

Gazette Project

Interview with

Bill Simmons,
Little Rock, Arkansas
4 January 2001

Interviewer: Jerol Garrison

Jerol Garrison: This interview is part of an oral history project about the *Arkansas Gazette*. We want to find out what kind of newspaper the *Gazette* was and what made it that way. Bill, this interview is part of an oral history project being conducted by the Arkansas Center for Oral History at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. The center will transcribe the interview, and you will have an opportunity to review the transcript and make changes before the document goes into the archives of the university library. It will be available to persons interested in Arkansas history. I have a form here for you to sign on this subject. Please take time to review the form and your name will go right here. I will put my name in there. There is a place for you to sign down at the bottom and date the form. Bill, please describe the time you worked for the *Arkansas Gazette* and your duties.

Bill Simmons: As I recall, Jerol, I started in, probably, 1958 as a --- I believe I was fifteen years old at the time. I was a copy boy. I had a high school journalism teacher in North Little Rock named Katie Lou

Russell. She had some sort of understanding or arrangement with the *Gazette* managing editor, A. R. Nelson. It worked like this. When Nelson needed a copy boy or somebody who might eventually become a reporter at the newspaper, he would contact Katie Lou at the journalism department at North Little Rock High School. He would see if she had anybody that she felt was promising as a possible prospect. If she did, she would refer them to Nelson. He would decide whether to hire them or not. One day he called her, and she drew me aside in class and mentioned there was an opening at the *Gazette* if I was interested in it. There was no assurance that I would be hired, but I might be. I contacted the *Gazette*, and they put me on the payroll as a copy boy making a dollar an hour in those days. I stayed a copy boy for about eight months of 1958 and on the first of the year in January of 1959. They sort of tried me out doing a little sports writing. They moved me into the sports department. I came under Orville Henry's tutelage. In those days they had Eddie Best and Chuck Miller in the sports department. Jim Bailey was there. Jim was and is one of the premier sports writers Arkansas has ever produced. He is an interesting guy to boot. It was a pretty exciting thing for a sixteen-year-old kid to get to fly up to Fayetteville, in a little airplane on Saturdays, sit at the Razorback games in the press box and eat the

press box food, go to the dressing rooms and write sidebars on the Razorback games.

JG: You were going to high school at this time?

BS: Yes.

JG: Working at the *Gazette* on . . .

BS: All at the same time.

JG: Did you work a forty-hour week at the *Gazette*?

BS: Yes. I also enrolled in college as a freshman in one of those years. It got to be a pretty hard grind, working a full week and carrying a full load in college.

JG: That was at the Little Rock University?

BS: At the time it was the Little Rock University, yes. Nelson was an interesting guy. Besides being a real stable guy with a deep appreciation of journalism, he had a fascination with sports writing, for some reason. In those days, the stories that would be written by Orville or myself from Fayetteville would come into the sports department on a little Teletype, a Western Union Teletype or an AP Teletype. Nelson would stand in the sports department reading these things word by word as they came in. One of the things that impressed me the most as a sixteen- or seventeen-year-old sportswriter was one time I had written a sidebar on one of the Razorback games of Fayetteville. Nelson had seen it come in on the Teletype and read it. He read the paper the next day, and he noticed that certain portions of what I had written had not appeared in the paper. They had been cut out by the sports slot. He made them run the story as I had written it, and it was

put in the Monday paper, so we ran it a second time. I thought that was just awesome.

JG: It was very unusual.

BS: That is a memory that will always stick with me. After a while --- I will tell another kind of funny story. I did a little bit of reporting on some of the high school all-star games. I was so new to the concepts in sports writing that --- in those days the teams were housed out at the medical center here in Little Rock. You'd go out there and interview the coaches and some of the players. One of these coaches for one of the teams of the West All-Stars mentioned that they were going to beat the other team like a drum. You know, coaches just don't say --- I know that now. In those days, I did not realize that I was supposed to understand that that was all off the record. I went on ahead and used it in my story. He was very upset that the quote was in the story. The quote was true. He just sort of assumed that I would not use it. I was a reporter. If a guy tells me something, it is for news purposes. I put it in the story. As it turned out, his team did beat the other team like a drum, but it made him very uncomfortable to think that I might have inspired the other team's ire to such an extent that they might rise to new heights and prove him wrong. But after a while of writing sports, I did all sorts of things, bowling, golf. By the way, I forget who it was, but somebody mentioned that one of the things that reporters do is they get an education in public. I went out and covered a golf tournament one time. Orville's brother was in the tournament, Bill Henry. He was quite a golfer. He hit a ball about two hundred

and twenty yards. I referred to it as a “two-hundred-twenty-yard chip shot,” which is a very small shot. That was one of those occasions that I got an education in public by making a big mistake in print. After a while of writing sports, I got bored with sports. I didn’t care much about covering them. I didn’t have that little boy aspect that I think helps some people stay enamored of writing about sports. I began to want to get out on the city side of the newspaper and cover what we would call general news or straight news. By then I was making about fifty dollars a week. I had been there a couple of years. I was also in college and dating a girl. We had aims of someday getting married. I wasn’t making enough money to afford to get married. I went to Mr. Nelson, and I said, “I have a problem. I need a raise or I need to get out of sports.” I couldn’t take staying in sports and also being that poor. I could switch them off. He said to let him think about it. I did. I let him think about it. I kept waiting on him to tell me something. Weeks went by. I finally went back to his office asked him if he had made a decision. He says, “About what?” I thought, “Oh my! He doesn’t even remember what it was.” I refreshed his memory. He said, “Let me think about it, and I will give you an answer in a couple of weeks.” In a couple of weeks, I went back to him. I said, “Have you made a decision yet?” He said, “Yes.” I said, “What is it?” He said, “No.” So I decided that my future must lie elsewhere. I had enjoyed my stay at the *Gazette* and it was a wonderful paper. I had been with it during part of the Central High crisis of the 1957 and 1958 and 1959 period. I had great admiration for the paper and for its moral courage at the time. It was

enthraling to see people like Sander Vanocur come down from their high places and sit in the *Gazette*'s newsroom back in some corner, tapping out what they would be telling the nation about the situation in Little Rock and to meet these famous people. When push came to shove, I had to think about little Billy Simmons and where his destiny might lie. I began to look for employment elsewhere.

JG: Did you go by Billy then?

BS: I think I probably always went by Bill in my news bylines. I also wrote some poetry at the time and some short stories. In some of those I was a little more pretentious. I went by B. Charles Simmons, my first name was actually Billy and I would go by B. Charles Simmons. Who knows what other variations? One reason that I wound up going to AP [Associated Press], which I did in 1962, is one night I was in the sports department at the *Gazette*. It was Friday night. As you know, Jerol, with Friday night football, almost everybody gets brought into the sports writing process at one level or another. We were in the sports department, writing a lot of high school football games. About 10:30 that night, some guy shows up in the doorway of the sports department. The sports department was connected to the newsroom. He had to come out of the newsroom to get to the sports department to get to where we were. He had this piece of paper, this piece of news copy in his hands. He looks at Eddie Best, who is the slot man that night, and said, "Who wrote this?" Eddie takes a look at it and looks at me and points to me. He said, "That guy." Well, the fellow who had

come into the sports department says to me, in front of the rest of the sports crew, “My name is Bob Starr. I work down at AP. When you get off duty, come see me tonight.” So about 12:30 in the morning, we finally got everything pretty well wrapped up. I wandered down to the AP to find out what was on this guy’s mind.

JG: 12:30 in the morning?

BS: Frankly, I thought I had probably done something wrong. I thought this guy wanted to chew me out about it. It says what expectations I had of life in those days. It turned out that Starr, ever the manipulative guy, knew there would be an opening coming up at the AP. He wanted to make sure that whoever AP hired was somebody who knew how to write sports in a way that was suitable for the AP’s purposes. He happened to see several of my items and inquired about one of them. He found out that might be a guy they would consider hiring. It was not Starr’s decision. He was just a member of the AP staff. The chief of the bureau at that time was a man named Al Dopking. But Starr, as I said, ever the manipulator, intended to determine what Dopking did. He helped me come to Dopking’s attention. As it turned out, I did not actually get the opening. A friend of mine, in fact, got it. That is another story. A later opening developed, and Dopking hired me for that. That is how I happened to wind up with the AP.

JG: Did Starr or Dopking know before that Friday night, that you were looking for a job elsewhere?

BS: Well, Dopking, I do not think did. To the best of my knowledge, Starr did not. I

had never met him until that evening. So, no, he would not have known.

JG: Are you a native of North Little Rock?

BS: Yes, I am.

JG: You went through the North Little Rock school system?

BS: Yes, I went to --- I can't imagine anybody being interested in this, but I went to Woodrow Wilson Elementary School for grades one through three, then to Clendenin Elementary School in the fourth grade. I think it was back to Woodrow Wilson in the fifth and sixth grades. Those schools have been torn down long since. I went to Fourth Street Junior High. It has also been torn down. I went to what was then North Little Rock's only high school. It is now the one that has been called Old Main. By the way, in junior high I knew --- I am told that I knew Tommy Robinson, who eventually became sheriff and Congressman. The fun thing is, he remembers me, but I don't remember him. How can someone not remember Tommy Robinson? But I don't. Another interesting thing, journalistically, Jerol, is in the Associated Press in the United States there are, I think, forty-two chiefs of bureaus. These are guys who are the administrative head of an AP operation taking in one or more states. Out of the forty-two, at one time, Robert Shaw, who is from North Little Rock, and I, who is from North Little Rock, were two of the forty-two. This is a pretty amazing percentage for one little town. I think that is probably a testimonial to the work that was done by Katie Lou Russell and others over there.

JG: Both you and Robert, who is the current Associated Press bureau chief here in

Little Rock, were students of Katie Russell?

BS: That's right. Robert had been chief of bureau earlier in Indiana, which is a bigger operation and in Oklahoma, while I was chief of bureau in Little Rock. I always like to point out that North Little Rock produced two of the forty-two.

JG: What year did you graduate from North Little Rock High School?

BS: In 1959.

JG: You had already been working at the *Gazette* for two years?

BS: Maybe a year and a half or two years, something like that.

JG: You enrolled in that same year at Little Rock University?

BS: I enrolled that fall at LRU. That is where I met the young lady that I was hoping to marry and eventually did marry. We got married in 1962.

JG: Her name is?

BS: Jane Cast.

JG: You were both students?

BS: Yes. Her family was from Newport and then moved to Little Rock. Then she went back to Newport the year the Little Rock schools closed. She graduated up there.

JG: What do you remember about Orville Henry?

BS: I remember that he is a careful technician of sports writing. I am indebted to him for giving me the chance to get into sports writing, for kind of advising me, not in a very detailed or thorough way, but from time to time he would give insightful observations of my work. He was a Frank Broyles devotee – Frank and Orville

were in some respects almost joined at the hip. The program, the Razorback program, was in some respects, as vital to Orville as it was to Frank.

JG: Frank Broyles, at that time, was coach of the Razorback football team.

BS: That is correct. In his first season, if my memory is right, he started off by losing six games in a row, but, of course, history turned, and the Razorback record got better. Terms like the “pooch kick” got invented. It was a privilege to get to see how that sort of relationship worked in terms of being beneficial both to the newspaper, through Orville, who became the voice of the Razorbacks – Paul Eels is called that now because of the role television plays in covering sports. But in those days, the voice of the Razorbacks was Orville Henry. There was no one to compare with him. He was a wonderful read. It was fascinating to get to read the intricacies, the details – and, inevitably, the defense that Orville would make for all things Razorback. It is not an independent aggressive investigative type of approach that he took towards Razorbacks athletics. It was an advocate and defender of the program. In fact, a critic of anything critical of the Razorback program.

JG: Who else, in particular there in the sports department, what other particular character stands out in your memory?

BS: Well, Jim Bailey, who was truly an outstanding sports writer. He introduced us to other outstanding sports writers, people like Red Smith. I don’t mean Arkansas people but great sports writers. And writers of other kinds of material around the country, Red Smith, Jimmy Cannon and others, Blackie Sherrod.

JG: Your first job was as a copy boy? Were you strictly working for the sports department as a copy boy?

BS: No, I was just a copy boy for the newspaper in general. That was where you would go back into the Linotype area, where they would have the pots of hot type and the Linotype machines, the decks of type where they would build the paper. I learned how to read type in reverse. I met some of the crazy characters that worked at the paper. My first day on the job, the other copy boys took me down to the basement to show me the hideout place. I never went there once they showed it to me, but it turned out that it was apparently a hideout place where the copy boys could disappear when they didn't want to be found. They showed that to me as sort of an introduction to the club.

JG: It was kind of a secluded room down in the basement?

BS: Yes. It was where they kept the huge rolls of paper that would be put on the press.

JG: At that time, the press was in the same building.

BS: That is correct. In fact, late in the evening when they would finally start the press, you could feel a little bit of vibration and hear a little bit of background noise that was not otherwise there. The copy boys did all kinds of things. We would run and get sandwiches for the crew working at night. I would go to Peerless Engraving to pick up engravings that would be used to reproduce photographs in the paper. I would go to the bus station and pick up things that had been shipped to the paper. I remember one cold evening – just as a personal

note – I went one cold evening down to the bus station to pick up something.

When I got back to the newsroom, I was hanging up my coat and getting copies of the proofs put on the appropriate spikes in the newsroom. There were separate spikes for different kinds of hard news. There was sports, society, and so on. As I was doing that, Tom Swint, a big, big guy, walks by. I forget exactly what Tom's title was. I think it was like city editor or something of that sort.

JG: News editor.

BS: I think you may be right because Bill Shelton was the prototypical city editor. Swint was there picking up his coat and hat and says to me --- I'm not sure that I can say this in oral history — “What are you doing with that shit-eating grin on your face?” Well, I was totally flustered. I didn't know what to say to that. I just kind of grinned and went on about my way. Well, a week or two later, Swint came in and had this smirky grin on his face. I thought I would be Mr. Cute Guy, and so I say to him, “Hey, what are you doing with that shit-eating grin on your face?” The next day when I reported to work, I had a note to see the managing editor. I went down to see Mr. Nelson. I said, “You wanted to see me?” He said, “Yes, what is this that I hear about you using vulgar language in the newsroom?” I didn't know what he was talking about. So I asked him. As it turned out, it was the remark that I had made to Tom Swint about the grin on his face. I thought, “Man, this is so stupid. This is not right.” But you let it go. You rolled on.

JG: Tom could get by with that remark, but you couldn't.

BS: Yes, and evidently he turned me in.

JG: How many years were you going to high school and working nights and weekends at the *Gazette*? Did you start working at the *Gazette* while you were a junior in high school?

BS: Yes, that probably would have been the spring or winter of my junior year. It would have been – my guess, it was in February of my junior year in high school. It was all through the summer and all through my senior year of high school. I continued through my freshmen and sophomore years at college.

JG: When did you switch from being a copy boy to a sports writer? When was that?

BS: That would have been in January of 1959. I would have been a copy boy for about eight months before I became a sports writer. In all, I was at the *Gazette* about three years and three months, speaking in round numbers.

JG: Do you remember what the furniture was like there in the sports department while you were working there? Did you have nice desks and chairs?

BS: No, no. Nobody wrote on computers. It was all typewriters. I think they were manual typewriters. We had long sheets of manila type paper.

JG: Was it manila?

BS: Well, that's not the right word. It was kind of a soft-pulp paper. There was some sort of carbon sheet. I remember one of the deals was that AP got a copy of some of the stories that we wrote. We kind of had these two-part copybooks. We would take the front, the original, and AP would get the carbon copy for whatever their purposes were.

JG: So you were banging away on manual typewriters. Were they all in good

working order?

BS: No, no. They were old and used. What made the *Gazette* a great newspaper, and I truly believe it was — was not its equipment, but its people. They had some through the years, both while I was an employee and later when I was with the AP, they had some people who were really special. I hope that I don't embarrass you, Jerol, but you were one of them. You will always be in my memory probably the best federal court reporter there ever was or that I could ever imagine could be. Anybody who did the thorough, detailed reporting that you did is almost beyond imagining that anybody could do that. There were other great reporters. They may not be known to history as great writers or great journalists, but, I am telling you, they were outstanding. George Bentley on the county government beat, county courts was one of them. I still do not see anybody that has come along to match George Bentley in terms of his expertise, range of sources, his knowledge of his area of coverage. Ernie Dumas is another one, on state government. When I was with the AP and wound up becoming their reporter for state government, it was Ernie who helped me to learn what state government was and how it really worked, the right and wrong ways to cover it. We had some wonderful discussions and debates out in the state capitol pressroom, Ernie and I did. I am indebted to him. He was a genuine asset, in my opinion, as part of the *Gazette* staff, as you were and George Bentley was. Bill Shelton was just a fantastic city editor in terms of knowing how to deal with people on his staff, sometimes through the power of intimidation, through

awesomeness, and knowing rules and applying rules rightly and intelligently, making news copy clear and accurate, and not putting up with any crap. A lot of really impressive journalists went through the *Gazette*. But the real key to its success is that some of them stayed, like you and George and Ernie and others.

JG: What time of day did you go to work in the sports department?

BS: Well, that would really depend on what it was that I was supposed to be doing that day. If I was supposed to be covering a golf tournament, I would go out sometime during the daytime. I would go out there and watch guys play golf for a while. Of course, they would expect me to get my story written by deadline. I would have it written by six, seven, or eight at the latest. If it was a Friday night football night, I would show up later in the day, sometime in the afternoon, sometimes very late like five or six, with the expectation that I wouldn't get off until one or one-thirty in the morning. It was kind of a day-by-day thing.

JG: Did you cover a lot of high school sports? Football, basketball . . .

BS: I covered a lot of the secondary games, not the main line games. We had a pretty impressive sports guy at that time named Jerry McConnell. He was sort of the Jim Elder of his day. He had a head full of sports statistics and knew everyone and everything about Arkansas high school athletics. He was a walking compendium of that sort of information. He was an awfully nice guy, to boot. Jerry would be the guy at the major games, and I would get something secondary. When Jerry would be covering Little Rock Central versus North Little Rock High School, I would get something like Benton versus Bryant or a game such as that.

Occasionally, I would go cover Catholic High. I saw a wonderful quarterback at Catholic High, a left-handed quarterback. I can't imagine how he avoided winding up in the pros or the Heisman Trophy contender. He was a phenomenal high school quarterback.

JG: You covered high school basketball, too?

BS: Yes, some. It would be the same sort of arrangement. It would be the secondary level of games. I was not the premier sportswriter at the *Gazette*.

JG: Do you remember J. N. Heiskell?

BS: I remember Mr. Heiskell as a living presence, as a force beyond the horizon who would occasionally, by some sort of a note, alter the course of the *Gazette* for good or ill. Nobody called them Heiskell grams, but they had the power of some sort of missive from on high and would descend on the newsroom. Everybody would understand that this was the way that it was going to be now. Usually some sort of style point was an issue, some sort of general principle of policy. I didn't actually know him. He was sort of like Moses. You might occasionally get a glimpse of him as you and the rest of the tribes went through the wilderness. He was an older fellow, thin. We were not chums.

JG: Did you see Orville Henry every day?

BS: I saw Orville Henry every day, yes.

JG: Did you receive assignments directly from Orville or Jerry McConnell?

BS: Well, I got them from Orville. It was clearly Orville's sports department. Nobody was in charge really but for Orville. But there were sub-captains.

Sometimes Orville would be away, and somebody would have to make decisions. Although Jerry made some, I do not recall Jerry being the main sub-captain. I remember people like Eddie Best and Chuck Miller being the ones who would have the role of deciding who was going to cover what.

JG: Did they just tell you orally what you were going to cover, or was it written?

BS: Mainly it was oral. It was kind of a day before sort of thing; “This is how we are going to do this tomorrow. You will be on the Western Hills Golf Tournament. Somebody else will be covering the bowling tournament,” or whatever.

JG: That was opposite of the way that Bill Shelton worked. He always gave his assignments on a little piece of paper. Usually reporters would find them in their typewriter when they came to work.

BS: Bill Shelton used to play golf and the late Jimmy Jones blamed me for ruining Shelton for winter golf. Back in those days they came up with the wind chill factor. Before that it had just been temperature. When Shelton found out what the wind chill factor was, that is, what the temperature of thirty-two and a northwest wind of fifteen miles per hour feels like — He found that out because I brought it and handed it out to the group — he quit playing winter golf. Jimmy Jones blamed me for that, probably rightly.

JG: Bill, I was wondering if you could tell me about when you joined the Associated Press and what your duties were and who you worked with?

BS: AP had a reporter named Leon Hatch. I believe that he was the person that I numerically replaced. This would have been in about March of 1962. At that

time the AP bureau chief was a man named Al Dopking. He had been a war correspondent in Korea. The AP news editor at the time was a fellow named Wick Temple. He is now an AP executive in New York. The Capitol reporter was Bob Starr, John Robert Starr. There were several others on the staff. There was a fellow named J. C. Tillman. I forget who else may have been on the AP staff at the time. The AP staff at the time – not counting the chief of bureau and not counting the technicians – was a news staff of six. It was a small staff and pound-per-pound you had to be very productive and very effective. One of the things they almost always did with their new recruits was to throw them into the job where an awful lot of volume had to be produced. I happened to be blessed in high school with a martinet of a typing teacher. So I was very fast at the keyboard. It wasn't always great writing, but it was clear and basically accurate. Therefore, I could generate a lot of stuff. I survived that trial period of my employment at the Associated Press. I became a full-fledged non-probationary member of the staff. AP, as you know, Jerol, serves different kinds of clients. They don't call them clients. They call them members. Some of them are newspapers and others are broadcast outlets: radio stations or television stations or others. You have different kinds of jobs. Some days your main work is to write things in the style for the use of radio announcers or televisions anchors. Other days you are writing basically for newspapers. Some days you would do a little bit of both. Most of the work you do on the phone at a desk. You aren't out on the field actually covering things firsthand, except on the State Capitol job.

That's what made that job attractive to me. It was general news, which was what I wanted. It was actually covering news where you can understand something, have a beat and get to know people, develop sources and do things in depth and get into details. That was what I eventually aimed for. That was what eventually came about. Bob Starr was the AP Capitol reporter for a long time. Then in about the late 1960s, I got a shot at that job. I wound up retaining it for about the next twenty years. In the 1960s, for two years, I went to Detroit with the AP and was their night news editor. It was a terrific time in terms of Detroit news to be there. They had a riot in 1967 that killed forty-four people. Walter Reuther and the UAW [United Auto Workers] struck Ford Motor Company for one of the longest strikes in the United Auto Workers history. Detroit had a terrible winter, more than a hundred inches of snow. It was a record for them. Out on Lake Michigan, one time in a blizzard, a tanker freighter named the Daniel Morrell, broke literally in half and went down with twenty-nine guys drowned. George Romney ran for the Republican nomination for President. He blew his own candidacy away with some silly statement about how the military had brainwashed him. I could enumerate other things, but it was a fantastic time to be a newsman in Detroit. But I missed Little Rock and missed my roots here. I eventually persuaded the AP to let me come back home. Although they deferred it three times, they finally relented because I told them, "Look, it is no longer a question of whether I am going back to Little Rock. The question is only whether I am going back with you." They were kind enough to let me stay with the AP in

Little Rock. In fact, Bob Starr was chief of bureau in Little Rock by that time. I needed his permission as well, and he granted it. I was indebted to Bob and indebted to Orville and others. I got back to Little Rock, and somewhere in the late 1960s, I got a shot at the State Capitol job. Win Rockefeller --- In fact, I think Orval Faubus was still in the last year of his governorship when I got to come out to the Capitol occasionally, not as a regular but for a few things here and there. During Rockefeller's administration I got to cover some of that. Finally, about 1970, I was the regular full-time AP guy at the Capitol and stayed for about twenty years. In 1990, when the AP chief of bureau was Kristen Gazlay, she asked me one day if I had ever thought about being chief of bureau. I asked her, "When are you leaving?" She confirmed privately that she was about to go to New York and take a job there. I went on ahead and applied for the job of chief of bureau. That's the year in January that general manager Boccardi appointed me chief of bureau in Little Rock. I remained in that position until the end of 1996, I believe it was. My friend, Bob Lutgen, who was managing editor of *Democrat-Gazette*, had asked me to consider becoming the northwest edition editor of the newspaper, which would have involved me having to move to Springdale. I told him that I really did not want to leave the Little Rock area. And so he had thrown other options at me: would I like to do this or would I like to do that. I said, no, I liked doing what I was doing, except for the Whitewater part of it, which had gotten very old for me. It was just wearing me out. I wanted to stay in Little Rock. I had never completely turned loose of keeping my hand in

political reporting or political editing. I told him if he had something like that --- well, one day, lo and behold, they offered me the job of being political editor – this was after Rex Nelson had left the *Democrat-Gazette*. They offered me the job of being political editor. I realized that I had gotten to the age where I could take retirement from the AP. I thought, “Lo and behold, this is it. This is what I need to do.” I checked out my retirement arrangements with the AP and made sure that everything was as I understood it. I could draw my retirement, and I could also retain my health benefits by paying the AP and become political editor of this newspaper, so that is what I did. We actually had to announce it two or three months before I left the AP because I think the *Democrat-Gazette* executives became a little nervous that someone might hear about this and reveal it before they had announced it, so I wound up asking the AP if it would be all right to announce my coming retirement. I think this was in October of 1996, and I wasn’t actually leaving until the end of the year. They said, “Yes, that will be fine.”

JG: Your situation, in some respects, parallels John Robert Starr, because he retired from the AP and went into academic work. He then became editor of the *Democrat-Gazette*. You retired from the AP and then came over here as political editor. What age are you now?

BS: I am 59.

JG: You’re a young guy.

BS: Well, thanks, Jerol. I appreciate that. I have been a young guy all my life.

JG: That's great. I would like to be fifty-nine. In fact, I was just thinking about it the other day. I am 10 years older than that, but I was thinking it would be nice to be 59 again, so I could do more traveling. Tell me about how many governors you have covered as correspondent for the Associated Press.

BS: In a very limited way, I covered Orval Faubus. He was my first. In a less limited but still somewhat limited way, I covered Winthrop Rockefeller. After him came Dale Bumpers, David Pryor, Bill Clinton, Frank White, and then Clinton again for several more terms. Then Jim Guy Tucker became governor. I did not do much actual covering of Tucker as governor. I had plenty to do as bureau chief to run the news operation of the Associated Press. Because of my background as a political reporter in this state and knowing so many people in politics and government and commerce, I wound up shouldering a lot of the AP's local burden in the Whitewater mess, one of the world's great hoaxes, by the way. And by the way, an experience that has done more than anything else in my life to disillusion me with the trustworthiness of national news coverage. I simply think those guys write lots of stuff that's just pure hash. They write it out of fear that there might actually be something there that their competitors will have, so they make sure they have it, too, whether it is true or not. It is a real shame. But that's a different story. Then with the advent of Governor Huckabee, I wound up almost at the same time – several months later – I wound up being political editor of this paper. So I have had a lot more hands-on involvement in the coverage of Governor Huckabee than I did with Governor Tucker, something Governor

Huckabee is not always pleased by, but he seems to take it pretty well.

JG: You supervise all the political coverage for the *Democrat-Gazette*?

BS: Probably not in the sense that you are talking about. My direct supervision is over the State Capitol coverage by my own staff, which at this moment consists of four reporters. However, I have some involvement, a more remote involvement, in some of our national political coverage. During the campaigns we handle the coverage of the races for Congress in the first, second, third, and fourth congressional districts. We also do the coverage on the U. S. Senate campaigns and things like that. But on a day-to-day basis we have a Washington staff, which actually works for another fellow here, a guy named Guy Unangst. Guy is the fellow who pretty much directs that coverage although every now and then I make suggestions, some of which he takes and some of which he doesn't. If you look at what this newspaper does in terms of what U. S. Senator Tim Hutchinson may be saying in tomorrow's paper, I may have had nothing to do with that, or I may have had a little bit to do with it. But, for the most part, nothing. In terms of the editorial policy of the newspaper, I have zero involvement in that. It is not what I do, nor have an interest in doing. I sometimes disagree with it. That is somebody else's bag.

JG: The State Capitol reporters for the *Democrat-Gazette* report to you here?

BS: Yes, those who are really State Capitol reporters. Jerol, we also have other reporters here who, from time to time because of their beat or interest, wind up doing things at the Capitol. In addition, during a Legislative session we bring city

side reporters into my bailiwick, and they become temporary additions to my staff. Noel Oman, who is a long time city reporter at the newspaper and a former State Capitol reporter, will be an addition to my staff starting next Monday when the Legislature convenes. Someone else will actually be added as well. We expand our staff when the Legislature is in a full blown session.

[End of Tape One, Side One]

[Beginning of Tape One, Side Two]

BS: A couple of the other men that I consider to be outstanding reporters at the *Gazette* have come to mind. I would not want to omit them. Ray Moseley was a fine reporter. Roy Reed was an outstanding reporter who went on to *The New York Times* and has written an excellent biography of Governor Faubus. I remember Bill Lewis used to do fine jobs in reviews of theatrical events. Bill Woodyard did a fine job of writing entertainment news and other things here in Little Rock. He got a little controversial one time when he wrote a music review of a performance that he didn't attend. [Laughter] There were occasional rascal elements in what went on at the *Gazette*. In fact, one night Tom Swint and Ray Moseley got into a tiff and Tom Swint knocked Ray Moseley unconscious. He left him flat on his back in the newsroom with one of his legs wriggling weirdly. People were wondering if Moseley had been killed. He eventually regained consciousness and went on with the rest of his career. A lot of inside stories that people on the outside would not be aware of.

JG: Bill, I wonder if you could tell me about some of the major stories that you

covered while you were at the Associated Press?

BS: Well, Whitewater, of course, would be one of them.

JG: You were bureau chief then, weren't you?

BS: Yes, by then I was chief of bureau. It got to be a man-killing task to be both chief of bureau, which is a very demanding job on its own, and then absorbing a lot of the burden of the Whitewater coverage locally. I did not cover events so much as sitting in on a trial. But I did an enormous amount of background investigation, record seeking, reading, interviewing, and things of that sort. I probably spent, on the average of eighteen to twenty hours a day involved in news work on one level or another. It got to the point where the lack of sleep was actually a real problem for me. I was in a constant state of exhaustion, which was one reason that I was happy to entertain Bob Lutgen's propositions about moving over here to the newspaper and getting away from a little bit of what I was carrying. I would be on the phone at midnight, or two in the morning, or three in the morning, with reporters from Washington, New York, or Los Angeles --- some of them worked for the AP and some of them didn't --- about various Whitewater things.

JG: You would be answering their questions?

BS: Yes, I would be trying to help them to understand what was going on, often to no avail, by the way. Somebody had their ear, and they were going with whatever they were being told despite the reality of our work. So many things were written about Whitewater-related real estate transactions that simply reflect the ignorance of people about the way our real estate laws work. Assumptions would be made

that something was illegal or unethical simply because the reporter did not understand it. This is a normal, valid, ordinary way in which transactions take place.

JG: You wrote a lot of Whitewater stories yourself, too, didn't you?

BS: I wrote some, yes. In comparison with what I did on background, that was nothing. The real work of Whitewater was funneling information to guys like our Washington reporter, Pete Yost. He wrote a lot of the stuff, some of which I didn't always think was very good, but my job was to help Pete get things straight. John Solomon in Washington was another one. I worked a lot with the Washington staff in its endeavor to cover the congressional side of the Whitewater doings. Covering the Presidential race from Arkansas was a part of the problem. Part of it was the way Governor Clinton chose to operate. In fact, this is kind of funny, Jerol. In 1992, when he was running for the Presidency, first for the Democratic nomination and then for the Presidency, the issue arose about his avoiding the draft in 1992. It turned out that he received a draft notice. He said at one point in the campaign that they would eventually make it public. Of course, he has never done that. At the last news conference he had in Little Rock before he went to Washington as President, I asked when we were going to get to see his draft notice. His response was, "Nobody is interested in that." He was sort of pronouncing the will of the American people on that matter. He has never turned it loose. Perhaps when we get the Presidential Library papers, perhaps we can find it in there. But the interesting thing to me was, back in 1978

or somewhere in there, I had evidently written a story in which he denied that he ever got a draft notice. In 1992, I had no recall of having written that story until a copy of it showed up in the mail. Someone sent me a copy of my own story reminding me that Clinton had once denied that he even got a draft notice. That guy.

JG: The person that sent you this did not identify himself? You don't know who it was?

BS: I don't even remember, Jerol, I am sorry to say. I remember that it was a copy out of the *Pine Bluff Commercial*. Someone had gotten it there and saw my by-line on it and mailed it back to me.

JG: I remember that information about Clinton's draft notice and related papers came out in dribs and drabs while he was running for office.

BS: You were asking about stories that I have covered. I have covered a lot of natural disasters in this state. I remember going to Warren after a tornado had hit there. It was in the middle of the night. Of course, you are going through a lot of wreckage on the streets you are unfamiliar with. You are worried about stepping on power lines and things like that. There was this wonderful situation where this elderly couple, one of whom was sick and one of whom was mostly blind, had several foster children they cared for. During the storm, the woman had the children singing hymns at the top of their lungs to drown out the sound of the storm passing through. It had actually lifted a part of the kitchen area they were seated in and separated it from the rest of the house. No one was seriously hurt. I

thought it was a wonderful story of people holding onto each other during a terrible time in their lives and trying to take care of each other. I always liked those kinds of anecdotes in the middle of a story about disaster and tragedy.

JG: Do you remember what year that occurred, that Warren tornado?

BS: No, but it would be one of the last two, the one before the last big one that Warren had. Of course, covering government was always fascinating. Covering governors was always fascinating. Covering Legislative sessions was very demanding but fascinating. There was a [time when the] government indicted fifteen or so people for alleged conspiracy to overthrow the government. That made a sedition case. That made a fascinating case to cover. The trial was in Fort Smith. Executions returned after an absence of many years. I went and covered the first and, I think, the second executions, which was a different sort of experience. – a little bit nervous to cover the death of another human being, one that was not accidental but purposeful. This is a person being killed.

JG: You were there covering it or as a witness or both?

BS: I was a reporter who witnessed it as a reporter, who wrote the story as the pool man. The first case was the execution of John Edward Swindler, who was the first person we executed after we resumed executions. The second one was R. Gene Simmons, no relation, by the way. He had killed sixteen people and wounded four more. It was a bizarre case of mass murder. During his trial he would pass me notes. They seldom said much, but it was intriguing to see what R. Gene might do next or what might be on his mind. He, too, was highly

manipulative. He always had an angle that he was pursuing, designed to serve some desire of his own, to know something or to get something. Were you about to ask something?

JG: You said that you covered these as a pool reporter? So there was one reporter?

BS: If my memory serves me right, they had two – one reporter going for print media, newspapers, and one going for electronic media. Being an AP person, they let us fall into either category. I think generally we went in as the electronic representative.

JG: The stories that you wrote while you were with the Associated Press, how many of them moved on a national AP wire? What percentage would you say? What type of stories?

BS: Gosh, it was a long AP career, Jerol. Hundreds went on the AP wire for sure. I hate to say thousands. That sounds like such a big number. In such a long career, it could have been thousands when you take elections and things of that sort into account. I guess, probably, thousands, some of which would go on on a recurring basis, the same issue being reported on day after day, like the Whitewater story with its many ramifications or the long trial in Fort Smith in the sedition case that lasted weeks and weeks and weeks.

JG: You were there covering that each day?

BS: No, not each day. AP had a practice where after awhile you would sort of pull your reporter off of it and then send him back near the end. It would go through that kind of a cycle.

JG: In the course of the AP. . .

BS: I would be covering other things, some of which also went on the national wire.

Go ahead, I did not mean to cut you off.

JG: At the AP you had the right to use material that was in your members' newspapers and move it on the wire, too, didn't you?

BS: Yes.

JG: As if you were actually covering it.

BS: But with this difference: Although the AP can pick up a story from the newspaper and write a version of it and send it on the wire, that is not like Bill Simmons covering it. Bill Simmons cannot put his by-line on a story that a newspaper has actually produced. That would be true of any AP reporter. That would be kind of like stealing.

JG: But if you needed a quote from somebody, some individual, could you use that quote that appeared in a member's newspaper?

BS: You ought to attribute it to the member. You ought to say, "Told the *Arkansas Gazette*."

JG: Tell me about your family.

BS: I have a wife, Jane. We have been married thirty-eight years now. She is the finest person that I have ever met. I have a daughter, Teddi. Her name is Theodosia. She is a schoolteacher in the Little Rock School District. She teaches elementary school out in Otter Creek. I have a son who goes by Toby. He is in computers. He works here at the *Democrat-Gazette*. He is one of our computer

geek guys. They are both married and have children. I have six grandchildren now, Jerol. I am a very fortunate grandpa.

JG: What is Teddi's last name?

BS: Her last name is Cole. She is Mrs. Troy Cole. Toby's wife's name is Penny Simmons. She is going home from the hospital today. She just had some surgery. She is okay.

JG: These grandchildren range in age from?

BS: About eleven to --- I guess the youngest must be three now.

JG: Your career as a newspaperman began at age sixteen?

BS: Age fifteen as a copy boy.

JG: Fifteen is when you started at the *Gazette*. You are now fifty-nine. That adds up to something like forty-four years.

BS: Yes.

JG: And still going.

BS: I have been very fortunate, Jerol. I like to work. I enjoy it. It is partly because journalism is interesting. But it is partly just me. I enjoy sawing logs and splitting firewood. I just like being able to do things and accomplish something. Journalism has the added benefit of meeting interesting people, wrestling with interesting issues, intriguing things.

JG: You have certainly had an interesting career. I am glad that you worked at the *Gazette* as part of it and that you're telling me about it today.

BS: Thank you. I consider it a privilege to have worked at the *Gazette*. It's a great

American newspaper.

JG: Thank you very much.

[End of Tape One, Side Two]

[End of Interview]