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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with

Sam D. Dickinson
Telephone Interview
12 February 2007

Interviewer: Jerry McConnell

Jerry McConnell: This interview for the Pryor Center for Oral and Visual History at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, on the oral history of the *Arkansas Democrat* was conducted on February 12, 2007, by telephone by Jerry McConnell with Sam D. Dickinson at his home in Prescott [Arkansas]. Mr. Dickinson, who will be ninety-five on February 26, said he is suffering from emphysema and did not feel up to my visiting him in his home, but [he] answered several questions over the phone. He said earlier that he did not want me to tape our conversation, so this interview is based on my handwritten notes, which were checked by Mr. Dickinson. Mr. Dickinson worked as an editorial writer and associate editor for the *Arkansas Gazette*, *Arkansas Democrat* and the *Shreveport [Louisiana] Journal*. He also worked as an archeologist and has a hobby of translating old French and Spanish books and documents about Arkan-

sas and Louisiana. He is a native of Prescott and is a fifth-generation resident of Nevada County.

SD: I'm living in the house where I was born and sleeping in the bed where I was born. This is the second house built in Prescott, which developed into a town because of the railroad. The original settlement, a place called Moscow, was about a mile away. Prescott flourished until the interstate highway [I-30] was built in the 1960s. Now it is a suburb of Hope.

JM: What were your parents' names?

SD: My father was Samuel P. Dickinson, and my mother was Bessie Sue Dickinson. I was a junior and because there were three other Sams in the Dickinson and Litton families, I went by my middle name, Dorris, until my father died and then I started using Sam.

JM: How old was your father when he died?

SD: My father was sixty-four when he died. My mother, whose maiden name was Litton, lived until she was 107-and-a-half [years old]. My father worked at the Ozan Mercantile store here in Prescott. He was in charge of groceries and animal feed. H. E. Dorris, for whom I was named, was in charge of dry goods. Sam White, brother-in-law of Governor McRae, was president of the company.

JM: Where did you go to school, Sam?

SD: I went through all twelve grades at Prescott, where I became interested in French and Spanish. Then I went to the University of Arkansas for two years. I wanted to be an archeologist, and Arkansas didn't have a real archeology program. So I transferred to the University of Arizona and majored in archeology and minored

in romance languages. I also attended [The National Autonomous University of Mexico/Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico City] and the University of Texas [Austin]. I only obtained one degree because I was more interested in studying under outstanding archeologists than in getting degrees. After a while, I worked for the University of Arkansas on an archeological survey funded by the WPA [Works Progress Administration]. I had charge of the laboratory. The University of Arkansas [chapter of] Phi Beta Kappa made me a member.

JM: How did you get into newspaper work?

SD: I had always been interested in writing, and I wrote some feature stories that the *Gazette* used and some that were used by the *Democrat*. So I went to work for the *Gazette* sometime in 1944 before Harry Ashmore joined the paper.

JM: So how did you like the *Gazette*?

SD: I didn't like it at all. Everybody was on edge. There was so much rivalry on that staff, especially after Ashmore came. I didn't really like Ashmore or Mr. [J. N.] Heiskell. The latter was too pedantic. He was antiquated in many ways. He still used eighteenth-century punctuation in his editorials. As much as I disliked Ashmore, I credit him with a big achievement in changing some of those rules. When I first went there, Mr. Heiskell wrote most of the editorials. He would read and reread his and my editorials all day before finally sending them to the printer. I marveled at the influence Ashmore gained there. Heiskell had insisted on brief editorials, and I agreed. Ashmore just wrote on and on and on.

JM: So why did you dislike Ashmore?

SD: I thought he was sophomoric. He wrote very well, but I never trusted him. He

definitely promoted himself. I never believed he was as well-educated as he appeared. We often disagreed on the content of editorials.

JM: When did you leave the *Gazette*?

SD: I left about a year after Ashmore arrived [1947]. I knew I had a job at the *Democrat*, but in those days the two papers had a policy that they didn't hire from each other. You had to be gone from one paper a year before you could go to work at the other. So I went to Arkansas State Teachers College [now the University of Central Arkansas, Conway] and taught English courses and one on Arkansas folklore. Then I left there and went to work writing editorials at the *Democrat*.

JM: So how did you like the *Democrat*?

SD: I liked the *Democrat* fine. They were good to me, and I liked the people. I liked the *Shreveport Journal*, which is where I went after I left the *Democrat*, even better. When I went to the *Democrat*, they had another editorial writer named Bill Johnson and he was getting pretty old, so I did most of the work. He was still there when I left.

JM: I suppose you also worked some with Karr Shannon, who was the editorial columnist.

SD: Karr and I shared an office, and we disagreed on practically everything, but I admired him and his family. You know, he even wrote a book or two and also learned to be a pharmacist.

JM: What kind of direction did you get on editorials from Mr. [K. August] Engel [owner and publisher of the *Democrat*]?

SD: You were right. He didn't want to rock the boat. He didn't want to stir up trou-

bles [or] get into any arguments.

JM: I know you were there when the desegregation troubles flared up at Little Rock Central [High School]. How did you all feel about that?

SD: We were against integration, but we couldn't say so.

JM: Why not?

SD: It wouldn't have been a very good thing for a newspaper to advocate defying the federal government, although the Shreveport paper did. We said it was the law of the land, and it should be obeyed. It would have been stupid to defy it. We couldn't have won.

JM: So how did Mr. Engel feel?

SD: Oh, he was against integration and so were Mr. Heiskell and some other members of the Heiskell family. Heiskell's father fought for the Confederacy [in the Civil War] and was very much in favor of it [the Confederacy?]. Ashmore and [Hugh] Patterson talked him into it [supporting integration]. I think Mr. Heiskell was getting senile, and he had always dreamed of winning a Pulitzer Prize.

JM: As I recall, Ashmore never wrote that he was for integration, but said the Supreme Court ruling was the law of the land and should be obeyed.

SD: Yes, but you could tell from the first that he favored integration. Early on he was writing about how the South had failed to educate the Negro, which was true. That was the subject of his first book [*The Negro and the Schools*, a study of how the separate-but-equal ruling was working in the South, which was paid for by the Fund for the Advancement of Education]. He was also writing about that in his editorials. I blame him and several others for counseling [President Dwight D.]

Eisenhower to send troops to Central High. I don't think that was necessary.

That was the beginning of the destruction of our public schools. Ashmore was determined to and did get control of that paper, and you can see the results today.

I think it deteriorated under Patterson. He was a very pleasant man, but he knew nothing about newspapers.

JM: What position did the *Democrat* take when [Governor Orval] Faubus called out the National Guard at Central?

SD: I think we said that we regretted that it happened, but that you couldn't blame anybody. At my age, my memory isn't always perfect, so perhaps you should check the editorials we wrote. But he did what the majority of the white people in Arkansas wanted. I very much admired Faubus. I regret that people do not remember all the good things he did, but that he is judged entirely by the race issue. I was against integration, but I was not anti-Negro. But I had to part with some very good friends over that issue, and I hated that.

JM: A new book, *The Race Beat*, about the coverage of civil rights battles in the South, notes that the *Democrat* originally had taken the position that the Supreme Court ruling was the law of the land, but then said, "From the moment Faubus thwarted the desegregation plan, the *Democrat* modified its earlier thinking. While the paper found opportunity to criticize Faubus, it drifted, after a period of sounding lost at sea, into the camp of states' rights." Do you agree with that assessment?

SD: That's not exactly right, but, as I said, my memory is not always perfect, and it would be best to check the editorials. But I don't think any of us were anti-Negro.

The *Democrat* employed a Negro reporter. The *Gazette* didn't.

JM: You don't recall the paper making a conscious decision to change its policy?

SD: Mr. Engel was very cautious from the start. He was always cautious. It is true that everyone perceived the *Gazette* as being in favor of integration and the *Democrat* against it.

JM: I take it that you didn't agree with everything you had to write.

SD: No, I was held sometimes to what somebody else thought. But you have to write what the publisher wants you to write. I salved my conscience sometimes by writing a letter to the editor, expressing my real views, and getting it published, although I did not sign my name.

JM: So you eventually left the *Democrat*?

SD: Yes. After thirteen years I had a much better offer and went to the *Shreveport Journal*. I wondered every day how the *Democrat* would survive. Mr. Engel ran an organization that paid poorly and used worn-out equipment, and he made a fortune. I particularly enjoyed working for the publisher in Shreveport. I took early retirement in 1973 so I could do other things I wanted to do, such as travel, and wrote what I pleased, for which I'm thankful.

JM: I understand that you also wrote a number of articles that were published in the archeological and folklore and literary magazines.

SD: Yes, and six books. I was one of the few people who knew anything about Gombo, which was a dialect that slaves spoke along the Gulf Coast. White children who were raised by their mammies [black women who cared for the children of white families] learned to speak it, too. They were not allowed to speak it in

public after they were ten years old. Then they had to speak Parisian French.
Gombo died out.

JM: How did you learn about the dialect?

SD: I learned it from reading books written in French by Alfred Mercier, who was a New Orleans [Louisiana] physician. He wrote a number of books about Louisiana and slavery. I translated two of them, but I never got them published. Both the Arkansas Historical Association and the Historic Arkansas Preservation Program have given me lifetime achievement awards. Life has been exceedingly good to me. Each setback led to something better. I have lived the way I wanted to do with a minimum of necessary hypocrisy, without relatives. I enjoy a wealth of friends, including devoted caretakers. Age limits travel now, but rare books and art surround me. I am content even with emphysema, which is my payment for delightful and excessive smoking that I'll never forget or regret.

[End of Interview]

[Transcribed by Cheri Pearce]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]