

*Gazette* Project

Interview with

Roy Reed,  
Little Rock, Arkansas  
29 November 2000

Interviewer: T. Harri Baker

Harri Baker: Good morning, it is Tuesday, November the 29th, in the year 2000. I am Harri Baker, and this is a continuation of the interview with Roy Reed. This is in fact, I believe, the ninth session, and incredible as it seems, more hours than that. You have done hard work, Roy. We are picking up chronologically where the last tape has left off. Roy, help me with the years here. Is it the year 1976 when you go to London?

Roy Reed: In 1976, late in the year, it was decided that I would go to London. I recollect that I had a surprise waiting for me. It had all been worked out. I had approached the editors about going to New York. They had said, "No, how about --- we would like to have you stay on reporting. How would you like to live in London and report from there?" That was a wonderful idea. One of the things that made it attractive was that I would get to work with a bureau chief that I had known and liked for quite a while, a man named Bob Semple, Robert Semple, Jr. I had met him in the Washington bureau years before and liked him quite a lot. He was the bureau chief in London. What I did not know was that in the inner sanctum of *The Times* on Forty-Third Street it had been decided that

Robert Semple, Jr., was being groomed to be the next foreign editor. Unfortunately, he had no foreign correspondent experience. To remedy that, they sent Bob to London for a couple of years to give him some foreign experience. His tenure in London was just about up. None of this was revealed to me when they talked about me going to London. The upshot was that Semple returned to New York just as I was on my way to London. There I was presented with a new bureau chief, a man named R. W. Apple, Jr., known as Johnny Apple, a brilliant and difficult man. I don't really know if it would have made any difference in my deciding to take the London assignment or not. I was a little stunned to learn that I would be working with this other man. Before we got to London, Norma and I went through New York. *The Times* put us up at the Algonquin Hotel for a couple of nights before we shoved off on a Trans-Atlantic flight. I remember having a lovely "farewell to America" dinner at a nice little French restaurant, somewhere in midtown Manhattan, with a nice bottle of wine. As I was checking out of the Algonquin the next morning, I ran into a fellow that we had known a little bit in Louisiana, Walker Percy, the novelist. He and his wife were staying there. Altogether, it seemed a time of omens. I was a great fan of Percy's. I was eager to get to London and see what that would be all about.

HB: You probably had a little bit of sentimental attachment to the Algonquin Roundtable, too.

RR: Yes, yes. Anyway, we got to London and arrived in the middle of the night for some reason. They had a hotel waiting for us in West End, a lovely old hotel called the Chesterfield. It was midnight or later, and the staff rustled up some food for us even though the kitchen had been closed for hours. We got up the next morning and walked around and were bedazzled by the West End of London. You know, it is one of the loveliest parts of any city on earth. We were off to a good start.

HB: Roy, let me pause here and ask some personal questions. Refresh my memory. Were both of your children now in college?

RR: No.

HB: They are not with you?

RR: They are not with us. Cindy was already out of college and had been for some time. She went off to Oberlin and had settled in the northeast around Boston. Johnny was still at Yale. In fact, he was doing his junior year abroad during part of the time that we were in London. He gave his mother a shock. He showed up in London one day, late in the fall semester. He was at a University in Madrid, studying Spanish and Spanish Literature. He was supposed to be feeding himself off a check from a scholarship that he had won, a merit scholarship. Unknown to us --- he had not told us --- his check had not come in. He was about to starve to death when he showed up on our doorstep in London. We almost did not know our own son. He was so gaunt and thin. The kids were gone, and we were by ourselves. We inherited a house there from *The Times* correspondent whose place

I was taking, Bernie Weintraub and his wife, Judy. They, in turn, had inherited the house from a correspondent with a very large family, seven or eight children. It was a huge, three story --- four, counting the basement, --- in Hampstead. It was an old, enormous Georgian house in Hampstead, about two hundred years old. It was in the middle of the Vale of Health. The Vale of Health is an encroachment on Hampstead Heath. It would not be allowed to be built nowadays. A heath was precious parkland. In fact, the Vale of Health celebrated its two hundredth anniversary while we were there, shortly after — The development had started out as a real estate man's usual thing, called Hatch's Bottoms. Some smart PR person figured out that you wouldn't sell a house in a place called Hatch's Bottoms. They changed the name to the Vale of Health. It was, in fact, sold as a place to get out of the miasma of unhealthy, downtown London. It sat up on a rise of Hampstead about four miles from the Thames. Looking out from certain places on Hampstead Heath, you can see the dome of St. Paul's. Our neighbors there told stories about during the war when the Germans would bomb London almost everyday. Every morning the people of Hampstead would go out onto Hampstead Heath and look out across London to see whether St. Paul's was still standing. This we were told was a very important factor in the morale of Londoners. They went to some pains to keep St. Paul's from burning down. Every night, old men and boys would station themselves around St. Paul's Cathedral. When the Germans would drop their incendiary bombs, they would roll them off into the street so they wouldn't catch the building on fire. One

German bomb went astray and hit Jack Straw's Castle Pub on the upper side of the Heath. One of our neighbors said that a piece of shrapnel or something from the bomb came through her kitchen window and landed in her kitchen.

Interesting old historic neighborhood.

HB: Does *The Times* pay the rent for the house, or are you expected to pay for that out of your salary?

RR: We pay the rent, but *The Times* subsidized it. In more expensive cities --- Tokyo, London, Paris --- there is no way a reporter could pay for housing. We were heavily subsidized.

HB: An overseas allowance?

RR: Yes, something like that.

HB: How many people were in the London bureau at that time?

RR: Altogether, it must have been ten or twelve, including support people. There were three American correspondents, an English reporter who handled certain kinds of English stories and things. It seems to me there were always young people drifting in and out of the bureau on an informal basis, free-lance writers and people who wanted to get on at *The Times*. Some interesting young people came through.

HB: It sounds like fun. Did you have a beat or an assignment?

RR: An informal arrangement. Apple, who, as you know, was an old political reporter for *The Times* and had been covering American elections for years. He was very good at that. He took the British government beat. Anytime there was a major

story about the Parliament or British government, Johnny handled that. I took Northern Ireland, which had heated up again --- It had been since 1969. --- I made the rounds with “The Troubles.” It was always capitalized in our minds, “The Troubles.” I spent quite a lot of time in Belfast and in Northern Ireland. I never felt personally endangered. It was interesting to go to bed at night on one of the upper floors of the Europa Hotel in downtown Belfast and hear bombs explode now and then throughout the night across the city. The Catholic IRA [Irish Republican Army] and the Protestant paramilitaries were trying to destroy each other. They were bombing each other’s pubs, houses sometimes. I saw a great deal of destruction in the city of Belfast. By the way, Belfast is now fairly restored to its old glory. It is a beautiful city and not many Americans know that. They have some of the best architecture in Europe.

HB: How do you develop sources in situations like that?

RR: The same way that I got that house in Hampstead. You inherit sources. First of all, I inherited a driver. An old, old, man named Sam Fee, a Protestant who was about eighty. He had an old car. For years he had been *The New York Times* driver for the correspondent in Belfast. The reason we had a driver was because it was fairly dangerous to depend on public transportation. One of the favorite devices of paramilitaries on both sides was to burn buses and burn and bomb taxis --- partly because taxi drivers, in some cases, were associated in some minds with one side or the other, and it was troublesome. If, say, an IRA guerrilla wanted to plant a bomb somewhere downtown, you wouldn’t want to rent a car because one

of their favorite things was to steal a rental car. You can tell them from the licenses. They would steal it, put a bomb in it and a timer, and park it downtown and let it go off. The rental car companies were high risk. It pays to have somebody you know to drive you around. I remember more than once asking old Sam to take me into West Belfast, into the heart of IRA country. He would wait outside while I went up and interviewed the people that I needed to talk to. He was very nervous, very nervous. But he was a pro, and he always did what he was asked to do.

HB: Is that another case where being from *The New York Times*, plus being an American, helped you a great deal?

RR: I think so. One thing, the people on both sides were proud of the fact that they had never killed an American. In fact, they had never killed a foreigner of any kind. It was said in the late 1970s that the only foreigner that had ever been wounded was some Frenchmen who got in the wrong part of town or something and got himself shot and hurt. No Americans were ever lost or even hurt, and they took some pride in that. It was for practical reasons. Both sides were depending on America for money and arms, in some cases. They didn't want to do anything to jeopardize the support. I never felt any danger, as I said. A very interesting story and a very intricate story and terribly hard to understand because all of the nuances and factions within factions.

HB: Did you enjoy that one? It sounds like a really difficult beat?

RR: That made it interesting. I found it to be by far the most interesting thing that I

ever covered the two years I was in London. It was just enough like the old Civil Rights beat in the South to make it challenging. It had all kinds of differences, and similarities went only so far. I found it very interesting and looked forward to going over there despite all of the drudgery. In fact, just getting there was a problem. You flew from Heathrow Airport in London to the airport in Belfast. Before you ever got off the ground in London, if you were on a flight to Belfast, you had to go through all kinds of extra security arrangements --- not just the usual electronic searches, but your bag, while you were standing there, would be laid open. A guard would go through every item in your suitcase. The suitcases would not be loaded in the cargo hold of the plane at first. They would be taken out to the tarmac beside the plane. Before the passengers got on the plane, they would be asked to go over and point to their bag and identify it so that every bag had to be accounted for. Once Norma went over to Belfast, and when she went through this, they got through loading all the bags and there was one bag left. They wouldn't start the plane until they had located the owner of that bag. They finally ran him down somewhere. He was somewhere out of pocket, a native. They were so afraid of an IRA terrorist blowing up an airplane. At the other end, a similar account of security. When you got there, --- a very dreary airport in those days --- it was crawling with policemen and soldiers. It was kind of hairy just getting there and getting back home. Once you were there, you sort of got used to the soldiers with guns, walking down the street pointing them at people. Driving around the province, you would come in from town and --- I remember

one time I pulled into some little town to get lunch or stop or something. I started to park on the main street. Before I could get out of the car, a policeman came and said that I couldn't park there. He realized I was American and explained why. There was no parking in certain areas of downtown because so many cars had been blown up on that street. They just wouldn't let cars down there.

HB: Did you ever go into southern Ireland?

RR: Yes, several times. As you might expect, there is not as much news in the Republic of Ireland as there is in the north. Now and then, there would be a feature story or a background story or something that needed some research. I would have business down there. It was always much, much more relaxed. You would rent a car and take off around the island. I remember once I was driving back to Dublin from somewhere way out in the west. I kept noticing hitchhikers. I had been told that you do not pass up hitchhikers. Back then not many people had cars. I picked up a hitchhiker who was a middle-aged woman. She was hitchhiking two miles into town for a school board meeting. She was a member of the school board. That was how she got to the school board meetings.

HB: Interesting. The social "no" was to NOT pass up a hitchhiker. Did you do any other traveling in Europe? Professionally or personally?

RR: Professionally, a fair amount, yes. In the London bureau we were always being called on to go somewhere else around the continent or somewhere to help out. When the world's worse aircraft disaster occurred in the Canary Islands in 1978, two or three of us *Times* people were sent down there --- one from Madrid to do

the main story. I went down there and stayed several days. Another time, a group of Mollucans, residents of the Netherlands, --- you probably recall the Netherlands made a colony out of the Molluccan Islands years and years before. A number of natives of those islands had settled in Holland. They were being mistreated, they thought. They hijacked a train --- some of the radicals did --- and held the people on the train hostage for thirty days. I went over to cover that. The funniest assignment off the British Isles occurred and started one night --- I had gone to bed at ten thirty or eleven o'clock. The phone rang, and it was Bob Semple calling from New York. He said I was to catch the next plane to Stockholm. This was where the Nobel Prizes were being handed out. The reason for this sudden assignment was that *The Times* had learned, from some source in New York, that the *Daily News* was sending a correspondent to Stockholm to cover the next day's events. Word had leaked out that a New York physician had won the Nobel Prize for medicine. *The Times* could not be outdone by the *Daily News*. I was to go over and cover this. I was on a plane very early the next morning. I got there just in time to get downtown to the auditorium where the ceremony was going to be, just before it started. I only had an hour to spare. I walked in and a very nice man met me at the door and asked me what I wanted. I told him my business. He said, "Well, sir, there is no way that you can get in. To cover this event, you had to have press credentials about six months ago." He said, "I am sorry, but that is it. There is no way that you can get in." I didn't try to argue with him. I had dealt with enough bureaucrats in Washington to know --

- I went around to another door. The man said, "By the way, how did you get this far?" I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Well there are policeman out there. They are supposed to be stopping everybody before they get [within] a hundred yards." I said, "I just walked in." I walked around to another door, and here is another fellow, a young man, very pleasant. Once again, he spoke perfect English. I explained my problem. He said, "I can get you in. That is no problem. It is very easy. I will take care of it. Please come with me." He led me right through the bowels of the building, and I suddenly realized that he was taking me to the same office that I had just left. When I walked in, the first man laughed. He didn't have to say anything. He just laughed. I gave up. I had the main phone number for *The New York Times* stringer, an American fellow. I called him and caught him as he literally was going out the door to be gone for the weekend out in the country somewhere. He canceled his trip to the country. He and I covered the Nobel Prize ceremony by television. We watched it by television in his office. We pieced the story together and did a few interviews. We managed not to embarrass ourselves too much.

HB: It was a New York physician?

RR: It was a New York physician.

HB: Did you and Norma do any personal traveling? You went to Tibet sometime.

RR: Yes, that was after I came home to Arkansas. Norma did a lot more than I did. We had some friends in London we had known for years in New Orleans. Our daughters were best friends in high school. Charles and Millie Blomberg. He

was with Chevron Oil Company. He had been transferred to London just a few months before I was. Norma fell in with Millie and a group of women called the Petroleum Wives Club. Norma became an honorary Petroleum Wives Club member. These women were forever off on trips round the British Isles, going to things like the Tulip Show over in Holland and that sort of thing. They did a lot. I don't think there was a castle or cathedral that they didn't visit. Norma and I did a fair amount of driving around the island and going out on trains. Most of my travel was with work. I did a lot of feature stories around England, Scotland, and Wales. The Welsh independence movement was going on, as well as the Scottish independence movement. These were small movements, but interesting politically. They had a little more political impact than their numbers might have suggested. I spent a fair amount of time traveling in Wales and Scotland.

HB: Did you do any kind of feature stories like you were doing earlier in New Orleans, about rural folks and rural areas?

RR: Yes. As a matter of fact, one of my favorite times there was a week that Norma and I spent in the village of Radwinter, up near Cambridge. We had known some people in New Orleans who had a cottage in Radwinter. She was English, and this was near her ancestral village. We rented their cottage and stayed a week up there, Norma and I. I did a feature story about village life --- not one of the little picturesque postcard villages, but just an ordinary village. I wrote about the problems they were having and [about] everyday life. It turned out to be, what I thought, a very interesting feature story. I did a fair number of things like that. I

was reading a local paper, and there was some little town up in the north, way up on the eastern coast, where somebody discovered that the people there seemed to live forever. The graveyards were full of people who had died at age one hundred and in their late nineties. I went up there. It was kind of a funny feature. It turned out that the people attributed their longevity to the fact that they had not caught up with the times. A lot of them had backyard gardens. They raised their own vegetables. They did not use commercial fertilizer. They still had outdoor toilets. They used human manure to fertilize their gardens. After talking with these folks and gaining their confidence, one after another would confide, “Yes, that is why we live this long. We still use night soil on our gardens.” Well, you know, there were a number of odd feature stories like that. I once spent a day with the Duchess of Sutherland. She was a descendent of the notorious Duke of Sutherland who was, two hundred years later, still being held personally responsible for the Highland Clearances. Hundreds of thousands of folks, including some of my ancestors, I suspect, were run off the land and shipped out to America. The occasion [was] like so many stories that came about accidentally. I went up there because we had found out that there was to be a gathering, an annual gathering of the clans in Edinburgh, people from Australia and Canada and the U.S. and other English-speaking places where there were a lot of descendants of Scots. They would make the trip every year and go around in kilts and wearing the tartans of the their clans, generally talking themselves into believing they were really Scots. It was supposed to be just another little

funny feature story. When I got there, I fell in with a journalist who said, “You know, if you are going to write about these folks, you really ought to mention the Clearances.” He recommended a book by a man named Pebbles. While I was there, I read it and was intrigued. Damned if the Duchess of Sutherland was not on the program in some way. I think maybe she was the host of some coffee or something for some folks out at her castle. I fell in with her and her husband and found out that they were driving right out across County Sutherland the next day. They let me in the car with them. It took nearly all day to drive from one side to the other on one-lane roads. We were driving down a road where every now and then you would have to stop for sheep. We looked off to the left and there was a stream and some people out there fishing. They said it was Prince Charles. They had known he was coming up there on a fishing trip. The story that I wrote did not please the Duchess, I’m sure. I never heard from her. It was not really designed to please the Duchess. It was to retell the story of the Clearances in about seven hundred words.

HB: Did you come back to the United States anytime during your term in London?

RR: Yes. A couple of times. Once for health reasons. Some problem, I came back to New York so that *The Times* doctors could get me some help. Another time when Norma’s mother died. We came back for her funeral. I think those were the only times that we came back. We were there a total of two years. We got to be friends with a number of people there. When we do go back to London now, we usually see friends from those days. Just the other day, I was in London having

lunch with some neighbors from the Vale of Heath and the lady who has run *The New York Times* bureau, the administrative assistant, for close to thirty-five years.

It is fun to revisit.

HB: Shall we take a break and drink some coffee?

RR: Yes, that is a good idea.

[Tape Stopped]

HB: We have this turned back on now and are sitting here with our coffee. Roy, is there anything else that you would like to include about the years in London?

RR: Yes, a couple of things. An Irish story that I remember. It is still painful for me to think about. In those days in Ulster, it was fairly common for a Catholic or a Protestant to be singled out and shot to death for no apparent reason. People who had no known connection to any political group at all. A Protestant paramilitary group had just shot to death a young Catholic fellow --- I think he was about eighteen years old --- on the street. He had some Protestant friends, and he was walking down the street. Somehow the IRA people of the Protestant paramilitary knew he was Catholic. They scattered and ran the other boys off and shot and killed this Catholic boy right on the street just because he was Catholic. It was one of those tit-for-tat murders, they called them. Somebody had killed a Protestant, so they were killing some Catholics. It turned out that this kid was a bright young guy who already was showing great promise as a poet. Some of the newspapers got from his family some of his poems and ran them. It interested me, so I went over there to do a feature story about this boy and his family.

Norma went with me, for some reason I have forgotten. She was with me and went with me to the house. It was a modest Catholic neighborhood, a small house for such a large family. I forget the number of children. They told me how many children there were and how many were left after this boy was killed. At one time or another — They had Norma and me to stay for supper. They were a very nice and cordial family. They had nothing at all to do with politics. In fact, they did not like the IRA and made it very plain that they did not like the IRA. During the three or four hours that Norma and I were in the house, we noticed that all of the children came through and introduced themselves. After we left, we realized that they didn't add up. One of the kids had not been there. They had talked about him and mentioned his name, but he hadn't been there. Later on I found out why. When I got back to London and wrote the story, I didn't say anything about this peculiarity, but a few days later a friend in Belfast sent me a clipping from the Belfast paper. It was about a three- or four-paragraph story, just a little short story. It was about a young man, and had his name, being arrested with some other young people. He was suspected of being an IRA operative. The young man was this boy, the missing boy of this family. Norma and I got to thinking. The family had been anxious to not say much about this boy. They seemed to be worried about him, but [we] could not figure out why. It all came together. He had been missing for several days. He had not been at home. They did not know where he was. We suspected the worse, that he had gone off with some IRA people. Indeed he had, and then he was under arrest. It still pains me to think

about that lovely family, good people, religious, devout, and caring people. After losing one son, then to lose another one to the IRA. I often wonder what became of that errant boy. I never had a chance to find out. I should say a little bit more about Johnny Apple. After he and I had got on the ground at London, we went to lunch one day. We had the open intention of sorting some things out so that there would not be trouble between us. We just said up front, both of us are known on the paper as prima donnas. We know that, and everybody is looking at us to see if these two prima donnas would get along, or will they explode at each other? We kind of made a pact that we would get along. We did. We never had any cross words, no disagreements about the story assignments, or nothing at all. In effect, we agreed for each to go his own way and the other would not interfere in any way. Of course, as bureau chief, he was more in position to interfere with my work if he wanted to. For the most part, he did not. Now and then, he would want me to stay in London while he was off traveling somewhere, just in case something happened. Maybe I had my own ideas about where I would like to be, but he had seniority in that regard, so I had to defer to that. It wasn't a big deal. You needed somebody there. We got along okay. We never became close friends, but we were friendly. We socialized a little bit, dinner at each other's houses. Not a great deal. He ran with a different circle than I did. We got along okay. He stayed on in London for several years after I left the paper and came home to Arkansas. He eventually went back to Washington and became, I think, Washington bureau chief for awhile. He is now a roving reporter and travels the

world writing about interesting cities and good places to eat. He still does some political reporting.

HB: You were regarded as a prima donna in *The New York Times*?

RR: I was indeed.

HB: By whom?

RR: Copy editors mainly. On the national staff, where I spent twelve of my fourteen years at the paper, --- I think I might have alluded to this earlier --- the national staff was made up of twelve to fifteen reporters stationed at various places around the country. Of those twelve to fifteen people, three or four came to be regarded as people who were good with words and maybe a little out of the ordinary in storytelling. I was one of those. Whoever happened to be national editor at the time seemed to make it his business to, not exactly favor these three or four reporters, but make sure they got assignments where their writing ability would show. Right there you can see where that can make you a target for those who were not so favored. In addition to that, this is more important, those of us who liked writing and thought we were good at it, resented having copy editors in New York meddle, as we saw it, with our stories. We did not suffer in silence. If we saw an awkward or clumsy piece of editing in our copy, we would let the national editor know what we thought about it. Of course, sometimes this would be passed on to the offending copy editor. We were not popular among the copy editors, who, in all fairness, have an important job to do. They are underappreciated by reporters, and they ought to get more respect than they do. I

know that back then I was as loud as any of them. I was trying to protect the sanctity of my prose.

HB: You have mentioned that twice in your career you seriously considered becoming a copy editor, once on the *Gazette* and once on *The Times*.

RR: That's right. I still think that I would have enjoyed it, and I think I would have been a pretty good copy editor.

HB: I don't find it unusual that you would aspire to that job. I think it would be an interesting job, too.

RR: You have done some copy editing. After I became a teacher, a journalism teacher, I was even more convinced that copy editing would be a lot of fun. You have to take it seriously. You have to do more than write headlines and mark paragraphs. You try to improve copy. But, boy, that is dangerous work.

HB: Yes. You have to have a very good relationship with the person you are dealing with.

RR: There were two copy editors on the national desk who were that way. I got along with them beautifully. If they had a problem with a story of mine, they would call me. We would talk about the problem. If they were making a change in my copy that went beyond just ordinary style changes or things like that, they would talk it over.

[End of Tape 9 - Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 9 - Side 2]

HB: We have just turned the tape over, and I don't think we have missed anything.

You were saying that nine times out of ten it would not make a significant difference.

RR: Or I would have to agree with the copy editor that he was right. Reporters resist this.

HB: All writers do.

RR: A lot of your ego is invested with what you are writing. Anyway, for that and maybe other reasons, I think I was known as one of the prima donnas on the paper.

HB: You were probably pretty proud of that.

RR: I did not resent it at all.

HB: So where have we come to? Do I have the year right? I have 1979.

RR: 1978 actually.

HB: 1978. You not only leave the London bureau, you retire from *The New York Times* at the age of forty-eight.

RR: Yes. Sometime during the last year that I was with the paper, *The Times* made a significant change. It followed the lead of other papers around the country that were already starting to run what was called Style sections or Living sections. Anyway, it was a lighthearted section of the paper to try to hold readers. It was not a bad idea, and as it worked out, it has probably been a healthy thing for newspapers. Back then, *The Times*, under A. M. Rosenthal, --- When *The Times* got ready to make this change and started what became what is now called the Living Arts section, to my mind, it was handled poorly. *The Times* for some

reason was reluctant to spend the money needed to do it right. They put in place a few editors, people in New York, to handle the new section. They did not hire enough additional writers or reporters. They instead imposed responsibility of these stories on the reporters who were already in the field, including one Roy Reed in the London bureau. All the foreign correspondents and all the national correspondents were expected to contribute to the Living section. We were not allowed any extra time to do it. They certainly did not pay any extra money. Time was the important thing. We were expected to cover our regular stories in addition to these. I had a problem with this. A lot of the reporters did. I had a more serious problem with it for this reason: the stories that *The Times* went after in the very early days of the Living Section, which were, to my mind, simply fluff, insubstantial, and didn't contribute anything important to the newspaper. I felt that my time could be better spent for the paper in doing other kinds of stories, stories that had some cultural significance or political significance or whatever. The shining example of the mindless fluff story that came my way was when I had a call from one of the assistant editors who was in charge of this new section. He once lived in London himself. He said he would like a story on bespoke shoes. He wanted me to go and have a pair of shoes made, handmade, and write a story about it. I did and got a very nice pair of shoes out of it.

HB: At the expense of *The Times*?

RR: Yes, at the expense of *The Times*. I think it cost *The Times* about four hundred bucks. It was a silly story. I guess it had some value, but in my mind not a whole

lot. To add to the fact, I did not get along well with that particular editor. It seemed to me that most of his ideas were shallow and insubstantial. I began to remember that before I ever went to London, I had a feeler from the University of Arkansas to go up there and teach. Bob McCord called me once or twice at the request of some people at the university to see if I would be interested.

HB: Bob was not working for the university?

RR: No, but he was a graduate of the journalism department there and friends of people like Ernie Deane. This had started some years before I left New Orleans. In fact, when Norma and I bought a small farm in Hogeye, fifteen miles from the University of Arkansas, one of the main reasons for it was with the expectation that someday we would be living there and that I would be teaching at the University of Arkansas. We bought that farm in 1974. So, for a convergence of reasons, fatigue I mentioned earlier, the travel weariness, and the unhappiness of this particular aspect of *The New York Times*, and the fluff, I decided it was time for me to leave. The thing that pushed me over the edge --- I don't think I have told you about this. If I did, then I will tell you again. --- The thing that pushed me over the edge was the morning that I woke up in a hotel and didn't know where I was. Not only did I not know what hotel I was in, I didn't know what city I was in. It turned out to be Belfast. It was no great surprise. It shocked me that this had happened. It made me realize how far gone I was and burned out after fourteen years of travel and living out of hotels and suitcases, rental cars, airports, and all the daily nuisances that you have to put up with if you are a newspaper

correspondent.

HB: You weren't tempted to try some other kind of journalism? To return to the *Gazette* or the proverbial small-town newspaper?

RR: In fact, no. I did make one attempt to stay with *The Times*. For a long time I had admired the work of Alden Whitman, the chief obituary writer. In fact, he became famous for his obituaries. He would travel the world interviewing famous people to prepare their obits ahead of time. I decided that I would like to do that. It meant living in New York, and I could handle that. I made some inquiries about that and found out that the job was not open and that I wouldn't be allowed to do that anytime soon. It was looking as if Rosenthal was as out of patience with me as I was with him. He was probably going to tell me that I had to come to New York to work on the metropolitan staff as a reporter. I did not want to do this. That was the standard punishment for foreign correspondents who had displeased the boss. They would bring you back to New York. Some managing editor had done that to Harrison Salisbury a few years before. They had pulled him back from Moscow against his will. He had said, "Okay." He came back to New York and proceeded to do some brilliant reporting on garbage in the United States. I think it may have been nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. Anyway, sometimes it worked, and sometimes it didn't. He went on to become the assistant managing editor. I really did not want to do that.

HB: Roy, how does it work? The reporter in the London bureau gets word that the executive editor is kind of mad at him?

RR: Rosenthal did not tell me this directly. He sent a man named Jim Greenfield, the man that I alluded to a while ago, to London to have a talk with me.

HB: That was the assistant editor that you alluded to a while back?

RR: Yes. We went out to lunch at some expensive restaurant and had at each other for about an hour and a half. It was a very angry conversation. Neither one of us --- with him telling me that I had to do more of these feature stories for the Living Section and me telling him that was a waste of my time and, essentially, that I wasn't going to do it. That was the way that it was left. Anyway, when I finally sent in my letter of resignation to Rosenthal, I got a letter back from him. I still have it in my file somewhere. It was utterly cordial, friendly, understanding --- you would never guess that there was a moment's conflict between us. I still have fond memories of Abe in some ways. I remember him as a great reporter, a beautiful writer, and in some ways a great editor. I once had a conversation with Gene Roberts --- at that time he was national editor of the paper --- about Rosenthal. He was trying to tell me why he thought Rosenthal was essentially a good editor in spite of his hot temper and his explosions and the way he made people mad. I said, "Are you trying to tell me that Abe is cool under fire?" It was quite the opposite. "Abe is a great editor because he is hot under fire." I know what he means, but I am not sure it will mean much to the people outside of the newspaper business. The stories excited Abe, and he wanted them covered thoroughly. He was a terribly difficult man to deal with. There are stories and legends about how he abused people in the New York office. I never had to

suffer that directly.

HB: I don't know if it's any worse than other newspapers or any other institutions, but *The Times* does have a reputation for Byzantine, internal politics.

RR: Yes, indeed. In fact, one of the great non-fiction works of our time is about that very thing. It is by Gay Talese [*The Kingdom and the Power* (1969)], about a great dust-up between the New York office and the Washington bureau of *The New York Times* back in the 1960s.

HB: By the way, the obituary that you wrote for Hubert Humphrey must have been about this time. It was in 1978, wasn't it?

RR: I wrote that obituary before I ever went to London. I was in New Orleans.

HB: Did you have an offer from the university for a teaching job before you quit?

RR: Yes.

HB: So you were not just launching out unemployed?

RR: No, I made sure of that. Harry Marsh was the chairman of the journalism department at that time. I had some correspondence with him. He had it all arranged before I came back.

HB: Did you have any trepidation about going into teaching? Had you taught before?

RR: No, I hadn't. I had been in a classroom a few times as a visiting reporter, that kind of thing. I had no experience. In fact, a lot of correspondence with Harry dealt with my anxiety and his reassurance before I ever left London. He would find any way that he could think of to reassure me that I would be able to do this. I was pretty antsy about it.

HB: Not surprising. Anybody would be. I was once upon a time. Was that a significant cut in salary?

RR: Oh, yes, yes. I had the silly notion that I could live in Hogeeye on practically nothing. We did a pretty good job of it. We managed to build a house without going into debt. We were doing okay. I realized after we had been there a year or so that I needed more money. At that point, John Guilds was the dean of Arts and Sciences. Harry Marsh left to go to Kansas State to be the chairman of the journalism department there. Jack Guilds persuaded me to become the chairman of the journalism department. I did not want to do it. I had just been there a year as a teacher. I came as an associate professor. Jack talked me into being the chairman. He agreed that if I did not like it --- I should stay a year as the chairman. --- If I did not like it, then they would find somebody else. But, meanwhile, as part of the deal, he gave me a substantial pay raise and a promotion to full professor and tenure.

HB: Also from being chairman, that meant that you went from being employed nine months to being employed twelve months.

RR: That's right. At the end of that year I told Jack that it was not working out, and it was not. I was not a good chairman.

HB: It's the worst job in the academic world.

RR: I was not cut out for it. I really did not want to do it anymore and told Jack that. He and I had that conversation in late spring of 1981. I went off to Tibet with National Geographic to do a chapter of a book about China ["Tibet," in the multi-

authored book *Journey into China*, National Geographic Society, 1982]. I spent six weeks in Tibet, and when I got home, I discovered that Bob Douglas had been hired to take my place as chairman. He had been managing editor of the *Gazette*. He and I had been friends since the 1950s. That turned out to be an important time in my academic career. Bob was a good chairman although he had no academic background. He had a background in managing things and people. He was very good with people. He quickly adjusted to the collegiate way of doing things. I became a happy teacher after that. I spent the next fifteen or fourteen years, or something like that, on the faculty. I was teaching my courses on news reporting. I never taught editing. That was Bob's precinct. I taught reporting, feature writing, something called the literature of journalism. The graduate students were reading books by journalists about journalism. There were two or three other courses including, during the last two or three years on faculty, I taught what was then the introductory course for all journalism students. We called it "Style and Usage." About a third of it was simple grammar because we had found out early on that even journalism majors in college did not know enough English to function as journalists. We had to teach them basic grammar.

HB: It is unusual that senior faculty members were teaching introductory courses. Was that your choice?

RR: It was. Once again, I got talked into something, and I was awfully glad that I did. A retired teacher named Wanda Belzung, who had been teaching advertising – She had taught for years and was a good friend of mine. One day she cornered

me and said, "Roy, they need a senior faculty member teaching that course." At that time we had graduate students teaching it. She said, "It is not fair to the students. We can give those students more than just grammar and newspaper style and the preliminaries of reporting. You can give them another dimension." She persuaded me, and I did it. I really liked it. I was still teaching it when I retired. I think it was probably a good idea.

HB: It is. Did the department have a deliberate policy of hiring people with newspaper experience?

RR: Or some other kind of professional experience, yes. This, as you probably know, is plenty controversial in journalism education around the United States. We have a pretty good mixture at Fayetteville of Ph.D.'s and non-Ph.D.'s. All of them have some professional experience outside of academia. The Ph.D.'s tend to have less experience and vice versa. Yes, it has been policy. In the College of Arts and Sciences, the last three or four deans have approved the policy. I think it is pretty firmly established.

HB: Did you ever get any pressure to get a doctorate?

RR: I never did, no. The rationale for hiring a person in my situation was his twenty-odd years of experience on a newspaper. It is roughly an equivalent of a doctorate degree. That, as you know, is not exactly right. I did have a master's degree from a very good journalism school. That made it easier for the dean and the others in the dean's office to go along with that theory.

HB: You were also doing some free-lance writing?

RR: That was part of my arrangement, that I was to teach, officially, half time and do research half time, research in my case being writing for other publications. I did a lot of writing for *The New York Times*.

HB: There were a lot of pieces for *The Times*.

RR: I had a very cordial relationship with *The Times* after I left. I published a lot with them.

HB: Who were you dealing with at the time you were a free-lance writer?

RR: Different desks. Part of the time, it would be the national desk. In fact, I would occasionally get a call from my old national editor, Dave Jones, asking me if I would do a story for him for the national desk. In other times, I would write for the magazine, the Sunday magazine and the Travel section. I think once I did a piece for the arts and entertainment section about making the movie "Lonesome Dove," [Larry McMurtry, *Lonesome Dove: A Novel* (1985)]. That was a free-lance assignment. I did a fair number of stories for *The Times* and other publications about political affairs. I sort of kept my hands in the political story. For example, I wrote a number of pieces about Bill Clinton, at least one kind of funny. I might not have told you about this. I got a call from *Esquire* magazine sometime in the 1980s. They asked me to do a story about Bill and Hillary Clinton. They were putting together a special edition of *Esquire* on young American leaders who showed promise of becoming more prominent in the future. They had a list of, as I recall, about fifty such people in the United States. My assignment was Bill and Hillary Clinton. I did extensive interviews with the

two of them and with other people. I wrote the story and sent it in, and they paid me for it. Before it came out, I had a call from the editor saying, "Roy, I am sorry, but we have not been able to sell enough advertising to publish all fifty of these. In fact, we are going to have to cut it back to twenty-five or thirty. Your piece is not going to run." That was about four years before Bill Clinton became President. I have wondered whether anybody at *Esquire* remembered that they had not published that story.

HB: It is also at this time that your book *Looking for Hogeye* [1986] was published.

RR: 1986, that's right. That was, very largely, a collection of pieces from *The New York Times* and two or three other periodicals --- feature stories, essays, that I had done, some of them while I was still on the staff at *The Times*, a lot of them after I had left there.

HB: This is a quote about *Looking for Hogeye*, by Lee Walburn, in his review in *The New York Times*, "It has been said of Southerners that they spend the first twenty-five years of their lives getting away from the places of their birth and the next twenty-five trying to return."

RR: I had forgotten that. Yes, that is true. The theme of that little book was coming home or trying to come home, wherever home was. I never was certain that I had found it.

HB: I am going to stop this for just a moment. It is break time.

[Tape is stopped.]

HB: Well, you taught for fifteen years at the university. Did you retire in 1996?

RR: I think it was 1995. It was sixteen years altogether. Arithmetic is a little fuzzy in my mind. Fuzzy math as George W. Bush would say. About sixteen years.

HB: What stands out in your mind?

RR: I am sure if I labored at it I could remember some unpleasant experiences at faculty meetings and things like that, but I would rather not get into that. From the very beginning, I was impressed with the students. Not all students, not all college students, but some of them. There were always the students who were majoring in journalism because it was an easy major, they had been told, or because they couldn't figure what else to do or because of one bad reason or another. They were not serious about it. You always had at least a few in every class that were serious. They wanted to learn this craft. They were the ones that I became the proudest of. They were not always the smartest kids, which was interesting to me after I figured that out. In the beginning, I assumed, the smartest kid in the class was going to be the most promising journalist of the future. I had toward the end --- I remember one girl. I can see her face, but cannot call her name. She had dyslexia and, on top of that, was just a mediocre student, a slow learner in all ways. But what she did have was a burning desire to be a newspaper reporter. I lavished attention on that girl that I would not have thought possible in earlier years. I wanted her to do this thing that she was set on doing. The last I heard, she was working as a reporter somewhere and doing all right. You know, you do tend to remember the stars. Bob Douglas and I used to talk about them frequently over lunch. Like Denise Beeber, who was one of Bob's star students

in editing. She went to work as a reporter at the Bentonville daily paper and from there to the *Arkansas Gazette*, where she transferred to copy editing. She went from there to the *Atlanta Constitution*, from there to the *Los Angeles Times* and for some years has been at the *Dallas Morning News*. A brilliant girl and, I think, could become the first woman editor for the *Dallas Morning News*. There is a young man named Chris Osher, who is now at the *Democrat-Gazette*, before that the *Des Moines Register* and the Toledo, Ohio, *Blade*, and maybe one or two other papers. A born reporter and one that just cannot stand not knowing what is going on. As Turner Catledge used to say, "To be a good reporter, you have to have an irresistible urge to find out and then an absolute drive to tell what you found out." This boy and a lot of others had it. Scott Morris, one of the best students that we had. He eventually became the Capitol correspondent for the *Mobile Press-Register*. He did an excellent job there and worked for two or three other papers. He is now back in Fayetteville, getting a degree in creative writing. I could name twelve or fifteen like that.

HB: Do you keep in touch with them?

RR: Most of them, yes. They keep in touch with me or I with them. We sometimes blunder into each other. It is awfully nice to hear from them. In fact, when I retired, one of the best things they did for me was a book of letters from old students. They had secretly contacted three or four dozen of these folks around the country and asked them to write letters, and they did. I treasure those notes. The students were always the pleasant surprise in teaching.

HB: When you first started teaching, was that true? Or did you have some kind of expectation of their ability that was not met?

RR: Oh, yes, I did. I overestimated their knowledge and their ability.

HB: Everybody does. That is why I asked.

RR: Yes, but you quickly adjust. I had a boy one day, and I made an off-handed remark in a reporting class about Faulkner. I said, "Now, you ought to read Faulkner." It was kind of a throw-away line in a conversation. This one fellow got up his nerve before the class was over and said, "You mentioned Faulkner while ago. Are you talking about Professor Faulkner, Claude Faulkner?" I was aghast until maybe years later when it came to me. Claude Faulkner wrote the book, literally, on how to teach English in college. That boy and thousands of others had been through Faulkner English, and he was the Faulkner that came to mind. This kid was a very bright student. That was not the conclusion that I jumped to at the time. I regret that I made a misjudgment on him. I have not kept up with him nor he with me. It could be the fact of that little incident.

HB: This may have occurred just before you got there, but did you notice an influx of students into journalism classes in the aftermath of Watergate and all the emphasis on investigative reporting?

RR: It had already happened when I got there. We could still see the evidence of it, yes. [Bob] Woodward and [Carl] Bernstein were still talked about by students in those years.

HB: Can you teach somebody to be an investigative journalist?

RR: You can give him some pointers, but, no, I think investigative reporters are born. The ones that I have known that are really good at it, it seems to be genetic. There is a restlessness in the personality and sometimes a stubbornness and sometimes just the plain meanness that it takes to make a really good investigative reporter. I remember once, at my invitation, we had a speaker at the university, Wendell Rawls. He was an old friend of mine from *The New York Times*. He was an investigative reporter who had done some wonderful investigative reporting in his career. He got up in front of a class of mine and said, "If you are a good reporter, you will do anything that it takes to get a story." He told a few stories about some things that he had done to get a story. He wound it up with this conclusion, "A good reporter will lie, cheat, or steal to get a good story." That was a topic of conversation around the journalism department for a year or two. Sonny Rawls, as we called him, had that mean streak in him. He was more or less serious.

HB: It was a good way to start a session anyway. Did you keep in touch with the newspapers in the state? The *Gazette* and the others while you were teaching?

RR: Yes, oh, yes. I think that is a vital part if you are the kind of program that we are in Fayetteville. It is very important to stay in touch. In fact, right now, Larry Foley and Dale Carpenter, who teach television, stay in constant touch with the television professionals in the state of Arkansas and, in fact, do a lot of work themselves for documentaries for AETN and for public television. The people who teach newspapers do the same thing. Gerald Jordan, who took my place on

the faculty, came there from the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, where he spent years as a reporter and an editor. Every summer since he has been there for the last five years, he has gone back to Philadelphia and worked for the *Inquirer* to keep his hand in it.

HB: He is also a Nieman Fellow, too?

RR: A Nieman Fellow, too. We think it is important to stay in touch.

HB: You must have seen that TV program develop. Was it in existence when you were on the faculty in 1978?

RR: No, it was not. It was kind of an idea. One or two courses were taught, but we did not have any equipment. In fact, we can thank the accreditation agency for that. We were told, in no uncertain terms, that we had to get serious about that if we were going to be a fully accredited department. The university sprang for some money and bought some equipment. They had some help from the television industry. They hired some good people, and it is now on the map. It is a going concern. They run a little on-campus television station to train the students, in addition to these two guys spending a lot of time doing professional work that they can share with the students.

HB: Shouldn't the department have a direct relationship with the student newspaper, the *Arkansas Traveler*?

RR: It is kind of --- no. But the editor and most of the people who work the paper are always journalism majors. The selection of editor depends heavily on the advisors of the journalism faculty. The editor is selected by the Board of

Publications that has people from all over the campus, but the word of the journalism advisor weighs heavily. They know that the teacher is acquainted with the work of the students. There will always be two or three candidates for the job. Now, after years of being published in other parts of the campus, the *Traveler* has its newsroom on the same floor as the journalism department. It is not part of the department, but it is right there, just steps away. For example, when Professor John Locke was shot and killed a few months ago, in the same building, the *Traveler's* editors and reporters had the benefit of advice from members of the faculty who were in the building, about how to go about covering the story. There is an informal but important link between the *Traveler* and the department, yet . . . the faculty try very hard to keep hands off of anything that would smack of meddling in editorial policies or coverage.

HB: Anything else you would like to add about your teaching career? You don't have to.

RR: There was something that I was thinking of moments ago.

HB: Okay, let us end for now. This is almost over.

[End of Tape 9 - Side B]

[End of Interview]