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Arkansas Gazette Project

Interview with

Tommy Walker
Little Rock, Arkansas,
9 January 2002

Interpreted by: Alice Berry

Interviewer: Jerol Garrison

Jerol Garrison: This is Jerol Garrison, and I am interviewing Tommy Walker, manager of Arkansas Relay Service for Southwestern Bell Telephone Company, about his work at the *Arkansas Gazette*. This is one in a series of interviews with former *Gazette* employees to shed light on what kind of newspaper the *Gazette* was. For the record, this interview is taking place at the Southwestern Bell building, at 1111 West Capitol Avenue in Little Rock, Arkansas, on Wednesday, January 9, 2002. Tommy Walker is deaf, and we are assisted in the interview by Alice Berry, a sign language interpreter. Welcome to everyone. Tommy, this interview will become part of the archives of the University of Arkansas library at Fayetteville for use by researchers interested in the *Arkansas Gazette*. I have a form for you to read and sign authorizing the interview. This is Jerol Garrison. Let the record show that Tommy Walker has signed the agreement and has read it and says he understands it. Tommy, when did you land a job at the

Gazette? Did the *Gazette* have a program of hiring printers who had studied printing at the Arkansas School for the Deaf at Little Rock? Were there very many printers working at the *Gazette*?

Tommy Walker/AB: Many years ago, especially during the war years, most schools for the deaf had vocational programs, which included print training. Those programs were not in general public schools at that time. As a result, many deaf people became printers like myself. I was educated while growing up in Missouri. I married an Arkansas girl, and printing was my training. During most of the years, printing paid better than teaching. I left college and went into the printing world. I worked one other job here in Little Rock before entering the *Gazette*. I started April 7, 1963. I stayed twenty-eight and a half years until the whole thing fell apart.

JG: Where was it in Missouri that you grew up? Did you go to the Arkansas School for the Deaf, or did you go to a high school in Missouri? Where did you go to college?

TW: I grew up in Arbyrd, Missouri. A stone's throw across the state line is what it is.

JG: Is it Arbyrd? A-R-B-Y-R-D?

TW: Arbyrd, yes. I went to school in Fulton, Missouri. I graduated there, and then I had three years at Gallaudet College, in Washington, D.C. Because I came from a poor family, a very poor family, I decided that I probably would be happier going into the world of work. Hopefully, I would get my degree later. I stayed on that job for twenty-eight and a half years before I knew it.

JG: Did you study printing in school at Fulton as well as at Gallaudet?

TW: At school in Fulton, yes. I got an elementary printing license. It was basic printing. It included the rules and measurements and things like that. At that time, everything was really called hot printing. It was a long time before we went to cold printing.

JG: Did you also study printing at Gallaudet?

TW: Well, Gallaudet was not a vocational program. They had printing classes, which I took, but it was more a work experience program, not really a training program. I took Linotype. I did almost everything. It was everything in printing. I was a pressman.

JG: Was this at Gallaudet?

TW: Oh, no, no, no. That was in the Missouri school more. At Gallaudet I learned Linotype. A lot of the printing experience I have really has been on-the-job training.

JG: Tell me about the *Gazette* program. Apparently, the *Gazette* hired a number of young deaf people to work in the composing room as printers. Was that a policy of the *Gazette* that the *Gazette* promoted and advocated? Is that how you got hired?

TW: The *Gazette* was always a union shop. We had the International Typographical Union [ITU]. I applied to take the International Typographical Union test, and the guy who tested me was Don Wortham. I was accepted, and I went on with the board. They hired me as a sub[stitute], and then I subbed for almost one year before they moved me to the regular job.

JG: At the *Gazette* you subbed for a year?

TW: Yes. Everyone started like that.

JG: How many deaf printers did the *Gazette* have?

TW: It varied from time to time. They had as many as ten at a time. A lot of them came and worked a few months and then moved on. That was one of the benefits of ITU. You could become a print tramp and work from shop to shop. You didn't have to apply to work. You just went in and told them you were available. If they needed you, they hired you. The ITU card was your proof of competence.

JG: You got into printing through the ITU, which placed you at the *Gazette* as a sub and then later on as a journeyman printer.

TW: I passed the ITU test, and then it was my choice where I wanted to go. I went to the *Gazette* because at that time it was the prime place to work in town. There were several job shops that were open, but I didn't want those. I worked the night shift for a long time.

JG: That was because the *Gazette* was a morning paper. Most of the work was done at night.

TW: That is right. Only the older ones worked during the daytime.

JG: Thinking back on the other deaf printers who worked at the *Gazette*, had some of them gotten their training from the vocational courses at the Arkansas School for the Deaf?

TW: A few of them did, but most schools for the deaf didn't provide anything near what the real world had. It was elementary training. Most of them got a job in small weekly newspapers or a place like that for two or three months or for a year.

They would then apply for their ITU, and a lot of Arkansas printers would move to California. A lot of them would move to Washington, D.C., and work for the government there, to print in their office. Some went north to Chicago [Illinois]. I know a few who went to Seattle [Washington]. They just went everywhere.

JG: You stayed with the *Gazette* for twenty-eight and a half years?

TW: Yes.

JG: What were your duties at the *Gazette*? What were you doing back there, working with all that hot type and later cold type?

TW: I started as an ad composer, using hot type. Later we started doing cold type. I was the cold type ad paste-up. Then later, I was added to the engraving department. Before I went to engraving, I did some work making a full page with type and all.

JG: Cold type?

TW: Oh, no, no, no. That was hot type at that time. We had not gone into cold type yet, fully. I went to engraving and worked there for, more or less, the remainder of the time. My job changed from making zinc plates to magnesium to plastic, until negatives were made onto offset plates. The last couple of years I worked with color separation in the color separation department.

JG: You certainly handled many different jobs and observed the change from hot type to cold type.

TW: Yes—the whole ten yards. I was foreman of the engraving department for two years and then went straight to color separation and stayed there until the end.

JG: I would like to ask you a little bit about what it was like to work in the composing

department. Did you do the same work as the printers who had their hearing ability?

TW: Oh, yes. We did everything that the next man did and what was expected from them. Like to make up an ad, we would go from this line and pick it up and work on it. It didn't matter what it was. We did it. There were no exceptions for a deaf printer. There was no special treatment, and a lot of deaf printers really were top-quality printers and workers. There were some things about the deaf individual that maybe don't always apply to hearing people because deaf people tend to be the kind who learn from visual aids. Show them one time, and then most of the time they know how to do it. You don't have to explain it in words.

JG: How did you get your assignments in the composing room? What were your relations with the other employees?

TW: I think, except for one or two individuals, the deaf employees were accepted as equal. We were respected, treated fair. We all had to handle Ernest, you know. Ernest Dodd. We all had the same issues.

JG: Ernest Dodd was the—what was his title?

TW: He was a foreman for life.

JG: Did you get your assignments from him, or how did you get your assignments?

TW: He was over all the foremen. When I went in to work, I had a habit of using one work station. I would go in, and if the person before me had left their job, I would take it up and finish it. You would then go to the front of the job and get whatever was first there. You would pick it up and start working on it. Everyone did the same thing.

JG: Did you pick your assignment off a hook or a spike?

TW: It was hot type. It was in a galley. You would just pick up the galley with the proof of what they wanted. It was hot type, so you would just take it and cut it up, work on it, and do whatever it needed.

JG: When you were making up ads in the beginning, you took those slugs, didn't you, in order to make up your ad?

TW: Yes, you are right. You filled up the whole area of the ad.

JG: Sometimes there might be an engraving to go in there. You had to put that in, too.

TW: Yes, you are right.

JG: When you got through, you pulled a proof.

TW: Yes, the proof. We rolled it up and then we would send it out to the salesman and put the ad on a tray to wait for the approval of the adjustments.

JG: Did you spend much time with Ernest Dodd? Do you consider him a character? How do you consider Ernest Dodd?

TW: He was my boss from 1962 until he retired. He was hard to get to know. Either he liked you, or he didn't like you. That was probably pretty much what he was like. I thought he was basically fair. He didn't give a whole lot of favors to many people. I had Wayne Bolick as my foreman for a long time, too. He was one of the co-workers who attempted to learn sign language. We had several of the co-workers who became pretty good with sign language.

JG: The people who could speak and hear but who learned the sign language, so they could communicate with the deaf printers. Is that right?

TW: Yes, that is right.

JG: You said that perhaps ten of the employees of the composing room were deaf printers. Is that about right? Was that an average, about ten?

TW: Well, it fluctuated. Most of the time there were probably six or seven, maybe eight. Then there would be five, then ten, so it fluctuated. Some of the employees were very mobile. They worked here, and then they would move to Washington, D.C., and then move to Chicago. It was easier to do that back then.

JG: These deaf printers were working there out of an entire work force of how many in the composing room? How many people all together were working in the composing room at that time?

TW: I have never been good with numbers, but I think, there were at one time about eighty. They were doing everything, day and night shifts. They were typesetters, proofreaders, everything—all of it.

JG: Did you ever operate the Linotype machine at the *Gazette*?

TW: A little bit. I preferred doing ad work.

JG: You would let somebody else provide the typing.

TW: Later I did some mark-up, writing on proofs, indicating which typeface, which point size, all of that. I let someone else type it for us. I did do some of that. Deaf people could do that pretty good. You could get a feel for what it takes in that full area.

JG: You would mark the type size and the font for the different lines that went in an ad?

TW: Yes. Do you remember Race Drake? He was a deaf man there for a long time.

Another one was Byron Caldwell, another deaf man. They were deaf.

JG: You are basically the one that I remember.

TW: Is that bad?

JG: No, that is good. I guess I remember Wayne Bolick because he was very friendly. He was all the time coming out in the newsroom. He would come out and talk with the editors about what they needed done to get their stories in the paper. Maybe Wayne would have a head that wouldn't fit or something, and he would go to the copy desk and tell them they needed to rewrite the head.

TW: You are right. The really older deaf guy, James Collums—he was very quiet. He would always go into the newsroom and read. He was a very bright man. We had several deaf men there who were college graduates. That was a better paying job than teaching or other things

JG: The transformation from hot type to cold type—was that a difficult transition for you to make, or did you take it in stride as it came?

TW: For me, no. I am probably different from many jobs that I have gone through. A lot of changes have happened. From hot to cold, to offset, to color. I have changed so many times in my life that I expect change. From hot to cold was really basic. From hot and heavy lead, it switched to paper, scissors and wax.

JG: It was a big change. The reporters had to be very careful when they finished writing their story because there wasn't anyone to proofread it any more after they switched to computers. It went to an editor, and he would read it, and then someone would write a headline. When it went to the back shop, it would already be set in type because it came from the computer. There were no proof readers in

the back shop or composing room as a last minute backstop to make sure the copy was correct.

TW: The world saw it just the way it was. The change that included computers and printing was really a big change, but now we don't require as many craftsmen as we did back then. The training for printers—apprenticeship—was really six years. Today, if you can type, then they can train you to do the job in one or two months.

JG: Did you ever see any of *Gazette*'s top people in the composing room? Like J. N. Heiskell, or Hugh Patterson?

TW: Oh, yes. I saw them and was pretty good friends with Carrick Patterson and Bill Rutherford. There were a bunch of others. Orville Henry—I talked to him occasionally. They walked through the composing room almost every day, sometimes two or three times a day. Hugh Patterson would walk through two or three times a day.

JG: What was he looking for? Do you know what he was looking for?

TW: A lot of times he would stop and visit on his way from his office to his car.

JG: J. N. Heiskell, did he come in very much? The editor of the paper?

TW: I saw Mr. Heiskell many times. I was always impressed to see him come to work. I never really got to know him personally.

JG: It was always interesting to think that a man who was the editor for more than seventy years was still coming to work in his nineties.

TW: I never stopped being impressed with him.

JG: Towards the end of the *Gazette*, were there reductions in the composing room

staff? You said at one time there were probably eighty people who worked over a seven-day period. Towards the end of the *Gazette*, before the *Gazette* closed in 1991, was there a reduction in the composing room staff?

TW: I think it went down to somewhere around thirty or thirty-five.

JG: Where did those other people go? Did the others get laid off?

TW: I don't think there was a lot of laying off. The printers would come and show up and then would go some other place. Most of the people stayed and had a good time. When we got into cold type, the people didn't seem to stay as long.

JG: Let's go back to the beginning, when you first went to work there. I wonder how long the *Gazette* had been using deaf printers. Do you have any idea when that program began?

TW: Probably since the war [World War II]. The school was training printers and that was not a general population training. The men went to war and the deaf people came in and got the jobs easily. They would stay there after that.

JG: Schools were offering training in printing way back into the early 1940s.

TW: Yes.

JG: When other people went off to war, those jobs became available to deaf people as well as others.

TW: Right.

JG: Did you ever hear of any specific *Gazette* policy about hiring deaf people or was it kind of an established tradition?

TW: I don't think any specific policy ever existed. Ernest Dodd accepted who he thought would be good for the job. We had a lot of deaf printers come and go

through the years. It was on their own that they made that decision. Many deaf printers were not ever fired, really.

JG: Was the *Gazette* a pleasant place for you to work?

TW: Probably a lot better than many places. Not only that, but when you have another deaf printer around, it is almost like you have built in social things there.

JG: You were always a member of the International Typographical Union?

TW: Yes.

JG: From the very beginning after you got out of school?

TW: Yes, to the end. All of my benefits are still there. I haven't touched them.

JG: You will draw some retirement benefits from the ITU?

TW: Yes, a few pennies a month.

JG: Was it a sad day for you when the *Gazette* closed?

TW: It was a shock. It was like you could compare that to what happened with the Twin Towers in New York. You couldn't believe it. It isn't going to happen. That is what you always thought.

JG: But it did. Where did you go to work then?

TW: The first job that I went to was Magna IV Color Imaging. It was the same work that I was doing at the *Gazette*. You know what? After working twenty-eight and a half years there, I started there with a new job at one dollar an hour more than what I was making at the *Gazette*. I worked probably three months, and then I decided that my heart was not really in printing anymore.

JG: So you went to work for where?

TW: Then I helped draft the Relay Service Program, which is what I work for now. I

helped draft the RFP (Request for Proposal), and when MCI got the contract, they asked me if I wanted to lead it up.

JG: Right here in Little Rock?

TW: Yes, it was in the Union National Bank building. I could see the *Gazette* building from my office.

JG: Then at some point you transferred to Southwestern Bell?

TW: After MCI decided not to re-bid for the contract, Southwestern Bell picked it up. Southwestern Bell asked me to apply for the job again, and so I am here.

JG: What does this title mean? What does it mean, Manager External Affairs, Arkansas Relay Service? What do you mean when you say "relay?"

TW: Okay, I am happy that you asked that because that is part of my job. I am deaf, and if I wanted to call you or you wanted to call me, we would need to have someone in the middle who could hear. Like right now. I am now talking to you through an interpreter right now. If we were calling the 800 number—that has changed now—you can call 711 to get an operator. You contact an operator at the relay center. I am typing, and I tell the operator that I want to call your number. Then I type everything to the operator. The operator reads it and then voices it to you. Everything that you say to me, the operator hears you and then types it back to me. I can call my family or order pizza or call my doctor, visit with my brother, or anyone else.

JG: You can do that from your home as well as from work?

TW: From anywhere. We even have mobile TTY [text telephone device]. Let me show you one. There is no cost for the operator.

JG: This service is offered by Southwestern Bell?

TW: Yes.

JG: Anyone on the Southwestern Bell system can use it who needs it?

TW: Anyone in the whole state. You don't have to be a Southwestern Bell customer.

JG: Are deaf people provided with one of these in their home, one of these typing units?

TW: It is a separate program. Not one that we are involved in, but yes, they can provide equipment to people through another program. There are different ways that they use the services. Some people are hard of hearing and speak well, but they do not understand what they hear on the phone. We can provide a voice carryover. It is like if I am talking to you and I am speaking with my voice and want to contact the operator, the operator would contact you. I would speak to you, and you will hear my voice on the phone, but when you speak to me, I won't be able to hear you or understand you. The operator hears you and types the information to me.

JG: It is a three-way conversation.

TW: The same thing happens with people who have cancer of the throat. They have normal hearing, but they can't speak. They can hear you on the phone, but they type what they want to say to the operator so the operator can voice it back to you. That is just some of the ways that we use the services.

JG: The service uses this little typewriter—what do you call this little typewriter?

TW: The first name that we had for it was TTY because we used the older Western Union Teletype machines. Do you remember those?

JG: Yes.

TW: We used those to start with. Through the years, we have started using nicer, new equipment, like this one.

JG: Yes, this looks like a streamlined version of the old Western Union teletype. It is very sleek. I just recently visited a man in Fayetteville, who is retired now. He has built a little building behind his house where he is setting up a museum of Teletype equipment. Some of it is in working order, and some of the equipment needs repair. He is involved in making all of this equipment work. It is kind of interesting to go through and see all the old Western Union equipment of one kind and another.

TW: Time marches on.

JG: Tell me about your personal life. Are you married? Do you have children or grandchildren?

TW: I have been married for twenty-nine years. Oh, no, thirty! December twenty-second was thirty years. We have two children. I just got my first grandson twenty-one months ago. The second one is coming soon.

JG: Wonderful! You live right here in Little Rock?

TW: Yes, I do.

JG: Your wife's name is?

TW: Margaret Walker.

JG: Let me ask if there is anything else that you would like to comment on?

TW: We have probably touched on most everything. There are a lot of deaf people who make a very comfortable living as printers. Today, almost every deaf person

who was involved in printing is involved in the press department now. Not the front end.

JG: Not the composing room?

TW: That is almost gone now.

JG: Do you know some people who are deaf who work at the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*?

TW: I think one. It is a black boy, Calvin Hall.

JG: Does he work down at the printing press?

TW: At the *Democrat-Gazette* for fifteen years, I think, in the composing room.

JG: In the composing room?

TW: Cold type department.

JG: Right there at Capitol and Scott?

TW: Yes.

JG: You know some other deaf printers who work at other businesses, too?

TW: There are not many, really. It is a dying breed. I have had my own small print shop forever, through the years. I have an offset press and type set, camera. I have stayed with that as a hobby.

JG: You have it at your house?

TW: Yes. It is something I do to keep me out of trouble.

JG: It is a small printing business. Is that what it is?

TW: Yes.

JG: Very good. The company that you work for is still called Southwestern Bell Telephone, which is part of SBC [Southwestern Bell Corporation].

TW: Yes, that is correct. I am an employee of SBC.

JG: Your paycheck comes from Southwestern Bell Telephone as part of the SBC system?

TW: Yes, that is right.

JG: Very good. This relay service, where you are the manager of external affairs—I want to be sure that I have this right—that provides communication through a third party for people who need help in hearing over the telephone?

TW: That is right. Our relay center is in Kansas—Lawrence, Kansas. I am the Arkansas point of contact. My responsibilities involve liaison with the board and contract services with all the things that we provide to help individuals who have various problems using the service. To educate groups, I speak to a lot to Rotary Clubs, Lions Clubs

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

TW: I speak to civic groups, senior citizen groups, AARP [American Association of Retired Persons] groups—almost any group that is interested—because the problem most often is it's not the deaf person or hard-of-hearing person that doesn't understand; it is the hearing person. They don't understand what is going on on the phone when they get a relay call. I speak, a lot of times, to educate people about the services. I often tell them that if they have a family member who can benefit from this, then they can use the services. They are there to use. If you lose your hearing, it is not the end of the world.

JG: You can keep going and have a good life.

TW: Yes, it is different. It is like if you become crippled and you to get around in a wheelchair but your life doesn't need to stop.

JG: Very nice. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

TW: No, I don't think so.

JG: I would like to say, that this tape will go to the Oral History Department in Fayetteville at the University of Arkansas. A graduate student will transcribe it. You will get a chance to review the transcript. It may be several months before the transcript is ready. You can expect to hear from me again.

TW: Okay, that sounds like a very interesting project. Will a book be written on all of this later?

JG: Basically, all of these interviews and transcripts will be filed at the Special Collections [Department] at the University of Arkansas Libraries for use many years down the road by researchers who want to know something about the *Arkansas Gazette*. Your interview will be there, along with interviews with Hugh Patterson, Carrick Patterson, and many other people who have worked for the *Gazette* over the years—probably 100 interviews.

TW: Wow, that really will be interesting. Maybe later, my great-great-great-grandchildren will look at that and go, "What? That is strange!"

JG: Thank you.

TW: Thank you, too.

[End of Interview]