansas bureau chief, I had to cover the football games, too. I never played any sports. I liked football, but didn't know much about it. I bluffed my way through that.

RR: Tell me about Mike Trimble. What kind of guy was he?

RP: Trimble was one of the funniest guys I've ever known. Trimble and I were the same age and sort of the same demographics and everything. We both dropped out of college after about a year and a half for no real good reason other than just didn't want to go to college. He started off at the *Texarkana Gazette*, and I started at the *Crossett News* and then the *Pine Bluff Commercial*, and we ended up being roommates for a while until I got married. Trimble was a beautiful writer. He'd cover stuff, and he was very perceptive. He could cover something that would ordinarily be dull and make it interesting. For a while, I don't know if you remember, I think he wrote the "Arkansas Traveler" column for a while. He got in trouble with Hugh Patterson because he was making stuff up, and he didn't like that. You could tell it was satire. My measure of that, bad satire, was something like John Robert Starr's writing. Trimble's was funny. He had some fictitious characters he would reintroduce in his columns. Old veteran VA guys and things like that.

RR: Kind of like Lancaster does in his *Arkansas Times*?

RP: Right.

RR: The Domino Park.

RP: The Domino Park, yes. Trimble is funnier than Lancaster though, and Lancaster would say that.

RR: Do you remember a story that Mike did about his old dog when he died?

RP: Yes.

RR: Tell them about that.

RP: I probably don't remember enough about it to give you a coherent account. I remember the story.

RR: Was it written for the *Gazette*?

RP: I think it was written for the *Arkansas Times*.

RR: I kind of think it was.

RP: It was just short of being a little too sentimental, but he always knew when to pull in the reins on that.

RR: Didn't it say something like "How to bury a dog"?

RP: "How to Bury a Dog," that's what it was. I can't really recount it.

RR: He had a hard time getting this big, old dog in the ground.

RP: Yes. Trimble was interesting. We wrote together. We had a big old house up on Ridgeway, and it was one-half of a huge house that had been made into a duplex. It had a big fireplace, and we looked for a long time for a moose head to put on the fireplace but we couldn't find one. The trouble was his personal habits were worse than mine. He'd never take his clothes to a laundry, for instance. His shirts would pile up in a corner, and sometimes he would air them out, but then when they got really bad he'd just go buy some more shirts. And then when the room

kind of filled up to a certain level, he'd go back down to J.C. Penney or someplace, and get some more. He'd never renew his car license, stuff like that.

RR: I used to teach his stories in the feature-writing class at the University. He was so good at it. He was great.

RP: I wonder if he's still doing anything like that? Do you know?

RR: I think he's city editor or something at some little paper down in Texas.

RP: You wonder why a guy that good would just quit doing it?

RR: Did he have a health problem?

RP: Well, I had heard he had a light stroke or something?

RR: What do you call these arteries?

RP: Carotid?

RR: Yes. Clogging up or something like that.

RP: I kind of lost contact with him years ago.

RR: Without going into the details in too lurid a way, can you give an account of kind of a family tree sketch of that long episode of wife-swapping and girlfriend-swapping and who ended up with whom in the *Gazette* during those years?

RP: Well, I don't remember a lot of swapping, but there were transitions. Leroy comes to mind as a major player in that game.

RR: I can't remember. He was married to Jeanine.

RP: He was married to Jeanine. Okay, here we are. Let's start off with Leroy and Jeanine. Leroy was married to Jeanine, and they had a boy, Scooter, Leroy III and a daughter named Becky. And Leroy fell in love with this beautiful librarian

named Lottie.

RR: Lottie?

RP: Yes.

RR: Spelled T-T-I-E, I guess?

RP: Spelled T-T-I-E. And I'm not sure whether these things overlapped. The time frame escapes me now. I'm not sure whether Leroy and Lottie got together and then Jeanine got together with Chris Kazan, or whether it was simultaneous or what. But, anyway, Jeanine started going with Chris Kazan, who was Elia's son, the movie director. Chris was a general assignment reporter over there. And he went to medical school, but he didn't like it. So, anyway, Leroy, Lottie, Jeanine, Chris. Ina Claire and Jerry. Jerry Jones. Jerry was assistant city editor. And I don't remember about Ina Claire. I don't think she was involved with anybody at the *Gazette*. I'm running into a cul-de-sac.

RR: Although they did eventually split up.

RP: They did split up, yes.

RR: And are now back together, I understand.

RP: Oh, really?

RR: Yes. Not married. She became a widow or something, but they are going around again. What got me thinking about this was Mike Trimble's sister. Pat, was that her name?

RP: Okay, yes, Pat. She was married to Jimmy Jones. And Jimmy and Mike Trimble were brothers-in-law, and they both worked at the *Texarkana Gazette* together

before they both came to the *Arkansas Gazette*. And Jimmy and Pat were divorced. Pat had already been married. Jimmy was Pat's second marriage. She was married to a guy named Butt from Fayetteville. An important Butt, an old family. He's a lawyer or a judge.

RR: This was Pat?

RP: Pat.

RR: She had been married before?

RP: Yes, as I just said, she had been married before to a Butt. And they were divorced. And then Carrick and Pat got married, and Jimmy married the state auditor, Julia Hughes Jones.

RR: But, meanwhile, this just to tie up a loose end — Chris Kazan and Jeanine did get married.

RP: They did get married.

RR: And moved away.

RP: And moved away to Connecticut.

RR: And did Leroy marry Lottie?

RP: Yes. I think they had two kids. I know they had one named Richard, I think named after Richard Allin, and maybe a second child. They may have had two. And then Lottie left Leroy and ran off with Winthrop Rockefeller's pilot.

RR: I never knew that part of it.

RP: That was the scuttlebutt. I'm not sure.

RR: Were you there for the fight between Ken Danforth and . . . ?

RP: Not physically, but I was at the *Gazette* then. I was not at the party where it happened. I saw the cast and stuff.

RR: What was it, a collar bone or a shoulder?

RP: I thought it was an arm.

RR: Douglas just remembers that he had to take Leroy to the emergency room after Danforth assaulted him, and Leroy couldn't stand the sight of blood.

RP: I think it was forearm fracture. It may have been an elbow, but I remember him being in a cast, but that's way back.

RR: And that was all caused by Lottie had been engaged to Ken?

RP: Ken Danforth thought he had dibs on Lottie. Apparently, he was being presumptuous. He caught them or they showed up at a party together, and everybody was drunk. This is how bad my memory is. I still to this day have a hard time remembering who broke whose arm.

RR: Well, it was Ken broke Leroy's. And they have made up.

RP: Oh, they have?

RR: Yes. Danforth called him up. Well, does that pretty well cover it?

RP: Just about. I know that after the Lottie and Leroy thing, the *Gazette* came up with a rule that married couples could no longer work at the *Gazette*.

RR: Oh, really?

RP: Because Leroy and Lottie were married, and she was still working in the library and he was on the state desk.

RR: Well, how did Pat and Carrick [Patterson] get together?

RP: I don't know. I have no idea.

RR: Pat wasn't working at the paper, was she?

RP: Yes, she was.

RR: Oh, she was?

RP: I think she was on the society page or something.

RR: Was Buff Blass working there?

RP: Yes.

RR: She wasn't involved in any of this?

RP: No. Buff had her own crowd. Buff had a reputation for being a "friendly" girl, but I don't think she had any boyfriends at the *Gazette*. I think they were in another circle.

[End of side one, tape one.]

[Beginning of side two, tape one]

RR: We were talking about different people at the *Gazette* when you worked there. What do you remember about Dumas?

RP: Oh, Ernie was probably one of the classiest people I've ever known. Smart guy, never got rattled. He was a good, solid reporter. Ernie's a classic liberal. Makes no bones about his politics. There were a lot of eccentric people who hung around or worked at the *Gazette*, and Ernie was sort of the solid guy. You could always depend on him. Nothing flaky about him at all. If there was something going on, big story or something going on, Ernie would be sober and get the job done. But he was just a hell of a nice guy. I don't think I ever saw Ernie in a bad

mood or upset about anything. I used to steal his hat. Ernie became prematurely bald and started affecting a hat in the newsroom. He would wear it. His desk was pretty close to the door as you walked into the newsroom, and he wouldn't take his hat off quick enough to suit me. And when he did, he would put it in a drawer. I would hide his hat and Douglas got in on it, too. We would hide it in different places. He finally quit wearing it, but he took it in good stride.

RR: Is it the truth that you once hid it once in the library?

RP: Under H for hat. But Ernie was in my Reserve unit, too. We would go out to these summer camps. We had to go to Fort Polk or Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and had to take over the weekly newspaper there, and we had a lot of fun doing that. Ernie would be sort of our managing editor whenever we did this. I can't say enough about Dumas.

RR: He remembers that you all would, or maybe just you, would write columns.

RP: You mean at the *Gazette*?

RR: No, at the camp.

RP: Oh yes, we did that. At the camp I would just make those up totally.

RR: It all sounded all very factual.

RP: Yes, it would be about the mess hall and stuff like, "In ancient Greece if the meal did not suit the soldiers, then the mess sergeant would be summarily executed." But I used to, also, Dumas might not know about this — but Jerry Rush for a while was the editor of the Sunday — what's now the "Perspective" section used to be called, I think they called it the Sunday Magazine. The front page of it was

the “Our Town” column, and for some reason they would always fill up during the week. They would fill it up to the bottom, but on Sunday there would always be a little gap there. Charlie Davis had the job before Rush, so it passed from one guy to a good hand off there. Rush would fill in the bottom of this Richard Allin column with little poems sent in by mostly female poets. So I told Rush one time, I said, “I’m tired of reading all that crap. Let me write something for you.” I would make up these nonsensical poems and for a long time, once a week, my poetry would be at the bottom of Richard Allin’s column on the front page of the Sunday section.

RR: Was that the beginning of your poetry career?

RP: That was the beginning of it and probably the apex, too. It was all downhill from there.

RR: You’ve been doing it for years now, haven’t you?

RP: I haven’t written a poem in a long time.

RR: I hate to hear that.

RP: I know, I need to get back into it.

RR: I’ve got some of them. Rosetta Parks Norfleet.

RP: I had different names, but there would always be three women’s names. I guess looking back on it, they didn’t give you much room. You couldn’t write much, and most of the time I would try to put the word gossamer into the poem. It would just be like a lot of modern poetry that they say is not supposed to make sense, but it would just be strings of nonsense syllables.

RR: The names you gave your poets might have been inspired by Rosa Marinoni up in Fayetteville. She had a third name.

RP: Probably something. Yes, Rosa Zagnoni Marinoni. Probably subconsciously, not a conscious thing. Then later on it occurred to me that Rosa Parks, you know, who wouldn't get up on the bus, sounds a lot like Rosetta Parks. I certainly didn't mean that. A slur to a great lady. My mother was a wonderful writer, and she wrote poetry, too, but she would go to these poetry conventions and have these little booklets of poems, and I noticed all the poets would have three names and that is where I got that.

RR: How hard was it to write one of those poems?

RP: It would only take me a matter of seconds. One of the easiest things.

RR: Well, the reason I ask is because I have actually studied one or two of them, and they are little gems that are perfect nonsense.

RP: I appreciate your saying that.

RR: And I got in my head that this must take some labor.

RP: No, if it required any effort, I wouldn't have gotten into it in the first place.

RR: Ernie wanted me to have you come clean on something else that he accuses you of, and I am sure you didn't do it. Something about the furniture at the *Gazette*, his desk and chair and typewriter. What's he talking about?

RP: That doesn't ring a bell.

RR: Surely this is not a false accusation.

RP: Sounds like it's a bum rap to me.

RR: He told me just this morning on the telephone that there was a period when Larry Obstinik had something to do with getting him some nice furniture. I guess he had some awful desk and terrible chair and maybe some other stuff, and just as he got it all accumulated, it began to disappear one item at a time.

RP: I wouldn't know anything about that.

RR: Until finally he came to work one day and even his typewriter was gone, and he just had a couple of pencils.

RP: I remember getting Ernie's hat, but the furniture part . . .

RR: Did you ever do anything else to him?

RP: Oh, I can't think of anything. We made fun of his feet. Ernie's got really big feet. There was some kind of foot thing we did — maybe it was shoes. Bought him some clown shoes or something like that.

RR: He holds a grudge. This is a surprising quality in Dumas, but he says, "Richard is always pulling some prank on me."

RP: Well, those things expand. I mean, I've taken blame or credit for stuff I did, but furniture. He doesn't remember the good part. Did he tell you about the letter of recommendation I wrote Alex Washburn trying to get him a job at the *Hope Star*.

RR: Yes, he did, and he's offered to give me a copy of it to put in the files.

RP: He remembers the hat.

RR: Well, in fact this was part of the same story that he told about the furniture. He said after all that you came up to him and said, "They don't appreciate you here, and if they were up front with you, they would just tell you to leave." But he said

then you wrote this letter to Alex Washburn recommending him for a job at the *Hope Star*. He says he's still got a copy of that.

RP: I really don't think I pulled that furniture job.

RR: All right. I'll tell him.

RP: Okay.

RR: That's between the two of you. You're neighbors. I hate to see a man lied about, and if you didn't do it, why you ought not to be accused of it.

RP: It may have been somebody like Bill Lewis, you know, a more malignant thing where Bill didn't like Ernie getting better furniture than he.

RR: There was some of that in the newsroom. There was some jealousy over chairs.

RP: Oh, yes.

RR: Seemed like I was always coming out on the short end. But Lewis was acquisitive. He played some records, music, that was legitimate, but there was a lot of envy after a while, because he was getting all these free records.

RP: Oh, yes, yes. He got a lot of free records, but then, according to George Carter, George couldn't ever stand him because of the record deal because George said he was selling them. He not only collected them, but sold them

RR: I think I can put the lie to that because I've been in his house, and he's got something like seven thousand LP [long-playing] records.

RP: Did Douglas tell you about Garrison's notorious slowness?

RR: Were you there that night?

RP: Yes. Well, the night of the blow up or something? No.

RR: Yes, Bob told me about that. Apparently, it was something to see.

RP: And the mole. Remember the mole, George Bentley? Did you ever know George Bentley? He covered the courthouse, Pulaski County Courthouse. Big reporter. Douglas called him the mole because he wore sunglasses inside all the time. Wore his hat and his sunglasses. For some reason, I never had the guts to steal Bentley's hat or shades.

RR: He and I went to work at the *Gazette* the same month, maybe the same day. And I was envious of him because he had more experience. He had worked at the [?] newspaper, so he got the courthouse beat, and they stuck me on North Little Rock where I stayed for two years.

RP: Oh, really?

RR: Had the record until John Woodruff came along. Kept it for about twenty years.

RP: You know, I don't think the *Democrat* even has a North Little Rock page anymore, do they? You never see any North Little Rock news.

RR: I don't think so. It has fallen off the map.

RP: I mean, they've got more Springdale news than they do North Little Rock. Big city right across.

RR: So you became a doctor in what year?

RP: M.D. in 1974, and then residency in 1975, and went to work in 1976.

RR: Where?

RP: Prescott.

RR: Okay. And then stayed at Prescott?

RP: Until 1987, and then moved to Hope and was at there until about the early 1990s, and I've done emergency room work since.

RR: Texarkana?

RP: Well, I've done at both, but I've worked at Hope for the last five years.

RR: You still go down there some, don't you, from Little Rock?

RP: That's my only job right now.

RR: Oh, you drive back and forth?

RP: Yes. I'm the medical director of the ER [emergency room] now, and I work two 24-hour shifts a week. It's pretty grueling while you're doing it, but then you're off a lot. Just eight shifts a month, so I like it.

RR: A shift is how much?

RP: Twenty-four hours. So eight twenty-four shifts a month, that leaves you twenty-two days off, not counting the day after you work — you're asleep. You sleep all day. I'm working tomorrow, so Friday will be pretty much a dead day. But I'm pretty much an insomniac, anyway. Doesn't bother me none. I get up pretty early.

RR: Would you tell the story you told me one time years ago about this guy who came into the emergency room with a wound to his privates, as I recall. What was that story?

RP: A gentleman had been shot, and I don't want to exaggerate the number of times, but either six or seven times by the same woman.

RR: Separate incidents?

RP: Separate incidents, not six or seven bullets at once, but recurrent shootings. She always would aim for his privates and, finally, the last time, it actually went right through the shaft of his penis. But he had scars and bullet wounds from his mid-thighs on up to his belly where she, over a period of years, had bracketed him in. One time she got him with a .357 Magnum in the belly, and he had to have pretty extensive surgery over that. After that she downgraded to a .25 caliber, which is sort of a little, low-velocity lady's gun. It doesn't really do a lot of damage unless it's point blank in the head or something. I asked him, I said, "Jerry, why do you keep going back to this lady? Over a period of several years now, she's shot you seven separate occasions." He said, "Well, sometimes folks just get into it."

Okay.

RR: But she had got him pretty good that last time.

RP: Yes, but I think he is going to make it okay. I haven't seen him in about three years and, periodically, they check on him. I keep looking for his obituary, too.

RR: Probably have a lot of things in the emergency room over the years that remind you of your newspaper days?

RP: Oh, yes, things that would be great stories, except you can't tell them.

RR: Where were you when the *Gazette* died?

RP: I was at Hope. Let's see. I think Jon called me. My brother worked for the *Gazette*.

RR: He was there at the end.

RP: He was there at the end, yes. He called me. But they knew. I remember waiting for the last edition. I saved a bunch of copies of it. And then they were never allowed to print a farewell edition. I think that on the front page, I think maybe Dumas, had a little story that kind of hints. And I remember the image of old, what was the guy's name? [Walker] Lundy?

RR: He had gone. [Ken] Moyer, the editor.

RP: Yes. I never knew any of those guys because I left long before Gannett took over. Standing in the newsroom and saying, "Well, folks, this is our last day." This was terrible, and it was like a death in the family. Even though I didn't work there that long and it had been thirty years since I worked. Or twenty years.

RR: You miss it?

RP: Oh, yes. It was a lot of fun.

RR: What made the *Gazette* what it was?

RP: Everybody had his own reason. Bob Douglas was, to me, the *Gazette*, and he set the tone for the morality of the place and the standards of what we could do and wouldn't do. I remember one time — you know, we were a bunch of rowdy smart-aleck left-wing guys, liberal guys, bolsheviks, and we were making fun of Lurleen Wallace running for George. And Douglas says something about, "You guys ought to shut up about that. She's just being loyal to her husband, and that's what she needs to be doing." And we all kind of backed off. Douglas was sort of the moral — and you don't think about him like that — he was sort of the moral fiber of that place. You had the boss. You had Hugh and Mr. Nelson and Bill

Shelton and everybody, but Douglas was really the guy. He was an editor. He would go and he would say, “No, we’re not going to run this shit in the *Arkansas Gazette*,” and that would be all of it. Nowadays, there is chaos out there. There are no standards. I sound like Jerry Falwell or somebody, or Gene Lyons, but I mean it. Do you agree with that?

RR: Don’t get me going. I stay mad all the time about that.

RP: There doesn’t seem to be anybody in charge who has any sense of reining these people in and say, “Look, we can’t do this,” or “We can do it, but we shouldn’t do it.” And that’s not censorship. It’s just editing. Being a decent person and a decent editor.

RR: Douglas had standards, and he knew what a paper was supposed to be. How do you learn that? I think I had it. I think you had it. I know Douglas had it, but I don’t know where we got it. Maybe at the *Gazette*, maybe it was just there.

RP: It was sort of you picked it up from people like Douglas.

RR: At the same time Douglas was a funny guy. In fact, your brother Buddy once described him in print as the funniest man in Arkansas. Did you ever see that column?

RP: No, I didn’t.

RR: Yes, and he told some story about Douglas that was truly funny. We didn’t even mention that all three of you Portis brothers worked at the *Gazette*. First Buddy, then you, I guess, then Jonathan. And Buddy was writing the “Our Town” column. He was a reporter first.

RP: He came out of the Marine Corps, went to the University and got a degree in English and Journalism. Went from there to work at the *Commercial Appeal* in Memphis for a year or so and then came in as a reporter, I think right around the 1957 [Little Rock integration] crisis.

RR: A little later.

RP: Maybe a little later? Yes. Okay. General assignment reporter, I don't know how he got into that "Our Town" job.

RR: Allbright had been writing it, and he either quit to become an editorial writer or went to work for Winthrop Rockefeller or I don't know.

RP: Yes, I think he wrote editorials for Winthrop Rockefeller because Buddy went to the *Herald Tribune* in like 1959, or 1960. I remember Daddy was really upset with him when he took that New York job and quit as the writer for "Our Town."

RR: Really?

RP: Yes. Thought that was his pinnacle, which may very well could have been.

RR: Well, he was terrific at it. He didn't do it very long, did he?

RP: No, probably a year or less. I think that there is a natural progression there. I went into it because Buddy did, and then Jonathan probably followed along because both of us did it.

RR: I always thought Buddy quit the best newspaper job in the world when he left the London bureau of the *New York Herald Tribune*. Remember what Tom Wolfe said about that? He and Wolfe worked together at the *Trib* in New York, and Wolfe later put together this anthology of new journalism, and in the preface he

said, “Back then all of us hot-shot feature writers wanted to be novelists,”and he said, “Now and then somebody would cut loose and do it.” And then he said, “Charles Portis, for example, left this great job as the London bureau chief of the *Herald Tribune* and went home to the hills of Arkansas, for God’s sake, and lived in a fishing shack and wrote this great novel.” Actually did it. Lived out the newspaperman’s dream. But at the time I couldn’t imagine anybody. Of course, I didn’t want to write novels, so all I could see was, here he was, he had this terrific job, and threw it over. But he’s done all right, hasn’t he?

RP: Yes. Did he tell you anything about what he’s working on now?

RR: Just that he’s working on a book.

RP: Something about this chiropractor who has this psychiatric hospital somewhere outside of Veracruz, but he actually helps people. But that was several months ago. It may be something else now.

RR: Can you think of anything more to talk about?

RP: I can’t think of anything.

RR: About the *Gazette* or anything else that ought to be down here? This is for history now. Five hundred years from now, folks will be pawing around.

RP: Well, we may have to edit some of it.

RR: Well, why don’t we call it quits and maybe go to supper.

RP: All right.

[End of Interview]

