

Gazette Project

Interview with

Mike Trimble
Little Rock, Arkansas,
14 October 2000

Interviewer: Ernest Dumas

Ernest Dumas: We're talking to Travis Mac Trimble. T-R-A-V-I-S M-A-C T-R-I-M-B-

L-E - otherwise known as Mike Trimble, who was a reporter and
columnist, and other, at the *Arkansas Gazette* for a number of years.

Mike, first of all, you need to repeat what was on that piece of paper. You
understand and agree that your remarks here will be transcribed and will
become public record and will be available for research or for whatever
purposes the oral history archive in Fayetteville wants to use them.

Mike Trimble: I do understand that, and that is fine with me.

ED: Okay. I said Travis Mac Trimble, that was your name, right?

MT: That is my name, Travis Mac, but I have always been called Mike, and that is
how my name appeared in the *Gazette*.

ED: You were born at Bauxite. You were reared at Bauxite.

MT: Yes, I was born in Bauxite, Arkansas, in Saline County.

ED: What year?

MT: 1943, November the 3rd.

ED: And your momma and daddy were who?

MT: My father was E.M. Trimble, Mac Trimble, and my mother was Francis Trim

Trimble. Her maiden name was Trim. They were both school teachers who came to Arkansas from Louisiana. My dad was a math teacher and a football coach, and my mother was an English teacher. After several years teaching at Bauxite, my father took a job with the Aluminum Company of America and worked for ALCOA until his retirement.

ED: You had a sister. You have a sister, Pat.

MT: Pat.

ED: Who is, what, two years older than you?

MT: Pat is two years older than I. She too was born and reared at Bauxite and also worked at the *Arkansas Gazette*.

ED: Your momma was a school teacher, and I recall one of the great pieces you ever wrote was an article in the *Arkansas Times*, when it was a magazine, oh, some time in probably the early 1980s, I guess, recalling an incident in class. You were, you went to school to your momma.

MT: Yes, I did.

ED: She taught you some.

MT: Yes, I did. And it was a strange relationship. It was full of unspoken agreements between us. I have determined, looking back on it, we never talked about it much, but there were certain things that I had to do in her class and certain things that I could not do. There were also certain things that she would let me get away with in order not to be either the teacher's pet, so there was a lot of give and take on both sides.

ED: She understood the peculiar situation you were in as a student?

MT: Well, I think so. Looking back on it. As I said it was never discussed. But looking back on it, I think she expected that I would have to take part in a certain amount of classroom horseplay and misbehavior in order not to be embarrassed in front of my friends. And I understood that there was a line beyond which I could not go. And, of course, the fact that I had to get the school work done, that went without saying.

ED: The piece you did for the *Times* magazine was about, as I recall, an assignment from your mother to read Shakespeare in class. Was it *Macbeth*?

MT: Yes, it was.

ED: *Macbeth*, and it was a story about one of your classmates who was apparently a football player and who had a great experience with Shakespeare.

MT: Right, well, of course, everybody is a football player in a little school like that. There were thirty people in my senior class. Yes, my mother was teaching *Macbeth*, and she decided we would have a reading of the play, not just assign it, but that we would assign parts. While we would just read from our desks, it would be essentially a readers theater type production. But characters were assigned, and Ralph Richards, better known as Bud, was to play *Macbeth*. And Ralph was one of those guys who was popular with everyone, teachers, students, but . . .

ED: Not a scholar.

MT: Not a scholar. Shop was his big thing. But he was never a disciplinary problem.

He was a bright sunny kid and smart in his own way. It's just that his priorities were different than the educational system's priorities.

ED: But he really got into *Macbeth*. He played Macbeth?

MT: He was Macbeth, and at first, the first day or two, he had a lot of fun with the Shakespearean language and would exaggerate with a lot of hithers and thithers that weren't in the script and stuff. And my mother would correct him rather sternly because she demanded that everybody do it right.

ED: Couldn't edit Shakespeare.

MT: No. I think it took about three days to do the whole play. And as we got into it, you could see that it was getting to Bud. He was into the story. And later on he would get into it to such a degree that he would commit these ad-libs, but it was because he was just – you could tell he was just so caught up in the events. I'm trying to remember a specific incident. There is a passage in which one of the ghosts appears, and, of course, I can't remember the exact quotes, but something to the effect that, you know, "Wave not those gory locks at me. Thou canst not say I did this deed." – something like that although probably not very close. Well, Bud, just caught up in it, says, "Don't wave them glory locks at me. You can't say I done it." And then my mother didn't correct him. Once again, looking back on it in retrospect, I think she had the good sense to know that this was an actor caught in the moment of the play. And at the very climax when Birnam Wood has come to Dunsinane and McDuff is about to do him in, we were all sitting in our chairs, and Bud just shouted out, "Lay on McDuff and damn be he

that first cries hold enough.” And the guy who was playing McDuff was a little guy, a squirrely looking guy named Turkey Ridling. And after he did that, Bud looked at him and said, “Come on, Sonofabitch.” [Laughs] And there was dead silence and Turkey literally scooted his desk back away from Bud. We were in a semi-circle [laughs], and everybody looked at my mother like, surely, she would not countenance this language in her classroom. And she didn’t say a word. It was just part of a play. It was, as I look back on it, a great moment in teaching, a real success story because Bud continued to live in this little town of Bauxite and, I think, even served a term on the school board. There are always people, any time, any place, who are going raise hell about Shakespeare. You know, that it has bosoms and adultery and all that stuff in it. There are jokes about urine and stuff in *Macbeth*. I always took comfort in the thought that when Bud was on the school board, that if some old beehive-haired women came up and bitched about Shakespeare, that Bud would just say, “Now wait a minute. I have played Shakespeare,” you know, that he would be a defender of the classics. Of course, that’s just all in my head. I don’t know if he ever did or not, if he ever had to. But . . .

ED: Well, it was a great piece, and we might find a copy of that and attach it to this transcript. I noticed you used nicknames for everybody. I gather everybody in Bauxite had to have a nickname.

MT: Yes, everybody but me. I never did get one.

ED: Where did “Bucket” come from?

MT: Ah . . . Bucket-head. Bucket-head Styles. Oh, Bucket. That was from later.

ED: Well, Pat always called you Bucket, and I always assumed that it went back to Bauxite High.

MT: No, no it didn't. It was a . . .

ED: Why did you not get a nickname?

MT: I don't know. And I don't know to this day.

ED: Has it been a problem for you?

MT: Well, [laughs] I hate to admit I spent some time thinking up nicknames for myself, you know, and maybe planning them. To see if they would fly. Nothing ever did, so I guess I just didn't have enough of a personality. I think part of it might have been that I lived in downtown Bauxite, which had probably three-hundred people in it, and many of my school mates considered me a city boy. Only if you were a real country boy did you get a nickname, I think. But there was, as I mentioned, Buckethead Styles, because of his oddly shaped head. There was a man who as a kid had sat down on a Coke bottle or something and had an odd, crescent-shaped scar, and he was known as Butt Cut. And Sourgut Green was the only kid in school with an ulcer. And he ran for county judge with Sourgut Green on the ballot, because that is what everybody knew him as.

ED: Did he get elected?

MT: Oh, yeah. He was county judge for a couple of terms. I think his wife or somebody prevailed on him, and after the first time he changed it to just Sour Green. But he was known as Sour Green till the day he died, and his real friends

called him Sourgut. We had Hootie Hodge, Jigs Bono, and Chago Dow, and Durock Stucky. Durock had red hair so that's why they called him Durock.

ED: I remember a lot of those names from another great piece that you did, a magazine piece that you did for the *Arkansas Times*, about playing football at Bauxite, in which you were kind of the butt of the story. I don't know whether that's true, whether you really were as a matter of fact, but it is one of the great, great stories.

MT: The story was all too true I'm afraid. [Laughs]

ED: You wound up tackling a cheerleader.

MT: Yes, I did that.

ED: On a pivotal play in the game. That really happened?

MT: Yes, Myrtle Baxley, who was Bud Richard's girlfriend and his wife to this day. And it wasn't a tackle. It was a block, and it was a hell of a block, actually. One of my guys had fielded a punt and headed up the sidelines, and I was ahead. I had been playing kind of short back on the punt return team. And there was just one guy between Jimmy Birmingham and the goal line, and I had a perfect line on him right at the sideline if Birmingham did the right thing and cut back, which he did. And we kind of all got to this place at the same time, right on the sideline, and I just closed my eyes and launched myself. It wasn't until I got up that I realized that I had just sailed over the sideline and coldcocked Myrtle Baxley. I was laying there . . .

ED: Kind of hit her skirts and everything.

MT: Yes, her skirt was over my head, and [laughs] even then I realized that this was

not a good place to be, that Bud would be really pissed about it, and I didn't know if I had hurt Myrtle. If I had hurt her, he'd kill me. And, you know, my mother was mortified, and my dad was mortified just at the bonehead play, I'm sure. All this and then the coach, of course, was pissed because it had cost a touchdown. The guy indeed had tackled . . .

ED: Birmingham.

MT: Birmingham, right at the sideline there. Yes, it was awful.

ED: Take a while to live that down. You never do.

MT: Well, you never live it down unless you just avoid your high school mates for the rest of your life. But, no, it still lives on in the annals of football infamy.

ED: Okay, did you write any in high school? Did you have a school paper?

MT: No, we didn't have a school paper. We didn't have a journalism class. We wrote essays in high school, and mainly I was obsessed, like most high school boys, with being clever and being a smart ass. I don't think my mother or anyone else ever kept any of the stuff I wrote in high school, and it certainly wasn't anything memorable. We did do some writing and, like I say, I wrote mainly to impress the other adolescent male members of the class. It would be something really smarty – although I can't remember anything specific.

ED: Well, when you got out of high school, you went to University of Arkansas?

MT: Yes, I did.

ED: Pat had gone there.

MT: Pat had gone there two years earlier and was majoring in journalism.

ED: And did you go and major in journalism, too?

MT: I did, but my ambition was to be a photographer. I had started taking pictures as a pretty young boy and had really embraced photography as a hobby. I had my own darkroom and managed to get a pretty good camera. And my ambition, my life ambition, was to be a photographer for *Life* magazine. Pat told me that at the university they had a very small journalism department, but that it had a course in news photography. So when I went up there, I declared myself to be a journalism major just so I could take this photography course and launch myself on the road to a career as a photographer. I also got a job as a photographer for the student daily, the *Arkansas Traveler*, which was published five afternoons a week back then. The problem was that by the end of the first semester I discovered that I was not a good photographer. Technically, I was fairly proficient. My pictures were in focus, they weren't blurry, and I was good in the dark room. I could turn out a black-and-white print that was good and dust free and all that stuff, but I just didn't have the eye. There was another photographer, whom I would work with later at the *Arkansas Gazette*, named Johnny Woodruff, who was the photographer of the annual, *The Razorback*, and I would look at his pictures and often we would be at the same event, covering the same thing, he for *The Razorback* and I for the *Arkansas Traveler*. We would be standing side by side, and I would look at his pictures and I would look at mine and – mine were well exposed and, you know, you could see what was going on, but Johnny's just were magic. I never did learn what that secret was of having that eye, but I learned that

I didn't have it.

ED: Johnny, of course, later became a reporter for the *Gazette*.

MT: *Gazette*, correct.

ED: And was there for probably twenty-five years at the *Gazette* until it closed.

MT: Johnny was, at that time, going to school and, as far as I knew, was really paying his own way. By working for *The Razorback*, he got enough money to hold body and soul together, and for one semester he lived in the darkroom in the journalism building. To save money he just sacked out on the big table in the middle there.

ED: That's where he slept?

MT: That's where he slept. But I really was just in awe of his talent with a camera. It was just amazing. But I had become enamored of all these people in the journalism department. I thought them very sophisticated. So I decided, "Well, I'll be a God-damned reporter then." So I got a job as a reporter for the *Traveler*. Couldn't type. Didn't know anything about journalism at the time. But I decided that's what I wanted to do. I was there with my sister Pat, John Woodruff, Doug Smith – a great *Gazette* writer who was there at the time – and Jimmy Jones. We were all there at the time.

ED: Jimmy Jones, who later became a reporter, a Capitol reporter, city hall reporter, and state editor of the *Arkansas Gazette*.

MT: That's right.

ED: Did you take journalism, other writing courses?

MT: Yes.

ED: How long were you there at the university?

MT: I was there three years. I took the basic journalism curriculum, and I declared a minor in English, so I took quite a few English courses. I'd like to say I had twenty-five hours of German, but it was the same five hours five times.

[Laughter] I failed the first semester four times and finally passed it the last time.

But, yes, I took the basic journalism course. William J. Good was a professor there. And, lord, what was the name of the head of the department? I can't remember. But Bill Good was a real pro. He had worked for UPI [United Press International], covered Huey Long in Louisiana, a very scholarly man who really knew his stuff. Great teacher. He taught law and the press and feature writing. I remember the other guy's name, Jess Covington, head of the department. He taught news writing and news editing, but he was less of an inspiration to me than Bill Good.

ED: Walter Lemke was there, I guess. Was he there?

MT: No, he had gone. He was already an icon by then. But he had either retired, or I think, maybe, he would have been dead by then, but he was not there when I was there.

ED: Well, other than write for the *Traveler*, did you do any summer work for newspapers up here?

MT: No, no, I didn't.

ED: So, after three years you left. Why did you leave the university after three years? Did you get a job at Texarkana then?

MT: Well, I left – I was just having a terrible time at school. I was an awful student. I was mercurial. I would do well one semester and then abysmally the next. I was not a serious enough person or serious enough student. I hated it. My social life was abysmal. I just went home and told my folks, “I just don’t think I can do this anymore.” And I moved back home and stayed there for, I guess, three months until my dad told me, “Son, it’s time for you to get out of the house and get a job.” So I applied at newspapers all over Arkansas. By that time Jimmy Jones, who had done sort of the same – well, not the same thing I had – He had left school before he graduated.

ED: Jimmy was from Hope, Arkansas.

MT: He was from Hope, Arkansas. He had been named the editor of the *Arkansas Traveler*. The editor of the *Traveler* was always named in the spring of the year before and nominally took over the duties at that time, just to get his or her feet wet. So for the last month of the year, the editor-elect would be the *de facto* editor of the *Traveler*. Well, Jimmy was named editor, I guess, in my sophomore year, the end of my sophomore year, and promptly got into a dispute with the administration over political speakers coming to the campus. Orval Faubus was running for reelection that year and he was riding pretty high, but he figured if there was a place where he would not get a good audience, it would be in Fayetteville at the University of Arkansas. So the administration of the university banned all political speakers at the campus. They just decided that there would be no public political speeches made on the campus. Jimmy Jones editorialized

vigorously against that position, and the administration decided to invoke a little used rule that the editor could not have been on academic probation within a certain amount of time of being editor. Well, the reason it was seldom invoked is because every *Traveler* staff member, once they started to devote a lot of time to the paper, got on academic probation. [Laughter]

ED: Sure, that's the same everywhere.

MT: Because of the time they devoted to the paper. But they decided to invoke the rule and said that Jimmy could not be editor. So Jimmy just quit school.

ED: Who was the president at that time? Was that . . .

MT: "Moon" Mullins.

ED: Moon Mullins.

MT: Yes, David W. Mullins. For a while, Jimmy worked at the *Northwest Arkansas Times* there in Fayetteville, and then he got a job in Texarkana at the *Texarkana Gazette*, close to his hometown of Hope. When I left school, I applied at several papers, the *Conway Log Cabin Democrat*, the *Pine Bluff Commercial*, but I went to Texarkana, and Jimmy was there and was my champion, I think. He encouraged the editor, the late J. Q. Mahaffey, to hire me. And Jake did. So Jimmy and I worked together at the *Texarkana Gazette* for about a year and a half. I went to the *Texarkana Gazette*, I think, in December of 1963. Jimmy was the managing editor, J. Q. Mahaffey was the editor-in-chief, and I got a job as their regional reporter, covering places like Vivian, Louisiana, and Idabel, Oklahoma, and New Boston, Texas. The four-states area, our promotion people

called it. Jimmy left to go to the *Gazette* probably in about 1965. And as others may have said about Jimmy, Jones had everybody's business all planned out for them. He said, "Trimble, you've got to come up to Little Rock." I guess, he indeed lobbied to get me up there, and at one point I was called to a interview with A. R. Nelson. At the time, he said, "Well, I can't raid Jake Mahaffey again. I just got Jimmy Jones from him last year, so we'll let you know something." So I went back, and at that time I was the managing editor of the paper, and before too long he did indeed give me a call, so I came to the *Gazette* in March of 1966.

ED: I will have to interject one little thing. As I recall, you came up, and I met you later at Jimmy Jones's department, and Pat was there probably, too. And we talked about your coming up and you had applied and he wasn't hiring you yet. About that time Gene Foreman had left the *Gazette* and gone to the *New York Times*. The *New York Times* had a strike, and he came back to Pine Bluff and was the managing editor of the *Pine Bluff Commercial*. He had hired a couple of people off our copy desk away from the *Gazette*, which pissed A. R. Nelson off mightily. I think I wrote a little memo to Nelson, in which I said, "I've heard that Gene Foreman is trying to pick off this brilliant young writer down in Texarkana named Mike Trimble." [Laughs] And I think he called you the next week.

MT: Well, yes, now that you brought it up, I had heard that story, and I guess it's typical that . . .

ED: And I called Gene Foreman, and he had never heard of you. [Laughs]

MT: Yes.

ED: I said, "You didn't get him," and he said he had never heard of you.

MT: I guess it is sort of typical that my big break came about through an act of fraud.

[Laughter]

ED: Well, so you came to work there about when? About what year was that?

MT: March of 1966.

ED: March of 1966. And you were general assignment? Or did you start off at the state desk?

MT: No, I started off as a general assignment reporter on the city side.

ED: Shelton, Bill Shelton was the city editor.

MT: And I sat in front of you and right next to Chris Kazan. I swear for the first year I was there, I was miserable. I thought I had gotten myself into deeper water than I could tread here. Everybody seemed to me to be just head and shoulders above me that I didn't think I would ever catch up. Now I later came to realize that the *Gazette*, like every paper, had some duds. I mean, they had Les Seago for God's sake. But by and large everybody there was really, really good at their job, and they were more sophisticated than me, better read than me. One time I looked over, and Chris Kazan was reading a book, just had it down in his lap, and I kind of looked over, and it was in German, for God's sake. And I thought, "Geez . . ."

ED: Chris Kazan, by the way, was Elia Kazan's son, the movie director.

MT: Yes.

ED: Well, was there some point when you got a break or thought you had passed the test?

MT: No, it kind of evolved, I guess. I always felt that I was working in the presence of people who were better than I was. There was this pressure, unstated from everyone else, to do good work. Shelton exuded this same kind of pressure, although it was non-verbal.

ED: All the pressure from Bill Shelton was non-verbal.

MT: He simply handed a story back with questions. You know, you would do a story over four, five times before he would accept it. Occasionally, he would communicate in writing, but it would be this little telegraphic note. One I remember I kept for years, and I lost it in a move. I wish I still had it. This, of course, was back in the days when they still used typewriters and paper and carbon paper. It was in that telegraphic language he used. He said, "If you cannot learn to spell, could you at least please learn to type? Your failure to do either is driving me crazy." [Laughter]

ED: So what did you do after that?

MT: Well, I used the dictionary more and tried to type a little cleaner, although, as I said, I had never taken a typing course. I didn't touch type. I was a hunt-and-pecker, but I really worked to clean up my copy. It was stuff like that. Shelton instilled fear into me, the fear of not being excellent and of not meeting his standards. I don't know if I ever did. I don't know if anyone ever did, but I worked real hard to do it, and I think today the way he went about making me a better reporter probably is frowned on by human resources people, but it worked for me. By sheer force of will and by reading the paper, by reading what good

reporters wrote and how they wrote it. If I had any talent at all, it was that I had a good ear. And I just stole reporting techniques and writing techniques from the good writers there at the *Gazette*. I'd like to think that's how everybody does it. I do not know. But it is how I did.

ED: Well, a lot of your writing technique didn't come from anybody else there because in some ways you excelled everybody else there during my time in some ways as a writer. You don't remember any particular story that you did for which you got some recognition? Or that you realized this is a hell of a job that I did on this story, maybe as a kind of transforming event?

MT: Well, I guess maybe it was the Jonesboro tornado. And I can't remember what year.

ED: I remember the Jonesboro tornado.

[End of Tape One, Side One]

[Beginning of Tape One, Side Two]

ED: It went up there.

MT: Right. The tornado hit Oil Trough and killed several people there. And then it went into Jonesboro and killed quite a few people there, thirteen, maybe. I don't know, but it was a deadly tornado. We spent two days there, and I think I probably filed eight or nine stories. It was really grinding work because in those days you wrote it on a note pad and telephoned it in. When I got back, there was some negative reaction to one of the stories, one of the sidebars.

ED: The last sentence of a story.

MT: The last sentence of one of the stories mentioned that the day after the tornado, there was a pretty good crop of golfers out on the Jonesboro Country Club golf course. Apparently, a lot of Jonesboro readers took offense at that and complained, although not to me personally. Shelton came up, and he had a copy of a letter in his hand. He just dropped it on my desk, and it was a letter he had written to one of these complainants. Handwritten at the top, it said, "I have been answering such letters in this manner." He told the person that he grew up in Jonesboro, it was his hometown, he had a warm feeling for Jonesboro and would not allow anybody to malign it in the paper, but that he thought that we were reporting the fact without saying whether it was good or bad. And for those people who said it was in bad taste for us to report it, it wasn't what the newspaper wrote that was in good or bad taste. It was the events that happened. Anyway, it was a defense of me, and I felt real good about that.

ED: I remember your coverage of that as well. And I don't know what point in time that occurred, but I remember . . .

MT: I think it was 1968, but I'm not sure.

ED: Probably was. But I remember being impressed, as we all were, with the kind of detail, which turned out, at least to me, to be your great skill as a reporter. It is your ability to see things that nobody else, small details that nobody else saw. Certainly in reporting it, I wouldn't see that, not the kind of the thing I would see and put in my story. The kind of visual things that you would see and put in your stories that brought it alive and put the readers there. That was exhibited in that

story, and I remember another story, probably about that time, maybe earlier, a strike or something involving Amtrak or . . .

MT: Railroads.

ED: Railroad strike, so all these people were hung up down at the terminal and having to sleep there. Bill Shelton sent you down there to do a story about it. You did a big story about all these people who were sleeping down there. You interviewed lots of them, and it was full of this same kind of rich detail that made it funny. You had a lot of good lines in there with the same kind of little detail that none of the rest of us would have written. We wouldn't have gotten the same kind of readership, wouldn't have elicited that same kind of joy that you got out of this kind of story. It seemed to mark your stories from everybody else's. No matter how dreary the assignment, how routine or trivial the assignment, you always inserted a line some place in that little story or big story that made it worthwhile reading. There was one sentence, one detail, one observation that made you glad you read that story. I don't know whether this was a conscious thing on your part.

MT: I don't know. I do remember that specific story because it was significant to me in that it epitomized what I thought was so great about the *Gazette*. Shelton didn't assign me to do that story. It was late at night, Shelton had gone home, and somebody had called up and said all these people are down at the railroad station. We got a photographer, and Bill Rutherford went down there. Something was happening, and we were going to go down there and get it. I remember in writing

the story what I was doing. I was trying to be Buddy Portis. His first novel had just come out, and I just was transfixed by this style of writing. It was a complete swipe, you know. There wasn't anything inspired about it. I just wanted to be Buddy Portis. I don't remember too many details it's been so long ago, but I can remember writing that story.

ED: It was a wonderful story to read, a delightful story.

MT: The short sentences and stuff – I mean, I was literally trying to write like Charles Portis.

ED: Right. I just remember reading it the next morning and I said, “Shit, I wish I had written that story.” Well, any rate. So you were a general assignment reporter. At what point did you begin to write a column?

MT: Yes.

ED: Was that after being a general assignment reporter or was that much later on?

MT: Well, it is embarrassing that I can't remember the sequence of these events. I think that I was a general assignment reporter and then did a stint on the police beat for about six months. At which time Shelton jerked me off and said I was the worst police reporter who had ever been at the *Arkansas Gazette* [laughs] and that I was, furthermore, the laziest reporter who had ever worked for the *Arkansas Gazette*.

ED: Did he say that?

MT: Yes. Then he said, “You are going to have to prove from scratch that you deserve a job here. You have done such a bad job.” [Laughs] And he was absolutely

right. I was the worst police reporter. I didn't like it. Those guys intimidated me. And rather than deal with them, I would just walk away and the *Democrat* was getting the police side. Now we, the *Gazette*, never did banner police items and stuff, but Shelton wanted them in the paper, and he wanted them in the paper before the *Democrat* had them. And, of course, they had Bob Sallee, who was great friends with all the police officers over there, and they were beating us every day. And, quite frankly, it was a failing on my part. I didn't care. And so he jerked me off, and I was back on general assignment in Shelton's doghouse. Every reporter was there at one time or another.

ED: Oh, yes.

MT: And he doesn't acknowledge your existence. I sat there for weeks and didn't get an assignment, you know. Or you'd just get handouts to do. I was pretty edgy about keeping my job. And then next Jerol Garrison left the paper, and I inherited the Federal beat. I think this is the sequence.

ED: Okay.

MT: And then . . .

ED: So you were on the federal beat – that was for, what, several years?

MT: I think probably three years, three or four years. And I loved it. It was a great beat at that time. I don't know whether it is now.

ED: Well, it was unusual, I thought, for you. And you turned it into a great beat. It was quite a bit different from Jerol.

MT: Well . . .

ED: During Jerol's period there, you had all the desegregation cases.

MT: Right.

ED: It was just literally dozens and dozens of school desegregation cases, mainly school desegregation cases. Other kinds of civil rights cases as well. Jerol did a great job of tediously covering all of the minute details of those cases. You came along, I guess, on the tail end of that, when most of that activity was over.

MT: There was still always some. The Little Rock case would be back in court for a hearing. You know, John Walker would be saying they didn't comply. But for the most part the school desegregation cases were over. Jerol had covered – in fact, this started when I first came to the *Gazette* – the prison scandals. And he had covered the case in which [federal District Judge] J. Smith Henley declared the entire state prison system unconstitutional. But, of course, it was in court for years after that, and I covered many of those hearings. The Vietnam War was raging, and protests were raging, and there were several draft resistance cases that appeared before him. There was a case in which a contractor for the F-111 bomber was put on trial for making and covering up substandard parts for this swing-wing bomber. Almost everything that was making news somehow ended up in Federal Court, it seemed to me. And I had a really good time covering it. Jerol had been there, gosh, eight or nine years and was a fixture over here, and everybody at the Federal Courthouse and Federal Building loved Jerol, with good reason.

ED: He never got anything wrong.

MT: He never got . . . Smith Henley called him “Jerol the Thorough” because he never got anything wrong. He always played it right down the middle. He was a serious reporter, not frivolous, and his stories gave the court the dignity that the federal judge thinks he deserves, which is a hell of a lot of dignity. And following him was a really tough act. I mean I had secretaries say, “Well, I’ll just tell Jerol.” And I’d say, “Ma’am, Jerol is not going to be back. Jerol doesn’t even work at the newspaper anymore.”

ED: I used to find the same thing when I would substitute [laughs] for Jerol when he would go on vacation. I’d go over there for two weeks, and nobody would get me anything. They’d just wait till Jerol got back.

MT: Wait for Jerol. He was revered and respected with good reason, but it did not make it easy for the fellow who followed him. I never did cover the beat as well as Jerol did. I never did cover the bureaucracy very well at all. The courts I really enjoyed and did a pretty good job, but the bureaucracy I never did cover those. There was one time I came in late. I didn’t even get to work till about noon. I don’t know whether I was hung over or what, but I knew it was a light day in court. There wasn’t anything scheduled that I had to cover. And I knew that I had to call Shelton by about noon to let him know what was on the federal beat budget for that day, what stories I would be turning in. So I was running late. It was like 11:30 a.m., so I dashed into the court clerk’s office and looked at all the new cases that they had put in the box for the reporters, and there was maybe one case worth a little story, nothing much. So I kind of breathed a sigh of

relief that I hadn't missed any blockbusters and called Shelton and said the only thing I got was a little time on a motion filed in some suit. He said, "What about the bomb scare?" And I said, "Oh, well, except for the bomb scare." And, sure enough, the Federal Building across the street from the courthouse had been emptied out that morning because they had found a suspicious-looking satchel. And I tried to make it sound like, well, of course, everybody knew about the bomb scare, other than that I had this [laughs] little thing. So I had to catch up on the bomb.

ED: Well, your coverage obviously was a lot different from Jerol's, but again I thought that federal court coverage was different from Jerol because you brought the same kind of reporting technique to the federal courts, where there was always some little detail that most of us serious reporters would have said, "Well, this is trivial and doesn't rise in importance enough to be mentioned in the story." But your stories were always enriched with some kind of detail or an observation, or a little side remark, or whatever in the testimony that always made it worth while, humanized the stories.

MT: I think it is essentially that I am a trivial person [laughs] and recognize that stuff. Now, I still don't think the coverage came close to Jerol. But I covered the courts adequately, and every once in a while I would notice something. Like, at one point there was a grand jury investigation into the North Little Rock Police Department, and all the reporters – well, the *Democrat* and *Gazette*, we were there every day, but then the TV stations were there. And it suddenly dawned on

me that we were just all sitting outside this grand jury room, asking each other who is going in and out. It just seemed excruciating to me, so I left and happened to get on a case in Judge Henley's court where a seventy-year-old man was being tried for letting his cow graze on federal land.

ED: I remember that case.

MT: And this guy turned out to be just a wonderful guy. He acted as his own attorney.

ED: There was a great story. I remember that.

MT: And so I spent all day there instead of the grand jury room. That turned out to be a pretty good story. It's not the kind of thing you would want every day, but it . . .

ED: Well, what was your relationship with Judge Henley? He was a very serious, unusually dignified, Republican federal judge.

MT: It was not close. I think that he had more of a sense of humor than a lot of people gave him credit for, and I think he viewed me with sort of amused disdain. When I covered that F-111 trial, I think maybe he thought, "Well, maybe this guy isn't as big a fool as I had thought," because it was a very complicated trial. And I think I did an okay job. But he did have a sense of humor, and he loved being a judge. God he loved that. And I was surprised that he took an appeals seat because he loved judging. He liked telling people that they were bad people. He liked lecturing them, which you don't get to do on the Appeals Court. At that time, I had adopted a stray cat, black with a little white on its throat, and I named him J. Smith because he was a terrible cat. He was irritable, and I'd feed him and

he'd bite me. Just irascible. So word had got back to Smith Henley that I had named my cat J. Smith, and in the hall one day he said, "Mr. Trimble, I understand that you have a cat named J. Smith. Could you tell me why you named that cat that?" And I was trying to come up with something plausible – "First of all, he's black and has a little white spot on his collar. You know, like a judicial robe. Why else?" – because I had been regaling everyone else with what an ill-tempered cat this is, so I am sure he had heard about it. And he said, "Well, tell me more. Why else?" And I said, "He's, he's very independent and he's. . . ,"

," and I was just kind of stuttering. He said, "Are you trying to say that you have an ill-tempered cat, Mr. Trimble?" "Well, actually, judge, I am trying very hard not to say that." He and I got along, but we certainly weren't close. It was an arms-length and beyond relationship.

ED: One day you had apparently stayed up all night or something, and you were kind of dozing in the courtroom. And during the course of the trial you were back there in the benches. He spotted you, stopped the trial, and said, "Mr. Trimble."

MT: That was, that was [federal District Judge] Tom Eisele.

ED: That was?

MT: Judge Eisele's court, and it wasn't in . . .

ED: "If I am going have to stay awake and listen to this stuff, you are, too."

MT: [Laughs] And I wasn't in the back. They had a press table right up in front of the railing.

ED: Oh, yes.

MT: I forget the case, but it was one of those times when I was awake enough to be aware of what was going on, but not enough to do anything. You know if you are ever in that state of semi-sleep. I heard Judge Eisele say to the bailiff or the clerk or somebody, “If you will wake Mr. Trimble up and tell him that if we have to be awake for this, he does too, we will continue this trial.” I was so embarrassed.

ED: Well, was there another incident in which there had been some kind of party, and you wore a Superman uniform, or some kind of uniform, and you woke up in your car and dashed into the courtroom to cover a trial.

MT: Trial. It wasn't a Superman suit. Now, let's get this straight! [Laughter] It was a sweatshirt, a dark blue sweatshirt, had a Superman emblem on it.

ED: Okay.

MT: And, now, it was snowing and real cold, and this is one time I was not guilty of going to sleep in my car. But it was real snowy and messy and very, very cold, and I put this sweatshirt on over my shirt and then put my coat on. I had on a coat and tie, like you are supposed to wear, and drove to work. But it took so long to get to work because of the icy streets that I was late. I forget what the case was, but it was something that I could not miss. So I just went directly to the courtroom – didn't go to the press room and take my gloves off or anything – and I forgot that I had this Superman sweatshirt on. And I walked in. At that time they allowed reporters to come in the side door in the courtroom, in front of the rail and sit in the jury box when it was a non-jury trial, and I knew it was a non-jury trial. Of course, I was late, and Smith Henley always kind of looked askance

at people who came in his courtroom late. He looked over and everybody looked over, and the clerk started giggling when she saw the Superman thing. And the marshal sort of rolled his eyes, and Smith Henley sort of rolled his eyes, but nobody said anything.

ED: He didn't order you to go change or something?

MT: No, but it was just further evidence that I was less than a serious journalist.

ED: Okay, you covered the Federal Building for, what, two or three years?

MT: Something like that.

ED: Then at one point you wrote the "Arkansas Traveler" column.

MT: The "Arkansas Traveler" column.

ED: Albright had left, or something.

MT: I'm not sure. No, Albright wasn't at the paper when I came to work there.

ED: Yes.

MT: He had already left to work for Rockefeller.

ED: He was working for Rockefeller, and then later he came back.

MT: And I think he was still working for Rockefeller when I took the column. I'm not sure about that. No, no, that's not right because, well, I don't know.

ED: He worked for Rockefeller probably until about 1971.

MT: Yes. Well, gosh, I can't remember the sequence of events.

ED: Okay, at some point . . .

MT: But any rate, he was a reporter when I was writing the column. He came back to the *Gazette* either . . .

ED: Maybe he was an editorial writer. He came back as an editorial writer.

MT: Could be. That I don't remember. I think he was a reporter.

ED: He was an editorial writer for while.

MT: Yes.

ED: And was miserable at it and hated it, and they let him go. I don't recall what the sequence was there. But how did you get to be the "Arkansas Traveler" columnist?

MT: Well, Bob Lancaster left. Is the only way I know of.

ED: Okay. Lancaster had been doing it. Okay, that's the sequence.

MT: Yes.

ED: Lancaster had been doing it. He went to Philadelphia.

MT: Philadelphia and . . .

ED: This is Bob Lancaster.

MT: And I had never asked for a job before in my life. Other than applying at a newspaper for a job, I'd never asked for a particular assignment. But I went to see Bob Douglas and asked for this one. I said, "I think I can do it," and he said, "Well, I think we're going to let you." And that may have been my most miserable six months at the *Gazette*, trying to do that job. And I think maybe one out of ten was worth putting in the paper. It was just . . .

ED: I think you are wrong about that. That's when you really developed a great following. Most of us, I guess, would call nearly all those unusual pieces of writing . . .

MT: Well, some people will read anything. First of all, Lancaster had a great following.

ED: He did. He did. I think . . .

MT: And there's some residual effect there, that anybody who is the "Arkansas Traveler" is going to be pretty good. But I was never as dissatisfied with the work I put out than I was when I was doing that column. Every day I would start out the day with the fear that is the day it isn't going to get written. And I was getting pressure from Bob [Douglas] to go out and do reporting, to do, you know, sort of like Ernie Deane did.

ED: Well, I think . . .

MT: And it was good advice because the best columns I did were that. They were when I was out talking to people and reporting on things. When I was sitting there trying to do like Bob Lancaster and just make something out of whole cloth, I just didn't have the wherewithal to do it. And they seemed to me to be contrived and smart alecky. When I was out doing reporting, I did a lot better. But I was too lazy to do that and wanted to be Bob Lancaster. I was out of the phase of wanting to be Charlie Portis. Wanted to be Bob Lancaster and not doing a very good job at it.

ED: I remember there was a lot of pressure on you to leave the office and go out. Hugh Patterson, the publisher, had a great interest in that. He liked Ernie Deane's column, which many thought were the worst "Arkansas Traveler" columns. But Ernie went out across the state and wrote from all these little towns and got a lot

of names in his column.

MT: Right.

ED: And that basically was all they were, just a lot of names. Not much . . .

MT: But that's not a bad idea. Now you can do it better than somebody else or do it worse.

ED: Yes.

MT: But the best stuff I did in columns was when I was doing that.

ED: Yes. Well, you did some good stuff. I remember you did one about some guy who ran a bait shop on a river, or something.

MT: This was a woman. Her name was Raye Dorothy, and she lived on a houseboat. She had been a prostitute, and she had been a bootlegger and stuff. Yes, and it's a thing that kind of writes itself. But I did two columns on her, and if I would remember one column or two that were really good, those were good. And it was a job of reporting. It was an interview. She lived on the White River in Des Arc and was just a great old lady. Had tattoos all over her arms, a big old fireplug of a woman. Had tried to commit suicide one time. She had a pet pig by the name of Pork Chop that she used to drive around in her car and feed beer to. You know, she was just a classic.

ED: Well, it was a great, great story. But you also did some pretty good ones where you just kind of made them up. The *Gazette* had a wine connoisseur who wrote a weekly wine column. And you did a parody in which you interviewed some guy down at Benton or someplace who was obviously a wino.

MT: Yes, I remember that.

ED: I guess it was all hoked up.

MT: Yes, it was all . . .

ED: His judgments about wine. It was funny.

MT: He liked wine in the flat bottle because you could roll over on it and when you were asleep, it wouldn't jab you in the side.

ED: And you did some great stories about your dog.

MT: Yes.

ED: Old Red and other . . .

MT: Those weren't columns. Those were when I was in the Feature Section, Omnibus Section.

ED: Okay. I thought you did some as a columnist.

MT: Well, I did as, I had a dog named Pearl there as I recall.

ED: You did Pearl, who chewed up all your furniture.

MT: Yes, and caught herself on fire and . . .

ED: Pearl was the subject of a number of columns as I recall.

MT: Well, yes, really it is kind of embarrassing to remember. You never know how you are doing writing these columns. One time I was debating whether or not to get Pearl fixed. She was nondescript, mixed-breed bitch. And I asked if "any of you people out there have any ideas on this, whether I should get her fixed." I really, I don't feel very good about making this kind of important decision for somebody who can't give me their feelings in return. It was actually just a cheap

play to get mail, you know, but people did weigh in. I got like fifty letters on whether or not to have Pearl fixed.

ED: A good old columnist trick to get the mail bag.

MT: Well, I don't know if it's an old columnist trick, but it was my trick. It was pretty shameless. I'm not very proud of it.

ED: So after six months you just quit. I think you were having to write four a week?

MT: Four or five, I can't remember. I think five. Maybe it was four. It was not on Monday . . . Thursday, Sunday . . . I guess it was four.

ED: So after six or eight months, you just told Bob you didn't want to do it anymore?

MT: I asked him if he would put me back on general assignment for now. I didn't think I was doing a good job, and plus I wasn't having any fun. Just real stressful.

ED: And you went back on general assignment. Later you worked through the Features Department and state desk for a while.

MT: Then the state desk. I did a stint on the copy desk. At one time they were real short on the copy desk. This was when we were still in the old newsroom and still using pencils and stuff. And I worked like three nights a week on the copy desk, as they were real short. That didn't last very long either, only until they could fill it back up again. And I used to fill in for Martha Douglas, doing the church and TV thing when she was gone.

ED: Well, do you remember any characters who worked at the *Gazette* during those years? You mentioned the photographer who went to Jonesboro with you, Gene Prescott.

MT: Prescott. Always just a delightful guy. The world to him was wonderful. It was a new day every day. And Gene loved to go on trips, assignments, and every place we would stop to eat had the best cheeseburger, you know. And during my whole career, part of my time has been spent in awe and wonder at photographers. Because their talent is, well, something I wanted to do. As a fairly intelligent fellow, I thought you could do it if you were fairly intelligent, and I've seen photographers who were dumb as a stump who were geniuses, who had the eye. There are so many different kinds of people I have seen be great photographers. It's been very interesting to watch. I remember Gene and I went to Fort Smith when [Vice President] Spiro Agnew was going to make an appearance. And I don't remember if he was a candidate or if he was already vice president. But we drove up there, and Agnew came in on the railroad, railroad station. And Gene never much talked about the assignments on the way up. He'd talk about Ruby, his beloved wife, or his house on the lake and stuff. But we got there, and it was a big crush of advance men and secret service guys, and Gene got his shot and, of course, it turned out to be excellent. When he was all done and walked away, Gene said, "Who was that son of a bitch anyway?" [Laughs] It just didn't make any difference to Gene.

ED: [Laughs] He didn't know he was vice president?

MT: No, or vice presidential candidate. He was just told to get a shot. [Laughs] And he did and it turned out great.

ED: Then Larry Obsitnik, who was called "Chief," who, I guess, is the biggest legend

at the *Gazette*.

MT: Yes, Chief would make you uneasy because he would be so – After a while I think he started trying to live up to his image as a curmudgeon and iconoclast so much that he would sometimes piss off the subject that you were trying to interview, you know. But he was, he was just a great character. He was one of the bunch that would go up to the Downtown Officers Club, where a lot of *Gazette* people drank. He loved to philosophize, and he was talking about original sin at one point, speaking to Lodema Fortenberry, the barmaid. Lodema .

..

[End of Tape One, Side Two]

[Beginning of Tape Two, Side One]

ED: You were talking about Obsitnik and Lodema.

MT: We were at the bar, and Larry was talking about original sin, speaking to Lodema, the barmaid. “If he hadn’t eaten that apple, I’d be sitting here and Jerry Neil [a *Gazette* editorial writer] would be sitting down there, just like he is now, and you would be behind the bar and everything would be the same except we would all be naked.” [Laughs] He just, he came up with these crazy aphorisms all the time. But Chief was, once again, one of these people you would not think would have an artistic bent, but his photographs were just magic. At one time in one of Winthrop Rockefeller’s elections, he got this great photo by getting where no one else was. He got directly in front of Rockefeller as Rockefeller was coming through this crush of humanity at the Marion Hotel. He was coming to the

ballroom or from it – I am not sure which – but Larry got right in his path, got down on his knees, as low as he could get, and when Rockefeller got in front of him, Larry extended his right hand, and Rockefeller, of course, almost like a reflex, just extended his. And you got this great shot of this disembodied arm going up and shaking hands, with Winthrop Rockefeller from a low angle. Just unbelievable, you know, and I don't know what kind of genius it is that produces the thought processes that in turn produce these photographs. They're just wonderful, and at other times you wouldn't think Chief had sense enough to get in out of the rain.

ED: Well, he had so much gall, too.

MT: Yes.

ED: Sometimes it didn't work. We all know the story when Harry Truman came to town, came through on the train, in 1948, and Chief got access to the car where Truman was and for the *Gazette*, I guess. He tried to get a picture of Truman reading the newspaper with a funny book inside.

MT: Yes. [Laughs]

ED: And Truman refused to do it, and then Chief tried to get a picture of Truman shaving, wanted to get picture of Truman shaving in the car. [Laughter] And I think Truman apparently just slipped and said, "Goddamn it, get this son of a bitch out of here." [Laughter] It didn't always work, but he was a great photographer. Okay, what else? You spent a period back in the Feature Department. I guess that was your last, or the state desk, one of your last?

MT: State desk was my last assignment.

ED: And Jimmy Jones was the state editor?

MT: Jimmy Jones was the state editor. And that in many ways was my most enjoyable period, although I really loved being a general assignment reporter. I liked all the stuff I did. But on the state desk you traveled the state, you know. You got to talk to deputy sheriffs. What could be more wonderful than that? And I really enjoyed it. Going to a tornado. I started out my *Gazette* career going to tornados and got to end up my *Gazette* career going to tornados. And I just, I had a real good time.

ED: But then Alan Leveritt had started the *Arkansas Times* magazine, some years earlier, I guess. Do you remember what year you went from the *Gazette* to *Arkansas Times*?

MT: Right.

ED: Alan Leveritt had started the magazine.

MT: It had been going, what, eight or ten years by the time I went there. I was at the *Gazette* eighteen years. So I came in 1966 . . .

ED: To 1982.

MT: Yes, about then. To write for the *Arkansas Times*. Jimmy Jones's death really took the wind out of my sails. He had been a friend since college. And in a way I guess that I wasn't really aware of at the time, he was sort of my anchor wherever I worked. I went to work at Texarkana. He was there. Then he helped get me work at the *Gazette*. Even when we were in different departments altogether and

didn't have that much daily contact, I guess he was sort of my anchor. And, of course, I think everybody at the *Gazette* felt somewhat the same way. Jimmy, of course, was a big guy, but he was bigger in other ways. He filled more space in that newsroom. Intellectually, he was a real force in the newsroom without really trying to be. At least it seemed to me. Jimmy was a guy, I think, who could have been a managing editor for the *Gazette* later in life because he was completely devoted to the paper, the welfare of the paper, maybe not as critical of it as he should have been, but none of us were, I guess. But he was really devoted to the *Arkansas Gazette*, and when he died that suddenly, I grieved over my personal loss, like everybody did who cared about Jimmy, and I got over that, but the *Gazette* wasn't the same to me after that. I think I started realizing that a lot of the people I had attached myself to weren't there anymore. I think Bob Douglas had left by then. George Carter had gone away to the *Washington Post* and had died. Jerry Neil had died. And Bob Lancaster had gone away to Philadelphia; he'd come back, but he was with the *Arkansas Times*. I guess you would call it burnout. I never really used that term, but maybe that's what it was. And I wanted to try something different in the way of writing. So Lancaster was the editor of the *Arkansas Times*, and it was a job I couldn't refuse. It was long hours and a cut in pay for a while.

ED: So how long were you at the *Arkansas Times*?

MT: About six or seven years. Like everybody there, I was an associate editor. They gave everybody a title and that way they didn't have to pay them overtime. And

we all just did sort of everything. There were four or five of us, and we all wrote stories, and we all edited each other's stories. We all edited free-lancers' stories. Now we didn't do any of the make-up of the magazine. We had an art director who did that.

ED: And then you left there. I guess you got crossways with Leveritt and you departed in six years or so there.

MT: I don't know about Alan. He and I didn't have that much daily contact. We got a new editor, and he thought I was kind of a throwback, not a serious guy. And I thought he was a semi-literate jerk. And we each had a point, but he was in a better position to make his than I was. [Laughs] It was finally agreed that I would look for another job, and by then things were getting really crazy at the *Gazette*.

ED: Gannett had bought it.

MT: They bought it. And I think Walker Lundy had come and gone and that this guy from Florida was editor. And we had written several pieces kind of lamenting the state of the *Gazette*. As I said, I was encouraged to look for work elsewhere, so I applied at the *Gazette* and this guy wanted to know who had written some of these pieces.

ED: Keith Moyer . . .

MT: Keith Moyer, yes. From Fort Myers, Florida, yes. And it turned out that I had at least written some of them. [Laughs] So I did not get a job at the *Gazette*. And so I started looking everywhere. I mean, I was unemployed. I finally found a job at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*.

ED: You went down there as a regional editor or something, or region . . . ?

MT: As a regional reporter and then became city editor.

ED: And wound up marrying the editor.

MT: Right. Jane Ramos was the editor of the paper and was the person who hired me. And I kind of liked the cut of her jib. And we started keeping company and decided to get married. And then, she had to fire me. The company had a nepotism policy.

ED: Married yourself out of a job.

MT: I screwed myself out of a job, literally. So I guess I was there a year and a half, not a long time. And I got a call from the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, from Griffin Smith personally, who said, "I hear because of this nepotism rule, you're having to leave the *Commercial*. Would you like to work here?" So I worked on the state desk for the *Democrat-Gazette* for, I guess, three years. And then Jane, who was editor of the Donrey property in Pine Bluff, was offered a job as the publisher of the Donrey paper in Weatherford, and it . . .

ED: Weatherford, Texas.

MT: Weatherford, Texas. It was, it seemed to be too good of a deal to pass up career wise for her. It was a real executive position and things looked very promising that she could really go somewhere after that. So we decided that should be what we would do. We moved to Fort Worth, which is about twenty miles east of Weatherford. And I got a job at the *Denton Record Chronicle* as a copy editor. It's about thirty-five miles north of Fort Worth, so we were commuting in

different directions at the first of every day. And it took Jane only about two years to decide that she hated being a publisher. Now, she was very successful. She bopped her earnings up, and she improved the quality of the newspaper quite a bit. They were really pleased with her, but she decided she hated it. By that time, I had become the city editor at the *Record Chronicle*, and I needed a city hall reporter. So I turned the tables and hired her.

ED: They didn't have a nepotism rule?

MT: They didn't have a nepotism rule. Pretty soon, Jane became the news editor at the *Record Chronicle*, in charge of the copy desk and the daily production of getting the paper out, and that's a job she does now. I am still city editor of the *Denton Record Chronicle*, which is an afternoon paper of about seventeen thousand circulation daily, twenty thousand Sunday. I'd like to comment that my newspaper career began at a daily newspaper of thirty thousand circulation, and after thirty-six years of unremitting effort, I am now at an afternoon newspaper of seventeen thousand circulation. I proved you can really go all the way up to the top. [Laughs]

ED: But you kind of like the small town.

MT: Yes, of course, some of it may be that you like what you can get. At that size, the people who read your newspaper are really interested in hard news and what goes on. They want to know what the city council is doing. They want to know what their county quorum court has done. And they want to know what happened the night before, what those sirens they heard going off were. At the big dailies, the

line between news and entertainment has become so blurred that I am not sure if they are providing that kind of nuts-and-bolts newspaper. It may be indeed be a natural evolution of newspapers, and newspapers may be finding the way in which they can survive. But I am kind of a neanderthal. I like my newspapers to tell me what went on the night before, and that's the kind of newspaper I like to work on. And I think more and more if you want to work on that kind of newspaper, you are going to work on a medium to small daily.

ED: Let's talk a little bit, again, just about the *Gazette*. You were there eighteen years.

MT: Eighteen years.

ED: I wonder if you could generalize about that, about that experience, about the *Gazette*. You worked at the *Texarkana Gazette*; you have worked at the *Democrat-Gazette*; you have worked at a smaller paper in Texas, been associated with the *Pine Bluff Commercial* and other papers. Was there something special about the *Gazette*? Was it a different kind of place to work? Or just . . .

MT: It seems to me to be unique. Now everybody has their own perspective, and in many ways I am sure it was just like working at other places. I mean, people bitched a lot about the paper among themselves, but were furiously loyal to it and defended it against all outsider criticism. I think probably that may be the case at a lot of papers. But it was – it just seems to me, looking back on my early years there, that it was just so different in that every person had one goal in life, which was to work at the *Gazette*. You didn't see many people who were saying, "Well, I'll work here a few years and then I will go to the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*."

Every newspaper person in Arkansas who was any good, their ambition was to work for the *Arkansas Gazette*. And it seemed to me that once they got there, they were content to stay there. There was not a lot of turnover at the *Gazette*, and I think industry-wide there is less of a tendency these days to stay at a newspaper for a whole career. I think people jump from paper to paper more often now than they did then, but even then I think the *Gazette* was unusual in that we had people who had started out as copy boys and had gone to be telegraph editors, you know. Their careers were spent at the *Gazette*. Other people started out at other papers, smaller papers, but their ambition was to work at the *Gazette*. And its status as an institution was so pervasive that you knew that you were working for something that was bigger than you were. The attitude of the *Gazette* people was a mixture of good and bad, I have come to believe. We were very arrogant about the *Gazette*, and we belittled people who weren't good. And sometimes our judgment was correct. Sometimes it may not have been that correct. But if a person who came to work at the *Gazette* was just bad, well, if Shelton couldn't run them off by not giving them assignments, we could be pretty cruel about people who we thought weren't cut out to be *Gazette* people. I think this was a Southern thing. We were very self-effacing at the same time. We were self-effacing and flippant about everything except the work we were doing that was in front of us. We'd work like hell to make it as good as we could. And then we'd throw it in the basket and talk about how terrible it was. It was just not done that you'd toot your own horn. I think that's why this reporter named Jack Baker

was never popular at the *Gazette*. Because he was a good writer and he knew it and he was not modest about it. We had other good writers, who were just as good or better, but they would never have said they were decent. And that's the way you did it at the *Arkansas Gazette*. You were self-effacing. You were not pushy about your talent. And whether that's good or bad, I don't know. I think probably good in some ways. It is the way that I know, but I think probably it was not good in other ways. But the *Gazette* was an institution. You always knew you worked for the *Gazette* and that there were people who had been there before you and the *Gazette* would be there after you were gone. It turned out, of course, that didn't come to pass. But when I left the *Gazette*, after eighteen years, I still considered myself one of the new guys. Not that people hadn't accepted me. They had, you know, and I felt really a part of it, but the *Gazette* was such an institution that I had not in my own mind worked myself up to be one of the veterans here. I had been there eighteen years, and I considered myself one of the new guys.

ED: Although at the time you were an icon for a big part of that staff at the *Gazette*. You probably didn't realize it, but you were.

MT: I . . .

ED: We're going to end on this, but I recall another story that I want to go back and mention. This was a feature story, and I don't recall whether you did that after you went back to the Feature Department or whether it was one that you did when you were on general assignment. You went down and did a story on Murray's . . .

MT: Right.

ED: Murray's Catfish place at DeVall's Bluff.

MT: That was in the old Feature Section.

ED: And everybody in Arkansas, I guess, knows about Murray's, but it is owned by an old black man.

MT: Olden Murray.

ED: Olden Murray. And he had this little old ramshackle trailer, or it started off as a trailer.

MT: It was either a railroad car or a . . .

ED: It was a railroad car, and he added to it.

MT: He's added house trailers to it, and it finally had about five or six, and it was a rabbit warren.

ED: Yes.

MT: You'd go from one to the next.

ED: Kind of a labyrinth. It would rock as you went through it.

MT: Yes.

ED: But he had this wonderful catfish, and everybody liked to go down to Murray's, and you wrote a feature about it.

MT: Yes.

ED: And it was probably on the front of the Sunday Section, Feature Section.

MT: Feature Section, yes.

ED: It was a wonderful piece. We all delighted in it. It was a great, great piece to

read. You wrote about how old Olden Murray would get up early in the morning and all of the things he did during the day.

MT: Right.

ED: And then we had this former *Gazette* reporter named . . .

MT: Bill Shadle.

ED: Bill Shadle - S-H-A-D-L-E - who had left the *Gazette* and gone to work for the Social Security Administration, Disability Determination Office.

MT: Right.

ED: He read that article and lodged some kind of complaint against Olden Murray.

MT: Yes. He had called me up. Olden Murray had worked for the Corps of Engineers on a drag boat for a time and had an injury to his arm. He was mangled in a winch, I think, and as a result had been getting a disability payment for several years. In getting Mr. Murray's history, he told me about that. Well, I don't think he said he'd been on disability pension, but he said that he had mangled his arm in a boat accident with the Corps of Engineers and said he couldn't work on the boats anymore, so he started a restaurant on land. And I reported this and also reported the long hours he put in at this restaurant. So I got a call from Bill Shadle, who was, as Ernie says, was working for the Social Security office or something. He said, "This story you wrote about Olden Murray, is it factual?" Well, of course, my dander got up, and I said, "Of course, it's factual." And he said, "Well, he's been getting a disability pension."

ED: One hundred percent, right?

MT: Yeah, one hundred percent disability for years. “Why, I’m going to have to talk to him about that.” And then I just panicked. And the only thing I could think of to say was, “Well, Bill, to be perfectly honest, I was real drunk when I went out there.” [Laughs] We went out and ate, and, of course, people would just bring their own bottles into the place. It was that Arkansas brown-bag phenomenon. Because people did go out there and drink and they took their own whiskey. I said, “I’ve got to admit I was real drunk when I was talking to him, and I don’t know if any of that stuff is right.” [Laughs] But I think he indeed started to investigate it. But Bobby Fussell was a deputy United States attorney, and he was a big fan of Murray’s. In fact, he would, a couple of times a year, rent a bus and take all his friends to Murray’s. The only thing I could think of to do was call Bobby Fussell. Bobby got on the case. He said, “Don’t worry, this isn’t going to happen.”

ED: They were going to try to collect . . .

MT: Collect, all the back stuff . . .

ED: Many, many years . . .

MT: Yes.

ED: Many thousands of dollars of disability payments.

MT: And I do not know exactly what Fussell did. I suspect he may have enlisted the help of Dale Bumpers’s office because Dale Bumpers was also a big fan of Murray’s. In fact, when I was getting the information for the article, I had called Dale Bumpers’s office in Washington and was speaking to his secretary, trying to

get a hold of Bumpers himself, and she said, “Well, what’s the nature of your call?” And I said, “Well, I’m calling about Murray’s Catfish Place.” And her response was, “Oh, my God, it didn’t burn down, did it?” [Laughs] Which was everybody’s fear, because it was a fire trap, and indeed it did burn down later on. So everybody at Bumpers’s office was familiar with Murray’s, and I think Fussell may have enlisted his help, although I do not know.

ED: Well, eventually, what happened – according to Fussell– is that he kind of represented Murray for a while.

MT: Yes.

ED: He finally told the Social Security people, “Murray doesn’t have any money. He can’t pay you back.”

MT: Yes, his relatives all stole him blind.

ED: He hired all of his kinfolks down there, and I don’t think he ever finished a week with a penny. Fussell said he finally told the Social Security Administration, “Okay, Murray doesn’t have any money, just come get it.” [Laughter]

MT: Yes, “try to run it yourself.”

ED: “The restaurant is yours. You can have it. It’s yours. Just tell us when you want to take possession.” And Murray would just leave. And they finally just said the hell with it. [Laugh]

MT: The hell with it.

ED: And just dropped the whole thing. And he didn’t get any more benefits.

MT: Yes.

ED: But I think that's how it was finally resolved. When they finally dropped it, Bobby Fussell loaded everybody up – I think you were in the group.

MT: Yes, I went.

ED: We all went down there in a big bus, and Murray served us mammoth amounts of catfish and fried crappie, which was illegal.

MT: Yes. [Laughs]

ED: To be served crappie. But he served us fried crappie and turnip greens and fried okra and purple-hull peas and about six other vegetables and then topped it all off with a bunch of hot chocolate pies, as I recall.

MT: Yes. Boy, that's some good eating there. They say his place burned down, and he moved to Hazen, at a place that had been a chicken shack or something, and they say it is still good, but I have never been to the new place. I don't know . . .

ED: I think he is back at DeVall's Bluff.

MT: Well, great. I am glad to hear it.

ED: He's back there for a while.

MT: I used to say that DeVall's Bluff had more great restaurants per capita than any other city in the world.

ED: Yes.

MT: Because it had that wonderful pie shop.

ED: Yes.

MT: Which split off from Craig's Barbecue. The pie lady got mad at Mr. Craig and moved across the creek. But you had Craig's Barbecue and Murray's and that

wonderful pie shop all in that same little bitty town.

ED: Well, all right. Do you have any other great stories to tell?

MT: No, that's about it.

ED: We have to get going.

MT: I don't know much about the last days of the paper because I left before Gannett bought the paper.

ED: Well, it's best left unsaid [laughs] what happened in the latter days of the paper.

MT: I know I was taken aback when I learned that Gannett had bought the paper.

Carrick [Patterson] called me up to let me know and said, "You're not going to like this, and I don't like it either, but we sold the paper to Gannett." But I have to say that at that point, well, I would rather it had been Knight-Ridder or something like that, but at least the *Gazette* is going to win the newspaper war against the *Democrat*. The war is now over.

ED: That's what we thought, too.

MT: So much for my prescience.

ED: It turned out we sold the paper to the dumbest group of people in the world at running a newspaper. [Laughs] Okay, well, that's all.

MT: I would like to add, Ernie, that I do hereby authorize our tape recording, and the subsequent transcript, to become the property of the Arkansas Center for Oral and Visual History at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. I understand that the recording and transcript, which we hereby convey to the public domain, will become available for research in the Special Collections Division of the

University of Arkansas Libraries at Fayetteville. Further, I am aware that the recording and transcript may also become part of the library web site, thereby enhancing access to the information. I approve of these actions as they will promote a fuller awareness and appreciation of the history of Arkansas.

ED: Thank you, Mike Trimble.

[End of Interview]

Postscript: As of the spring of 2003, Mike's wife, Jane, works for the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* as a special features writer. Mr. Trimble is still at the *Denton Record-Chronicle*, but as he put it, "I have been judged unfit for anything but writing editorials." Since July 2002, he has served as the paper's opinion page editor. Mr. Trimble offered one additional *Gazette* story to be included with his interview, one that he says, "might help illustrate the status that the paper enjoyed":

"I had not been at the paper very long, probably less than six months, when I got an assignment to cover a fire a couple of blocks away at the Old State House. Joe Wirges was either off that day or had just retired, and because I was the first reporter to walk into the newsroom that afternoon, I was assigned to walk down to the foot of Louisiana Street to see what was up. Bill Shelton, the city editor, knowing I was green as a bell pepper, took pains to tell me that the paper's editor, J.N. Heiskell, was VERY interested in the state's history in general and the Old State House in particular, and that I had better get every detail of this fire.

"When I arrived at the scene, I espied a gaggle of reporters and photographers being held at bay at the wrought iron gate of the Old State House by a stern looking

elderly woman whose name now escapes me. She was the director of the Old State House, and though clearly distraught by the fire, she was not about to let a bunch of reporters into her beloved building.

“I found the *Gazette* photographer, pulled him with me to the front of the impatient crowd, and introduced myself as a *Gazette* reporter. Her demeanor changed immediately, and she opened the gate to me and the photographer. ‘Tell them inside that you are Mister Heiskell’s representative,’ she said sweetly, and we strolled inside to get our exclusive as our competitors howled in protest.”