

Interview with

Doug Smith,
Little Rock, Arkansas,
24 March 2000

Interviewer: Michael Haddigan

Michael Haddigan: It is March 24, 2000, and I am sitting here with Doug Smith of the *Arkansas Times*, formerly a reporter and editorial writer for the *Arkansas Gazette*. This interview is part of the Arkansas Center for Oral and Visual History project on the *Arkansas Gazette*. We will transcribe this interview and make it available to those interested in Arkansas history. We will give you the opportunity to review the transcript, at which point you will sign a release. What I need you to do now is to tell me your name and indicate that you are willing to give the Center permission to use this tape and make the transcription available to others.

Doug Smith: Yes, I am Doug Smith, and I am agreeable.

MH: And do you agree to make this tape available to others?

DS: Right. Yes, I agree to make this tape available to others. Make this tape and make it available to others.

MH: First of all, I wanted to ask you about your personal background. Where were you born, and what did your folks do, and what sort of education did you get?

DS: I was born in Ione, Arkansas, and then we lived various places around in western Arkansas. Moved to Searcy when I was about ten years old, and that is where I

grew up and graduated from high school. And then attended the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. My father was, for the most of his life, was a traveling salesman, and my mother — neither of these were college, attended college, incidentally—my mother worked at various jobs and as a clerk at a ladies' store in Searcy. Let's see, I actually have a business degree from the University at Fayetteville. It is a complicated story, but, anyway, but I took a number of journalism courses as well and decided that is what I wanted to do, really. And so after I left the University in 1963, I came to work at the *Arkansas Gazette*, right at the end of the summer of '63 and went to work on the state desk. Leroy Donald was the state editor at that time. Robert Shaw, who is now the AP bureau chief here in Little Rock, was also on the state desk at the time. And then, there was a crap desk and obit writer, a part-time guy whose name I can't remember now, and then me. It was sort of the three of us full-time, and I was low man on the totem pole for a while.

MH: Well, what was it that drew you to journalism? Why did you find that interesting?

DS: Well, actually, I had gone up to Fayetteville with the idea I was going to be an engineer. That was, at the time, that was post-Sputnik, and that was very hot, and I had always made reasonably good grades in school in the math and science courses that I took. Got up to Fayetteville and quickly found out the math and science courses I had taken in Searcy High School were nothing like the ones they had at Fayetteville, and that I was in the wrong field entirely. So then, I decided I

still wanted to do something to make money. That was my main deal, and I thought, well, maybe I can get into, like, accounting or something like that, and, but, as it happened, I had a friend who was working on the *Arkansas Traveler*, which was the college newspaper, and I had also had some interest in writing. I took a creative writing course, and I was in the honors English classes as a freshman, so I kind of had some interest in writing, and he got me interested in writing for the paper, the *Traveler*. And after I started working on that, I realized, you know, this is probably what I will be doing for the rest of my life. But I hadn't bothered to change majors again to journalism, although I did, as I say, take a number of journalism courses. That guy actually wound up getting out of journalism and becoming a lawyer after he got me into it.

MH: Well, at the *Gazette*, what sorts of stories did you cover? How long did you work on the state desk?

DS: At the *Gazette*? Let's see. I worked on the state desk, I would say, probably not much more than a year and a half or two years, maybe. Maybe not quite that long. Well, we just covered a lot of stuff. At that time, we still had a lot of these little country stringers around, and we relied on them quite a bit, and they would call in stuff and send in their little clips, and we would pay them. But it was, you know, automobile accidents and shootings and whatever. We did a lot of it by phone. Occasionally, you would go out and cover something. I remember seeing that Les Seago died the other day. I think maybe the first time I ever met Les Seago was when I got sent down to Pine Bluff. They were having some kind of

student uprising at what was then called Arkansas AM&N, the black college there. Seago was working for the *Pine Bluff Commercial* at the time, but — and we did a lot of feature type stories — I remember doing one on a church group down around DeQueen that wouldn't accept any medical treatment for their kids. And I did in those days — Donna Axum being named Miss America was a big story for me at this time. That kind of stuff. The last train between Little Rock and Hot Springs, the last passenger train, I rode that. So it was some hard, a lot of it, as I say, a lot of feature stuff. We wrote and edited that kind of stuff, and a lot of the hard news we kind of did over the phone, calling sheriffs or whoever. And I think the reason I went from the state desk to the city desk was because Matilda Tuohey was on the city desk at the time, and she had gotten tired of being sent around from one beat to another. She was — she didn't want to do that any more — and so she was going to quit unless some other arrangements could be made. And A.R. Nelson, who was the managing editor, I think he worked out a deal where he would, she would go over to the state desk and I would go over to the city desk as a general assignment reporter, which meant, as part of it, that you filled in on all those other beats around from time to time. Why I mentioned it, the *Gazette*, when I went to work there, was not your rainbow coalition at all. Matilda was the only woman in the news room. They had women working back in Society, but Nelson did not like to hire women reporters. He was prejudiced against women, I guess you would say, and Matilda had been there, she was middle-aged by then, and I guess she had been there since the '40s, maybe, or

sometime. Quite a while. But she was the only woman there at the time. A couple of years later, they hired a young, attractive woman, which caused a great stir in the news room at the time. No, no blacks in the news room then. There had been some. There had been one or two, I think, during the, back before, maybe even during the '57 crisis, back in the '50s, but they covered just strictly black news, I think. But by the time I went to work there, as I say, in '63, there were no blacks on the staff.

MH: Was there still kind of a lingering, sort of, atmosphere from the '57 crisis? Was there still — did people still talk about it?

DS: Oh, yes. Right. Right. Yes, very much so. Of course, that was one of the reasons I wanted to work there, and a lot of other, lot of people, other people, did, too. And, yes, you were very much aware of that, and proud of it and, yes, there was still a lot of talk about it. Mr. Heiskell, J.N. Heiskell, was still living at that time. He must have been about ninety-five, but still coming to the office every day. He was the editor. In fact, the first day I reported to work, I met him. There was a young woman named Marian Alford, whom I had known at the University, who was working in the Society department as an intern that summer, and she was one of these really outgoing young women who would just go up to anybody. And so she saw me, and she happened to see Mr. Heiskell listing down the hall, as he did, and so she immediately called him over and took me over and introduced me to him, and he, of course, completely forgot about it immediately afterwards, if he remembered the name, ever remembered the name at all. That was sort of a

link to '57, too.

MH: Did you, did you ever interact with him in any substantial way after that?

DS: No, except one time he was, I had written a story about a speech Fulbright made here — and this was at the time, I guess, in the, probably, late '60s, when Fulbright was catching hell from a lot of people, from a lot of people for the Vietnam war thing — and the paper had, the story had appeared in the paper that morning, and I didn't come to work, I guess, like until 12:30, as a general assignment reporter. But, anyway, I came to work that one day, and Mr. Heiskell came in and went up to the city desk. I heard him ask somebody, "Which one is Mr. Smith?" And so, then, they, Bill Shelton or Jerry Jones, whoever was there, pointed over at me, and he came over and said that Senator Fulbright had been up there and had said that this, my story, was just for sure a lot better than the kind of stories they did on him in Washington, and that he was appreciative. And Mr. Heiskell says, "Sometimes I think some of these young reporters can maybe do the job even better than I could." He went off then. That was about my only personal contact with him other than just seeing him around the building.

MH: Can you describe for me the — what the news room was like in '63 to the mid-'60s? What did it sound like? What did it smell like?

DS: Well, there was — it was loud because there were teletype machines around clacking, although some of them were in another room, but some of them just kind of sitting out in the main room, so that stuff was going on all the time, although you, in my case, I got, you got used to it, you know, to the point where

you didn't even notice it. But it was — people who came in and weren't used to it noticed it was loud — And it was, of course, that was back in the time when most everybody smoked, too, so it was very smoky, and everybody would leave their butts on the floor or some, maybe some, maybe you had ashtrays, maybe you didn't. Lot of smoke, heavy smoking around. And it was a fair amount of just yelling, the way most news rooms are. You know, Bill Shelton, on the city desk, was not, he didn't do a lot of yelling. He was usually quiet. Bob Douglas was the news editor, so he was usually running things around the copy desk. I think Jim Clark was the, I guess, was often the slot man and [Bill] Rutherford was on the desk at that time, too. Pat Carithers was the wire editor. Nelson, who was the managing editor, he had a little glassed-in office, off the main news room itself, so he just came out occasionally into the room.

MH: Well, people wrote their stories on typewriters?

DS: Right, right. Yes, people did write their stories on typewriters, and we did have copy boys. You would slam your story out on a spike and yell "Copy!", and a copy boy would come get it and take it over to the city editor, wherever, the news desk, wherever it was supposed to go. That was true, yes. We made carbons, generally, and the carbons would be given to AP, which had an office in the, well, back on that same floor, right next to the *Gazette* news room, at the time. But, occasionally, Douglas or somebody would get mad at AP, thought they had done us wrong in some way or other, and so we would have a period where we would withhold carbons from the AP, and that was the — I think, I suspect that is one

reason John Robert Starr hated the *Gazette* so bad. The *Gazette*, being AP's biggest customer, was — our guys could be pretty, pretty arrogant to the AP guys from time to time. UPI also had, they had an office on the third floor above the news room, so we were all kind of in the same building then.

MH: What was it like, as a young reporter, to go to work for Bill Shelton?

DS: Well, it was fairly intimidating because I had heard a lot of stories about him, and, also, you would see him. He was not, like, say, Douglas, who would, you know, meet with anybody, young guys and everything — Shelton was just, pretty much aloof, and he communicated a lot by notes, more so than direct conversation with you. And I, for a long time before I worked for him, didn't know what to call him, and so I would, finally, when I had to talk to him, I would just kind of go up and stand there until he looked up, and then I would start talking about whatever it is I wanted to talk about because I didn't feel like — "Bill" didn't sound right, and "Mr. Shelton" after a while — I guess, at the first, I called him, "Mr. Shelton," but then after I had been there, worked for him for quite a while, that seemed too, too formal. And some people just called him Shelton, and I guess, maybe, toward the end, I started calling him that, but, yes, he was a fairly intimidating figure. And, of course, he looked like what a tough city editor should look like, too. But I generally got along with him okay, except once or twice when I was covering city hall, I got some nasty notes from him and I fired back, but other than that . . .

MH: Did you generally agree with his judgment?

DS: Yes, generally. Yes, I did. I don't think I ever had any quarrels with his news judgment. Yes, I think he was, of course, he was very interested in everything pertaining to the schools and the crisis and all that stuff, and I thought we should be interested in that kind of thing.

MH: Well, during that same time, you mentioned Sputnik earlier, was also a time when the civil rights movement was really moving into high gear and the Vietnam war was just beginning. There were a number of world events that were really starting to boil about that time. Did you feel that you were in a special time at all? In the '60s?

DS: Yes, to some extent. I don't know that I reflected on it much at the time, but it was certainly — there was the, like, the civil rights thing. Well, at Pine Bluff, one of the things that they did down there, this was when SNCC had become active at Pine Bluff, and I remember meeting a guy named Bill Hansen, who was the white guy among these SNCC organizers and had a black wife, which was very unusual in those days. They were kind of raising hell, and I went to AM&N and covered it. And then, it kind of, later, I guess, in the '60s, it spread to Little Rock, and there was some very tense times for a while, near riots and confrontations. And I remember going to some kind of meeting at the Dunbar Community Center that was supposed to be one of these kind of "let's be interracial; let's get together" meetings. And inside it was okay, but when you walked out to your car, there were a bunch of young black guys standing around, and they were not much interested in this interracial harmony and were making loud and sort of

threatening comments. And I was glad to get into my car and be gone from there as quickly as possible. And then there was the war thing that — it was kind of the first time, you know, people were openly attacking the President for war. It was not that I was old enough to remember World War II, but I knew that this was a different attitude than had been around in previous wars.

MH: Well, can you describe for me the, sort of, the character of the *Arkansas Gazette* during this same time? Maybe in the context of the journalism as a whole?

DS: Well, it was, the editorial page was certainly, would be considered, more liberal than most papers in the country, big and small. I think the paper generally had a pretty good reputation, and — I know it had a pretty good reputation — and, of course, at the *Gazette* itself, we kind of liked to think of ourselves as a smaller *New York Times* kind of paper, the paper of record in our era, in our area, that is. But I think it was, I think the *Gazette* was widely regarded in the profession as one of the better papers around for its size. Let's see. What else can I say about that?

MH: Were there any special quirks that the paper had that you might now find unusual or other papers at the time would think was unusual? Ideologically or in practice?

DS: Well, I, let me see. I remember some of the photographers thought Shelton — and maybe some of the reporters thought so, too — that he went overboard in trying to get black news and black people in the paper. I remember photographers complaining they would go out and cover some event that was not overtly racial, but Shelton would throw away the pictures because there were no black faces in

the pictures. I think we were probably, in the South at least, one of the first papers that went out of our way to try to get black comments and black, some black representation in the paper, although we didn't, perhaps, we didn't do as much as we should have done, even then. But that was the kind of thing most people would have thought that was a quirk, and I think some of the segs even commented on it, thought that there were too many pictures of black people in the paper. And there was still occasionally a thing that the editorial page was, as I said, was generally liberal, but while Mr. Heiskell was alive, there were some occasional things that they did just because [it was] his special interest. Like he was big on the Arkansas River project, which I think has turned out not to be all that much, but it was to Mr. Heiskell and, therefore, to the *Gazette*. That was going to be the salvation of Arkansas, so they went on about that a lot.

MH: Well, where do you think that — okay, you have got the *Arkansas Gazette* in the South that is taking a somewhat different approach to covering race, covering the civil rights movement. Where did that come from? What was the cultural or ideological push behind that? How did that develop, where maybe it didn't develop in Alabama or some other place?

DS: Well, I think, well, I guess I think you would just have to give credit to Mr. Heiskell, who, as you know, back in the '20s when they had the big lynching in Little Rock, he thundered against that, and that was a time when newspapers in Jackson, Mississippi, and places like that, they didn't condemn lynchings. If anything, they apologized for them. But he was — the stories are that friends of

his had to have an armed guard around his house, so I think he and his son-in-law, Hugh Patterson, also, I think, were more enlightened than a lot of people at that time. Of course, in the '57 crisis, I think now everybody recognizes that Mr. Heiskell didn't really, or the *Gazette* didn't really, come out for integration. They wanted to obey the law. That was really what they were saying. They didn't come out and say, "Blacks and whites are equal. . . ." It was mainly the thrust to just say, "This is the law of the land, and we have to obey the law of the land." But that was much more than most southern newspapers were willing to say at that time about school integration. So, I think, yes, I think, the family. And then they got Harry Ashmore, who was a liberal, to run the paper — they brought him in. He was gone by the time I got there, incidentally, but he had been, they called him executive editor, so he was over the editorial page and the news side of the paper both. And he had a great deal to do with setting the tone of the paper, particularly in the crisis years. So, I think, just a combination of some unusual individuals. I mean, I don't think before the Heiskell years that the *Gazette* had ever had any particular reputation for progressiveness as far as I know. It was just another typical southern newspaper before then.

MH: Was that perspective that the *Gazette* had, did that run counter to opinion among the general populace of the state? Or was it in step with general feeling among Arkansans at the time?

DS: I would say it was ahead of the general feelings of Arkansans for the time, but it was pretty well accepted by the establishment in Little Rock, the kind of ruling

classes, some of the better people, if you will. But I would say that the *Gazette*, it was, on race relations and school integration, it was ahead of the average Arkansan, certainly, and caught some heat because of it, but weathered the storm. And by the time I got there in '63 — at one time, I think the circulation dropped lower than the *Democrat's*, but then by the time I got there in '63, that had passed. The *Gazette* was already back in front as the bigger paper and building on the lead.

MH: You mentioned that, as a general assignment reporter on the city desk, you kind of moved between various beats, were on various beats at various times. Did you, at any point, settle on one beat, into a specific beat?

DS: Yes, I guess it was in 1967, which was Winthrop Rockefeller's first term as governor, I got sent out to the — I was a general assignment reporter then — and I got sent out to the Capitol to help with the Capitol coverage. And, at that time, it was mostly — Ernie Dumas was in, regularly, in the Senate. Jerol Garrison was regularly in the House, and Ernie Valachovic was kind of just covering the rest of the Capitol while the legislature was in session. And he was a guy who had dealt — under Faubus and under Rockefeller, too — was the one who dealt with the governor most of the time. So I was kind of a swing man out there. And then, after the session, I went back to general assignment, but by the time the next regular session came around in '69, there had been a lot of conflict between Douglas and Jerol over Jerol turning copy in slowly. He was very meticulous. So they made me the full-time man in the House and Jerol the swing man, which

means he would have less to do and could write some stuff during the day, and he wouldn't be the one coming back at 5:00 at night and starting to write up the whole thing. And I stayed on that until — well, I stayed as a Capitol reporter, me and Ernie Dumas, with the legislature not in session. Ernie Valachovic died along in there some place, so it became me and Dumas as the, pretty much, as the full time men at the Capitol when the legislature was not in session and when it was, too, although when it was, some other people would come out and help. And I stayed on that beat until about '75 or so, and that is what I really, I guess, thought of myself mainly as a reporter, as a Capitol reporter, until I became an editorial writer.

MH: What were the main issues in play at the time you were there, the time that you worked at the Capitol? What were the big issues affecting the legislature at that time?

DS: Well, Rockefeller went in. It was the “old guard,” as they were called under Faubus, that he had left, and Rockefeller had beaten the last of the old segregationists, Jim Johnson, so it was race. And improving race relations was a very big thing. I remember when Martin Luther King was killed, Rockefeller stood out on the front of the Capitol steps with a bunch of black ministers, singing “We shall overcome,” and he was very much into that kind of thing. He had been a member of the NAACP and admitted it, which was kind of surprising in Arkansas. Just a few years before, they had been trying to outlaw the NAACP and people like that. And he made a big point of appointing blacks to offices,

public offices, and he wanted to, roughly, he wanted to advance — He had very big plans for advancing Arkansas, like raising taxes and — most of which he couldn't get through the legislature, although he did get some of them through. And he was certainly a very important figure in just changing the mood of the state, I think. He served two terms and ran for a third term — but still, the state was mostly Democratic, and when a really good Democratic candidate came along, Dale Bumpers, most of the Democrats who might have voted for Rockefeller went over and voted for Bumpers. Oh, I voted for Rockefeller. I mean, again, I thought we owed him that. And Bumpers was a very progressive governor.

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[Beginning of Tape One, Side Two]

DS: . . . It was flush financially, so there was some money to spend, but still, it was a remarkably productive four years under Bumpers as governor. And then he ran against the famous Fulbright, which was a big contest, and as it turned out, Bumpers beat him fairly easily without ever really saying anything bad about him. That is kind of a funny thing, too. The *Gazette*, editorially, stayed with Fulbright through that, although later they became as thick as thieves with Bumpers. At that time, the *Gazette* ownership was still loyal to Fulbright, even though on most things, Fulbright was really the, I mean, Bumpers was the more liberal of the two on race even. But Fulbright's record on foreign policy and on the war and stuff was such that he had a — some people would stay with him no matter what, and

the *Gazette* did, editorially.

MH: Well, who were the big knockers in the legislature at that point? Who were the powerful lobbyists or committee heads?

DS: Well, at that time, there was, like, you know, Max Howell from Little Rock, who was the chairman of the Judiciary Committee and took care of all the judges and prosecutors and attorneys. Everybody had to go through him. He was also chairman of the Efficiency Committee, as I recall, so anybody in the Senate that wanted to get, wanted favors done for them, wanted to get somebody put on the legislative payroll, you had to go see Max. And he was just — he did pretty much what he wanted to do. And the other one was Knox Nelson from Pine Bluff, who was — I forgot exactly what the name of his committee he chaired was [Rules] — but, effectively, he had control of the Senate calendar, so Knox could decide whether your bill got up or not. And so you had to cater to him. He was a very powerful guy. And it was always easier to become more powerful in the Senate because the House is so much bigger. It has a hundred members to the Senate's thirty-five, and it is much more factionalized. You can't just get together, get a few guys together in one room and decide what you want to do. Whereas, in the Senate, you could get Howell and Nelson and Bill Ingram and Clarence Bell, who was a big public school supporter, and the guy who usually handled the public school taxes, Olen Hendrix. You get four or five of them back in the Senate quiet room, and they could pretty well decide what the Senate was going to do. The House was a much more free flowing, I mean, just free flowing

kind of thing, although people like John Miller, who was a budget expert — there were guys with a lot of influence. Bill Foster from Lonoke was another one, but they didn't have the same kind of influence that the big boys in the Senate did.

MH: What about on the lobby side? Were there big industries at the time that had the most influence?

DS: Well, yes, some of them weren't as big then as they are now, I guess, like Tyson and Wal-Mart and people in the individual ones, but the Chamber of Commerce, a lot of it was done through the Chamber of Commerce and the AIA, Associated Industries of Arkansas. Bob Lamb was one of the big lobbyists. Oh, well, AP&L, they were one of the most effective of all lobby groups. They always got what they wanted. ArkLa, too. The utilities always did very well. The Farm Bureau was always a very powerful lobby, in part because they had this big grassroots organization of so many members that they could do it, but the people like organized labor had to fight for the little scraps they could get. The AEA, then as now, I mean, it, they had some influence because of their size and their numbers, but . . .

MH: AEA is the Arkansas . . .

DS: Education Association, right? Schoolteachers' group. People like Forrest Rozzell, who was the executive director of AEA for much of this time. He was a big influence, an important lobbyist. The timber companies always had the influence, Georgia-Pacific, Weyerhaeuser and those people, they always had people around. They got pretty much what they wanted, too.

MH: Well, in 1975, you left the Capitol crew and went on to other duties?

DS: Well, I, actually, I went on, I was going to write a book. Write a novel. And I didn't have any agreement but that I would be hired back. I kind of mentioned it to Douglas once . . . and he gave something like . . . he just kind of indicated, like, "Well, we'll have a place for you," or something, but there was really not any formal commitment. But, anyway, I tried that for about, oh, I think it was actually a little less than a year. I was, you know, struggling at it and it wasn't going well at all, and I, I guess after about nine or ten months, I got a call from Carrick Patterson, I think, called me. The *Gazette* was starting up this new Omnibus section, which was going to be a—you may remember the Omnibus section—it was going to be a new kind of thing, a feature-type section separate from the rest of the paper, and they wanted people to work there and thought that I would be, be a good fit for me, and wanted to know if I was ready to go back to work. And I said, "Yes, I am." And I did. That was the end of the, of the novel, which is . . .

MH: So the novel is still in the works?

DS: No, no, the novel got thrown away. It was not of a quality that I wanted anybody to read, so it was — but it was, you know, it was an interesting experience, and I found out whether I really wanted to write one or not. So it was okay. I didn't regret doing it.

MH: Was the Omnibus section a departure from general practice in the *Gazette* up to that point?

DS: Yes, because the *Gazette* was always considered kind of a, mostly, you know, a hard news paper, and that this was, you know, you had the occasional feature, but this thing was of a separate section devoted to soft news. There was a kind of controversy all over the country. Papers all over were doing similar kind of stuff, but the *Gazette*, kind of like *The New York Times*, most people there in the news room prided themselves on not doing that kind of stuff. So it was pretty controversial, although once I started working for Omnibus, I became, of course, pretty defensive of it, protective of it. But, yes, it was a departure for the *Gazette* and a very unpopular departure with some people.

MH: Who else worked with you in that section?

DS: Oh, well, Paul Johnson was there, Mike Trimble, Bill Lewis. I think Lewis was the first editor of the Omnibus section. Pat Patterson, Carrick's wife, worked in there. Ann Henry worked in there. Nancy Sparks. Kelley Bass. Dorothy Palmer was in there at the time. Kay Speed, who is the sister of the photographer Gary Speed. Chuck Kaufman was on the copy desk. Let's see. Jack — I can't remember Jack's last name now — he was from Mississippi. He was a copy editor also. And some other people from time to time. Eventually, Lewis gave up the — it was not, the section, was not working out too well, partly because a lot of people in there were just not producing enough copy, at least the right kind of copy. And so Lewis, he said, voluntarily relinquished the editorship and became a writer in the section instead. And then David Petty became the editor. I think Carrick himself may have been the editor for a while, I am not sure. But I know, I

know Petty did. Sometime after Lewis, David Petty became the editor.

MH: Let me ask you, when did you start the Words column?

DS: It was around 1980, and — I am not sure exactly, but it was right around there — and that was something that David Petty, in fact, was responsible for that. Somebody was, some syndicate person was selling a column on words or language, and I guess he figured I had some interest in it. So he said, “Why don’t you write one? You can do it as well as this guy can.” So I said, “Well, I’ll write a few, and we’ll see.” The *Gazette*, years before, had carried the old Theodore Bernstein column on language, but he had died, so they didn’t have a language column at that time. So I agreed to do it and wrote a couple and said, “Yes, I guess I can do this all right.” So, after that, that became a regular part of my duties, writing this column every week.

MH: And you continued to do that throughout your time at the *Gazette* and now do the same thing for the *Arkansas Times*?

DS: Right. Right.

MH: At one point, you moved. I don’t know, did you move directly from the Omnibus section to the so-called “hot dog” desk?

DS: As I recall, yes. Was that under McIlwain? Was that when he was there? I think that probably was under McIlwain, after he came in as editor, but, anyway, yes, we were told the old Omnibus section was being shaped up and some people were being shipped out, back to the news room. And Bill Green was another one who was back in the Omnibus section. So Green and I went back to the news room on

what was then called the “hot dog” desk, working out there with Max Brantley.

MH: That was a city desk function, meant to be sort of a feature section for the city desk?

DS: Yes, it was meant to sort of turn out features for the city desk and, I think, kind of hard features, in many cases, not just fluff, for the most part. But it changed over the years. Sometimes we would hear that the, you know, take your time with a long story, in-depth story, and then, maybe a few weeks later, he would say, “No, no, we want shorter stories. And more of them.” And then there was the period where we just couldn’t get our stuff in the paper. It was just, you know, you could take as long as you want because the demands of the regular daily stuff, daily journalism stuff, were such that, I mean, a lot of our stuff was not getting in the paper at all. And so I think Max was often frustrated by some of that, and I, personally, was not too happy with the “hot dog” thing and was, in fact, considering going over to the, kind of moving over to the copy desk. I think one of the reasons, maybe, I didn’t move was because that was about the same time all the computers were coming in, and being a copy editor was somehow, suddenly becoming much more complicated than it had been before. It was driving Shelton crazy at the city desk, of course. But before I had to make that decision, they approached me about working on the, going up to the editorial page. And so I worked part-time there for about a year, for about half my time was on the city desk and about half the time on the editorial page. And then I went and moved up to editorial full time. Associate editor was the title. It was what all the editorial

writers were called.

MH: And were you writing editorials at that point, or were you copy-editing and writing or what?

DS: Yes, I was just, you mean after I moved up to the — I was writing editorials from the first.

MH: Were you given any kind of instruction about how the editorials were to be written when you first went up there? Did anybody pull you aside and say, “Look, here is generally how we look at things”?

DS: As I recall, I think Jerry Dhonau, who was at that time the editor of the editorial page, he did talk to me some and gave me some little advice. I don’t remember too much about it. I think it was kind of of the nature that, “You know what our political views are on most things, so it won’t be a problem, you know. Maybe, occasionally, the publisher will have something that maybe we, the editorial writers, won’t necessarily agree with.” And then, in that case, I think the rule was that the editor of the editorial page, that was his job then to, if nobody else wanted, was willing to do it, that he would write the publisher’s editorials. And then Jerry just gave me some little tips about just the tricks of the trade, like I would sometimes write a “we,” just meaning “we, all of us,” you know, and he would point out, “You have got to be careful whether you are using the editorial ‘we’ or the general ‘we,’” and some other little things like capital punishment. That was something that — we took a dim view of it, but we never came right out and said flatly, “We are opposed to capital punishment.” We wrote a lot of

editorials pooh-poohing this particular case or something, but we didn't, it was not part of our editorial position. And we did not categorize. That is another thing Jerry told us, that we do not categorize. We do not, our editorial position, we do not say we are "liberal Democrat" or "liberal" or "moderate" or whatever. We don't. We do what we do, but we don't, if anybody asks, we don't — I guess we do what is right, but we didn't call it by any label.

MH: During this time as well, the so-called newspaper war was really beginning to gain momentum. How was that for you, as a reporter, and then, later on, as an editorial writer? As an editorial writer, were you aware of the newspaper war?

DS: Oh, yes. We were in, we didn't change the editorial policy. I mean, we kept the same kind of policies we had, even with Gannett. I guess I had been up there about a year when Gannett bought the paper. Of course, then there was considerable trepidation about whether they would try to get a more conservative editorial page. Walker Lundy, who was the editor brought in by Gannett, I remember he said once that — he met with all of us individually — and he said — and I think he pretty much stuck with it — that he was not going to make any big changes in the editorial page because, he said, there are so many other big changes going on right now he didn't want to do it. And, anyway, he always claimed that he agreed with most of our positions anyway. My own suspicion is that he was getting ready, when he got fired himself, that he had his eye, just from the things he had said, that he had his eye on changing up the editorial page considerably. You know, where he is now, he has pretty much effectively

abolished the editorial page. I don't know whether he would have done that here, but he had made it clear that he was, that he had been letting it go just because he didn't want to pick another fight at that time with the old *Gazette* readers. But, sooner or later, he was going to get around to changing it.

MH: He is now at the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*?

DS: Yes.

MH: Did you, at any time during that period, did you begin to see the handwriting on the wall in terms of the demise of the *Gazette*?

DS: Well, I, you know, I had been worried about it for some time because it was just, Hussman kept spending money. And I knew that the *Gazette*, the Patterson family, they had limited resources. It was the only paper, whereas Hussman had a chain to subsidize the *Democrat*. Then, when Gannett bought it, I thought — I guess the way most people did — I thought, “Well, you know, this huge chain, surely that is, that means that the *Gazette* is going to survive.” For a while, I thought that. And then, how long did it take? After three or four years, whatever it was, I think we all started realizing, well, that may not be the case either. I don't remember exactly when the first serious rumors that the *Gazette* might go under started going around, but I was aware that, under Gannett ownership, the *Gazette* was not making the strides that the Gannett people and Bill Malone, the publisher, the kind of goals he had set. In fact, we were going backwards in some areas, losing ads, advertising, instead of gaining, and so on.

MH: Well, in terms of the journalistic quality of the paper, what effect did the change

of ownership have?

DS: The paper overall, you mean? Well, I think it became more interested in sort of light news. Didn't think it was — Lundy thought that there was too much space given, and may have been correct, that the readers didn't want all this hard news stuff about government, and that they wouldn't — I remember Pat Carithers, the wire editor, telling me one time that Lundy said he didn't want to see all this Middle Eastern news. People in Little Rock weren't interested in the Middle East. He liked, he claimed he liked, both the hard news and the soft news, but he certainly seemed to devote more to features and the — It just became a flashier kind of paper. A lot of the people didn't like that. The *Gazette's* old makeup had been very conservative, and it probably could have used some change, but a lot of the people didn't like the changes that were made.

MH: Did you ever get any reaction from readers, say, longtime readers of the paper? What was their response to the changes?

DS: Oh, yes, I got, yes, I heard people talk about it. They didn't like it, and they wanted the old *Gazette*. I think a lot of that was just people grew used to what they read. I mean, there was some truth in it, I think, that Gannett was dumbing down the paper to some extent. But it is also true that readers tend to, they get used to something, and that is what they like, and it may not be always related to the quality of the paper so much as it is their own personal tastes. In fact, I realized at some point, you know, there were a lot of people at the *Gazette* who had the idea — you know, you put out a better paper and you win newspaper

awards and have more readers. I kind of came around to the point of view that what people like is not necessarily what is the better newspaper. I think that some tastes were changing, and people — newspapers all over the country seemed to think so and I think probably if enough people thought that there was some truth to it . . .

MH: Well, in the very final days of the paper's life, did the, in the editorial department, did you all, did you draft a farewell editorial, or did you make any sorts of plans?

DS: Yes. Jerry Dhonau wrote a farewell editorial, and it appeared in the last issue of the *Arkansas Gazette*, even though we hadn't been told that it was for sure that was going to be the last issue. The word was out that it would be, and so Jerry wrote an editorial, and it ran and it said — and I forget exactly how it went — but he said something like, “We don't know for sure, but this, we hear, this may be the last hurrah.” And, of course, we, yes, we were hearing that stuff, and Jerry was wondering what to do, and finally he decided, “Yes, we are going to run this.” So there was a kind of farewell editorial in the last issue.

MH: What was it like for you, the first morning that you were unemployed, the first day that you did not have to get out and go to the office, read the paper and go to the office and do things, what was it like for you on that day?

DS: Oh, well, I don't know. I am sure it was sad. I don't know if I — I don't remember if I was hung over or not. I may have drunk some the night before. Probably did. I guess I was mainly thinking that, you know, I had had the best job I had ever had, writing editorials at the *Arkansas Gazette*, and I knew that I

was not going to get a job again that pleased me as much as that one had, so — and I was over fifty, too. In fact, my chances were a lot less than some of the younger people's were of finding employment, finding a good job. But finding a job as a liberal editorial writer on a good newspaper was going to be very unlikely. So you know, I was thinking about that.

MH: Well, before we run out of time, I wanted to ask you — You mentioned you had a favorite story about the *Gazette*.

DS: Right, and that, let's see, it fits in back there when you were talking about the attitude of the people toward the *Gazette* and vice versa. I covered a lot of politics, as I said, and I covered a couple of campaigns of David Pryor's, traveling with him and Barbara, just with them all day for weeks at a time. In one of those campaigns, either '72 or '74, I guess it was, we came back into Little Rock late on a Saturday night, flew back into the airport, and he had a car there. A young college guy was driving it, and so the Pryors gave me a ride to the *Gazette*, where my car was parked. So we pull up there, and the lights are shining at the *Gazette*, it is midnight, and I think maybe even Pryor said, "Give us a first edition of the paper" or something. Anyway, he, David turns to this young driver, and he says, I know partly for my benefit, but partly because it is true, he said, "You know, Rick, the difference between Arkansas and Mississippi is the *Arkansas Gazette*." Hear! Hear! It was great!

MH: Well, is there anything else that you wanted to add that I haven't asked you about? Is there anything that we have missed?

DS: Let me see. Gosh, I don't know. I thought there were, you know, some exceptionally talented people who worked at the *Gazette* over the years, and partly because of its reputation, it attracted some people like that. And I think maybe more than some people outside the profession realize. Some of them had gone on before I got to work there, well, like Roy Reed had been on a Nieman [Fellowship]. He came back and stayed there, worked for a while, and then went on to *The New York Times*. Bill Whitworth was a reporter at the *Gazette* when I first went to work there. He went on to the *New Yorker* and then later became editor of the *Atlantic*. Buddy Portis had been there. He left shortly before I went to work at the *Gazette* and went to the *New York Herald-Tribune*, then over in Europe and then started writing his books.

MH: This is Charles Portis.

DS: Right. Right. Right. But even in the time I was there, there were always, I mean, we attracted some good reporters. Ernie Dumas was a great reporter. One of the best we had ever had there. Douglas was a good managing editor. Jerry Neil was a great editorial writer and a memorable character. There were a lot of good people that worked there.

MH: Well, . . .

DS: And it was a congenial place. There was a lot of camaraderie about the *Gazette*. That may be true of most newspapers, I guess. Newspaper people being kind of cliquish, they kind of hang out together.

MH: Did you ever think about working anywhere else? Did you ever make an attempt

to go to any other papers?

DS: Well, I think, once or twice, there was — oh, I remember fairly early there, when I was on the state desk, the *Pine Bluff Commercial* wanted to hire me, but I stayed at the *Gazette*. And I guess I did something wrong later because, you know, I told Nelson that they were offering me a job. And so instead, I stayed at the *Gazette* and got more money to stay at the *Gazette*. I found out later it pissed him off, but at the time I didn't know enough about what the etiquette was in these things to know that you are not supposed to do that. And one time, there was, seems like the Omaha paper, I had some dealing, contact with them one time, and, I think, finally decided, no, didn't want to go to Omaha. I mean, I like what I am doing here in Little Rock.

MH: That is the *Omaha World*?

DS: Oh, whatever it was. So I didn't really look too much, and I was kind of the — the *Arkansas Gazette* meant a lot to me and I was, for the most part I was — you know, unless somebody came in looking for me, which they didn't — then I was pretty much content to stay there.

MH: Okay. Well, listen, thank you very much for talking with me and thanks for participating in the project.

DS: Thank you.

[End of Interview]