

Gazette Project

Interview with

John Workman
Conway, Arkansas
6 April 2001

Interviewer: Donna Lampkin Stephens

Donna Lampkin Stephens: This is John Workman on April 6, 2001. Okay, John, the first thing is we want to make sure that you give your permission to record this interview and give it to the Arkansas Center for Oral and Visual History.

John Workman: That's fine. I do agree to that.

DLS: Now, first of all, we want to ask a little bit about your biography. Where were you born and when?

JW: Okay. I was born at Fayetteville, Arkansas, on July 4, 1927. I'm 73 years old. At the time of my birth, my father, a Methodist minister, was superintendent of the Western Methodist Assembly at Mount Sequoyah there at Fayetteville. He was later the pastor of Central Methodist Church there. I went to high school while we were living in Illinois-Dad was in a church assignment there; I graduated from New Trier High School, in Winnetka, Illinois. Then, after two years in the Army, I went to Hendrix College, where I graduated in the class of 1950. Then I went to Perkins School of Theology at SMU, where I received a bachelor of divinity degree. For twenty years I was a Methodist minister, a local church minister. Of those twenty years, the last six were spent as editor of the

Arkansas Methodist newspaper. Following that, I went as religion editor of the *Arkansas Gazette*. I might give some dates here, if it's of interest. I was editor of the *Arkansas Methodist* from June 1973 to June 1979, and then in June 1979 I went to the *Arkansas Gazette*. I retired there in July 1989, so I was at the *Gazette* for ten years as a religion editor. Then, after that "official" retirement, I continued to write a weekly column for two years, right up until the *Gazette*'s demise. Then, following that, I wrote a column for the *Democrat-Gazette* for one year. Well, actually, one year and two weeks, I believe. [Laughs] Actually, when I was writing the additional two years as a columnist at the *Gazette* and then the one year and two weeks for the *Democrat-Gazette*, I was writing from home here in Conway, using a computer and modem. So, let's see—I've been retired now, let's see—I retired from my ministerial conference in June 1989. I am trying to find these dates on a piece of paper here. Let's see—so, actually, I have been retired from my writing activities since November 1992. Since the retirement, I've just been having a good time trying to keep my study clean and my shop clean and riding my bicycle and my motorcycle, I've got to mention my motorcycle.

DLS: Oh, great.

JW: Anyway, that's that. Is that enough bio?

DLS: That's fine. One thing I'd like to know, what churches did you serve?

JW: I served at Newark and Oil Trough from 1953 to 1955. This would be June of each of these years mentioned. And then at Cabot from 1955 to 1959. And

Berryville from 1959 to 1964. And Sylvan Hills in North Little Rock, 1964 to 1970. And then Markham United Methodist in Little Rock—this is in the Little Rock Conference, as opposed to the North Arkansas Conference—from 1970 to 1973. Then I was editor for six years of the *Arkansas Methodist*, from June 1973 to June 20, 1979.

DLS: How did you get involved with the *Arkansas Methodist*? That's as an appointment, right?

JW: Yes, it is. And the reason—the way that came about is in that year—well, I'm not certain of the date [when] Alfred Knox, who was editor at that time, died.

DLS: K-N-O-X ?

JW: K-N-O-X. Yes, Alfred P. Knox, a longtime editor there. He died, and at each of the churches I had served, (most notably the one at Sylvan Hills in North Little Rock) I had written a weekly column in the church newsletter that attracted the attention of people at the *Arkansas Methodist*. So, I had somewhat of a little reputation, I guess, as being an essayist or a columnist. And because of that, they asked me if I would be interested in becoming editor. I said, "Well, I've never had a class in journalism, so I guess I'm qualified to do it." [Laughter]

JW: So I did that, and it was delightful. I remember it was quite a baptism by fire, so to speak because after I took the job, they said, "Oh, by the way, you're also editor of the *Louisiana Methodist*."

DLS: Two for one.

JW: Two for one. That relationship with the *Louisiana Methodist* lasted only about

one year because they were going through a transition. They were going to have their own conference paper and their own editor. So, anyway, I had a fine staff here at the *Arkansas Methodist*. I had as an associate editor, Doris Woolard, and then a staff of about three office assistants. As editor, I was both the principal writer, both news items and feature stories, editorials and columns of opinion, and photographer, so I did it all. But I remember being so frustrated coming into that responsibility. But I had a lot of help from people there who had been on the job for a long, long time. Mrs. Alfred Knox, Imogene Knox, had assisted her husband as associate editor. She was a tremendous help. Anyway, I remember after the first week, we got our first edition out—I was so relieved, I thought, "Boy! Well, we got that done." "Yeah, John, but we gotta do it again next week." [Laughs]

DLS: Oh, it was a weekly?

JW: Yes it was a weekly. It is now bi-monthly, I think. Twice a month now.

DLS: That was a big job.

JW: Oh, it was a big job, absolutely, so it suddenly dawned on me, "Hey, you know, I thought I was through, but we've got to do this every week." [Laughter] But I found it totally fascinating. I enjoyed the six years there. But near the end of those six years, I began to think about a move. Like many Arkansans, the *Arkansas Gazette* had been a tradition in our home, and in my parents' and grandparents' homes; they, by the way—both my father and grandfather—were Methodist ministers. And, just incidentally, both of them at one time pastors of

the church here in Conway.

DLS: First Methodist?

JW: Yes, First Methodist. And both of them served as presidents of Henderson Brown College, now Henderson State University.

DLS: When it was a Methodist . . .

JW: Yes, when it was a Methodist school, right. Yes. My father was the last president there just before it became Hendrix College and moved.

DLS: Oh, okay.

JW: So, aside from that, when I knew that my term was about over at the *Methodist* . . .

DLS: Was it only a six-year term?

JW: No, it wasn't limited to that, but I figured I had pretty well served six years, and I was ready to move on. So I talked to the bishop and I said, "You know, I would like to approach the *Arkansas Gazette* and see if they weren't about ready to have a full-time religion editor."

DLS: Yes.

JW: The *Gazette* had never had a full-time religion editor.

DLS: Oh, I didn't realize that.

JW: That's right. And, just coincidentally, my father, James W. Workman, when he was pastor of First Methodist Church in North Little Rock—and I'm sorry I don't have the years on this—Hugh Patterson, then publisher of the *Gazette*, asked him to write a weekly religion column, so he wrote a weekly column there. [Laughs]

DLS: Really?

JW: And so—that was—oh, gosh, I don't—probably back in the late 1940s. I remember, I think it's when I was at Hendrix. I graduated from Hendrix in the class of 1950, and I think it was when Dad was serving North Little Rock there that he wrote.

DLS: But that was simply as a correspondent?

JW: Yes, just simply as a correspondent. Right. He wasn't on staff or anything. Right. So I called Mr. Patterson—this was some months before I was to discontinue at the *Arkansas Methodist*—and I told him that I had always had great respect and regard for the *Gazette* and wondered—I said I had been with the *Methodist* six years and all of that, and found journalism to be quite a challenge, and if they had given thought to having a full-time religion editor and, if so, I'd certainly be interested in applying for that position.

DLS: Yes.

JW: He said, "Well, I'll give it some thought and get back to you." Well, I was kind of surprised. Here in several weeks, he called back and said he'd like for me to come down and have a talk. So, as I remember—I'm trying to recall a sequence of how this happened or who was present at that interview. I think Bob Douglas, as I remember . . .

DLS: Who was the managing editor.

JW: Who was the managing editor, yes. And Jim Powell—James O. Powell, the editorial director. Carrick Patterson, who, at that time, I don't know if he was—

what his title would have been, associate editor or something. I'm sorry, I don't have that exact title. But, anyway, I was interviewed by these folks. It was very interesting. I remember one little incident during the interview. I think it was Mr. Patterson. He said, "By the way, I think—I'm kind of remembering something—John Workman—John Workman. Do you—you're not the John Workman that lives over on such-and-such address in Little Rock?" [He] called by name the street that we lived on in Little Rock. I said, "Yes, that's the one." He said, "Are you the one that has called the *Gazette* about your delivery problems?" [Laughter]

JW: I said, "Yes." [Laughs]

[JW consults with his wife about the name of the street they lived on]

JW: Briarwood. Yes.

DLS: Now, which one remembered that?

JW: I think it was Hugh Patterson. [Laughter]

JW: He said, "Are you the one who's been calling the *Gazette* every week for . . ." I said, "Yes." "And you finally asked to speak with the publisher?" And I said, "Yes." I said, "Mr. Patterson, that's the kind of regard I have for this paper. I didn't want to miss a single day." [Laughs]

DLS: That's right. That's right.

JW: So they all got a big laugh out of that. So he said, "And now you want to work for us." I said, "Yes, right." [Laughs] So they said, "Well, we'll be back to you." And in a few weeks, they called and said, "Yes, we would be interested." So in June, when the annual conference—the church's conference—met, I was put in an

“on leave” category, freeing me to be employed by the *Gazette*. Understandably, the paper needed to be non-sectarian and removed, and at arm's length from any specific identification with any denomination. They thought, "Well, this won't work if you have to remain officially a Methodist minister." I said, "Let us talk about it and think about it." I was put in an "on leave" category, and I came so to the job objectively, rather than subjectively. I bent over backwards not to favor the Methodist church or to show any preference in anything I wrote, either in straight-on news items or in opinion pieces. Just parenthetically, I think I succeeded in that. I don't think I showed any bias at all. If anything, I had a reputation, by the way, in the six years that I wrote editorials for the *Arkansas Methodist*, of being pretty much of a critic [laughs]. [It was] kind of an adversarial relationship, which I think is proper for the church publication, rather than to be an in-house publication. If it was really going to do its job, it would do what a minister in the pulpit has to do, which is, I think, to be critical and to be objective. So, anyway, that was one issue that it pleased me that the *Gazette* was conscious of. I think, in response to that, I gave a rational response that was agreeable with them. Excuse me just a minute. I think a related little episode that might be of interest in this oral history. I went there with the understanding that I would do both objective reporting—do the church pages, as we call them. . . .

DLS: Once a week?

JW: Yes, once a week.

DLS: On Saturdays?

JW: On Saturdays. Yes, right. Also, do a column of opinion on that page, too. And one of the very interesting issues, I think, was that most newspapers at that time—and I'm not so sure this is still true—had an unwritten law that people who wrote opinion pieces did not cover the beats that those opinions would deal with. And so it was stated that this would be an exception. In fact, this became part of a conference with Mr. Patterson and James O. Powell and others that this would be kind of a break from tradition, in that I was both covering these denominations that I was reporting about, and also making opinion statements that might regard them. Mr. Patterson came on to the floor at that point, and he said, "I've followed John Workman's writings for a long time in the United Methodist newspaper." He said, "I don't feel uncomfortable..." I'm paraphrasing or putting my own understanding of his remarks at that time, about him doing this. He said, "We'll do it and we'll try it for a bit, and if there are problems, we will meet them at that time." So I never had any problems in that respect. One little interesting aside along those lines: I remember about the second or third opinion piece I wrote, I had my immediate editors who'd come in . . .

DLS: And who were they?

JW: Okay. All right. Carrick Patterson was one, and David Petty, at that time, the Omnibus editor.

DLS: He ran what is now the features section?

JW: Yes, that's right. It was, at that time, the Omnibus section, which, I think, we all hated to see it go. But I recall on a couple of occasions, Carrick would call me in

and we'd have a conference about—he'd just say this: "Don't you think you need to say that, on the other hand, someone with the other point of view would say this?" And he would go to David Petty and he'd talk about it. And about the second or third time that happened, I said, "You know, is this going to work? A committee can't write an opinion piece." I said, "If this is an opinion piece, why don't we talk to the publisher about this?" And Carrick said, "That's a good idea." And David, too. So I went to the publisher, and I think Carrick was there and maybe David, and James O. Powell was there. It was a legitimate question, I think. But the thing I remember most of all in those exchanges was James O. Powell. I think Mr. Patterson asked Jim Powell what he thought about it. He said, "If you're going to have an opinion writer, let him state his opinion. If you don't like it, you fire him." [Laughter]

JW: I was so relieved that Jim Powell came forth with that comment. That totally affirmed what I think Hugh Patterson felt. After that, there was no discussion about that issue at all. I've got to say, I never came to work any morning at the *Gazette* without really having a sense of awe, really, about the privilege I had. I was so proud to be associated with the *Gazette*.

DLS: Because of the paper, the tradition, or both?

JW: Because of the paper's tradition, its reputation, you know. The oldest paper west of the Mississippi and Pulitzer Prize winning—how it stood, its integrity, the way it was viewed across the state and across the region, and indeed, in the nation. And I was just tremendously proud. I know that it's probably not very becoming

in a religion editor to have pride. [Laughter] But I was. And, therefore, I felt a real sense of responsibility in writing opinion pieces. Really, what I wrote did turn out to be quite highly, I guess, controversial is one word, because we had a whole lot of letters to the editor about things that appeared on the religion page.

DLS: Like what sorts of stories led to those?

JW: Well, okay. For example, if I would write about my opinion on the death penalty, I was very opposed to the death penalty. I'd get all kinds of response from very conservative Christians, you know, who were opposed [to my column], and said, "This is not biblical," that "your religion editor isn't what he should be." [Laughs] My point of view—those responses I kept—somewhere I've got a file, I think, of a lot of the "agin" letters. [Laughs] It's really quite a large file. But I never felt personally bad about those responses. I thought, "This is really a function a secular newspaper should have in American society, that it's a forum for exchange of opinion." When I state my opinion very honestly, that provokes a response, and it helps produce a dialogue that, I think, is very important in this country. And so, consequently, my bottom line at this moment in all of that is that I felt a real sense of privilege and responsibility, and I must say, inadequacy, in being entrusted with that responsibility.

DLS: Why do you think they okayed the position? Do you think that they thought there was something lacking, or do you think they would have done it had you not approached them?

JW: Well, I think there was an awareness—and this is a point I made when

interviewed for this job—[I pointed] out to them the place religion plays in Arkansas society and in the South and, really, in the nation. For example, I remember talking about that there are more people in attendance at worship services than there are in all the sporting events.

DLS: Yes.

JW: And look at our sporting section, how we have it so well staffed. The *Gazette* doesn't have anybody on a full-time basis dealing with religion, and I said, "In this society . . ." Well, just look at politics, for example. There are moral dimensions and ethical dimensions to politics and business, and you don't have anybody whose beat it is to cover those areas from an ethical or moral or religious perspective.

DLS: Yes.

JW: And all of the people who are involved, or a great percentage of the people who are involved, in each of those dimensions of collective life, they are people who have lives other than just their business. They are in churches or synagogues, mosques, the Muslim houses of worship, and to me it would be a real asset to the *Gazette* if it would recognize this by naming a full-time staff person. So I think that's the reason they did accept the idea at that point.

DLS: What was your routine? You prepared the paper for Saturday. What was your weekly routine?

JW: Okay, my weekly routine. I tried to monitor everything that was happening in the denominations. Possibly I unfairly looked first at the major denominations. You

know, the ones who have the larger numbers in the state: the Southern Baptists, the Methodists, the Episcopalians, Presbyterians. But I kind of went out of the way to say, you know, there are other groups out there who maybe don't have the numbers or the visibility, but they had very legitimate things going on from the standpoint of news that needed to be attended to. So I would review what was going on across the entire religion landscape. I had good contacts. I established and tried to maintain contact with the denominational headquarters and with individual pastors.

DLS: Phone calls.

JW: Phone calls. Absolutely. And then [I] got their mailings and their publications, so I would track what was going on and if—a normal week would be that there was really a whole lot of stuff going on for one reporter to cover. And so I would go to denominational meetings, I'd go to lectureships, and then I would make a news judgment. I'd say, "What here is really newsworthy from a secular newspaper's point of view?" And it might be a lecture by an eminent professor from the Northeast who spoke at an ecumenical lecture series and those types of events. Or we had the annual meetings or quarterly meetings of the denominations in some instances. Or we had unusual events. I would look at these as either hard news stories or as a feature story possibility. I arranged interviews with a whole lot of people all the way from Billy Graham and Mother Teresa to Jesse Jackson and Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell and many others.

DLS: That was when Pat Robertson ran for president, right?

JW: Yes. Right. I once covered a speech by a gentleman who was very critical of Jerry Falwell. In a few weeks I had a call from one of Jerry Falwell's lawyers who wanted to know if I could verify—if I stood by my story. So I met with [laughs] first my editor, and then—I'm not sure if he went to Mr. Patterson or had one of the lawyers—but I said, "Here are my notes and this is what the gentleman said." And he said, "Will you stand by it?" I said "Yes," and we informed Jerry Falwell's lawyer that, yes, we stood by our story, and we never heard anything more about it. [Laughter] So, as far as the question, Donna, about my average weekly routine, we had a continuing column, titled "Events in Religion". I would take the mailings from local churches, and if there was something there that was a little bit out of the ordinary or newsworthy, we would mention that, or churches would mail notices to us and say, "Could you put this in the newspaper under events?" So we had [laughs] a whole lot of interesting little episodes. Some, I suppose, would be of interest in an oral history about the kind of telephone calls I would get. But, to me, these reflected activities going on in Arkansas communities that a lot of the—what I think secular news men and women would say, "Hey, you know, is this really news?" But it's what goes on in society, and it's important to people and to congregations and little churches and so, therefore, it is news. So all the way from the single church one-day events to big, maybe statewide denominational events. Elie Wiesel is another [I] interviewed and . . .

DLS: Spell the name.

JW: E-L-I-E W-I-E-S-E-L. A great Jewish author—Holocaust writer.

DLS: How about Mother Teresa?

JW: Yes, that was just as interesting. [Laughs]

DLS: I don't remember that one.

JW: Okay. Mother Teresa came to Little Rock, and it was very much hullabalooed: a whole lot of press attention, TV attention, and everything. I covered about two events where she spoke, and then I had an interview with her—not a one-on-one interview, there were other media present, it was a press conference, rather. And at this press conference, the media, in my opinion, weren't asking the hard questions.

DLS: Yes.

JW: They were asking the obvious questions—they were more a part of the, oh, kind of the adoring public, and so I asked her some tough questions.

DLS: Like what?

JW: Like, for example, I asked her, I said, "What about—you're very outspoken on the abortion issue, of course, as we would expect you to be, but what . . ."

[End of Tape One, Side One]

[Beginning of Tape One, Side Two]

JW: "What do you say to people who have a contrary opinion to yours, but who also base that opinion on a religious perspective?" And she said, "Well, I say they are murderers."

DLS: Oh!

JW: And so she came back very hard. And I wrote an opinion column about this, and

[laughs] I remember at that time, my section editor, David Petty in the Omnibus section, came to me and he says, "Huh! Well, Workman, I see you're the only journalist in Arkansas who dumped on Mother Teresa." [Laughter] But also, I remember . . . one of the questions I always held in the back of my mind in interviewing these noted people, Billy Graham, Robert Schuller and others—I remember asking Billy Graham [when] he came to Little Rock and had the Billy Graham Crusade in the stadium, War Memorial Stadium, and several nights going there, I believe it was, right before my retirement I was living in Conway, I know, at the time, and commuting daily to Little Rock, and so I'd go back and cover the Crusade there in the stadium. And one of those evenings there was a press conference Dr. Graham had, and I was there with a number of other media folk, and they were asking, again, the easy questions because—one of my criticisms of a lot of secular reporters is when they get in the presence of religious people, they just ask the easy questions. So I came at him with a bunch of tough questions, and Dr. Graham—very interesting to me, and I wish I could remember the specific question, but I can't at this point. You know, I was asking, "Well, what about the other point of view?" And another reporter, I thought very interestingly, kind of challenged my question, and Dr. Graham came back in defense and said, "No, you let Mr. Workman ask this question." [Laughter]

DLS: Do you remember where the reporter was from?

JW: He was from a television station, and I don't really—I wish I could remember, but—kind of on the same line—I had gone up to the Camelot Inn to interview

Jesse Jackson at a certain time. I had an appointment, I think, at 2:00 in the afternoon, or some similar afternoon time. I got up there, and he was not available, and I had to wait about thirty or forty minutes. He was supposed to be on Channel 11 at a certain time, and there were just about fifteen minutes until that time. He came in very apologetic. He said, "Mr. Workman, will you ride in the car with me? I said, "That would be fine." We got to Channel 11, and I continued asking questions that he really wanted to respond to because they were questions dealing with stuff on his agenda, and people from Channel 11 were coming in and getting real nervous, and about the third time they came in, he said, "You wait just a minute. This gentleman has been waiting on me. He waited forty-five minutes." He says, "I want to answer—he's asking good questions, and I want to answer his questions." [Laughter] So I had quite a few interesting experiences with folk like that. Let's see, as far as—is there another direction you want us to go there, Donna?

DLS: Well, we can always come back to this, but where was your office?

JW: Yes, okay. Physically in the *Gazette* building. I worked for a time—I started in the features section, and then some of us moved over to the main newsroom, so I had the benefit of being in the Omnibus section there. There were about—in that physical setting, I guess, there are probably about ten, twelve, maybe fourteen different reporters sitting around in the Omnibus section. We had little desks at which there were—no, we shared computers at that time [laughs], and it was quite interesting because it was always quite a contest as to who would get a terminal.

And I eventually got a cubicle all my own and I felt like I'd finally made it!

DLS: Which was on the second floor?

JW: Yes, still in the feature section, I had the business writers right next to me. Let's see, I remember Bill Lewis, the book review writer and travel writer, and Leroy Donald was right next to me.

DLS: Business writer.

JW: Yes, David Palmer, also a business writer. Anyway, I felt I had really died and gone to heaven, so to speak, when I got a cubicle because I had my own computer terminal. I thoroughly enjoyed being in that kind of setting. When I was editor for six years of the *Methodist*, I had an office all to my own and could close the door if I wanted to. Then, when I went to the *Gazette*, it really kind of frightened me, I said, "Can I really work and be creative in this kind of an atmosphere where you've got people all around, all the time, talking . . . "

DLS: Telephones.

JW: ". . . and telephones, and everybody's got something going, and you're hearing the other person's telephone conversation and all this? How in the world do these people turn out their work?" And, pretty soon, I got into it okay, and I could handle that all right. But so many wonderful and marvelous associations that . . .

DLS: Well, mention some—names, stories . . .

JW: Okay. All right. [Laughs]

DLS: That's what we want.

JW: One episode I really got a kick out of, and—anyone who's ever been in a

newsroom and—you know that the language—you've got a lot of Old Testament words being thrown around. [Laughter] I remember when one morning Richard Allin came in and Ralph Patterson at the same time—Ralph Patterson of the—Mr. Patterson family. [Laughs] They both came in and spied an empty terminal at the same time, and they both, Ralph and Richard, ran to that terminal, and Richard tried to work his way into the chair first, with Ralph . . . jerking the chair away from him. And all these four-letter words were being thrown around. [Laughter] And Richard said, "I got here first." And Ralph said, "No, I got here first." And Richard said, "I got here first." And Ralph stepped back, and he said, "Well, let's just go ask Daddy." [Laughter]

DLS: That's a great story.

JW: And then Richard had the perfect comeback for that. He said, "Well, you're just damned lucky I'm through." [Laughter] Let's see, at one point there—let's see, Richard Allin was in one of those bay windows over there, and Charlie Allbright was, I think, in another one there. Paul Johnson . . .

DLS: Television guy.

JW: Yes, right. And Paul, he could swear more beautifully and creatively than any human being I think I've ever known. [Laughter] And a funny thing about that—Paul's swearing—there's some swearing that really is offensive to me, but Paul was so creative. It was just a beautiful act to listen to him swear because he could do it so marvelously. [Laughter]. Oh, let's see, who was the marvelous writer? Oh, Debbie Mathis.

DLS: Deborah Mathis.

JW: Deborah Mathis was also very creative in her language. [Laughter]

DLS: I remember that. I remember that.

JW: And, of course, I think when I first went there, people kind of subdued their language a little bit. Here I had come as a clergyperson, and I remember I had been there, oh, several months, and Ralph Patterson uttered what I thought was one of the highest compliments I'd had so far. He said, "Well, if this newspaper has to have a [blankety-blank-blank] religion editor, I guess we're just lucky it's John Workman." [Laughter]

DLS: Now, at that time, Ralph was . . .

JW: He was probably movie reviewer.

DLS: Okay. And was he working full time?

JW: Working full time. Yes, he was full time. Yes. Well, let's see, Larry Obsitnik, I remember.

DLS: Chief.

JW: Old Chief.

DLS: What's that, O-B . . .

JW: O-B-S-I-T-N-I-K. Larry. A photographer. Larry was nominated, I think, for a Pulitzer for his shot of the Central High School crisis when the trucks were coming across the bridge carrying the troops—the Main Street bridge—and he had a picture there that showed a billboard sign in the back. I think the wording on the billboard sign—it's a famous picture and it would be in the archives—but it

was, "Who will build Arkansas if her people don't?" or something like that.

DLS: I remember seeing it.

JW: It was kind of a Chamber of Commerce type promotion of Arkansas. But [laughs] I remember when I had been there just a couple of weeks, Larry Obsitnik came and said, "You're doing a good job, Workman. You're doing a good job." Well, I had been there, as I said, just a few weeks. And as the years wore on, every time anybody would come by Larry, I'd hear him and say, "You're doing a good job. You're doing a good job." Or maybe they had been there ten years, and Larry'd go by—or twenty years—and say, "You're doing a good job. You're doing a good job." [Laughter] And here I thought that was just for me. [Laughter] But just kind of an aside a minute, I had written a column about some issue or illness, or something. Larry was surprised me one day. He came by and showed me his wallet. It had a little laminated piece—torn out of my column and had it laminated—where I said, "The worst things that we fear will happen to us never happen." And Larry later, or about this time, was going through an illness. It proved to be his terminal illness. But he said, "I just keep that in front of me."

DLS: Quite a compliment.

JW: Yes, I took it as that. Yes. Speaking about little episodes, I remember Jerry—do you remember Jerry Jones?

DLS: Oh, yes.

JW: Okay. This will be an indication of some of the variety of types of things I wrote for the *Gazette*, which [were] not really in the religion dimension. I, at that time,

was doing a lot of bicycle touring and bicycle riding, and I would carry along a camera and do a feature story on bicycle touring. And then I did some feature stories on car trips—one was about when we took our youngest son up to college, up in the East, and about camping on the way. Then on another occasion, I did a travel-type story about a camp trip our family took to Colorado, I believe it was. I had a little sidebar in it called "Tightwad Travel Tips," on how you could take a trip and spend just a little bit of money. I said, "At last I totaled up how much the trip had cost us," and said, "but my books showed I was a dime short!"

Somewhere I mentioned in the story that I was ten cents short. So, the day after the story ran, I went over to where we picked up our mail and there was a little yellow Post-It note there. Somebody had taken a dime and Scotch taped it to a yellow Post-It note with a note that said—in fact, I think I've got it hanging on the wall in here—It said, "Workman, is this it?" And it was Jerry Jones. He said he had found my dime. [Laughter]

DLS: Now you worked pretty well 8 to 5?

JW: Yes.

DLS: So you were there with—you missed out on some of the night time.

JW: That's right, I missed some. However . . .

DLS: You probably worked some.

JW: Yes, I did. I worked some nights and would come in on deadline after covering a lecture or an event. I remember one occasion I went to a most obscure lecture. I came out of there not knowing what in the world had gone on, and what the

fellow was talking about, and I had to get a twenty- or thirty-inch story in on that.

DLS: Oh.

JW: And I think I wrote about everything except religion. [Laughs] Which reminds me of a story about Bill Lewis.

DLS: L-E-W-I-S?

JW: Yes, L-E-W-I-S. Right. Somewhere along in the memorabilia that people had was a story that actually got published in the newspaper about when Bill Lewis went to hear a noted wine expert [laughs]—You may have seen this, Donna—over at one of the hotels nearby, and progressively in his lecture he talked about the fine wines of California and all of this, and [after] that part of the presentation . . . [the] people present were invited to do the wine tasting around. And so Bill, as he wrote his story, began to misspell words along the way [laughs], and he got progressively worse [laughs]. They—in fact, you ought to get this story.

Whoever interviews Bill Lewis for this, get him to tell that experience because the *Gazette* actually printed the story, and then they had a big backlash from the guy [laughs], from the organization that brought him here. [Laughs] But if that story could be found for a visual history, it would be great.

DLS: Yes.

JW: And it's really a great story for an oral history, too.

DLS: Yes.

JW: But one impression I had—and I had occasion to go numerous times and talk to various church organization groups about my work as a religion journalist—and,

by the way, people said, "Oh, you're the religious editor of the *Gazette*." And I said, "Well, sometimes I am [laughs] and sometimes I'm not." But one of the things I always tried to do in those presentations was to give kind of a "defense" of newspaper people because out in the so-called religious community, you know, the hard-nosed news people didn't have a very good reputation. But I, having been in it for twelve years, I could say, you know, there are probably as many people in newspapers that have church-related lives as in the whole community at large. And, really, along that same line, I found that one of the problems for the newspaper is dealing over the phone with religious people, with pastors, because some of the toughest experiences [laughs] at the newspaper were what reporters had with pastors.

DLS: Yes.

JW: I mean, some pastors could be very "un-Christian," and I would tell this to pastors' groups when I talked with them. I think pastors were a little bit defensive when they got on the phone with a reporter. They thought they had to kind of respond in kind to their image of a hard-nosed newspaper man, you know?

DLS: Yes.

JW: And they had to be kind of hard and coarse and tough. I said, "It really doesn't do them any favor—it doesn't do their profession any favor or their calling any favor—to come on that way."

DLS: Yes.

JW: I could name some names, which I will not do for our protection. [Laughter]

DLS: Of the guilty.

JW: Of the guilty, yes. [Laughter] But what's gone before this—this is some kind of very random recollections of things. But my own bottom-line experience, I had twenty years in pastoral ministry and nineteen years and a couple of weeks in religion journalism, and I think it was just—I thoroughly enjoyed every bit of it. There were aspects of—I often thought if the Apostle Paul had to do it over again, he might have chosen journalism for a career.

DLS: Oh?

JW: Yes. You can speak on religious dimensions of issues that a newspaper, by its nature, a secular newspaper, would not do. It was a very, very big plus in my life. And, by the way, one reason I had to retire early is that I had a very tough bout with cancer.

DLS: And that would be what year?

JW: That would have been—let's see. I was diagnosed in 1986, and I had surgery in 1987—a major abdominal tumor. I was out away from work . . . let's see, I must have been out of work three or four months, and the *Gazette* was very helpful and very patient, you know, and we had people substituting for me there. But when I came back, I had such a tremendous sense of support and help from folks.

DLS: From those hard-nosed news people.

JW: Yes, from those hard-nosed news people, right. Yes.

DLS: With hearts of gold.

JW: Absolutely.

DLS: Like who?

JW: Well, I remember Pat Patterson. P-A-T-T—Patt.

JW: And Patt Clark.

DLS: Patt Clark.

JW: Patt Clark, the artist. Yes. C-L-A-R-K. P-A-T-T. Yes, P-A-T-T. Patt Clark, but Pat Patterson, the photographer, would be in this same observation also. Patt would come in and go down and get me some yogurt, about the only thing I could eat. I remember driving from Conway to Little Rock at times where I had to stop and be sick alongside the road. I was taking chemotherapy at that time, for over a year, monthly sessions of four days of chemotherapy. I'd lose eleven pounds over four days every month, and gain it back before the next four-week time. But there was such support and love shown that it impressed me tremendously.

DLS: Yes. What do you remember about the sale to Gannett? Now, were you . . .

JW: Yes, I was there. Right. I remember two or three occasions where we had the big conferences in the main newsroom where we came—we were introduced to the Gannett people and all.

DLS: Yes.

JW: I remember meeting on—by my request after Gannett had—and, I'm sorry, I don't remember the names of our first couple of editors we had with Gannett.

DLS: Walker Lundy.

JW: Yes, Walker Lundy was one. But before him was Bill . . .

DLS: Moyer?

JW: Yes, Bill—it wasn't Moyer. Or was it?

DLS: No, Keith Moyer. Bill—I know—I can see him.

JW: Right. I had real concerns and reservations at the time, and I can't be specific about what policy changes I reacted to. There were some very definite style changes and even position changes that—I requested an appointment with one of the new editors and went in and expressed my concern about that direction, or so forth.

DLS: Yes.

JW: I had a good hearing, a patient hearing, but nothing came of it. [Laughs]

DLS: Very pleasant ending.

JW: Pleasantly. Yes, right. Yes, right. So it was a tough time.

DLS: Did you feel, as many of us did, that they were ruining what had been a wonderful . . .

JW: Arkansas tradition? Absolutely. Yes. And it was from that standpoint that I talked with them.

DLS: What about their attitude? Do you remember the attitude of the outsiders coming in?

JW: Yes. . . . I found that that attitude evidenced no awareness of this kind of tradition that I was concerned we were losing.

DLS: Yes.

JW: Again, I can't—some of it had to do with the play of news and . . .

DLS: Do you remember some specific examples?

JW: Yes, there was something that happened. What was it? At Eureka Springs, where kind of the sensationalized approach rather than a hard news, objective approach—we had a picture on the front page of some outlandish event at Eureka Springs, and I'm sorry, I can't recall it.

DLS: The one I remember is the spandexed cheerleaders for UALR [University of Arkansas, Little Rock].

JW: Yes.

DLS: On the front page. [Laughs]

JW: I'll tell you one specifically that I got concerned about. One day I had a call as religion editor from a paper in California that wanted to know about this man from Arkansas who was predicting the end of the world . . .

DLS: I remember that.

JW: . . . coming. [Laughs] Yes, okay. Well, I got on it and went to talk to my editor about it and then went to talk to, I think, the news editor, and maybe into the budget meeting about how here's a guy from Little Rock who's getting a lot of press out on the West Coast, and people were selling their real estate and their homes and businesses, and going to get ready for the end of the world. And he was broadcasting over about ninety radio stations nationwide. So I did, and they said, "Yes, do a story on it." And suddenly it began to get a big reaction across the nation, not from my story, but from just other stories. The *Arkansas Democrat* was not doing anything on the story. I think it may have been Walker Lundy. Who followed him? Do you know . . .

DLS: Wasn't that Moyer? Keith Moyer?

JW: Yes. I don't really remember. I thought Lundy followed Moyer or Keith.

DLS: I think Keith—I think Moyer was there at the end.

JW: Yes.

DLS: Because Lundy went to St. Paul.

JW: Whichever editor it was, and I'm sorry, I don't—or publisher—I don't remember.

But he wanted to push that story because it was sensational, and I went to him and said, "Look, we've done three stories on it, and I think it's going to be overkill if we keep at this because this really is a marginal story as far as, you know, legitimate religion is concerned. And if we continue to kind of sensationalize it, it'll backfire on us."

DLS: Yes.

JW: And, in fact, it did, to the extent that John Robert Starr wrote a column in which he referred to the once-respected religion editor at the *Arkansas Gazette* [laughs].

DLS: Oh! Starr from the *Arkansas Democrat*.

JW: Yes. John Robert S-T-A-R-R. [Laughs] The infamous John Robert. And so, anyway, that was the type of thing I saw Gannett trying to encourage that I thought was out of character for the *Arkansas Gazette* and it was not complimentary to us. So it really tugged at me to be told to do another story on it and everything. And, over my objections, I'd do that. So that was a very unpleasant series for me.

DLS: Back to the *Democrat* a little bit. Did you have a counterpart at the *Democrat* at

that time?

JW: Yes, I did. A very fine woman who had been there a number of years. Oh, goodness, she was a member of Pulaski Heights United Methodist Church—another United Methodist. Her name is Juanita Taylor.

DLS: I remember her.

JW: It'll come to me in a minute. Yes.

DLS: Did you predate her?

JW: Yes, I think I did.

DLS: Did they name her religion editor after you?

JW: That's right. That's my understanding of it. Yes, right.

DLS: Now, did you two compete? Tell me . . .

JW: We were friendly competitors, and we collaborated a lot, too, on various things. So we had a good relationship there in contact. Let's see. When I came to the *Gazette*, by the way, Martha Douglas, Bob Douglas's wife, was the religion editor, and she was doing the church pages, and she was not a full-time religion editor.

DLS: She did the church.

JW: Yes, she did the church pages among other duties.

DLS: Part of the feature section.

JW: Right. Yes.

DLS: Now, you retired in 1989?

JW: Yes.

DLS: So that was in the middle of Gannett's hold.

JW: Yes. Right.

DLS: I realize that you had some physical problems. Did some of the disappointment—
was that part of your . . .

JW: Oh, yes, it is, indeed. In fact, do you remember the *Arkansas Business* issue
[about] when the *Gazette* was not allowed to do a final edition?

DLS: Oh, yes.

JW: They invited several writers to comment in the *Arkansas Business*. I think it was
Arkansas Business . . .

DLS: Yes, I think so.

JW: . . . ran an issue. I've got it here somewhere. But I wrote a little piece in that
about, you know, the feeling kind of like a funeral.

DLS: Yes.

JW: So, yes, it was—and I remember going to that candlelight vigil that was held
down at the *Gazette* building.

DLS: That night [the paper closed].

JW: Yes, right.

DLS: Even though you had already been retired?

JW: Yes, that was during the two years that I came back and was writing from home, I
think.

DLS: So you didn't have an office down there anymore?

JW: No. You know, I'm wrong. I did have an office there because I remember . . .

DLS: So you did occasionally come by?

JW: Oh, yes, I did. Because I remember trying to get things out of my office and being among those who were not allowed to go up and get things from the office because the locks had been changed and all that and, I'm sure, for some kind of legal reasons.

DLS: Yes. We will talk some more about that. Actually, it's nearly finished, so let's just let that run out, and we'll pick up there.

JW: Yes, okay.

DLS: But these are the kind of . . .

JW: Yes, okay. I wish my memory was more sharp on—is this still going, or . . .

[End of Tape One, Side Two]

[Beginning of Tape Two, Side One]

DLS: This is the second tape from the interview with John Workman.

JW: Yes.

DLS: Okay, John. You had retired from full-time work by 1991?

JW: Yes.

DLS: Do you remember your first inkling that the *Gazette* was going to be sold or closed in the fall of 1991?

JW: I remember, I guess, being in the newsroom. I remember Max Brantley and John Brummett and all the conversation that was going on in the newsroom. It just didn't seem to me it was going to happen. I felt there was going to be something at the last minute that would come and deliver the *Gazette*, and I still have a T-

shirt with the words, "Save the *Gazette*" on it.

DLS: I've got one, too.

JW: A red T-shirt with the building there. I remember the role that Max Brantley played in being very vocal and very instrumental—very significant, I think, to see the efforts that were attempted to try to revive interest and try to revive some kind of business response among the community, but those things just probably were unrealistic to expect them to materialize.

DLS: Do you think that—the thing that I remember was that we didn't know for so long, until it was almost a done deal. Did you feel like if we had known, something could have saved it?

JW: Yes, I felt that it really came as a real sudden shock to realize that it was, in fact, probably a done deal and that it was beyond stopping at that point, and had we known really, that perhaps something could have been done.

DLS: I have enough blame to go around for everybody.

JW: Yes.

DLS: Who did you blame? Did you blame Gannett? The *Democrat*? I mean, what were your emotions?

JW: I am not sure I was able to focus blame on any particular segment. I think I just probably saw that this was one of those almost inevitable things, given the realities of the finances, the deep pockets that the *Democrat* obviously had developed over the years, and that we had pretty much expended, I guess, the Patterson family. And so I guess I blamed fate more than anything else.

DLS: Do you remember your emotions as far as when you realized it was going to happen?

JW: Oh, yes.

DLS: What did you feel?

JW: Well, very much like a death in the family because you think of all of the folk here that had been very close friends and companions and workmates for the dozen years that I was honored to be a part of the *Arkansas Gazette* newspaper and to realize how much it meant to me, how much more it must have meant to those who had been there so many decades and so much longer, and whose very life and soul had been part of that. And then I felt a great loss for the state.

DLS: Yes.

JW: And I felt that something really irreplaceable had gone. Like the great oak in the forest that fell, you know. How can you replace that? I still feel that loss today at the *Gazette*. It was almost a sense of shock. Just kind of a deep, emotional, physical shock and just couldn't believe it was happening or had happened, and that we would never see the likes of it again. And I realized that we were in a time of transition where across the country the newspapers, old, established institutions, were going by the way, and it was a real sense of loss.

DLS: Yes. Were you there the last day?

JW: Yes.

DLS: See if you can recall the events of that week.

JW: Yes, right. I'm probably not going to be able to recall as much as I should

because I was still in a lot of throes of reactions to illness, and so I don't really recall a lot, even about my own illness that people help me recall, and so I'm not going to be much help there, Donna. But I can remember instances, and I don't even know names, of when I left on that day, of seeing anger and seeing sorrow, emotion, and not really fully understanding some things I even saw about—there was a little bit of a scuffle on the outside of the alley way entrance that I would always go out to the parking lot.

DLS: Yes.

JW: And I, to this day, don't know what that was about.

DLS: Yes. Emotions were high.

JW: Yes. Very definitely so.

DLS: Tell me about being locked out of your office.

JW: Well, I just went back in . . .

DLS: The next week or next day?

JW: The next week or something, and was not allowed to enter the building.

DLS: Even for your personal things?

JW: Yes, right.

DLS: Were there security guards?

JW: Yes, there were security guards there. Yes. I had to wait for a certain time. I don't remember. I was able to go back later.

DLS: But you did get your personal . . .

JW: Yes, I did get my things. Yes.

DLS: Tell me about the candlelight vigil that night.

JW: Well, I remember standing across the street there from the main entrance on . . .

DLS: Third Street?

JW: . . . Third Street. Right. Seeing all the *Gazette* associates and hearing—I remember, I believe Bertram Stanley—didn't she—oh, what's her first name?

DLS: Audrey.

JW: Audrey Bertram Stanley was one of the speakers. And I remember several—let's see, was it John Brummett who spoke? And did Jim Powell speak at that time, or not?

DLS: I can't remember.

JW: I can't remember specific individuals. But I think George Fisher spoke, as I recall. But I remember it being a very moving time.

DLS: And was that it? Did you—what did you do the next Monday morning when it came time to go to work?

JW: Just stayed at home, I guess. [Laughs] Yes.

DLS: And so how did you get associated with the *Democrat-Gazette*?

JW: I knew that several writers had gone there.

DLS: Was this immediately?

JW: Yes. No, this was a little bit afterwards. Yes. I imagine several months intervened. And I asked them. I initiated that contact. And felt real bad about doing it.

DLS: Why?

JW: Because here I was kind of—I felt a little bit disloyal, quite frankly.

DLS: Did you?

JW: I really did. Yes, I felt disloyal because this had been "the enemy" all along, and I felt like I was kind of turning my back on a heritage to go over there.

DLS: Yes.

JW: But I didn't have an office there. I did all my writing at home, and I guess I was only in the building about three times during the year, so I didn't have . .

. [Laughs]

DLS: Now, was Juanita Taylor still the religion editor?

JW: Yes, she was at that. Right.

DLS: So you were strictly a columnist?

JW: Right. Yes. Yes, just a columnist.

DLS: What was their reaction when you approached them?

JW: I think they had to think about it a bit, and then I heard back from them. I don't remember the length of time that they would want to consider that.

DLS: Now, several people also went over from the *Gazette*.

JW: Yes, right.

DLS: Do you remember some names?

JW: Yes. Well, Richard Allin did, and Charles Allbright, and Ed Gray. Did Jerry Jones go over there?

DLS: He did. I don't remember if it was immediately. I think he's over there.

JW: Yes. And, let's see, there were others.

DLS: Was there sort of a group in exile? Did you all . . .

JW: Well, I had no office in there. Not being around there, you know, since I wrote from home and sent my stuff over the wire, I just didn't have a chance to have much contact.

DLS: Now, by this time, your cancer was in remission?

JW: Yes, right.

DLS: So tell me physically how you recovered?

JW: Well, I recovered very well and got back to doing bicycle stuff and was quite active in everything.

DLS: Why did you stop your column at the *Democrat-Gazette*?

JW: Well, at that time, because I was—I really wanted to fully retire.

DLS: Yes.

JW: Yes. And meeting the deadlines weekly was more than I wanted to do. It was getting to be a real chore, you know.

DLS: Yes. So, since you've retired, tell me what you've . . .

JW: Okay, yes. Since retirement, I'm trying to keep my storeroom straight. [Laughter]

DLS: In Conway.

JW: Yes, in Conway. And I continue to—I do some woodwork, and I work in the yard. We have a cabin up at Magazine Mountain that I work on occasionally, and we are up there from time to time. We don't get as much time there as we did when the kids were home.

DLS: Yes.

JW: We have four children and seven grandchildren.

DLS: Go ahead and tell their names.

JW: Okay. My wife, Liz, right. Liz—when we were in Little Rock, she was a special ed teacher and taught at Fair Park School and junior high school in special education.

DLS: When did the family move to Conway from Little Rock?

JW: We moved to Conway in 1985, I believe—1985.

DLS: While you were at the *Gazette*?

JW: Right, while we were at the *Gazette*, right. My father had died the year before, and my mother was living here alone, and we invited her to come live with us in Little Rock, but she had so much invested emotionally in the house here and in the community, so we sold our house there and bought their home. And, let's see, since retirement—is that where we were?

DLS: The children.

JW: Oh, excuse me, yes. The children and grandchildren. Yes. My wife, Liz, the former Ruth Elizabeth Teague, T-E-A-G-U-E, from Pine Bluff. Her father was also a Methodist minister.

DLS: Oh.

JW: We have four children. The oldest is John, Jr. He lives in New Jersey, and they have two children, he and his wife.

DLS: He does what?

JW: He's a business consultant. He went to graduate school, as we say, about a

hundred years, and he got a Ph.D. from Yale University in Renaissance History, and then immediately went into public relations work.

DLS: Oh.

JW: He worked for CBS for a while in New York City, and then for a business consulting firm there, and then established his own business consulting firm, Hudson Strategies, in Ridgewood, New Jersey, and so that's his work. They have two children, ages thirteen and nine. And then our second-in-age son is Steve, in Sapulpa, Oklahoma. Steve is a public school band director, a high school band director and music director at Sapulpa, Oklahoma. His wife is a public school administrator there in the Union District, near Tulsa. They have two children, our grandchildren, John Thomas, who's in the Army. He's 82nd Airborne, jumping out of airplanes for a living.

DLS: All right!

JW: And our granddaughter, Jenny, is a sophomore at OSU [Oklahoma State University] in Stillwater, Oklahoma. And then our third in age is daughter Suzie, and she and her husband live in New Mexico. Suzie Jones. She works for an Arkansas firm but works over the modem, the Internet, and lives in New Mexico on their sprawling, fifteen-acre ranch, and she raises horses, and they have all kinds of critters and pets. And her husband teaches at a high school nearby. They live in really kind of a ranching area -- about two hundred people in the little community—and very beautiful up in northeastern New Mexico, a little town called Miami. And then our youngest son, Charles, and his wife, Alex, live in

London, England, and have three children. He's an operatic tenor, singing. We heard him at Christmas time singing in Paris.

DLS: Oh.

JW: We were there with them in London. And he sings all over Europe and South America. He's been there and sung at the Met [Metropolitan Opera]. We had fifteen of our family members [there] when he had his debut at the Met.

DLS: Oh, how wonderful.

JW: Yes, it's real fine. And so we're proud of each of them. And then I have enjoyed retirement here. I ride my bicycle and ride my motorcycle. I've made two motorcycle trips out to see a brother in Idaho and back.

DLS: What kind of motorcycle do you have?

JW: It's a relatively small—I call it a geriatric motorcycle. It's a sixteen-year-old Suzuki, two-cylinder, four-hundred-fifty cc. I have a brother who's a retired lawyer down in Houston, Texas, and he's also a motorcyclist. He and I have ridden back and forth together to Idaho to see a brother out there, an older brother.

DLS: Now, does Liz ride with you?

JW: Well, she does, but not really. She doesn't enjoy it. [Laughs] Liz is a very active tennis player, and so that's her hobby, and mine is this other stuff.

DLS: Oh. What impact do you think—I guess the *Gazette* had, first, and then the death of the *Gazette*, on our state?

JW: Yes. Some of it's measurable, and I'm afraid a lot of it is not measurable. I think

the *Gazette's* impact across the state, I think, is so well spoken of and accurately so, and documented, a tremendous impact. I think, for example, of my grandfather, who was also a Methodist minister, James Mims Workman. He wanted to always get his Methodist church appointment on the railroad line, so he could get the *Arkansas Gazette*. [Laughter]

DLS: Now, this was about when?

JW: This was back in the late 1800s, and all.

DLS: Wow.

JW: Yes. And its death, Donna, the death of the *Arkansas Gazette* had a tremendous impact not only on those who were present at the bedside, so to speak, but throughout the state—on institutions, on government . . .

DLS: Yes.

JW: . . . on the business community. I think it's—I think there are some ways that that is measurable in some kind of hard statistics and, yet, I think, significant are the ways it's not measurable. The *Gazette's* editorial stance of being progressive and being liberal and the finest meanings of that term and tradition. I think of people like James Powell and our business writer, Leland Duvall, and of Jerry Dhonau, the editorial writers, and I know I'm leaving out names that shouldn't be left out.

DLS: You can add those to the transcript.

JW: Right. Okay. Right. But they're—of course, the Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial director, whose name I should call, but I don't right now—the one that—

DLS: Ashmore.

JW: Yes. Harry Ashmore.

DLS: Now, was he still there?

JW: No, he was not there when I was. He had left when I came. Right. And Roy Reed, of course, his contribution. Oh, we have so many writers. The government beats. The state government beat reporters and writers were so good at their work and so deeply rooted in that and could assess issues in such a fine way. It's a quality of writing, quality of journalism, and integrity—journalistic integrity—[these] are the types of things that were missed. Not to say that those same elements were not present in the *Arkansas Democrat*. They were. But there was, I will say, a qualitative difference in the *Gazette's* reporting that was recognizable.

DLS: What do you think of the success of the *Democrat-Gazette*?

JW: I think, at this point, I'd have to say some positive things. I would also say that there's not the quality on the opinion, op-ed, editorial and opinion pages. I really miss what the *Gazette* had on those pages. We had some of our wire columnists [who] were top quality in representing a point of view that is not being heard today in Arkansas in our newspapers. We had *New York Times* columnists, and we had other syndicated columnists that gave us a local look at a perspective that we're just not getting in the *Democrat-Gazette* today.

DLS: Yes.

JW: And, I think one little window into that is you compare the Voices page, the letters to the editors of the *Democrat-Gazette* today. I'm being very critical here, but I'm being sincere in this observation, that there's just not the quality there that

was in the *Gazette* of old.

DLS: Yes.

JW: And that's—I sometimes feel embarrassed for us when I see the quality of letters that are in the *Democrat-Gazette*.

DLS: Could that be directly related to the fact that there is no more *Gazette*?

JW: I think so.

DLS: Something to talk about, an exchange of ideas.

JW: Yes. Right. Yes. You know, we had people contributing letters to the editor at the *Gazette* that were quality writing on issues that were really significant issues and not just the sensational stuff and the surface things that . . .

DLS: Instead of the comic strip that's been . . .

JW: Yes. Right.

DLS: . . . that's been discontinued. And the crossword puzzle.

JW: Yes. Right. Yes. All the less significant issues, really.

DLS: Looking back over, I guess, your time at the *Gazette* and also before, when you were just a reader, what would you say the strength of the paper was?

JW: Well, I think the strengths of the *Gazette* were in giving a kind of a "newspaper-of-record image," a quality of reporting for Arkansas that—I'm not all that well acquainted with the newspapers across the country, but I think we had a very highly above average—in fact, I know we did—presentation of a "newspaper-of-record"- type of publication.

DLS: For years.

JW: For years. Absolutely. Absolutely. Over generations here for the state. And I think its strength was in its editorial positions, I think, in its op ed pages, and, I think, certainly, in its sports coverage and its feature coverage, and quite naturally, in its religion coverage. [Laughs]

DLS: What about weaknesses?

JW: Well, that's kind of like asking me to criticize my parents. [Laughs]

DLS: That's okay. We've got to be objective. [Laughs]

JW: Yes. Right. Absolutely.

DLS: You can talk about the Gannett years, I think, overall.

JW: Yes. It was very painful to see it deteriorating right before our very eyes.

DLS: Yes.

JW: And to see a lot of tinkering, I'll put it, all the way from saying, "You know, we want just one-sentence paragraphs," and that kind of tinkering that was just—kept the staff and the writers just on edge and nervous. I noticed—I think one thing that's pretty much expressive. During the Gannett years, I was not producing as much copy. A lot of the other writers were not producing as much copy. I know when I first went there, it wasn't unusual that we could write forty-, fifty-, even sixty-inch stories, . . .

DLS: Yes.

JW: . . . in-depth reporting. And that began to be whittled away even toward the last of the pre-Gannett years. And then when the Gannett years started, twenty inches almost was a maximum column.

DLS: Yes. How did you adjust to that?

JW: Well, really, not very well. It cheapened, I think, the content of the paper, in that you were not getting the real in-depth kind of writing that more space required, or that more space made available or made possible.

DLS: Yes.

JW: And it kind of sapped your interest and your desire to produce copy.

DLS: Yes.

JW: I was very conscious, as in those last few years, I didn't produce as much copy—as many feature stories and so forth—and felt really guilty about that. I think that is generally true across—in all the feature writers—that there was just not as much going on, not as much challenge. And it was kind of a little bit of a slow death, in a sense.

DLS: Yes.

JW: It was very painful.

DLS: Yes. You have published several books?

JW: Yes, a couple of books. Two books, which were both collections of columns.

DLS: From the *Gazette*?

JW: Yes, from the *Gazette*. Right.

DLS: And the names were?

JW: *Fireflies in a Fruit Jar*, published by August House in 1987, I believe, and then *Open Windows*, published by August House in 1988. Those were both collections of previously published columns.

DLS: Yes.

JW: And I have one coming out in May of this year from the University of Arkansas Press at Fayetteville, which I am very pleased to be associated with. I hope it won't damage their reputation too much. [Laughs] It's another collection of columns titled *Travels in a Tree House*, and it is columns previously published both in the *Gazette* and in the *Democrat-Gazette*, and then one chapter of previously unpublished essays.

DLS: Now, did you go through and pick out the ones to be included?

JW: Yes, I did all of the editing on that.

DLS: How do you go about choosing?

JW: Yes. Well, I got kind of the concept—developed the concept—the title. Let me start with that and then I'll be brief on this. *Travels in a Tree House*—the introductory column is a column published in the *Gazette* when we dismantled at our family cabin on Magazine Mountain a tree house that I, with our children, had built some thirty years previous, probably. And told about how that is a vacation site, how it was really a tree platform more than a tree house. There on a bench on Magazine Mountain, on a ridge—Barber Ridge—that we could climb up the twenty-five feet into our tree house and see sixty miles in almost three directions of the compass. We could sleep up there. You could sleep as many as five, six, seven, eight people up there.

DLS: Oh.

JW: Anyway. Building the concept around—with travel as a metaphor for life and

selecting the columns into various travel categories. It's kind of hard to explain it a bit.

DLS: That's good. I'll look forward to it. Anything else? Any other stories?

JW: Well, no.

DLS: Or personalities, or conflicts, or . . .

JW: I don't, at the moment, think of any. There'd be a lot of things that I could remember, given a little bit of reflection. I remember when I was writing for the *Gazette* in the years it was there, I lived in West Little Rock, and about a block and a half, no, about a block from where Bob and Martha Douglas lived, so a lot of times I would take Martha to work in my little Volkswagen Beetle. And a lot of times we'd go by and pick up Paul Johnson. We'd ride back and forth.

[Laughs] And I remember one time Paul Johnson—he was riding in the back seat of this VW—he said, "Workman, you need to fix this [blankety-blank] floor in here. There's a hole in this floor back here." I said, "Oh, Paul, you're just joshing me. There's no hole in the floor." So I went home and, sure enough, there was a hole in the floor. [Laughter]

DLS: Oh!

JW: The battery is, in a Volkswagen Bug, positioned underneath the back seat, and the acid had gotten out of there and actually eaten a hole. [Laughs]

DLS: And you had no idea? [Laughs]

JW: I had no idea the hole was in the floor. [Laughs] And I remember on some days when the weather would be real slick, in the winter months when we'd get ice,

Martha would be so—she would ride with her hands on the dashboard, afraid we were going to slip off the side of the—[laughs] and Paul lived in a section out there in—oh, I can't think of the addition name now—but, anyway, we had to go up some really slick hills. And it was a tough job for Martha. [Laughs] And also from off of Markham Street, where Bob and Martha Douglas lived, there was a real steep climb up to their house. And so Martha chose a lot of times to try to walk up there rather than to ride up there with me.

DLS: But just a very collegial place to work?

JW: Oh, yes. Definitely so. And I have— I'm a proud owner of a sweatshirt that says, "I survived the blizzard of," what was it, 1985 or 1983?

DLS: I have one of those, too.

JW: 1983.

DLS: And you went into work when very few of us did.

JW: Right. [Laughs] And I carried—during those last few years, as I said, I was commuting from Conway to work. And in the winter months I carried an overnight kit, so to speak, in case we got snowed in, which we did. And I spent two nights running sleeping on the couch up in, at that time, it was on the third floor, where Richard Allin and Charlie Allbright had their office up there.

[Laughs]

DLS: Yes.

[End of Side One, Tape Two]

[Beginning of Side Two, Tape Two]

JW: Yes. I recall one of the early bits of wisdom that Leland Duvall passed on to me when I went there. He said, "Workman," he said, "one thing you need to know about working at the *Arkansas Gazette*." He said, "If you ever get up from your desk to wander around the building, always take two pieces of paper with you." [Laughs] Or maybe said a piece of paper with you, so people will think you're going somewhere. [Laughs] And that you've left one and you've taken another, or something. [Laughs]

DLS: Was it a typical, messy newsroom?

JW: Yes. Very. Oh, yes.

DLS: Describe the . . .

JW: Oh, yes. Absolutely. You wondered how these people ever got anything—ever found anything. [Laughs] And then, after I had been there for a few weeks, I was won over. I was probably among the worst of those in keeping order in my cubicle [laughter] and around my desk, but it was delightful. My observation has been in writing, you know, some people can sit down—and I marveled at Leland Duvall, able to sit down—they said he never rewrote anything. He just sat down and typed it out and that was it. As opposed to my style, I would continually rewrite and have to struggle. It was like opening a vein, as someone expressed. And so I would work for a while at my computer and then have to get up and walk around and go visit or bother somebody, you know. So I would either saunter off up to Richard Allin and Charlie Allbright's and we'd swap stories [laughs] for a while. And then come back to work and, you know, you get

refreshed and go on about the job. But one thing I appreciated is that the section editors—David Petty—they would never press us—we were free, as long as we did our work and turned out our work. But one thing I want to recall that I thought of a few moments ago was working in the Omnibus section there. It was such a fun time with all the people around. It was just a great big family. Everybody did their work—did it well, and worked hard at it, but also had a lot of fun and a lot of cutting up. And we got to calling it "Mother Petty's Adult Daycare Center" [laughter] after David Petty.

DLS: [Laughter] How did he handle all that?

JW: Oh, he loved it. And there's always some kind of—I've learned that newspaper people are the quickest wits and can turn phrases so well. I remember one of the things in—the Omnibus section always did all the engagement announcements.

DLS: Yes.

JW: The brides. Well, we could always tell when the brides would come in bringing their news releases [laughter]. And one day, I remember, everybody was kind of struck dumb—in the door of the Omnibus section came this beautiful, attractive, young woman and just dressed to the nines, and she was so attractive, and everybody was kind of struck dumb and silent and just watched her float across the room over to David Petty's desk with her wedding announcement. And she turned and walked out, and everybody was quiet and bug-eyed, and David Petty said, "Humph, how did she ever find anybody to marry her?" [Laughs] And, let's see, what was Chuck's name? Charles Kaufmann, Chuck Kaufmann?

DLS: That's before my time.

JW: One time in the Omnibus section, we had—and I'm sorry I can't call her name—representing the Arts Center or something. She had a very pronounced English accent. She's on NPR [National Public Radio] all the time now, on the local NPR station. “Arts in Arkansas.” And a fine woman. A pronounced British accent. She came in, and the folks would really love to mimic her voice, you know, after she left. [Laughs] And I remember . . .

DLS: Who was really good at it?

JW: Well, Chuck Kaufmann was one of the feature editors, and she'd come in and talk to David Petty and tell about all the things upcoming in the arts this week, in her best London accent. And after she left, Charles Kaufmann got up and started mimicking her, but she had forgotten something . . .

DLS: Oh! [Laughs]

JW: She had to come back into the office, and was standing right behind Chuck when he was mimicking her. [Laughs] And I remember another little funny incident with—Mr. Hugh Patterson had come into the Features section, as he frequently did throughout the week. Almost a week didn't pass when he was escorting some visitor from out of town or out of the country through the *Arkansas Gazette* and introducing them around to the various people. And, of course, he knew all the names. He came over—Karen Knutson [pronounced "Ka-noot-sen"] had just been working there a few weeks and . . .

DLS: Knutson. K-N-U-T-S-O-N.

JW: S-O-N. Right. Yes. And, at that time, she was the reception person for the Omnibus desk, and he had introduced all the staff around. He came to Karen and, of course, she hadn't been there long enough for him to know her name, and said, "And this young lady," he said, "what she does, "—he was trying to come up with her name[laughs]—he said, "she does very well." [Laughs] But there was always something to have fun about and enjoy.

DLS: Are you still in contact with many of them?

JW: Regretfully, I'm not. I see Richard Allin. He has lunch up here at Glory Be's Cafe with some friends here.

DLS: In Mayflower.

JW: In Mayflower, yes. Let's see, now I think Jack Meriwether comes with Richard Allin. Jack, who was in the administration there at the *Gazette*. And I saw Ernie Dumas a time or two when he was at the UCA campus. And Joe mostly—fish and wildlife writer. He now writes now for the *Log Cabin Democrat* and the Game and Fish Commission, I believe. And, other than those, I don't see too many. I've seen Ken Parker from time to time. He was at the *Gazette* before I went there, but we were classmates at Hendrix together.

DLS: Oh.

JW: And Ken lives in Little Rock. Jerol Garrison, I knew Jerol Garrison before I went to the *Gazette* and he was there. But I don't really see many others.

DLS: Well, anything else?

JW: Well, I really, Donna, don't think anything right now.

DLS: Well, you can always add to the transcript.

JW: Yes, but I will add this. I've said this before in a different way, but I really counted it an honor to be associated with who I considered some of the finest writers in the state, and it was really an honor and a privilege and a pleasure for me to be there, and I really count it kind of a high point in my life.

DLS: That's what a lot of people say.

JW: Yes. Yes.

DLS: Okay. Thanks.

JW: Okay. Good.

[End of Interview]