

Gazette Project

Interview with

George Wells,
Little Rock, Arkansas

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Interviewer: Ernest Dumas

Ernest Dumas: This is Ernie Dumas and I'm with George Wells at his home on Gaines Street in Little Rock. George was a reporter for the *Gazette* for a number of years, covered the federal building and the federal courts. George, first of all, I need your consent, or at least your acknowledgment, that this information — your testimony in these tapes — will be available to the public through the oral history project at the University of Arkansas. Anybody might use it for whatever purposes they like. Do you understand the acknowledgment?

George Wells: Sure. That's fine.

ED: George, let's talk about your life. Where and when and to whom were you born?

GW: I was born February 9, 1938, in Hot Springs. My father was George Wells, and my mother was Annette Wilson Wells. He was an insurance salesman in Hot Springs at the time.

ED: Were you reared in Hot Springs or Camden?

GW: Yes. During the war, my father went off to a series of construction jobs. Well, after working at a munitions plant around Little Rock, he went off to a series of

construction jobs, and my mother took me and moved back to Camden because that was her homestead. We lived there, and she worked various jobs in Camden. I went to first grade at the Catholic school there, although we weren't Catholic, because my birthday was too late to get in with the group of children that my mother thought I should be in with. I went to first grade in Catholic school and went to public school at Center Street Elementary and then Camden High School.

ED: So, you graduated from Camden High School?

GW: Right. 1956.

ED: In 1956. Did you get interested in journalism in high school?

GW: Yes, I worked on the school paper while I was there. I wasn't an editor or anything. We weren't that well organized to begin with. I took journalism courses. I basically knew I wanted to write, and I didn't know, at that time, what. So I started off just taking the only writing courses that were available. After Camden, I went to Ouachita Baptist College, as it was then, for two years. I worked on the paper the first year and was named news editor in about the second semester or something like that. I was the editor the second year, undoubtedly the worst editor the *Signal* ever had.

ED: I doubt that.

GW: I don't.

ED: Well, do you know that we met each other, I guess, about that time? I was the editor across town of the *Oracle*, which was the weekly newspaper at Henderson, across the ravine from Ouachita. We met at a restaurant downtown through the

good offices of a mutual friend named Chris Zwahlen . . .

GW: Right.

ED: . . . who was from El Dorado and was a year younger than I was. Was she an editor of the *Signal*? She worked over at the Ouachita paper, right?

GW: Right. I forget exactly what title she had, but she was editor of some section or other.

ED: Well, I remember she was in some little café there in Arkadelphia, and I went in, and you were there with others, but she introduced us at that time. And then, of course, we met, I guess, a year later. But you went there two years at Ouachita?

GW: Right.

ED: And then you decided to transfer to the University of Missouri?

GW: Yes, I went up there in the fall of 1958, I guess it was.

ED: Yes.

GW: That's where we met at some sort of freshman orientation thing.

ED: I think we met outside. We were standing in a long line outside the freshman orientation. We recognized each other and were both, I think, happy to see each other because neither of us knew a soul in the state of Missouri.

GW: That was true of me, I know.

ED: We were both enrolled in the School of Journalism.

GW: Well, no, I ran into a problem. I had taken journalism courses at Ouachita, and they were totally wiped out. So when they were wiped out, I didn't have enough hours to get into J-School, and I had to spend my first year at Missouri, in effect,

qualifying to get into J-School.

ED: That's right.

GW: Then I went in and worked there on my undergraduate degree for two years, and, in 1961, I graduated with a Bachelor of Journalism and a Bachelor of Arts in History, and then I stayed on and took a Master of Arts in History, but I continued to work in J-School as a grader. I was working on the *Sunday Missourian*. When I left, I was the slot man for the *Missourian*.

ED: The *Missourian* was, I should explain this, a daily newspaper for central Missouri that happens to be published by the School of Journalism, but it is a community newspaper. It was competing with another local paper, the *Columbia Daily Tribune*, so it was a daily newspaper and not a campus newspaper.

GW: Right. That is true.

ED: Yes.

GW: While I was there, I ended up two weeks one summer as a sports editor, and — I find this hard to believe, looking back on it — I spent one summer as the farm editor, knowing very little about farming.

ED: It didn't make any difference.

GW: I needed a paycheck. That's the way it is!

ED: So you got paid as a staffer for the *Missourian*?

GW: Yes, those were paid positions. And, of course, it went against my tuition, or whatever. So it wasn't like I had spending money, but at least it helped the cause. I worked as a reporter. Everybody had to do a stint as a reporter and had to do a

stint as a copy editor. While I was there, for my senior year and for the time I was in graduate school, I was the chief grader for Copy Editing I, which was a course that was required of all students entering the University of Missouri School of Journalism, even if they'd had experience on newspapers before and were working on graduate degrees instead of undergraduate. I know of at least one student who took a hike as soon as he found that out.

ED: And you were a grader for Professor Bickley or Professor Spencer?

GW: No, I was a grader for Newt Townsend.

ED: Newt Townsend, okay. Newt Townsend.

GW: The first year, Newt was off with health problems or something, and so they had a substitute teacher, Walter Hackett, who hadn't edited copy in a good forty years. He had made his reputation as a travel writer, and he taught copy editing and feature writing. Unfortunately for the kids that year, I did most of the teaching of the copy editing in that course. I'd not had a professional job, so I'm afraid they suffered a little. Then, the next year, Townsend came back, and I worked for him. Somehow or other, I wound up working at least a semester under Spencer because he filled in for Townsend, and I've forgotten the reason why.

ED: Anyway, so you spent another year and got a Master of Arts in History while working on the *Missourian* and doing a little bit of grading and stuff as well, and so that would have taken you through about 1962, right?

GW: I graduated with a master's in January of 1963.

ED: 1963. What did you do then, after graduation?

GW: I went to work for the *Arkansas Gazette* on the copy desk, and I was awaiting my draft notice. A. R. Nelson, who was then the managing editor, said, “That’s all right. Just come on, and we’ll use you as much as we can.” So I worked on the copy desk, and it was filled up with a bunch of over-the-hill guys, for the most part, and a couple of young guys . . .

ED: Who were they? Who were some of the guys on the copy desk? Was Ray Kornegay on there then?

GW: Ray Kornegay was there and . . .

ED: John Fleming?

GW: John Fleming. Yes, he was there at that time.

ED: Leon Hatch?

GW: Oh, yes!

ED: Can you tell us anything about those characters? Ray Kornegay?

GW: Well, Ray spent a lot of time picking horses.

ED: That’s right. He was interested in the horses and Barry Goldwater. He hated Barry Goldwater.

GW: Yes. Well, most everybody on the copy desk, at that time, considered themselves liberal. I’m trying to think of who else — I don’t remember that much about Fleming. He was sort of the head man on the rim. He got to write the feature headline or the main headline for most of the stories. When I was there, there were two things: Mr. Heiskell was still coming down to work, and he considered the copy desk his personal fiefdom, or something, and, on three or four occasions,

we took a break from editing copy. We'd go in and sit with him, and he'd talk to us about language. He was very good with language.

ED: You mean, you went down to his office?

GW: Yes, we went down to his office and sat around. He did most of the talking, and it was about recent mistakes he had seen in the paper and that sort of thing. I thought he was pretty good with words.

ED: Do you remember the kind of fetishes he had about the language, about the mistakes he corrected?

GW: I think it was his rule that we couldn't say something was "in a city." It had to be "at a city."

ED: Yes.

GW: He had some sort of strange rule about the use of the word "athletics," which could only be applied to members of what was then the Philadelphia professional baseball team, since moved, first to Kansas City and then Oakland. He was just very old fashioned about language. He didn't accept change very much.

ED: The word "chief," like "the Soviet chief" or "Russian chief" or something like that
...

GW: Yes.

ED: It had to be "the premier."

GW: Right.

ED: He didn't want anything about chiefs in the paper unless it was an Indian chief or something.

GW: Right.

ED: Bob Douglas said, "What about fire chief and police chief, then?" And Mr. Heiskell said, "Oh, don't be silly!"

GW: Yes, but that was interesting. That was 1963. I don't know how old he would have been at that time, but he was . . .

ED: He probably would have been about ninety-one because I think he died in 1977, when he was one hundred.

GW: Yes.

ED: So he probably would have been about ninety-one.

GW: But he got down to the office regularly, and we had these little talks. While I was on the copy desk, I made a pretty good impression on Nelson, anyway. He thought I was a pretty hotshot editor, and one of the things I remember was that, on rare occasion, he would send out congratulations for writing a good headline. While I was there that six months, he sent out three such notices, and two of them were for me. Of course, that was when I was hot out of Missouri and had just been teaching headline writing, so I was a little sharper then than I would be now, but no matter where I went, from then on, I was confident that I could always come back to work on the desk at the *Arkansas Gazette* if A. R. Nelson was still there. He liked my work.

ED: He hired you originally?

GW: Yes, he had hired me originally.

ED: You had applied when you were at Missouri and wrote him a letter, or how did

that happen?

GW: Well, I did an interim thing over Christmas break. I guess that was Christmas of 1962. He liked the work, and so when I got out of Missouri, I just came to the office and asked for a job, and he said, "What's been keeping you?" So he, apparently, had been impressed with the brief stint I did on that interim break.

ED: Do you remember what your weekly salary was when you when you went to work there?

GW: I do not remember clearly.

ED: Probably about ninety bucks, I imagine. Ninety or a hundred.

GW: It was something in that neighborhood, I'm pretty sure.

ED: Mine was eighty when I went to work there in the summer of 1960, so . . .

GW: But you'd had more experience in actual reporting.

ED: Yes, I'd had a little more experience, yes. Not much more.

GW: Yes. I worked there for six months, and then I got my draft notice. This was kind of strange. When I got my draft notice, I was living in Little Rock. I knew I was going to have to report to Little Rock, so I wrote to the Draft Board and asked them if it would be all right if I just reported directly to the center in Little Rock. They sent me back a notice saying, "We are deferring your reporting for one month," but I still had to report to Camden. I was there for about fifteen minutes, and they put me on a bus and shipped me to Little Rock.

ED: So, this would have been late in 1963, then?

GW: Yes, it would have been August of 1963 when I actually made the trip.

Originally, I was scheduled to go in July, but because of that deferment, which I hadn't asked for, they sent me in August. I went to basic training at Fort Polk, Louisiana, and escaped there, barely. I went to Redstone Arsenal in Alabama, where I was assigned to what was then called the Ordinance Guided Missile School, which was a school for soldiers who would be assigned to work on either guided missiles or radar systems connected with guided missiles, that sort of thing. I was sent there, and I started off as a clerk and then I got transferred into the information office, where I, more or less, assumed something akin to reporting duties.

ED: Did you have any public information training?

GW: No.

ED: You didn't have any of that? They just recognized — saw your background and put you over in the public information office. You did two years, right?

GW: Right. Two years, and I spent the balance of that term in Redstone Arsenal.

ED: Redstone Arsenal?

GW: I got out in August of 1965 and went to work for the *Louisville Courier Journal* as a general assignment reporter. I worked there for about fifteen months and then came back to Arkansas.

ED: So you were on the general assignment staff at Louisville. You were not out in one of their regional bureaus, but you were there in the city.

GW: No, I was working out of the main office in Louisville.

ED: What did you think about the *Louisville Courier Journal*? Of course, those were

in the *Louisville Courier Journal's* good days.

GW: Yes, it was an excellent paper.

ED: It was one of the great Southern newspapers at that time.

GW: Yes. I worked under George Gill. Anyway, he was a very good editor and was sort of the main managing editor. I came back to Arkansas because I hadn't been very happy, personally, in Louisville, and it reflected in my work.

ED: You didn't know anybody there, and . . .

GW: Very few people. It turned out that I wasn't a big-city boy. I found that out a number of ways, so I called up Nelson and said, "Have you got a spot for me?" And he said, "Yes." Then I got this call out of the blue from Gene Foreman, who was then the managing editor or executive editor --- I forget whether they had made that change in title yet --- at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*.

GW: Yes, he was a former *Gazette* employee and was then running the *Pine Bluff Commercial*. He had heard that I was coming back some way or other, and he called and I flew down to Pine Bluff and did an interview, and they offered me the job. I said, "I've already committed to the *Gazette*, and so it will depend on whether they will release me from my commitment." So I called Nelson up and said, "I've been offered this job, and it sounds pretty interesting." He said, "Well, is that what you'd like to do?" I said, "I think so." Another big mistake in my life, but he said, "Okay." So I went down to the *Pine Bluff Commercial*, where they were trying to hire college graduates for what amounted to minimum wage. We had some good people on the staff, but most of the good ones were people

who were local residents who just happened to come out and get a job at the paper, and, for one reason or another, didn't have any ambition to go on to another paper.

ED: What was your job at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*?

GW: Well, I was city editor for the first three years, and it was driving me nuts because I was trying to work with these people, some of whom had trouble writing a sentence, and everybody who was worth anything was totally unhappy because of the wages they paid. So, finally, when our special assignment reporter, Harry Pearson, took a job in New York, I went in and, more or less, said, "I'm quitting as city editor. If you like, I'll take Harry's job." They said they wanted to keep me, so they gave me that job. That's when I started covering politics and the environment, two things I knew virtually nothing about, and I tried to learn my craft.

ED: The *Pine Bluff Commercial*, at that time, was owned by the Freeman family, had been for quite some years.

GW: Right.

ED: It really had a great reputation, and, as a matter of fact, it was quite a good newspaper for a small-town, rural Southern newspaper. It was kind of a feeder for the *Arkansas Gazette* and for other newspapers.

GW: Yes.

ED: A lot of reporters got their start at the *Pine Bluff Commercial* during that time and went on to great careers. We hired quite a number of them, including you, at the

Gazette. Tell me something about the *Commercial* during those years, what it was like. You talked about the low wages, and they weren't just ridiculously low, they had the bizarre mechanics of paying people so that if you worked overtime, you made less money working overtime than you did for regular hours.

GW: Ed Freeman called it "Chinese sweat," and the unusual thing about this was that it had been approved by the Labor Department. They paid you a base salary, and then they divided the actual number of hours you worked into the base salary to determine your overtime. Then you were paid one-and-a-half times your hourly wage for that week. They had a standard forty-five-hour week, but it was fairly common to work fifty. So, if you worked fifty hours, they divided fifty into whatever they were paying you and got an hourly rate, and then paid you one-and-a-half times for the ten hours of overtime.

ED: Okay, I'm not sure I followed that. .

GW: It took me a while!

ED: . . . to figure it out, but, at any rate, it was less than — ordinarily people got for time-and-a-half.

GW: Right. Most papers I've worked on, when they had to pay overtime, your base salary was figured on a forty-hour week, and so it was one-and-a-half times your base.

ED: Yes.

GW: Ed Freeman was a very serious newspaper man, a very good one. He was extremely bright, and he insisted on quality, even though it was hard to track

quality, but he did manage to get people like Gene Foreman, John Thompson . . .

ED: Patrick J. Owens.

GW: . . . Patrick J. Owens, Paul Greenberg. Paul, of course, won his Pulitzer [Prize] when he was at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*. It was a pretty good production, except for trying to be city editor and working with a new crew every third or fourth week because the others left.

ED: Well, of course, at the *Arkansas Gazette*, in those years, the *Pine Bluff Commercial* was such a good training ground that we just snapped up anybody who was any good. The *Gazette* didn't like to hire people fresh out of college, so frequently, when people would call me in college, I'd say, "Go down to work at the *Pine Bluff Commercial* for six months, and then the *Gazette* will hire you." And that's typically what happened. Probably at least a third of the *Gazette*'s reporters during that twenty-year period came from the *Pine Bluff Commercial*, and they went to the *Commercial* from all across the country. Oberlin College in Ohio sent a whole string of unusually bright young men and women to the *Pine Bluff Commercial*.

GW: I've forgotten who the first Oberlin was.

ED: Eric Black and then Tom McGowan and then Tom Hamburger.

GW: Tom Hamburger, and there was another guy who came in at about the same time as Eric.

ED: Chuck Heinbockel came along a little later.

GW: He was a little later.

ED: Carol Matlack.

GW: Yes, Carol. So, there was this Oberlin connection that was formed, and we got a lot of very bright students, but, of course, being bright, they figured out right away they could make more money someplace else. As soon as they thought they had enough credentials, they went off, a lot of them to the *Gazette*. We got very few applications from experienced people while I was there.

ED: Well, the town itself was not a drawing card.

GW: No.

ED: It was a dismal place, down in the Delta and poor, not a particularly attractive community.

GW: It's a strange thing. Pine Bluff has always struck me as an introverted town, really. For example, there's a lot of money in Pine Bluff, but you don't know it unless you know who's got it already because there are very few people who just flash money around. A lot of people lead very conservative lives even though they could afford to do just about anything they wanted to. The political control of the town seems to be vested in these same people, so you get very little change on the surface. It wasn't that they necessarily handpicked people, but they could block the people they didn't want.

ED: So you were at the *Pine Bluff Commercial* from, roughly, 1966 or 1967?

GW: Essentially, from 1967 until 1979, when I came up to the *Gazette*. Who was it who died? It was an editorial writer.

ED: Jerry Neal died in 1979, and I went up to take his place on the editorial news.

GW: And, numerically, I was replacing you, although you were at the Capitol and they didn't want me at the Capitol. They had other people they wanted at the Capitol. I came on as a general assignment reporter. At that time, Carol Griffiee was on the federal beat, and she hated it. I was in the office one time, and Bob Douglas had this office with a glass window facing out into the newsroom.

ED: Douglas was the managing editor?

GW: Yes, Bob was the managing editor. Carol was in there throwing a tantrum. I couldn't hear what she was saying, except every once in a while, a word was loud enough that it would come through. She was waving her arms and was very excited. It turned out, she was trying to get off the job. Well, one night, I think it was a Sunday night, right about that time, I got this call at home from Jerry Jones, who was the assistant city editor. He said, "Can you go in and cover the federal beat tomorrow?" "Sure, what's up?" He said, "Well, Carol's going through a — Carol wants off." I've forgotten how he put it. I said, "Well, is this, like, permanent?" Jerry said, "Well, I guess so." So I started making the rounds the next day and introducing myself as the federal beat reporter. Well, it turned out, in about two weeks, Carol had calmed down enough, and they sent her back over, but that didn't last too much longer. In October of 1979, she was assigned permanently to cover environmental stuff, so they sent me back over there. I told them when this switch was going on, "I'd like to have that beat." Essentially, it was the only beat at the *Gazette* that I really wanted because I like that kind of stuff. I went over there, and I was there for twelve years until the *Gazette* closed,

and that's longer than anyone else has ever been on that beat.

ED: Twelve years?

GW: Twelve years.

ED: Until the *Gazette* closed.

GW: Jerol Garrison was on it for eleven years, he told me, and he got off the beat by quitting the *Gazette*, primarily because he wanted off the beat.

ED: Well, he also wanted to give up the whole newspaper business, I think, although he loved it, but it was extremely stressful to Jerol. He was a perfectionist.

GW: Boy, was he ever.

ED: He was not terribly fast, but he was very precise. Deadlines were a terrible problem for him. He said it was a hassle for him every night, so I think he wanted into a job where there would be less stress, but Jerol put stress on himself wherever he was on the job.

GW: Yes.

ED: So you went on the federal building in 1979? Describe what the federal building entailed. Obviously, you were covering the federal courts.

GW: Well, when I first went over there, I had to cover the federal agencies in the federal building next door, including the three local congressional offices, two U.S. Senate offices and one of the House of Representatives, and various federal agencies that were over there. The longer I was on the beat, the more consuming the courts would become because there were so many lawsuits filed, and, for a while, there were a whole lot of high-profile cases that took up a lot of time.

ED: I want to talk a little bit about some of the big cases. There were some really landmark cases that came along while you were covering the federal building. Perhaps the most famous was the creation science case. I guess, to build the record a little bit, the legislature in 1981 passed a law that required schools to offer instruction in the biblical account of creation in every instance in which there was a mention of evolution, right? Is that basically what it was? In 1981 the legislature passed a law that required schools to teach creation science if they taught evolution. Is that it?

GW: Close enough. It was what they called creation science, and it outlined in the law very specifically what should be taught, including things like the flood of Noah, and that sort of thing. And the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] filed a lawsuit in federal court. It was assigned to U.S. District Judge William R. Overton. We started receiving attention from all over the world. We had reporters come in from England, France, and all parts of the country. Probably from some other places, but I didn't meet them. Then we went to trial, and the law was defended by Attorney General Steve Clark and two of his aides. Supporters of the law tried to get Clark to appoint a special attorney to represent them because they didn't think Steve would.

ED: Well, he was not an ardent defender of the law itself, was he? I mean, he had kind of indicated that, had he been asked for his opinion, he might have rendered an opinion as attorney general saying that it was unconstitutional. But, nevertheless,

he was going to defend the law vigorously.

GW: I don't know about that because after the lawsuit was filed, some reporter asked him about the law, and he said that it was not only a good law, but it was good education.

ED: Oh, did he? Okay. Well, I think his account now is a little different.

GW: Yes, his account now is different. Anyway, we went through this thing. We had some fairly famous people come in. Jay Gould, an internationally known scientist, testified. He was the primary ACLU witness on evolution. One of the most interesting things to me in the trial happened while he was on the stand. The reporters were all over in the jury box, since there wasn't a jury. I was scribbling along, trying to keep up with it, and all of a sudden I looked up, and there's this man in a wheelchair right under the witness stand.

At a break, I went up to Mike Trimble, who was my backup at that time. I said, "Mike, find out about that guy." He said, "I already got it." He had already learned what this was. It was a former federal prosecutor named Drew Bowers . . . he had been interested in the original Scopes case because he had a science teacher who had been on the list to back up possible expert witnesses, so he had always had an interest in that issue. And when it came up, he wanted to hear it. Well, it's normally not allowed for somebody to just go inside the bar during a testimony like that, but he was the favorite of all the judges. Nobody objected to it. They knew he wasn't going to disrupt anything. Mike was the only person other than myself who spotted this, apparently, because it wasn't even mentioned

at the other paper. No television people did. There had been a biology class that was brought to the courthouse by the teacher for part of the testimony, especially Gould's testimony. They got all the attention of the media. But this one was a fascinating case. Overton later described it as the best tried case he had ever seen. It was marked by some strange things. Steve Clark wanted to try to make a point that there were a variety of explanations for creation, even though the scientists say that creation itself is not necessary to understand evolution. So he brought in a scientist from England - Dr. N.C. Wickramasinghe. He was an associate of Sir Fred Hoyle, a world renowned astronomer, and he tried to explain Hoyle's theory of how life came to earth. He said it was probably in the form of something like a virus and came in on meteors.

Another witness was a professor from a Baptist seminary in Dallas.

He made all the headlines because on his cross-examination by the ACLU lawyer, he said that he believed in UFOs [Unidentified Flying Objects], and he thought that they were satanic manifestations. Of course, everybody grabbed on that. I was the only one who noticed, I think, that during his testimony he also said, "Of course, the law is religion," which just shot the bottom out of the state's boat right there. I mean, he was their expert on religion, and he said, "Yes, the law is religion."

ED: Which was the whole issue of the case.

GW: Right. Yes.

ED: That was the bedrock issue, "Is this law the imposition of a government religion?"

GW: Right. That was how the ACLU framed it. That's how it was decided. And, of course, Judge Overton struck down the law in January of 1982. It was the second time Arkansas had been the legal battleground over evolution. The Supreme Court struck down the antievolution laws in an earlier Arkansas case. By that time, however, only Arkansas and Tennessee had such laws on the books.

ED: That was the Epperson case. Susan Epperson, a Little Rock school teacher, filed suit challenging the constitutionality of the law banning the teaching of evolution in public schools. Well, I think what happened in the Epperson case was that the chancellor at Little Rock, Murray Reed, struck down the law. Then, on appeal at the state supreme court, the state supreme court, by a vote of six to one, affirmed the law. And then on appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court, it was unanimously overturned. And the law was struck down, and they had a pretty sharp rebuke of the Arkansas Supreme Court in this case.

GW: There were a couple of strange people who came once or twice, but there wasn't anything like what happened at Dayton in the Scopes trial. A lot of the reporters wanted it to be like that, and some of them, after three days of sober testimony, a couple dozen of them, I think, went back home. Some made arrangements to find out what the results were.

ED: I think a lot of them were hoping that it would be kind of flamboyant, like the Scopes trial, but I guess the reason it was not was that Steve Clark, the attorney general, I guess, to his credit, tried to argue the case as best he could on its merits, and tried to keep out the crazies. He didn't succeed entirely, as you pointed out.

But I later heard Phil Kaplan say last year at the ACLU dinner that Steve Clark probably saved Arkansas a lot of face by his conduct at the trial and trying to present the defense side of the case. That he tried to do it with some dignity and deal with the fruitcakes as best he could. But it turned out to be impossible. He still had some fruitcakes on the stand.

You mentioned Mike Trimble. The two of you were assigned over there, and I guess it was like a sports event. You were to cover the “game,” the serious side of it, and in anticipation, perhaps, that there were going to be a lot of sideshow antics, Trimble was to provide the “color,” was he not?

GW: That was more or less it. By the end of the first week, the powers that be at the *Gazette* decided to name Mike state editor, so they took him off the trial — let’s see, I think there were, like, two days or two and a half days of trial remaining, Carol Matlack finished up. She was there to catch somebody leaving the courtroom to get quotes and that sort of thing. Mike’s story was just terrific, I thought, on Bowers.

ED: That was the story that was so impressive, the story about Drew Bowers, the former prosecutor.

GW: Yes. Mike dug up a lot. What he did was he dug up a lot of stuff on Bowers, stuff he remembered, because I think that at one time Mike was on the federal beat. I think he may have known Bowers. Bowers would come back periodically. Judge Thomas Eisele always threw a birthday party for him, stuff like that. So he dug up stuff about how Bowers had prosecuted moonshiners, which, when he was

the prosecutor, was the main thing in federal courts. The laws have since been expanded to give federal courts a lot more authority over more kinds of cases. But when he was back there, at least in Arkansas, the main thing was moonshine. He retired from being a prosecutor, and he went into the private practice of law and he would up defending some of the moonshiners. Stuff like that was what Mike dug up. But he had a talent to [dig up stuff] I've never seen.

ED: And our coverage of that trial, as I recall, was quite impressive. I think outsiders were impressed, I think, by the quality and depth of our coverage of that case. We devoted a lot of space — in-depth coverage — to that case everyday.

GW: Yes, we did. Well, the paper nominated us — Mike, myself, and Carol — for the Pulitzer [Prize] that year. I didn't think it was the type of story that was going to attract Pulitzer attention. I just thought we did a good job, and that was rewarding in itself.

ED: Okay, you were about to mention another case.

GW: Yes. The other case that was significant was when the *Gazette* sued the *Democrat* in an anti-trust case, claiming that the *Democrat* was trying to drive them out of business with unfair trade practices.

The *Gazette* hired Stephen Sussman of Houston, an antitrust specialist, to represent it. He had three lawyers from his firm, and then, of course, there was a Little Rock lawyer, James McHaney Jr., who was there. He was technically the lead counsel because in the federal system, you have to have a local lead counsel. The *Democrat* had some high-powered guy from New York or Chicago, I've

forgotten where, but they let Phil Anderson, who was a Little Rock lawyer, handle all the work.

ED: Phil Anderson was the courtroom presence?

GW: Right.

ED: And he is a Little Rock lawyer, and has, in a way, kind of a country manner about him. He can be courtly as well, but nevertheless, he's an Arkie, and knows an Arkansas jury. Plus Peter Kumpe and somebody else.

GW: Peter worked on that, too.

But Anderson handled most of it. Judge William Overton had been the same law firm with Anderson, because Anderson was still in the Wright law firm.

ED: They were together when it was the Wright . . .

GW: Wright, Lindsey and Jennings. From what I'd heard, he and Phil didn't necessarily get along, but he told his staff after the trial that he had never seen Phil Anderson so well organized in his life. So he was very impressed with Anderson, and I think Anderson did a very effective job for the *Democrat*.

ED: Well, I think even people at the *Gazette*, like Max Brantley and others, thought that the *Gazette* got out-lawyered on the thing, maybe not in preparation, but at least at what they delivered in the courtroom. It was far more effective than the *Gazette*. The *Gazette* had the case, but had been out-lawyered.

GW: I think that's probably a good analysis of it. The lawyers for the *Gazette* had prepared a meticulous case, and Overton let them get just about everything in that they wanted. I mean, there was very little excluded, but they were up against the

local guy who knew the local people. I think he did the more effective job.

ED: How much damage to you think was done to the *Gazette* case by the disclosure during the trial that Hugh Patterson had not only gotten a substantial increase in his salary as publisher, but had also gotten a pretty hefty bonus a year or two earlier, all of this supposedly when the *Gazette* was supposed to be hurting from this unfair competition from the *Democrat*? Did that hurt the *Gazette*, do you think?

GW: I think it did. As a matter of fact, it was one of the things that Anderson harped on.

ED: Do you know how much that was? Didn't he get a \$500,000 . . . ?

GW: It seems to me that his salary was increased — if I remember the pleadings correctly — \$250,000 and maybe he got a bonus of the same, or something like that.

ED: In about 1984 or 1985, something like that? Within a year or so of this suit they filed.

GW: If I remember correctly, it was done during the same meeting when they decided to look into filing a lawsuit, to explore that possibility. Yes, I think that hurt. I think the *Gazette* lawyers let the *Democrat* off the hook when Hussman was testifying and they were bringing up the fact that he had pumped \$40 million from his other newspapers and media holdings into the *Democrat*, and he sat there and explained very straight-faced, “Well, we all filed a joint return for all the papers so I could write the loss off against the earnings of the other papers,” which at that

time was fifty percent, so it meant that over that period he had only wasted \$20 million of his own money to fight the *Gazette*. I thought that the *Gazette* lawyers ought to have jumped up and said, “Yes, well, you spent \$20 million of the taxpayers’ money, too!” But they didn’t. They didn’t ask me for advice.

ED: Well, I know all of us who followed it, the course of the trial in the *Gazette* newsroom, every day we all followed it. Some people actually sat through parts of the trial. I went down and sat through parts of it. Max Brantley was down there almost every day. And I think all of us — it might be natural — second-guessed our lawyers every day. “Well, why didn’t they make a point of this?” “Why didn’t they ask this?” “Why in the world did we not do this or that?” I remember how frustrating that period was for everybody.

GW: Well, it was frustrating for everybody involved to be in that situation. After the suit was filed in, I think it was December of 1985, the next spring I was in St. Louis for something at the 8th Circuit Court of Appeals. They were hanging was a picture of J. Smith Henley, who had taken senior status. The local lawyer for the *Gazette*, James McHaney Jr., was up there. I got him in a bar, and we got to talking about this thing. I unloaded on him about how dumb I thought it was for the *Gazette* to file a lawsuit. It probably didn’t do me a whole lot of good with management when they heard my opinion. But I thought it was the kind of lawsuit the *Gazette* could not win because the only way they could win actually would be to get a judgment that would destroy the *Democrat*, and Arkansas juries don’t give judgments like that. It was going to appear to the people of Arkansas,

whether it appeared this way to the jurors or not, that the *Gazette* was trying to use the court to do something that they couldn't do in honest business. I don't necessarily believe that is the case, but I think that's the perception of a lot of people.

ED: Right. Well, the fact is that two newspapers could not survive the market. If you tried to be competitive, it could not survive. The market was not going to bear that. If both papers abided by the law, the *Gazette* would survive, and the *Democrat's* only chance of survival was simply flout the anti-trust laws and engage in predatory pricing, which it did, and ultimately won as a result of that. The jury was wrong about it. The *Gazette* was harmed, pretty clearly it was harmed by their predatory pricing. But probably that the jury recognized that didn't matter. They might've liked the *Democrat* better. It was a conservative paper, and it was giving its product away, and the *Gazette* was not. So there was not much going in the *Gazette's* favor in that suit.

GW: Well, one of the things about this is the Pattersons — all the *Gazette* people — had been saying for several years that the market wasn't big enough to support two competitive newspapers. And Hussman kept saying, "Oh, yes, it can." At one point he was quoted as saying, "All I want is half of the advertising and half of the market." Well, I tend to think that there's no such thing as a publisher who would settle for just half.

ED: Of course not.

GW: That's a personal opinion, of course.

ED: He's also making the same case now in the newspaper war in northwest Arkansas that he just wants his little fair share of the market. Obviously, he's trying to get all the market. That's what a businessman tries to do, isn't that right?

GW: Yes. It was nerve-wracking. The thing ended on a Wednesday, as I recall, the jury verdict and so forth. So the next morning, I got up like always — shaved and got dressed and went down to the court. There was another *Gazette* reporter, Peggy Harris, there and I said, "What are you doing here?" She said, "Well, they sent me over here. They're going to give you a couple of days off or something." They hadn't told me! So I went in, and, sure enough, they thought I'd done a very good job under very trying circumstances, so I was getting a couple of extra days of vacation.

ED: Well, that you did, but as I say, I thought it was one of the *Gazette's* finest hours. When it came time to write about our own survival and our own case, the *Gazette* was imminently fair and thorough, and the other paper was not. I think even the ownership and management of the *Gazette*, unhappy as they were with the outcome, still recognized that we did what a newspaper ought to do, both in your coverage and in the *Gazette's* handling, the placement and handling of the stories.

GW: I'll tell you, there was very little change to my copy during that whole thing. They left it pretty much to me. I probably caught a few mistakes in grammar and things like that that I tend to make when I'm writing fast, but other than that, they pretty well left it up to me. They didn't fool around with the copy or try to make it slanted or anything.

- ED: Gannett bought the *Gazette* late in 1986. Six months after the trial was over.
- GW: I've always believed one of the factors in the *Gazette* selling the paper was because they lost the lawsuit. It sort of discouraged the Pattersons. They were on the verge of losing money for the first time, or at least that's what Carrick Patterson told me. He said they had never lost money before, but they were going to be very close that year.
- ED: And they had, in fact — although they had not lost money, the reason they had not lost money was that they had taken some pretty drastic economic steps. The paper had been shrinking. And it had not been filling vacancies. I think the staff had actually shrunk on the newspaper as well — all in an effort to make ends meet. We might talk a little bit about what the *Democrat* had been doing that caused it to . . .
- GW: Well, things that were cited in the *Gazette*'s case, some of which the *Democrat* admitted — I mean, they were giving away newspapers. They called it “testing,” or something like that.
- ED: “Total market coverage,” or something like that, too.
- GW: The *Gazette* claimed that the *Democrat* was selling advertising space at below cost. Yes, and they actually had a program giving away free classified advertising, which probably was a shrewd move on their part because their circulation started going up right after they started that. Now, I knew a good many people who said that they only bought the paper to read the free ads because some of them were pretty zany, or something. I never read the free ads, so I don't

know.

ED: Their classified section finally got to be huge. It was massive, much larger than the *Gazette*'s, and before that, the *Gazette* dominated nearly all the classifieds.

GW: The *Democrat* made a deal with the Realtors. If they'd run — I've forgotten what the percentage was — a certain percentage, but it was more than half, I'm pretty sure, with the *Democrat*, they would get a very special rate. At that time, the economy wasn't so good anyway. They just went along and that hurt us.

ED: Personal classifieds were the ones that were free.

GW: Yes.

ED: I mean, if an individual wanted to run a classified, they could run it and for as long as they wanted to.

GW: Yes.

ED: Some of them would run weeks on end in the classifieds.

GW: Now, there weren't any limits then. Since the *Gazette* went out of business, then the *Democrat* retooled everything. Now they have a few free advertising slots still, I think, but you have to stand in line to get the space because they've restricted it. And, of course, they had a special deal with the movie theaters. The *Gazette* got into some sort of dispute with the movie theaters over advertising space, so we lost practically all of the movie ads.

ED: Our rate was about nine dollars and the *Democrat*'s was about a dollar, or something like that, or less.

GW: Of course, eventually Dillard's canceled all its advertising in the *Gazette*.

ED: But that was after this case.

GW: Yes, that was after this case.

ED: That was after Gannett took over the paper, in 1987 or 1988 when they . . .

GW: It was somewhere about two years after . . .

ED: 1988 or 1989, somewhere in there.

GW: But that was essentially the death knell for the paper because that was the single-biggest advertiser, and somebody was telling me, I've forgotten who now, that some other advertisers canceled because they didn't think it looked like a real Arkansas newspaper without Dillard's ads.

ED: And also a lot of them just advertised around Dillard's. So, as you say, it was a mortal blow to the *Gazette* when that happened. But that wasn't involved in the lawsuit. When the anti-trust case was filed, Dillard's was still the dominant advertiser in either paper.

GW: This case was also tried before Overton.

ED: Overton, by the way, would've been a judge that you might've expected to have favored the *Gazette*, at least his personal inclination might've been in that direction. But I gather that at the trial, as in the creation science, he was kind of down the middle and . . .

GW: In fact, there were judges over there who I doubt would've taken the case. I believe Henry Woods was on at that time, and I'm fairly certain that he wouldn't have wanted to take that case because of his friendships. He was pretty sensitive to appearances of conflict of interest.

GW: But Overton was also a very efficient judge. He moved cases along.

ED: It was remarkable that it came to trial when it did, I mean, not so long after the case was filed . . .

GW: For a major anti-trust case, it came up amazingly quickly.

ED: Usually, those things take several years to come to trial.

GW: Right. And that's when Overton got this thing organized, and, as was his style, he let the lawyers know very early on that he wasn't going to tolerate stalling and all that sort of the thing.

At the end of the trial, after both sides had presented their case, the *Gazette's* lawyer wanted to take one more night before presenting the closing arguments.

Overton said, "No. We've finished the presentation of evidence. You should be ready to present your closing arguments right now." So they got up there and I

thought the *Gazette* lawyer made a big mistake and tried to personalize the thing by attacking Walter Hussman personally. That's not going to go over with an

Arkansas jury.

ED: This guy wore a vest, too, did he not?

GW: Oh, yes.

ED: He was a dapper dresser. Expensive suits, obviously, and vests and gold fobs and so forth.

GW: Among other things, he had won a billion-dollar anti-trust judgment. And, as a matter of fact — I didn't mention it, you know, because I didn't want to look like I was playing up the *Gazette's* side, and the *Democrat* missed it altogether - he was

the state's lawyer in the milk case, which went on forever and ever, and then, finally, he got on the phone with a guy in Chicago and they reached a settlement agreement. Of course, Steve Clark got to make all the announcements, but this was the guy who did the work.

[Editor's note: The milk case was a suit filed by the state of Arkansas alleging that five major dairies were fixing prices and overcharging schools in the state for milk. All five dairies settled out of court.]

GW: In the Gazette case, I thought Sussman gave the jury the material to rule for the *Gazette* if they concluded that the *Democrat's* intentions were malevolent. But they were out for about two hours, I think, an incredibly short time for an anti-trust case.

ED: It seemed to be instant. I remember that.

GW: Yes.

ED: Everybody was shocked when word came out that the jury was coming back.

GW: And I saw the guy coming back. He had a little paper in his hand, which I recognized was going to be the verdict form, and I said, "The *Gazette* has lost because there's no way they could come back that quickly and find for the *Gazette*."

ED: Because they would have to make a lot of complicated findings on what the judgment would be.

GW: Right.

ED: But on the other hand, if you say, "No," that's it. One word is it.

GW: Yes. It's generally the way, in civil trials, the longer the jury stays out, the more the plaintiff benefits. In criminal trials, the longer they stay out, the more likely they are to try to find some way to prevent convicting somebody.

There was one thing about the preparation for this trial that I found impressive. I had a conclusion in my own mind, and told maybe a few friends, that this was probably the most important commercial trial in the history of Arkansas because the loser was probably going to go out of business, and that would leave us with only one newspaper. That's just the way I felt about it. I went to Carrick Patterson, who was the managing editor then. I said, "Now, this case is too important to screw up by managing the copy." So he sent out a memo that more or less said that I could write whatever I wanted to, and if there was a space problem, come to him. And nobody fooled around with my copy, more than just normal editing things. The *Democrat* reported this thing — it read to me like it had been written by the *Democrat* lawyers every day.

ED: I think anybody who wanted to judge the two newspapers at that time — the quality and professionalism of those two newspapers at that time — should go back and read the developing accounts of that trial by those two newspapers. At the time, I thought it was remarkable that the *Gazette's* coverage was thorough, that all the bad points for the *Gazette* were there for everybody to see, and you got a straightforward account of the trial. And I think anybody who read that might have anticipated the result of that case. But if you read the *Democrat* account of it, damaging points for the *Democrat* never showed up in the paper. I thought it was

the most one-sided coverage I had ever seen of a case that kind of spotlighted the paper's professionalism. It seems to me that that's the kind of case where you should really set out to prove to everybody that you're fair. They didn't do it, and the *Gazette* did in that case. And that's kind of tooting our own horn, and that's obviously coming from someone who is, I guess, biased about it.

We gave, I thought, extremely thorough coverage to that case. I mean, there were long, long, detailed accounts every day.

GW: Oh, yes. I wrote tons every day, it seemed like.

ED: As if the *Gazette* were not in your own livelihood and was not involved in the case.

GW: Yes, well, I'll tell you what, it would've been a lot more interesting and fun for me if I hadn't been employed by one of the parties.

ED: Yes, that's a tough thing to do.

GW: You know every word you write is going to be read by everybody at the paper, and probably at the other paper, too, but they didn't have the right to fire me.

ED: Were you surprised at the verdict at the end?

GW: Not really. No.

ED: Although the case seemed to be — they marshaled a pretty powerful case, that the anti-trust laws had been flouted.

GW: Right. But the thing about it is, it still got down to motive.

ED: Motive?

GW: Yes. Like I said, the *Democrat* admitted a lot of this stuff, the free ads and that sort of thing, free classifieds and so forth. But they just said, "We're trying to

catch up, and these are things we were hoping would increase our circulation. We weren't trying to damage the *Gazette*. We were just trying to catch up." The jury believed them.

ED: The *Gazette* was, I guess, not an entirely sympathetic institution, and the owners were not entirely sympathetic to their, in effect, working-class jury. Probably people who couldn't understand what's wrong with selling your product as cheaply as possible or giving it away.

GW: The thing about it is, I don't think that Hussman was that appealing to the jury either. Here again, it's a subjective thing, but I think that the jury said, "Why are they taking up our time fighting over something in court? Just let them go at it and the best paper will win or something." In jury selection, it was revealed that several of these people routinely did not read either paper or any paper. And if they had read anything about the lawsuit, several said they had, but they couldn't remember anything.

ED: So the jury was largely made up of people at the end who did not read newspapers. It was a condition of being on the jury, I guess, that you had to not be a devotee of either newspaper.

GW: Well, yes, and as I say, just came back, wham. So it was pretty clear to me that the jury had pretty much decided by the time deliberations started that they weren't going to give anything to the *Gazette*.

ED: I forget who told me this account, and I don't know whether it was you or

somebody else that the day before the last day of the trial the attorneys for the *Gazette* went off and told Hugh Patterson to write two statements.

GW: Oh, yes. He did. The lawyer told me that, and I may have told it to you. He had to write a victory statement and a losing statement. When it was over with, Hugh Patterson was sitting there just obviously stunned. He couldn't believe that he had lost. We went up and duly asked him if he had any statement, and he just sort of whipped out this piece of paper and threw it down on the table. He said he wasn't going to have any more comment.

ED: A decision was made not to appeal, right?

GW: They made some post-trial motions to set aside the verdict. It's typical in these cases. But, basically, I think they just decided to let it go.

ED: Not likely to get much consideration at the appellate court level.

GW: I would not speculate on that. And, of course, at the appellate court level, the first level there is no choice. If somebody files an appeal, they have to consider it at some level. It's not like the supreme court where they can pick and choose. But that doesn't mean that they'd necessarily be sympathetic, either.

ED: It was in the spring of 1986. Almost immediately after that case was decided, the Pattersons then began to look for a buyer for the paper. They scouted around and, I think, in the succeeding months, several potentially interested buyers came by the paper. At least I know of one, perhaps more. Perhaps two. And then the *Gazette* sold. The Pattersons sold the paper to Gannett in October of 1986.

GW: No, no. December. I was thinking it was December.

ED: Yes. Anyway, it was that fall, because Gannett kept the paper for almost exactly five years, and sold it in October.

GW: I remember the day that the sale was announced. My beeper went off and I called. Max said, "There's going to be a staff meeting." I said, "I've got something going on over here. What's this about?" He said, "Well, they've sold the *Gazette*." I said, "Well, do I really have to be there?" He said, "No." So I said, "Who bought it?" He said, "Well, the word was Gannett." I mean, he already knew, but he had to phrase it a little bit like that so as not to give anything away. By the time I came back to the office, Al Newhart, I guess he chairman of Gannett, who had come down to announce that they had bought the paper, had already come sweeping through and had gone, so I missed my one chance to see "Big Al."

ED: Talk about the Gannett years.

GW: My experience with them was not as bad as some people because, you know, it was like I was operating on another planet as far as they were concerned. They weren't interested in the federal beat.

ED: Yes. They weren't interested in government coverage at all. This was Walker Lundy and that regime, the first regime after Gannett bought the paper. He didn't think the paper should be devoting a great deal of space to coverage of government at any level, particularly state and local government.

GW: But they didn't really interfere with me. What amazed me is that they seemed to keep changing the paper. When they first got there they said, "Write short and

bright.” Well, that’s the way Gannett does everything, so that wasn’t surprising. Before long, they’d come out and say, “Well, now, if you need it we can give you a lot of space, but it’s got to be a good story. A good yarn.” They like to use that word, yarn, a lot. Next time it would be, “We’re emphasizing things that the *Democrat* isn’t getting.” I’d say, “Now, look, this is a public thing over here. I mean, they have access to everything that I have access to.”

ED: Yes.

GW: But they just kept changing things like that. And that was sort of demoralizing to me, and it was somewhat disruptive. When I brought in a story, they ran it. They didn’t screw around with it.

ED: Well, that was the cheap criterion, as I think probably for both papers during those years is that if you had a story that you didn’t think the other paper had that merited front page. It didn’t matter a great deal about the quality of the story or how important it was. It’s just that if it was exclusive, it was liable to make the front page. .

So Gannett buys the *Gazette* in 1986 and owns the *Gazette* for about five years.

How did things change for you? You stayed at the federal building for five years.

GW: Right.

ED: How did things change for you at the *Gazette* with Gannett? Any change at all?

GW: There were no changes that affected my beat directly except at one time I had been covering the congressional offices, and they sort of shoved that off to their political people, which was all right with me because covering Tommy Robinson got to be a

pain. I didn't mind giving that up at all. My best friends in Senator [David] Pryor's and Senator [Dale] Bumpers' office both retired, so I'd lost my best sources of information over there anyway, so that wasn't a whole lot of fun. And there were still a lot of things going on in the court. I don't think they ever decided what kind of paper they wanted to be. And I thought, "Well, they had come in. They didn't know Arkansas. They didn't know the market or the people, and they didn't understand the institutional value of the *Gazette* to Arkansas. So they were going to make a Gannett paper." Reporters kept getting all this negative feedback from people who were loyal to the *Gazette*. We'd go in and tell the editors and they'd be ignored. In the end, my conclusion was they took something that wasn't broken and fixed it to death.

ED: Yes. Were you there when Bill Malone, the publisher, assembled us in the newsroom and introduced our new editor, Walker Lundy?

GW: No, I told the city desk I had something too important to do. But I really do not like these kinds of meetings. I was there when they introduced Malone. That wasn't any big deal. And I remember thinking — because Lundy had been fired at Dallas . . . ED: Fort Worth.

GW: Fort Worth, was it? Somewhere in there. Anyway, somewhere in Texas. The story that was reported nationally was that he was fired because of a dispute over the news hole, and he was trying to get more news coverage. It wasn't until he got up here that we found out that some of his ideas on news coverage were a little strange.

ED: So maybe he learned his lesson down there, then. He got fired for advocating that

kind of thing, so he changed since then and did nothing that would upset management, the owners of the paper.

GW: I wasn't there for his introduction, fortunately. Based on my own personal reaction to him after I did get to know him, I probably would have been instantly offended. He was sort of — he struck me as being kind of an arrogant person.

ED: Well, he didn't think government should be covered much. He didn't like government news — state government news, federal government news, the court news. He thought the *Gazette* devoted far too much to that kind of stuff which was boring, that we needed more kind of light-hearted feature stuff that young people might like who were bored by public affairs. He didn't like public affairs. And he loved movies. He thought he'd love to have instant movie reviews. He thought that was a priority. He used to have — the day a movie came to town, he wanted a review in the next day's paper, and prominent movie reviews.

GW: I remember that change. That was a change that struck me as particularly short-sighted and, to some extent, offensive because we were giving up news space for movie reviews which could wait. This wasn't *The New York Times* where they have movie reviews every day, but they had it in a section devoted to the arts and so forth. It's one thing if you're going to go so far as to have a section like that where you can do daily movie reviews. But to take it out of your news space is another thing, at least it was to me. So I didn't agree with him on that. I've forgotten whether he was blamed for this or not, but I remember when this TV actress, Clara Pella died. Clara Pella? Whatever her name. She had been the one who said,

“Where’s the beef?” We put that on page one.

ED: Oh, yes. I remember that. No, that was Lundy’s decision. My recollection is that Lundy thought she was an important figure in American culture.

GW: Boy, that was . . .

ED: She was just an old lady who cut a commercial for Wendy’s or McDonald’s, one or the other . . .

GW: It was one of those hamburger joints.

ED: . . . where she said, “Where’s the beef?”

GW: That one was the decision. And I remember there was a plane crash in Dallas, and he took half the staff and shipped them down to Dallas because so many people passed through there, cursing every minute. I’ve never heard anybody who enjoyed that airport. But he thought that was something that would really be compelling to the people of Arkansas, and certainly we should have covered it, but . . .

ED: Our people couldn’t have given any better coverage than Associated Press did. But he wanted to have Arkansas people covering the plane crash, I guess.

GW: That was a strange decision, to me.

ED: And, in the end, to bring us down to the close of the *Gazette*, do you remember where you were?

GW: Well, that day they told us to come in. They didn’t say they were going to close, they just said, “Come on in. We’re not going to be doing anything,” or something like that. But we got in, and sure enough, they had already started closing down the computers.

ED: All the computers went dead at noon. I was sitting on my computer when it went dead.

GW: Yes.

ED: I was writing an editorial.

GW: And, of course, by this time, we had already had pretty good information that Hussman was going to buy the paper in some way or other. We had been waiting for this to happen, but we just didn't know how or when. So then it came. By this time, it wasn't a shock, but I was — I was just really depressed because — not that I was losing a job. I wasn't really happy about losing a job, but I thought the state was losing an extremely valuable institution which had been, in my opinion, anyway, weakened considerably by Gannett's management.

ED: What is peculiar about the *Gazette*? Why do you think the *Gazette* was an important institution for this state?

GW: Ever since I was old enough to read a newspaper, the people I knew read the *Gazette*. I grew up in Camden in an apartment over a grocery store. We would read the *Gazette*. Never the *Democrat*. We wouldn't read much besides the obituaries in the *Camden News* because there wasn't much besides the obituaries in the *Camden News*. I knew a guy in Pine Bluff who put it about as well as anybody. He was a teacher out at UAPB [University of Arkansas, Pine Bluff], and he was friendly. We all knew him from the *Pine Bluff Commercial*. He told me one time, "I don't know what it is about that paper, but every morning I can't wait to get my hands on it." I think the *Gazette* covered what was important to Arkansas. And there were some

people, even if they didn't like the editorial page, who didn't believe something had happened until they saw it in the *Gazette*.

ED: What was it like to work at the *Gazette*? You had worked at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*, the *Louisville Courier Journal* when it was a great newspaper, and the *Gazette*. You were familiar with other newspapers. You knew a lot of reporters for other newspapers around the country. You read other newspapers. Was there something special about working at the *Gazette*?

GW: Yes, there was. Now, I don't know whether everybody would phrase it the same way, but I think that there was a feeling that we were part of an important institution. We were contributing to the state. There was largely a good feeling around the *Gazette*. When I was there the first time, only six months, and on the copy desk, there were, I would say, a lot of good feelings. We had a lot of talented people. And when I came in the second time, there were still a lot of people from when I worked there the first time. Bob Douglas was there. Bill Rutherford was there.

ED: Pat Carrithers.

GW: Pat was still there. So there was a sense of continuity there. You didn't have that kind of continuity, say, at the *Pine Bluff Commercial* because there was so much staff turnover. At the *Gazette*, not only did people know each other pretty well, they had known them for a long time, in many cases.

ED: I was going to ask you about a few people at the *Gazette*. You've already talked a little bit about A. R. Nelson, who hired you. I'm going to ask you about Bill Shelton,

who was the long, longtime city editor of the *Gazette*, and familiar to most of us, but, I guess, you worked under Shelton as a city editor only four or five years, I guess?

GW: Yes.

ED: Six years, something like that.

GW: Shelton was not the easiest person to communicate with, but he was a quality editor. I don't know why, but I was surprised at how well he knew the language and could handle the language. It shouldn't have surprised me because he had been doing it for so long, but I thought that he was a very good word man. Like most editors at the *Gazette*, he had some peculiarities, and, in his case, one that sticks out is the word "contact." We obviously could not use that as a verb, except if we were quoting somebody else.

ED: That's right, I had forgotten about that. People didn't contact each other.

GW: No, they did not. And, at one point, he said the only sense I could use it in was an electrical contact. I thought that was excessively narrow, but, then, he was the boss. He was a hard worker, too.

ED: Yes, he was tireless — long, long hours.

GW: I remember one time, when I was still on general assignment, I was working the late shift, and there wasn't somebody coming in to fill in for him, for some reason. I don't know why that was. So he asked me if I would finish it up, and I said, "Certainly, I'll be glad to." He wrote down a number on a piece of paper, and he said, "Now, this is where I can be reached, and don't wait too long because I'm going home to open a bottle of gin." I don't know whether he did that or not, but

that's what he said.

ED: Probably did. You talked a little bit about copy desk people. The guy who took Shelton's place was Max Brantley, who became the city editor and the metro editor after that and was a dominant figure in the *Gazette* in its latter years in the newsroom, partly because of his imposing physical stature and demeanor and his voice and everything else about him. How was he to work for? A lot of people think Max was even harder to work for than Shelton.

GW: Well, in some ways, he was.

ED: He had a fiercer temper.

GW: Yes. Well, he certainly did not suffer fools gladly and not at all if he could help it. He seemed to take the attitude that the reporters were the ones out there on the scene and knew what they were doing, and pretty much gave us a lot of leeway. Very rarely did he tell me how he wanted a story written, if at all. I have a vague recollection. One time, he said, "I think the story is thus and thus," and it pretty much was. He was sometimes hard to communicate with, too, but he was a good editor.

ED: Terribly competitive.

GW: Absolutely!

ED: He wanted to beat the *Democrat* every day, with every story, and still does, of course.

GW: I'd like to do the same thing.

ED: Fiercely competitive person.

GW: He also has a prodigious appetite.

ED: Yes, he was a legend in his own time. Okay, anybody else who kind of stands out who worked at the *Gazette* who we haven't talked about?

GW: Well, you know, going back, it always — like your work, I enjoyed being on the same paper with you, even though you had left the newsroom by the time I got back because you wrote a lot of the most understandable and insightful stuff about state government that anybody ever did. There's always Bill Lewis and his legendary speed. I don't think I ever saw anybody who could type as fast as he did, and sometimes it made sense.

ED: Yes, and Lewis never spent any time thinking about a story.

GW: He'd just let it flow out.

ED: He might be working on two or three stories. He might come back and he'd interviewed somebody for a feature, and whether it was a hard news story or a feature story or a review of a concert of a string quartet or a vocal group or a pop group or whatever, he came back, sat down at the typewriter, rolled his paper in — back when we had paper and typewriters — and just started clattering away. He didn't stop until he finished the story and ripped it out and put it in the basket. There was never any delay at all. You never saw Bill up there pondering about how to write a story. That was always just so amazing to me. When five o'clock came — usually he was off at five or six — he was done. If Shelton had given him eight assignments, every one of them would be absolutely finished at that hour, and he would be out of there. He didn't work overtime. He didn't have to. He got it done,

and Shelton loved him for that. He was the one reporter who Shelton remembers clearly.

GW: I had one hit with Shelton. He stomped on me a few times. Shortly after I'd gotten on the federal beat, I realized there were going to be dead spots on a lot of days. I had little short stories to do. You know, lawsuits filed, and that kind of news. So I'd go back in the middle of the afternoon and write these things up. I thought that was the logical way to do it, but, apparently, nobody else had ever done it that way because after I had done this for several days, Shelton came up to me and said, "Thank you for coming in early and writing these stories!"

ED: Well, he was thinking that because the rest of his experience was with people like me, on beats, who came in at five o'clock and wrote all their stories . . .

GW: Yes.

ED: . . . right on deadline, and so Shelton didn't have this enormous amount of copy that he had to handle between about 5:30 and 7:30 from people like me and probably George Bentley and others because we couldn't get our work done during the day.

GW: There's a difference because when you were out at the Capitol — that's a long commute to come back in and write up stuff. I just had to walk six or eight blocks, and there were days when I didn't want to do that because of the weather, but I just thought that was the logical thing to do.

ED: I'm sure he did.

GW: I think it was about the only compliment I ever got from Shelton.

ED: I don't know that I ever got a compliment from Shelton. I don't recall it,

specifically, if I did. Well, I did. I wrote a story once that he thought was wonderful, and it never got in the paper. Shelton thought it was wonderful, but somebody else along the line did not, and it never got in the paper. It was back in about 1968.

GW: Somebody else I remember working with is Mike Trimble. Mike was a natural writer. He was just terrific, I thought, and one of the best writers in journalism in Arkansas. I couldn't necessarily vouch for all of his reporting. I don't know that there's anything wrong with it, but I know . . .

ED: Well, he reported differently from the rest of us. He saw things that the rest of us didn't see, and the things that we wrote about were the things that, frequently, he thought were boring.

GW: Yes.

ED: I think he was accurate in what he wrote, but it was just different from the things you would . . .

GW: Yes.

ED: His story on an assignment would be much different from the rest of us. He would see things that we didn't see.

GW: Yes.

ED: And his stories were much more readable than most of ours were.

GW: He could do it fast sometimes. I know he did it when he was working with me on the creation science trial. He'd come back in and he'd whip that stuff out, and, like I say, the best single story in that trial, I think, was his story on that former prosecutor. Let me see — it's hard to just single people out. I never really worked with Roy

Reed. I think he was there when I was working with copy editing.

ED: Yes, the first time. He would have been there when you came in 1963 — well, not for long, because Roy left — no, that's right. He left in about the fall of 1964.

GW: Yes.

ED: Late in the year of 1964 to work for *The New York Times*.

GW: I didn't have a whole lot of interaction with him or anything, but, of course, he was a top-notch reporter, and I was always proud to work with top-notch reporters. I remember Jerol Garrison. Like you say, he was very, very precise, and the whole six months I was on the copy desk and I'd edit his stuff almost every day, I don't think I ever caught a single misspelling or a single grammatical error. I would have written a sentence differently, maybe, but his stuff was precise — if you need to just ship it straight to the printer without editing it, you could trust it that much.

ED: And there was never an error. There were no factual errors.

GW: I never found one.

ED: Now, his stories might be kind of plodding. They were not exciting stories.

GW: No, he was not a scintillating writer, but he was . . .

ED: Precise.

GW: . . . precise. He was accurate.

ED: The only reporter, I guess, I've ever known who did not make mistakes, at least as far as anybody ever knew — there might have been a mistake, but if he made one, it never came to anybody's attention.

GW: I can believe that.

ED: He never wrote corrections. He never had to. People on the beat would swear by him. He'd go on vacation and I'd go out to the federal building, back when I was on general assignments, to cover for him for a few days. Nobody would want to give me anything. They'd want to wait for Jerol to get back because they knew he would be accurate.