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*Arkansas Democrat* Project

Interview with

Jackye Finch  
Little Rock, Arkansas  
25 June 2005

Interviewer: Phyllis Brandon

Phyllis Brandon: This is Saturday, June 25, [2005]. I'm here with . . .

Jackye Finch: Jackye.

PB: Finch. [This interview is for the University of Arkansas's Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History's project on the *Arkansas Democrat* and the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*.] We're going to be chatting about the newspaper war [between the *Arkansas Democrat* and the *Arkansas Gazette*]. So we'll start at the beginning. Where did you grow up?

JF: I was born August 8, 1944, in northeast Arkansas in a town called Leachville between Jonesboro and Blytheville in Mississippi County. My daddy, [Robert Franklin Shipley, Sr.], was a cotton farmer. He had eighty acres—as they called it in those days—rented some property from a man who was learning how to farm, and my daddy was teaching him. When I was twelve, we moved to Phillips County. It was like going into a different century. It was a different kind of culture there. Anyway, there was a good school in Leachville, and there was a lot of encouragement of kids to going to school. My daddy had a fourth-grade education. He was next to the last in about twelve children. He was born in north Arkansas into a very poor existence. My father was born in 1901, and my mother, [Ruth Mildred Hill Shipley, was] born in 1906. And she grew up in north

Arkansas in a very poor family. She had a sixth-grade education, but when she was in her sixties she got her GED—is that what it's called? She got her high school diploma and got her picture in the paper with her cap and gown. Even though my parents had not much education, they were great supporters of it, and great believers of it. And out of their five children, three of us went to college and got degrees. One went on to law school and got within three hours of [completing] his degree and decided he didn't want to be a lawyer. So that was important in my growing up. They expected the best out of us—to perform in school.

PB: Did you go to Leachville High School?

JF: No, I went to Leachville Grade School.

PB: Yes.

JF: And the first two months of the seventh grade in Leachville. In Leachville, in Mississippi County, cotton was pretty much king.

PB: Right.

JF: And we had what was called a split term. We went to school in—if you can believe this—July and August in an un-air-conditioned building. It was a good building, but un-air-conditioned. Then we were out in September and October. So the entire community—even town kids—would pick cotton. This was right before the mechanical picker. I picked enough cotton to know that I wanted to study hard in school and get out of the cotton patch. So I went to Leachville Grade School, and it was known at the time—I don't really know what this means, but it was called one of the model schools. I don't know if there was some state

education program for that, but we did have a very good school. Then, when I was twelve, my family moved to Phillips County because the man that daddy had been renting the property from to farm decided he wanted to farm it himself, and daddy realized he could not make a living on eighty acres. So we moved to Phillips County and rented some farmland there. And the first year we were there—1957, I guess—yes—he raised what he said was the best cotton crop he had ever raised in his life. A week or so before the picking was to begin, it started raining, and it rained for about thirty or forty days. He never got to pick anything. It was a terrible thing. And at that time, he was in his mid-fifties, so it was like starting all over again. I went to junior high and high school in Elaine [pronounced E-laine. with emphasis on E], which is what we call it—we're from there. But if you're not from there, you call it Elaine [pronounced E-LAINE, with emphasis on second syllable]. The school there was not nearly as good as it was in Leachville. It was a smaller school and just not as good. I graduated from there.

PB: Did you have any special interests when you were in high school?

JF: Yes, I did. I got interested in the school newspaper, the *Panther's Tale*. T-A-L-E, of course. The panther was our mascot. I wrote—a friend of mine, who was a year older, was the editor—this was a very small school. And she got me to write up a little funny story for the paper. I sat in study hall and wrote the story, comparing study hall to a guarded concentration camp. I mean, that's very unpolitically correct right now, but it was my first attempt at humor. So she got me to work on the newspaper, which I loved. In those days, it was done on the old

purple mimeograph machine. And I worked on the yearbook. I loved that. Our graduating class had twenty-nine [members]. We actually had thirty-one, but one of them got the other one pregnant, so they got married. In those days, if you were married, you couldn't go to high school. Now, that makes a lot of sense, doesn't it? Of all the people who needed their degree. But anyway, we had twenty-nine in our graduating class. A good friend of mine, Dale Calhoun, and I were co-valedictorians. We did the yearbook and the paper. Of course, in a school that small, we did everything.

PB: Then the time came to go to college.

JF: Right.

PB: What was that? How was that going to be?

JF: That was pretty well decided at an early age, as far as I was concerned, because I was the youngest of five children, spanning sixteen years. My favorite sibling was a brother who was twelve years older. He had gone to [the University of Arkansas,] Fayetteville, I guess, when I was about five or six, and we visited him—drove over to Fayetteville and visited him. I was little tiny, but the campus was very impressive. I had never seen mountains and hills before. I adored him, and I was just in awe of this campus. So that was pretty much in my mind all along, I think. My mother wanted me to go to Harding [College in Searcy] because I had gotten a scholarship offer. I think every valedictorian in Arkansas probably got one. I don't know. But anyway, I decided to go to Fayetteville, and I proceeded to find out how I could do it. I got a loan from the Arkansas Rural Endowment Fund. I think Fayetteville gave small—like, \$100 scholarships to

valedictorians, too. I had also been to 4-H camp on the campus a couple of times. That really solidified what I wanted to do. Also, it was the biggest school in the state, and coming from a graduating class of twenty-nine, that appealed to me. It was a small . . .

PB: It wasn't terrifying, it was . . .

JF: Oh, no. It was exciting to me.

PB: Yes.

JF: That was the world.

PB: What year was that?

JF: I graduated high school in 1962. I graduated from [the University of Arkansas] Fayetteville, in 1966.

PB: Yes.

JF: And it was also as far away as I could go and stay in state. [Laughs] In several ways, from the delta to the mountains—it never occurred to me that I could go out of state. Number one, it was too expensive, and, number two, I was in love with Fayetteville. So that's where I went. I loved every minute of it—absolutely loved it. I was a freshman in Fulbright Hall, which was the first or second year, maybe, that it was open. I can't remember. Anyway, I was a freshman there in the College of Arts and Sciences. I majored in journalism and English. In my sophomore year, I did not go through rush. Large groups of women were not my thing, but it never occurred to me that I could afford it or would even want to do that sort of thing because I wanted to be—there was no term for it then. Bohemian was not the right word. It was a little before hippie, but . . .

PB: You were independent.

JF: I was independent, yes. So my sophomore and junior years I lived in the 4-H House because you did some of the work for part of your room and board.

PB: Yes.

JF: Then I found out that if you were the president or the house manager, you didn't have to pay anything and you didn't have to do any duties. So I did that my junior year. My senior year I was a live-in counselor at Fulbright [Hall] again. So I started and finished in Fulbright.

PB: Yes.

JF: I loved my journalism courses.

PB: Okay. Was Hill Hall still there?

JF: Yes, it was. Hell Hole.

PB: Hell Hole. [Laughs] Who were some of your teachers?

JF: Jess Covington was head of the department, and Professor Good.

PB: Bill Good?

JF: Yes. I loved that man. He taught law and the press and photography. To me, he was the consummate college professor—dignified, stately, respectful of his students, and I really liked him. And Mr. Al Blake down in the printing plant—really, his bark was worse than his bite. Was he there when you were there? And I loved the printing plant. This, of course, was before computers, and we had the Linotypes and the hot lead.

PB: And you'd go down there and the paper was on the stone.

JF: That's right.

PB: You picked up the type and put it where you wanted it to be.

JF: I took a typography course with him. We had to hand-set type. I loved that. I loved everything about that dirty place. And, in addition to my loan and some partial scholarships, I also worked at the library. I did some part-time work before I went on the *Traveler* [the University of Arkansas student newspaper] staff in the printing plant, collating and things like that, which I loved.

PB: Yes.

JF: I worked in the library in that wonderful old building [Vol Walker Hall] that's now the Architecture [Department]. I worked in the library, which I loved. Then I got on the *Traveler* staff in probably my sophomore year—I'm not sure. I loved that. That was the big . . .

PB: Who was the editor then?

JF: The editor—I think when I started working on the staff, Marian Hodges—Marian Alford. Isn't that her maiden name?

PB: I don't know.

JF: Marian—you know, she's married to David Hodges.

PB: I know who—yes—I know who she's married to now, but I don't know her maiden name.

JF: Yes, it was Marian Alford. I think she was editor and Pat Trimble, who is now Pat Patterson.

PB: And then who was next?

JF: Ron Robinson was an editor. He was an editor when I was feature editor. Yes, they assigned the jobs at the end of the year for next year, and I had applied, I



guess, for feature editor and got it. Then when school started, he had a fraternity brother who needed pledge points or something, so I got booted down. I did all the work and he got the title.

PB: Who was this the editor—was this Ron?

JF: This was Ron—or we called him Ronnie. [Laughs]

PB: Yes.

JF: Anyway, I did get to write a lot of stories, and enjoyed that. I guess Cid Sutoris was editor when I was a senior, and, by then, I was managing editor, which I dearly loved because you got to—from start to finish—you got to start off on the top floor and you ended up in the printing plant and putting it to bed, which I loved.

PB: Yes. How many days a week did it come out then?

JF: I believe it was four days a week.

PB: Yes.

JF: That was fun and exciting. I loved it. I just loved it. And [I] found that I was drawn to feature-writing and proofing. I loved to proof and loved working in the printing plant. And some of the people who worked on the staff while I was there who showed up later in my life—Ginger Shiras, who was from Mountain Home. Her dad or uncle owned the *Baxter Bulletin*. She came from a long line of journalists. Who else? Ron Robinson, of course. Pat Trimble, who I mentioned. Marian Alford Hodges. Sylvia Spencer. Gosh, lots of them. And a lot of campus leaders and so forth would come in and out. I remember Mack McLarty. He was there. And a lot of—Sandy McMath, Buzz Arnold [Judge Morris]—they

were in law school at that point. But a lot of people that I met back then, later on in life were becoming very important leaders. And, in a way, it was kind of scary to think that [laughs] those kids I knew were in such positions of responsibility.

But it was fun. Let's see, what else?

PB: You got your degree.

JF: I got my degree—a major in journalism and a minor in English, although—actually, if I had realized it at the time, I could have declared a double major because I had enough in English to do that. But journalism was my real love.

PB: Yes.

JF: And the last year I was there—I'm trying to think who else was on the staff. Oh, there was another student, Ruth Ann Vaughn from Little Rock. While she was in college, she married Mike Snipe. She appears later on when I'm working at the *Democrat*. Anyway, I got my degree in 1966. A few weeks or a month or so before graduation, the journalism department posted available jobs on the bulletin board. I saw two that appealed to me. One was the *Commercial Appeal* in Memphis, and one was Hendrix College, [Conway, Arkansas], in the public information office. So I applied for both. Hendrix College replied immediately, offering me the job, even without an interview. I guess it's no big deal, but—and I took the job. Less than a week later, the *Commercial Appeal* replied offering me a job, and I should have—I didn't realize then that I could have said to Hendrix, "I'm sorry, but I've taken another job," because I would have much preferred the *Commercial Appeal* job. But I thought I was bound to my word, so I took the job at Hendrix and started work immediately out of college because, of course, I had

to. I moved to Conway and became the assistant director of public information at Hendrix College. There was no director of public information, but, of course, you couldn't give that title to some little kid out of college. I did press relations and wrote stories and generally did public information. They had just started a capital campaign. I think it might have been the first in their history. Their goal was \$1 million, which—in those days people thought, "That's absurd. You'll never do that." They wanted a little ad, so I wrote a little ad for them, and it ran—I don't know where it ran, but they liked it. The secretary working at Hendrix said that she had a good friend in the advertising business, and she thought I ought to get into that. Well, she wrote him or called him, and sent—maybe she sent that ad. I can't remember. Anyway, her friend was Wayne Cranford, who she had gone to [Arkansas] State Teachers [College] with. So I contacted them and they asked me to do some freelance articles, which I did. I was at Hendrix for a year and a half. I started work there in, I guess, June of 1966—worked through 1967, and in January of 1968 a friend of mine, Sylvia Spencer, graduated mid-term from Fayetteville, and she was going to Little Rock. She had a job with United Press International [UPI], and she wanted me to go to Little Rock, too. I said, "Why not?" This is the ignorance of youth. I quit my job at Hendrix—moved to Little Rock with her—did not have a job—wasn't worried about getting one—needed one because I was my full support—and went to the *Democrat* and made an application, and three days later, got a job. Now, can you believe that? Anyway, I was very lucky because Virginia Pearson was the women's editor of the *Democrat* then. She was a very good editor because she had vision and she had

tenacity and she had diplomacy. She wanted to change the women's section. In those days, as you know, there were brides on the front page of the Sunday women's section and she wanted to change that. I started working there in February of 1968. I worked—I was trying to look it up the other day—I worked a year and a half or two years there. I can't really remember. Probably more like a year and a half. And when I first started work there, it was your typical women's section with the brides on the front page on Sunday and more and more brides inside, and just the typical thing.

PB: What did you do?

JF: I was hired as a feature writer. I wrote about three or four local feature stories a week. I did—it was a small women's section that we had, maybe four employees—and I also did clipping and layout and headline writing and copy editing and would even type up the brides—I mean, I did everything. But I was primarily hired as a feature writer. By the time I left, she had cleaned those brides off the front page.

PB: [Laughs]

JF: And it was fun.

PB: But that was part of the times, though.

JF: That's right.

PB: The *Gazette* did, too, right?

JF: Well, the *Gazette* did, but it was quite a bit later. I had this theory that we got away with so much in that women's section of the *Democrat* because no one read it. [Laughter]

PB: You know, we don't have your maiden name.

JF: Shipley.

PB: Shipley. That's what I thought.

JF: Yes. S-H-I-P-L-E-Y.

PB: Yes.

JF: Anyway, it was great. I worked at the *Democrat* in two different times. I had been there about a year or maybe a year and a half, and I had continued to do some free-lance work for Cranford Johnson Advertising. Then they offered me a full-time job. The money was very tempting, and so was the job, so I took that job and loved it, too. I worked there about two years and went back to the *Democrat*, and then went back to Cranford Johnson. So I was sitting, rocking back and forth.

PB: Yes.

JF: I loved them both. I guess I just couldn't decide which one I loved the most. But my first stint there, when Virginia Garrison was the editor, we did some really neat things. We did a—well, this was, I guess, the second stint. I guess we did a front page—the upper half of the front page of the women's section—I think it was on the front [it had been on front?] on vasectomies. This was in 1972.

PB: That got your readers' [attention], didn't it? [Laughs]

JF: I think it probably did. It was great fun. I interviewed everyone from the first woman cab driver in Little Rock to Burt Reynolds when he was here to do [the motion picture] *White Lightning*, and everything else in between. I remember when George McGovern was running for president in 1970 or 1972—whenever

that was. [Editor's note: McGovern ran against and lost to Richard M. Nixon in 1972.] His wife, Eleanor McGovern, came to town for a speech, and the only time I could interview her was when she was going to the airport to leave. So she and I got in the back seat, and the driver in the front seat and her companion on this trip—he was kind of involved in that campaign—was [the actor] Warren Beatty. He was in the front seat. There I was in the back seat, twenty-something years old, trying to look very professional and cool and sophisticated—trying to pay attention to this very intelligent, interesting woman in the back seat, and Warren Beatty was hanging over the front seat inserting all kinds of comments on this. [Laughs] It was one of the more challenging interviews I've ever done.

PB: [Laughs]

JF: And Burt Reynolds was a delight. He was as charming and as nice you would think he is. It was interesting. When I interviewed him, I went to England, Arkansas, because they were filming there that day. When I got there, probably mid-morning, they were filming on the north/south part of Main Street—and then it turns and runs east/west—so they had that north/south part of it blocked off. So I went around and parked on the other leg toward the end of the second block. That was probably mid-morning. In making movies there's a lot of waiting. They did a little bit of acting and a lot of waiting. So by mid-afternoon to late-afternoon, I had interviewed his co-star, Jennifer somebody. Jennifer Billingsley, I think. Then I finally got to interview him. By the time I finished, it was late afternoon, and the scene had progressed from that north/south axis around to the east/west. I got ready to leave. I had a little Volkswagen Beetle. I started to get

into my car, and they said, "You can't do that." I said, "Why not?" He said, "Your car is frozen." I thought he was talking about the motor or something. I said, "No, it's working fine." He said, "No, it's frozen on the set. You can't move it because we've already started shooting." It's like, in one scene if you're filming the characters and in the background there's a red Volkswagen, and the next scene there's not—anyway, I left my car there and just enjoyed watching all that. That was fun. Anyway, when he [Burt Reynolds] was in town for the filming of that, that was when he was having this relationship with Dinah Shore. Remember that?

PB: Yes. Oh, yes.

JF: But he had brought—another friend had come to town to visit him while he was here before Dinah came, and her name was Sherry Boucher [pronounced Boo-shay]. I later became very good friends with her sister, Savannah Smith, or Savannah Boucher, who was later married to Bill Stover. Got all that? Anyway, Sherry was here. The rumor was that she was visiting him as more than friends. She stuck around for a while and then she left. Then Dinah Shore came. I got to interview her. So I was just—I thought, "This is a great life." It was, between the female cab driver and Burt Reynolds. I never knew from one day to the next what I'd be doing, and that made it fascinating to me. I loved it.

PB: Yes.

JF: When I started to work at the *Democrat*, Marcus George and Stanley Berry were the editor and publisher. They had inherited it, I guess, from Mr. [K. August] Engel.

PB: Mr. Engel had already died at that point.

JF: Yes.

PB: So Marcus was city editor and Stanley was running the business end.

JF: Publisher. And we never saw them very much. Of course, they were both very quiet, so I never saw them very much. Jon Kennedy was the cartoonist. I really liked him. Nice guy. And I don't know when—I guess it might have been a little later when Bob McCord came on board. They paid in cash every week. It made me think of when we paid the cotton choppers on the farm. Paid in cash every week.

PB: Yes.

JF: I think I started work there for about \$400 a month. Of course, I thought I was just high on the hog. I worked for Cranford Johnson after the *Democrat*, then went back to the *Democrat*. And, at that point, Mary Dee Terry was the women's editor. Virginia Garrison had left and had gone to Cranford Johnson. She had followed me to Cranford Johnson. Eventually, she moved to California and worked for an agency up there. But Mary Dee Terry was the women's editor then. Some of the others in the department during my first stint—Lelia Maude Funston, the religion editor—Lord love her. She was probably not as old as she seemed because she wore those black orthopedic lace-up shoes, and she wore very old-fashioned clothes. Well, a lot of people would have called her an old maid, but I don't know that I'd call her that. She was the religion editor, and she had a desk in the women's section. She was very prim and very proper. There were times when I thought, "She's going to move out," because we were having so much fun being a little bawdy at times. But during that first stint—Virginia Garrison—who else



was in there? Merla Maynor—what is her name? She did a weekly feature, if you want to call it, on somebody's house. She would go out to somebody's house, take pictures of various rooms—would even get the blueprints and they'd reproduce those. I thought that was interesting. And we had the local food section.

PB: And, at this time, it was all an afternoon paper.

JF: That's right. So we got to work early, at about 7:30 [a.m.] or so.

PB: 7:30 and were finished by . . .

JF: 3:30 [p.m.] And in those days . . .

PB: How many days a week did you work?

JF: Five . . .

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[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

JF: We did not have a women's section on Saturday. Of course, we had to put the Sunday paper to bed by Thursday afternoon.

PB: Yes.

JF: But there were . . .

PB: The news department worked six days a week.

JF: Oh, yes. Yes.

PB: Yes.

JF: The women's section [worked] just five, but there were a lot of times when I worked holidays and weekends when people would want off. Oh, George Douthit was another figure when I was there. He was very colorful and considered the . . .

PB: Political.

JF: The dean of political reporters because he had been there so long. I remember one time I attended some sort of women's organization meeting, and Virginia Johnson, I believe, was speaking there. It was not a political speech, as such. I can't remember what the meeting was [about]. I covered it for the women's section. In that speech, she said she was going to run for governor. Nobody—she had not announced this. Nobody knew this, so I put it—I led with it in my feature story. And Virginia—you know, I put the headline on it. George Douthit blew a *gasket*. He came in there ranting and raving about—"This is political news, blah, blah, blah, and you had no right to do this, and blah, blah, blah." No, maybe it was in the newsroom, and I was walking through one day. Back in those days, I was much more quick-tempered than I am now. I said, "George, if you had been doing your job, you would've found this out." I mean, it just flew all over me that he would attack me for that. Then I did an interview with Virginia Johnson in her house in Conway. This was after everybody knew she was running for governor. That interview, of course, ran in the women's section with my byline on it. And at that time the Associated Press [AP] had its offices in the *Democrat* building, in the same area as the big newsroom.

PB: And the newsroom was on the second floor.

JF: Right. Right. And John Robert Starr, of course, was head of the Associated Press. And Bill Simmons and Tommy Yates and—oh, this roommate I mentioned—Ruth Ann Vaughn Snipe was also working for Associated Press at that time. Anyway, the article on Virginia Johnson that I wrote then appeared a

few days later in other newspapers with an Associated Press tag line on it *and* Tommy Yates's byline. And it was word for word. So that was my time to pull a George Douthit. I went to John Robert Starr and I told him I could not believe that he would do that. He said, "Well, you've got to understand the Associated Press, we get to do all this." And I said, "Yes, but you shouldn't put a byline on it if it's not written by your guy." Anyway, it infuriated me.

PB: Justifiably so. [Laughter]

JF: Well, I thought so. That was when the newsroom was noisy with lots of typewriters going and people [going] back and forth.

PB: No air-conditioning.

JF: Well, we did have air-conditioning in the women's section and, I guess, in the newsroom at that point, although I don't think the printing plant had it. But at that time—I never understood the thinking—the printing plant was on the top floor with all those heavy machines.

PB: Yes. Right behind the newsroom, sort of, and up.

JF: Yes. And I would have to run up those stairs four or five times a day.

PB: The spiral staircase. Yes.

JF: Yes, to proof and check things like that. God, it was a filthy building. It was just dirty *all* the time. *Filthy*. I don't know how we stood it. Anyway, I mentioned Ruth Ann Vaughn Snipe. She was a student at [University of Arkansas] Fayetteville—a journalism major when I was there and a friend of mine, and so was Sylvia Spencer. When I moved to Little Rock and started working at the *Democrat*, the three of us got an apartment together out at [Chateau DeVille?],

which was brand new, I think, at the time. Ruth Ann worked for AP, Sylvia worked for UPI, and I worked for the *Democrat*. So, of course, we were referred to as "Apartment 3-G," which was a comic strip in those days. But that was a lot of fun because, of course, we were all in the same business and were all keeping up with what was going on, and going to press parties and press conferences. It was just a lot of fun.

PB: Yes.

JF: I interviewed a lot of women—some men—politicians, politicians' wives. I remember Barbara Pryor [wife of former Arkansas Governor and Senator David Pryor]. I interviewed her a long time ago. She was an interesting person—still is, I'm sure. Very interesting, because back in those days she was not—and maybe still is not—your typical politician's wife.

PB: Yes.

JF: I've always had a lot of sympathy for politicians' wives because I think it's very hard for them if they had any kind of independent streak at all. But it was [a] great story, and fun.

PB: At some point, you quit all this and got married.

JF: Right. After the second stint at the *Democrat*, I went back to—well, no, at one point in there I worked for Ben Combs for his advertising agency. I guess that was after the second stint at the *Democrat*, which was around 1971 or 1972. I went to work for Ben Combs for a couple of years, and then back to Cranford Johnson. I worked until 1981 as a copy writer, and loved it, too, because I worked with a lot of creative people and [had] lots of fun. Jim Johnson, Steven

Mangan, Bill Stover, Lindell Dean—lots and lots of fun. Very creative people, and it was just a ball working with them. And I had some really interesting accounts that I worked for. In 1981 I married Curtis Finch, Jr., and had planned to keep working for a while. I worked for a month after I got married, and then realized Curtis's travel plans and my work plans [laughs] would not fit, because he loves to travel. Of course, he was still working, too, at that time. So that's when I started working—Jim Faltin, who also had an advertising agency, got wind that I was leaving Cranford Johnson, and proposed that I work on a free lance basis for him exclusively, and I was very lucky because it was the perfect way to wean myself. For so much a month, I would guarantee him so many hours. Whether he actually had that much work for me or not, I was guaranteed a certain monthly salary, and if I worked over those hours, he would pay the extra. So it was just a sweetheart deal for me. And it was a lot of fun working with Jim and his people, too. He's also a Fayetteville graduate, as you know, of journalism. So I was very lucky. I was *very* lucky in all my jobs, working with good people.

PB: Did you ever regret that you got a journalism degree and not a broader degree?

You know, a lot of people say, "Oh, you shouldn't stay in journalism, you should"—did you ever think [unintelligible]?

JF: That's a great question because I have thought a lot about it. Your advisor—your counselor in college—all they did, almost without looking, was sign your schedule card, and that was it. You didn't get any counseling or anything like that. So I naturally just took the courses I thought would be fun. If I were doing it over, I would, I think, major in something else—maybe an interdisciplinary—

maybe a combination of history and English—or something a little broader, and then take some journalism courses.

PB: Yes.

JF: Because I can see, especially since I have traveled so much with Curtis—and he has been the one who has awakened me to this history timeline and what's going on all over at the same time. Until that, history was just memorizing dates. But I definitely think I would have pursued a . . .

PB: And that's what you would recommend to somebody else.

JF: Yes, I would definitely recommend that.

PB: Do you think that you have a natural-born talent to write?

JF: I think I do. I think it's a gift. I feel guilty at times because I haven't done as much with it as I feel that I should have. And I haven't really done anything to earn it. I think it's an out-and-out gift. I do.

PB: Yes.

JF: Just like some people are good spellers and some aren't. I was a good speller. I was not good at math.

PB: Being in journalism was an easy “A” then. [Laughs]

JF: Yes. Exactly. Exactly.

PB: Right.

JF: It was the easy way to go.

PB: Yes.

JF: I've written a few things since then, but probably not as much as I should have—although I was looking back the other day at—I keep a notebook—not every

day—but I write in it more when we travel than anything else. It's not anything sophisticated enough to call a journal. It's just a notebook. I was cleaning out some closets the other day and I was amazed at how much I had. Now, I haven't done anything with them. These are just notes that I've scribbled in.

PB: Yes.

JF: And I wrote a short story one time and sent it off to various literary magazines. The University of Arizona published it in the *Arizona Quarterly*. As soon as I got the acceptance letter, I just sort of panicked because all my attention had been on getting this thing published. It was like, "This will be a validation," or something.

PB: Yes.

JF: And once I got the letter that they had accepted it, I thought, "Oh, my God! I'm going to have to do this all over again."

PB: [Laughs]

JF: Which I haven't done.

PB: Do you have children?

JF: I do not have children.

PB: You don't have children. So you've traveled rather extensively.

JF: We've traveled a lot. Three years after we got married, he sold his primary business, which meant that he could do a lot more traveling. He came by his love of travel, honestly, because his mother, Libby Finch, had taken college groups to Europe back in the fifties [1950s] before kids went in gangs with backpacks. And she would take them over—they'd usually go over on a ship and stay for a month or so. She loved to travel, and he loved to travel. So we've done a lot of that.

Considering where I came from, I have been more blessed than almost anybody I know, to be here. You know, this is a long way from the cotton patch.

PB: It certainly is. [Laughs]

JF: And I don't ever forget that.

PB: So you've been here in Little Rock and you've watched the sale of the *Democrat* from Marcus George and Stanley Berry to Walter Hussman [Jr.].

JF: Yes.

PB: You watched the *Democrat* switch from an afternoon to a morning paper. And you watched the newspaper war [between the *Democrat* and the *Arkansas Gazette*]. You watched the lawsuit that Hugh Patterson filed, and then you watched Gannett take over the *Gazette*.

JF: Well, yes, a few—and this is not—this may not be the thing to say. I would say that I'm always sad when a two-paper city loses one of its papers, but I know that's just the way it's going now. I thought the lawsuit was most unfortunate. I thought it was doomed from the start, but I thought one of the things that did the *Gazette* in was the attitude of not only the ownership, but I think of many of the staff members—sort of an arrogance that nothing could destroy them because they were . . .

PB: The *Gazette*.

JF: They were the *Gazette*.

PB: Yes.

JF: Of course, the war was interesting. It was entertaining with John Robert Starr.

But I just thought it was all unfortunate. I'm sad that we don't have two papers. I



think Walter has done a *tremendous* job with the *Democrat*. I really do. And, believe it or not—this may be funny to say—it may be ironic and maybe unexpected, but, believe it or not—I'm not saying this because you're still a friend—but I think one of the best things about that paper is “High Profile.” You might think somebody who wanted to get the brides off the front page would not say that about a “society section,” but I think it's not your typical society section from back in those days. I think it's obviously one of the most read sections in the paper. I think it's one of the best-written, best-photographed, and the emphasis that you put not just on society, but on groups raising money—charities and arts groups—rather than just the social aspect of it, and the “High Profile” interviews you do, I think, are some of the best things that the *Democrat* has ever done. I really do.

PB: Well, thanks. I appreciate that.

JF: Well, I *mean* that. Maybe that seems unexpected from somebody who wanted to take society out of the society news, but there's a difference there. I think Walter has done an *amazing* job with the *Democrat*. I feel kind of like Curtis's mother, who used to say when we'd go to a family dinner on Sunday night at the club, and maybe during the course of the evening two or three people would stop by and lean—this was when Libby was much older—they'd lean down and say, “Mrs. Finch, I'm so-and-so. Remember I went with you to Europe in nineteen-such-and-such.” And she'd say, “Oh, yes,” and they'd go on. At the end of the evening, she'd look up and look around the room, and she'd say, “I don't know *any* of these people!” Sometimes when I look at the *Democrat* bylines and pictures of

columns, I think, "Who *are* all these people? Where did they come from?"

[Laughter]

PB: It's part of the aging process, isn't it?

JF: It is. But I guess we're in the new age now in journalism, where it seems that so many of the columnists and writers at the *Democrat* are not Arkansans. So many are brought in from outside, and I guess that's just the way it is now.

PB: Yes.

JF: But back in the *old* days . . .

PB: The young college graduates come here to get experience.

JF: Yes. But back in the old days, I guess we were all from Arkansas and home-bred. Home grown.

PB: Yes.

JF: And I do detect a little bit of—I'm a little nostalgic in that it seems that so many of the imported kids have no knowledge of the state or the city or our history or our customs or our culture, and so many of them could be written from Peoria [Illinois] or Portland, Maine, or Dayton [Ohio] or Salina [Kansas?]. I miss that about some of the old—I shouldn't say old—some of the former columnists and writers. There seems to be a lack of understanding of where they are.

PB: Yes.

JF: But maybe that's just the way all papers are now. I don't know.

PB: Well, what have I not asked you?

JF: I jotted down some notes because my memory is so bad, and I didn't want to leave anybody out. [Sound of flipping through notes] But I think maybe—oh, yes,

there was another young woman who worked in the women's section my second stint. Her name was Libby Barnett, and she was primarily a food editor. She edited, of course, a lot of "canned" stories—you know how those came in. But you also did local features, too. And she—it was interesting—she went to UALR [University of Arkansas, Little Rock] and she married an exchange student out there from Bangladesh. His name was Mizan Rahman. They married. He has his own civil engineering firm here in Little Rock, and he's on the city planning commission. They've got two kids who are recent *Summa Cum Laude* graduates of places like Duke [University] and other things like that. But she was . . .

PB: Spell his name.

JF: His name, I believe, is M-I-Z-A-N. R-A-H-M-A-N. I run into her there once in a while, and I talk to Mizan, too. He's just a charming man. And she has gone back to Bangladesh with him a few times.

PB: But he has decided to stay here.

JF: Yes. Yes, he's here. And they raised their children here, of course. She was there my second stint, then she left and they opened a restaurant called International Bazaar. Do you remember that restaurant?

PB: Yes.

JF: The first location was Broadway and Seventeenth—something like that. Then they moved to downtown Little Rock. It was one of the first—what would you call it? Of course, it [had] a lot of Indian dishes and things like that.

PB: Yes.

JF: I think they sold it or closed it quite some time ago. She was an interesting

person. I enjoyed working with her. Another one was Carol Cult Robinson. She was a Fayetteville graduate. She was at Fayetteville when I was there, and she was—I don't think she majored in journalism, but she came to work at the *Democrat* in the women's section my second stint, when Mary Dee was the editor. She was primarily a photographer—a fantastic photographer, but she also interviewed people for the women's section and did page layouts and things like that. She was very talented. I remember when she was at Fayetteville—I think she was maybe a Kappa [Kappa Kappa Gamma]—I can't remember. She was voted best dressed—you know, when you had those things. [Laughter] She had a great sense of style, and she was very tall and thin. She was just really interesting. I liked her a lot. She and her husband still live in Little Rock. They have a son who's married and has children now. Later she and her husband adopted a child from either Colombia or Venezuela—Barkley. A really cute girl. Oh, and there was a woman—Mrs. Wright, who worked—she was the official proofreader at the *Democrat* my first stint there. I think her husband was manager of the printing plant. They both seemed ancient to me at the time, but they probably weren't that old. She was a real stickler for proofing and things like that. She was just an interesting character there. Bill Terry, Mary Dee's husband, also worked there. He was wire editor and I think he did some columns, too.

PB: Mary Dee's ex-husband. [Laughs]

JF: Yes. I guess—I'm trying to think if there was someone—I know there were a lot of people who—John Brummett worked in the sports department part-time. I think he might have still been in high school at that time.

PB: At the *Democrat*.

JF: Yes, at the *Democrat*—the first time I was there. I remember because our office was the northwest corner of that second floor. I'm sure it has all changed now. The sports department ran behind us—a bigger section. I would walk through there to get to the ladies' room. It seemed like every time I walked through, John Brummett was sitting there at his desk with this glum expression on his face, doing nothing. And most of the sports people were not doing anything because they were covering games at night. But I remember that he just had this kind of glum presence for such a young kid, I thought. It was a good life. It really was.

PB: Yes.

JF: Well, I can't think of anything . . .

[Tape Stopped]

JF: There was one other thing about how fortunate I've been in my life and the gifts, I think, I've gotten. One of my first memories is watching my dad with his fourth-grade education read the newspaper every day. It was the *Commercial Appeal*, because Leachville was only about ninety miles from Memphis. So Memphis was our center like Little Rock is to most of Arkansas. He loved to read the newspaper, and he would read it word for word. Now, I'm sure he read it very slowly, but he remembered it, and that was an important part of his day. He usually didn't get to read it in the morning because it didn't come until mid-morning, and he was working on the farm. But he would read it when he would come in at night. And my mother was a great reader, too. You said I have made my life, but I think other people make it for you. I think my parents were the

most important people who have made this life for me. When the university started this capital campaign [the University of Arkansas's Campaign for the Twenty-First Century]—this unbelievably successful campaign that they have done—Dave Gearhart called on Curtis and me early on, as he did, I'm sure, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people—and showed us what they were trying to do. And when he left, I was so incensed—I was [unintelligible] Razorbacks [unintelligible] that it just left me feeling cold about the university. But Curtis said, "No, you can't let that keep you from doing something. I think we need to do something." So we endowed a scholarship for English and/or Journalism graduates and named it the Bob and Ruth Shipley Honors Scholarship—for them, because that's where it started. Later Curtis decided that—he said, "Well, you know, we probably need to do something else." So he and his brother, Les, endowed one for their mother, Libby, as a travel abroad scholarship.

PB: Oh, my! That's great!

JF: So we both felt our good life started from our parents, I think.

PB: That's great. That's great.

[Tape Stopped]

[End of Interview]

[Transcribed by Cheri Pearce]

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