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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with

Ralph Patrick
Marietta, Georgia
2 July 2005

Interviewer: Amanda Miller Allen

Amanda Miller Allen: This is an interview with Ralph Patrick conducted on July 2, 2005, by Amanda Miller Allen for the [Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History's] oral history project on the *Arkansas Democrat*. Ralph, thank you for agreeing to be part of the project. For the record, can you state that you have agreed to participate and know the interview is being taped and will be transcribed and donated to the [Special Collections Department in the] Mullins Library at the University of Arkansas [Fayetteville]?

Ralph Patrick: I understand and agree.

AA: State your name, where you live, your current occupation, and please spell your name.

RP: Ralph Patrick. R-A-L-P-H. P-A-T-R-I-C-K. I live at Marietta, Georgia, and I'm retired.

AA: And he says that with a smile. [Laughter] Tell me a little bit about your personal history. Where and when were you born? Who were your parents and grandparents?

RP: I was born on April 3, 1939, in the old Baptist Hospital in Little Rock, Arkansas. My dad, R. M. [Ralph Maurice] Patrick, at the time, was a cookie salesman. He subsequently became a wholesale distributor for the Curtis Candy Company. He had a cute little panel truck with his name on the side of it and a picture of a Baby Ruth candy bar on it. The principal products he sold were Baby Ruths and Butterfingers. During the war [World War II], I don't think it was a matter of selling them, it was a matter of *delivering* them. [Laughs] My mother, Wietske Hoekstra Patrick, had taught school before they were married. She was a housewife. After my dad was a candy salesman, he bought a grocery store in east Little Rock. He and my mother had it. She subsequently went to work as a secretary to the chief of police in Little Rock, and then spent about thirty years in the welfare department. She retired at the age of seventy. The grocery store had closed, and my dad never worked again [laughs] after that. My grandparents—my dad's dad was a tailor. His name was Ralph Waldo Emerson Patrick. My grandmother was a housewife. She was Mary Helen Strayhorn—not connected to Billy Strayhorn, the Duke Ellington collaborator, I guess. My mother's father came from Holland, which was why she was named Wietske Hoekstra. They had about six kids, but she was the only one who had a Dutch name. [Laughs] All the rest of them had American names. Her mother was named Ida Lillian Fullbright, sometimes with one and sometimes with two Ls. Not the senator [former Arkansas senator J. William Fulbright]'s family, apparently. She was a housewife her whole life. I grew up in Little Rock—well, actually, the first six

years of my life were spent in Conway, then when my parents bought the grocery store, we moved back to Little Rock. That's where I grew up and went to school until I went to college.

AA: You probably should spell your mother's name.

RP: W-I-E-T-S-K-E. H-O-E-K-S-T-R-A.

AA: So you went to Little Rock schools and Little Rock High School?

RP: Little Rock Central High School. I was in the last all-white class of Central High School. I graduated in 1957.

AA: That's something. [Laughs]

RP: Yes, I guess so.

AA: And you went to college where?

RP: I started out at what was then Arkansas State Teachers College [now the University of Central Arkansas, Conway]. I went there for a year and then went to UALR [University of Arkansas, Little Rock] for a semester or two, I guess. That's when I, of course, went to work at the *Democrat*. Subsequently, I ended up going back to State Teachers College and graduated from there in 1963, although I had been in the class of 1961. Then I went to the University of Oregon [Eugene] and got a Master's degree in 1964 in English.

AA: All right. Tell me a little bit about your work history. What was your first job?

RP: My very first job?

AA: Your very first job.

RP: [Laughs] My mother got me a job the summer after I was in the tenth grade at the

Vess Bottling Company. She had gone to school with a guy who ran the Vess Bottling Company. He gave me a job. I was making \$18 a week—\$3 a day for six days a week. I worked about three weeks, and I said, “This is ridiculous! This bus fare is eating me up!” [Laughter] So I quit.

AA: What did you do for them? Did you just [work on] the assembly line?

RP: No, actually, primarily what I would do would be to move dirty bottles around, or sometimes I would go out with a guy who was delivering and help him. I don’t think the building is not there anymore. It was kind of between Robinson Auditorium and the old state capitol back toward the Arkansas River—back in there. I think Conway Street was the name of it. But that was my first job. [Laughs] I didn’t have another job until the summer after I graduated from high school. My mother got me that job, too. She was working for the city. She got me a job on the Little Rock Street Department. A really good friend of mine—in fact, he was in my wedding—his father was a fire captain. Captain Strosahl. S-T-R-O-S-A-H-L. He got his son a job and we were working together on the street department and getting dirty every day, just digging ditches and stuff like that. Mike Strosahl got so fed up with it that he quit and joined the Marine Corps.

[Laughter] I stuck it out all summer.

AA: Do you remember what they paid you?

RP: No. It was probably about \$40 a week, which, by that time was about minimum wage. After my freshman year of college, I worked a semester in the garment industry [laughs]—a place that made dresses for Sears, Roebuck [and Company].

It was down by the old train station. I replaced a guy who had gotten drafted, I think. My job was that I was a shader. There were bolts of cloth all over. They looked like they were the same shade—they may not have been. I was to mark them so they could be separated by shades so the guys who cut the patterns could—I wasn’t very good at that, either. [Laughs] I remember one guy—the manager of the plant came down with this dress that had been put together, and all parts of it were different shades of green. [Laughter] I was going to night school at UALR [University of Arkansas at Little Rock]. I said, “I’ve got to go back to school. This is ridiculous.” My parents had bought a little insurance policy, and I cashed that out. I went to UALR full-time that next semester. The semester was ending when I got a call from Bill Whitworth, who was working at the *Democrat* on the Sunday magazine. He had known that I was interested in journalism. We lived just right down the street from each other when we were growing up on Rock Street in Little Rock. I actually interviewed before that. My mother also [laughs] arranged for me to—I had met the *Democrat*’s police reporter, Rodney Worthington, I think it was. He got me an interview at the *Democrat* with the city editor. I remember meeting the city editor. He said, “Ralph Patrick. You’ve got two first names.” The city editor was Marcus George. And I thought, “You silly ass!” [Laughter] Anyway, he gave me an assignment as a tryout, something out at UALR. I went out there, and nobody at UALR was interested in doing a story about this, so nothing ever came of that. But then Bill called me about this—he had dropped out of school and he was going back to school. He arranged for me

to have an interview with Roberta Martin, who was editor of the Sunday magazine at the time. This was a job that had typically been held by someone with not much experience. It was a feature-writing job on the Sunday magazine. Before Bill Whitworth had held the job, a number of other people—Phyllis Brandon had that job for a while, I think, and Wayne Cranford. When I took the job—and Bill, too, and, I guess, the other people, too—you wrote features for the Sunday magazine, but you also wrote the television column, which gives you kind of an impression of how important television was to the newspapers at that time. In fact, the owners of the *Democrat* owned the CBS affiliate, [so] they had to have a TV column, I guess. In those days there were no VCRs [video cassette recorders], so you didn't get any tapes of anything to preview. You wrote the column based on handouts you got from the three networks [CBS, ABC, and NBC].

AA: So every show was wonderful. [Laughter]

RP: Well, at least they thought so. What I did, and I think other people have probably done the same thing—you tried to be clever, but ended up being a smart-aleck. And, again, how much importance [laughs] they gave to it was—the first week I did it, I would just turn the copy in to the city desk for the daily column. [After] about three days [of] doing that with that consistency, the editor came over and told me to type my byline on there every day so they wouldn't have to do it. They gave me a byline every day for something that probably didn't deserve it. That was a good job, though. Roberta Martin was the editor, and Will Counts was the

assistant editor. He was a *great* photographer. He shot all those famous pictures you see from [the] 1957 [integration crisis] at Central High School.

AA: Yes.

RP: In fact, he was instrumental in putting together years later the—[the photo of] the white girl shouting at the black female student—he put them together and produced a book. Will was the photographer, and he also laid out the magazine. We traveled all over the state doing stories—rice at [laughs] Stuttgart. We went up to Fayetteville a couple of times and did a story about Gaebale. [Editor's note: Gaebale was a spring carnival put on by the students, and was very popular for a while.]

AA: That sounds like a great job.

RP: It was a great job. I was [about] twenty years old. It was a great job. It was one of the two best jobs I ever had in this business. The other one was also at the *Democrat* when, for a short time, I was a general-assignment reporter on the city desk. That was a great job, too. But I did that for, gosh, I don't know, a year or a year and a half. Then I went back to school again. [Laughs] I worked the following summer on the Sunday magazine, except on Mondays I was a relief police reporter, at which I was a bust. [Laughs] I had absolutely no training to do that at that point in time. The police just kind of ignored me. I would sit in the press room and listen to the call box. Anytime something sounded interesting, I'd go talk to the radio guy. Sometimes he'd tell me what was going on and sometimes he wouldn't. [Laughter] But that was an interesting time.

AA: Who was the full-time police reporter then? Do you know?

RP: I think it was Bob Sallee.

AA: So it was Bob Sallee, even then?

RP: Yes, I think—I'm sure it was. I think Bob came there from Fort Smith while I was on my first tour on the Sunday magazine. He was the police reporter.

AA: So he hadn't quite developed the reputation of being there forever and knowing everything at that point. [Laughs]

RP: Not quite. There were some people there who had been there forever. [Laughs] It was an interesting group of people, from Marcus George on down. Gene Herrington was the managing editor. I remember how much I made then. When I first went to that, and then, I guess, the following summer, I made \$47.50 a week for six days a week. Of course, we tried to slide out early on Saturday. I don't think anybody was still there by lunchtime after the second city edition was . . .

AA: Did they pay expenses to have you travel?

RP: Oh, yes. It was about a nickel a mile. We rarely spent the night somewhere, but they paid the expenses. And they paid the salary in cash every Friday. You'd go down to the business office and there would be a little brown envelope. They did that, I think, until Mr. [K. August] Engel died. [Laughter]

AA: Well, I once heard that Mr. Engel himself used to do that. Do you know if that's true?

RP: I never saw him do it. His nephew who was the business manager did it. He had two nephews. Marcus George was one of them. And Stanley [Berry]—I can't

remember it now.

AA: I should remember it, too. I can't.

RP: Yes. He became the publisher. When Mr. Engel died, Stanley became the publisher and Marcus became the editor. That was in the late 1960s. So I finally graduated college in January of 1963, and Woodie and I—my wife—W-O-O-D-I-E [Martha Pryor] knew we were going to get married in March. We also knew that we were going to go to Oregon in September for me to go to graduate school. So I went back to the *Democrat*, and, lo and behold, they paid me \$70 a week after I graduated from college.

AA: Oh, you nearly doubled your money. [Laughs]

RP: Yes, almost. For the first month or two after I went back to work, I was on general assignment. I loved that. That's the best job I've ever had because every day when I went to work I had no idea what I was going to do. I'd get to work, and Marcus or an assistant city editor would give me an assignment, and I'd go do it. I'd go report, come back, write it, and they'd put it in the newspaper.

[Laughs]

AA: And they didn't expect you to come up with your own ideas?

RP: No, they really didn't. A lot of what I did, though, would have some sort of official tinge to it. I remember writing about a bond issue and going to press conferences about the bond issue, and covering the bond election. The *Democrat* responded a lot to people who would call in and say, "This is a bad thing going on out here. You need to send somebody out," and they'd do it. I did a lot of that

with Don Brown, a photographer—another really fine photographer. We had a lot of fun doing that. Then they sent me to North Little Rock, which, in the long run, turned out to be a good thing, I guess, because I started learning about North Little Rock. When I eventually went back to North Little Rock working for the *North Little Rock Times*, I had kind of a basis there that I would not have had if I hadn't spent six months covering North Little Rock for the *Democrat*.

AA: Were you covering City Hall?

RP: Yes, City Hall. The press room was in City Hall. In fact, there were *two* press rooms. The *Democrat* had one on the first floor that had been a major part of the police department before they built a new police department. And the *Gazette* had one up on the second floor, where they could actually see the mayor come and go [laughs]. It was kind of a small cubicle that held the *Gazette*'s reporter and a woman who took—I don't know what kind of news [laughs]—they'd always had one, so they still had one then. The *Democrat* had had one before, too, and I think she retired and they just didn't replace her. I don't know about that.

AA: Was Casey [W. L.] Laman mayor then?

RP: Casey Laman was the mayor. He was about as colorful a guy as I've ever encountered. [Laughter]

AA: He was still colorful when I covered him [laughter] twenty years later.

RP: Yes.

AA: I guess it wouldn't be twenty years later—it would only be ten years later because

that would have been 1973.

RP: Yes, and this was in 1963.

AA: Yes. So you covered North Little Rock for six months, then you took off to get your graduate degree?

RP: Yes. I went to Oregon for a couple of reasons, I think. One is—we hadn't been married very long. Both sets of our parents were around in Little Rock, and we kind of wanted to get out on our own a little bit. Also, on the English faculty there was the brother of the fellow who had been the head of the English department at State Teachers College. [Laughs] I mean, I know that's a tenuous connection and not a very serious reason for doing it, but it sounded good at the time, so we went to Oregon. Woodie worked for the welfare department and I went to school. After a year we went back to Arkansas. [Laughs]

AA: This was in Eugene?

RP: Yes.

AA: Okay. Did you have a graduate assistantship?

RP: No, I didn't. Actually, my grades as an undergraduate wouldn't have been enough for me to do that, really. Also, we had the idea we wanted to do this in one year. Everybody who had to work there—it took them two years to get it.

AA: So you got a Master's in English?

RP: Yes. I really thought I was going to end up teaching English on the college level. I graduated in August, which is a terrible time to try to find jobs in September. I couldn't get anybody interested before I actually had the degree in hand. So, by

the time I had the degree in hand, there weren't any openings in September at the places I applied—mostly on the West Coast, for some reason. Well, the reason is because the English department at Oregon had more clout along the West Coast, and, in fact, gave me some ideas about places to apply. It didn't work out, so we went back to Arkansas. Woodie was pregnant. I don't know what I did about looking for a job. I don't even remember, but I went to see John Ward, whom I had known at the *Democrat*. He had been a reporter at the *Democrat*, and he had gone to work for Winthrop Rockefeller in kind of a PR [public relations] job when he made his first run for office [as governor of Arkansas]. He put me to work. I had a beard, and the second day when I came to work, he said that I was going to have to shave the beard. But he *paid* me to shave it. [Laughs] Rockefeller was already being criticized for having all these hippies working for him, or something. I don't know. So I worked for Rockefeller's first campaign. I had just signed up for the campaign, and at the end of the campaign, I didn't know what I was going to do. I was hired to be a researcher because he knew he was going to run again. So from November to January or February, I clipped things out of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* and the Little Rock newspapers and sent them to him on the mountain [Rockefeller's private ranch on Petit Jean Mountain]. I don't know if he ever saw any of them, but . . .

AA: What were the subjects you were looking at?

RP: Education, industry—all the fascinating things that politicians always talk about and don't do much about.

AA: So you weren't scoping out opponents?

RP: No, no, no. I wouldn't have been very good at that. [Laughs] I mean, we *knew* who the opponents were going to be. It turned out to be Jim Johnson. [Laughs] I think it was Jim Johnson, wasn't it? Yes. Anyway, then somebody told me that there was an opening at the *North Little Rock Times*. So I called Bob McCord and went over to talk to him. He hired me, so I was back in the newspaper business.

AA: He was editor then?

RP: He was editor of the *North Little Rock Times*. He had been Roberta Martin's predecessor as the editor of the Sunday magazine at the *Democrat*. He had gone to work at the *Democrat* when he was fifteen years old, or something. I had known him and, actually, before I went back to graduate school, I got to know him in North Little Rock. He offered me a job then, but I was set on going to graduate school and I told him that, so nothing came of it then.

AA: So you went to work as a reporter at the *North Little Rock Times*?

RP: Yes. [Laughs] The title was managing editor. [Laughter] I started to work there at \$125 a week. The *Democrat* called me—Marcus had called me about a job, but they couldn't pay me \$125 at that time. I remember one of the photographers at the *Democrat* asked me how much I was going to make at the *Times*—and I told him. He was making more than that. He had been there forever, but he was astounded that I was going to make that much money. And that was no money at all. I think poor old McCord had to give himself a \$5-a-week raise so he'd be

making more money than I was. [Laughter] I enjoyed doing that. I had one person working for me. As the managing editor, there was one person—a part-timer, Patsy McCowan . . .

AA: Oh, my goodness. I haven't thought about Patsy in years.

RP: She wrote the obits [obituaries] and did—I don't know what all. I guess she graduated and then worked full-time. Then Mr. Engel died, and I think the day after he died [laughs] they called McCord and wanted to know if he wanted to come over and edit the editorial page at the *Democrat*. I became editor for the *North Little Rock Times*.

AA: And how old were you then?

RP: Twenty-seven or twenty-eight, I think, because I know when I went back to the *Democrat* as a city editor a year and a half later, I wasn't thirty yet.

AA: Okay. So as editor you had a managing editor working for you and one employee? [Laughter]

RP: We didn't have a managing editor anymore. Actually, I had a guy shooting pictures—he shot most of the pictures, but he also worked in the composing room. But I was able to hire somebody, and I tried to hire Bill Eddins. He was just getting out of Hendrix [College, Conway, Arkansas], and he went to work at the *Democrat* instead. Then I hired Ralph—geez—a little, short guy who had a physical problem.

AA: Oh, I don't remember him.

RP: Oh, what was Ralph's [last] name? [Editor's note: His last name is Baldwin.]

He's a news editor in Jackson, Mississippi, now. Oh, well. Anyway, I hired him. He worked for me about a year, I guess, then he went to work for some city agency in the PR department. I did that for a while, and after I [went] back to the *Democrat*, he came over to the *Democrat*. Patsy McCowan came over to the *Democrat*.

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

AA: So what years were you at the *Democrat*?

RP: I first went there in 1959 and worked there, I guess, until about 1961. Then I went back the next summer. I worked the spring and summer of 1963. Then I went back in 1969 as a city editor and stayed until 1979, I guess. There were a lot of changes, but after Mr. Engel died, you might imagine there were a lot of changes. [Laughs] They brought Gene Foreman up from Pine Bluff [Arkansas] to be the news editor, but I think everybody knew he was going to be the next managing editor. In fact, he became the managing editor. He and I had some conversations. He had tried to hire me once at Pine Bluff. I had relatives in Pine Bluff. I had spent a lot of time in Pine Bluff, and I knew I didn't want to live in Pine Bluff. After he became the managing editor, he and I had a lot of conversations over the telephone. He would call me up at night and we would talk for hours about the *Democrat* and what all had happened at the *Democrat*, and that sort of thing. So they decided to make a change. I went back to the *Democrat* in 1969.

AA: And you were hired as city editor.

RP: Yes.

AA: And how many reporters were working for you?

RP: [Laughs] Not a lot. Maybe a dozen, if that many. It fluctuated. I think we pretty much covered the bases as far as the traditional beats. But Foreman had the idea, which is kind of common now, that the subject matter ought to be a beat rather than a geographical place that the reporter went to every day. We started out trying to do that really dramatically. For instance, the City Hall reporter, theoretically, was responsible for the city hall in Little Rock and North Little Rock. That didn't work out too well, as you might imagine. The best example of it, I think, probably, was what we called Health, Education and Welfare. The person who did that the longest while I was there was Martin Kirby. Martin covered both school boards and the welfare departments and, I guess, the health departments—but, primarily, education and welfare, and he was pretty busy at it.

[Laughs]

AA: Oh, I'm sure he was.

RP: And he got out of doing it. [Laughs] He really became kind of an investigative reporter. He did a lot of fine work. One of the banks went through a real crisis when it was purchased by a fellow, a really high-profile fellow. Then the bank got into trouble. Martin was covering that better than anybody. Martin could get on the telephone to the secretary of state's office in Delaware, which is where everybody incorporated their business, for reasons I've never been quite clear

about. [Laughs] He'd find out all sorts of stuff that we'd put in the newspaper. I remember that there was going to be a really important meeting of the stockholders for this bank. I think it was Union Bank. And that they were going to try to oust the president. It was going to be closed to the press, so I suggested to Marcus George, the editor, that we buy Martin a share of stock, and we did. They were going to keep Martin out of the meeting, [but] he presented his share of stock [laughs], and they had to let him in. And since they let him in, they let everybody in to cover it. But it was worth the \$19, or whatever. I don't know whether the *Democrat* still owns that share of stock or not! [Laughs] Martin did a really fine series, I think, on Cummins Prison [16,000-acre correctional facility located twenty-eight miles south of Pine Bluff, off Highway 65 near the town of Grady in Lincoln County, Arkansas], that ran forever and ever. It was well done.

AA: Who else worked for you when you first came back?

RP: When I first came back, there were still a few people—George Douthit was the one who was covering the capitol. Bobbie Forster . . .

AA: Bobbie was there forever. She was there when I came to work there ten years later.

RP: Yes. And I can't remember who all—but the number of people who I knew from when I worked there as a kid. It was kind of an awkward situation in many respects, that a person I had first known when I was a twenty-year-old kid as the youngest guy on the staff at that time, I guess—and then I came back at the age of twenty-nine as the city editor and I was the boss. It didn't sit well with some

people, and I can understand that. There were a couple of guys in the photography department, the chief photographer, Owen Gunter, and a man named Mr. Moon, who was a little, short, thin fellow, who had been there since World War II. The interesting thing about Mr. Moon, I always thought, was people would make—this was while I was still working on the Sunday magazine the first time I worked there—people made fun of him for some reason. They didn't think he was that great a photographer, and there wasn't any reason to think he ever had been. He kind of got fed up with it, so he brought in some work that proved that during World War II—he showed that fact vividly—he had been assigned to the Signal Corps of the army. One of his assignments—I think it was at Yalta—he went in and shot all these pictures [laughs] of the Big Three at Yalta, or wherever it was. [Editor's note: The Big Three at Yalta was the conference held in February 1945 when U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and Soviet Union Premier Joseph Stalin discussed the surrender of Germany and the post-war division of Europe.] Some famous pictures—we ended up doing a little story about him in the Sunday magazine with some of these pictures that he had shot during World War II. I can't remember his first name, either, but I remember his wife's name was Minnie. Minnie Moon.

[Laughter]

- AA: I can't remember his first name, either, because we always called him Mr. Moon.
- RP: I know. Everybody always—Glenn! Glenn Moon. That's what it was.
- AA: It was.

RP: It was Glenn. There were a couple of other reporters there, but most of the people had come in that ten-year hiatus, or whatever. Well, not ten years—a seven-year hiatus.

AA: So you had about a dozen reporters?

RP: I think about a dozen. Something like that.

AA: At that time, was the newsroom divided into the society section and the business section and the city desk, or was it all together?

RP: No, at that time there was still—the library separated the second floor. The society—women's section—was in the northwest corner of the second floor. Coming along the western wall next was sports, and then there was the darkroom and photography. But the library was a separate room with four walls. And the city side was over on the east wall. Editorial—the managing editor's office was in the northeast corner, and along the north wall the cartoonist and an editorial writer, I guess. McCord's office, at that time—he was still editor of the editorial page—was along the east wall, and Van Tyson, who was writing editorials—he was next, I think, and then it was the managing editor's office. And the rest of the room was the city side.

AA: Who was editor then? Was it Marcus George?

RP: Marcus was the editor. Gene Foreman was managing editor, and Bob McCord was editing the editorial page. Roberta Martin was the women's editor. No, she was still the editor of the Sunday magazine, then they killed the Sunday magazine and she became the women's editor. Oh, yes, business was—I don't remember

where—I don't remember there being a separate business department. It must be [Van Tyson] at that time. I know Randy [Tardy], at some point, came on to write business, and he—Bobbie Forster took a long break—I think one or both of her parents were sick, and she stayed home with them for months. And when she came back, she became the business editor, and Randy was a reporter, as I remember the situation. I'm trying to think—Bob Sallee was still there. He was back on the police beat again.

AA: I didn't know he ever did anything else.

RP: Yes. I succeeded him in North Little Rock. He had been the North Little Rock reporter before I was in 1963, and had been for a couple of years. He and Laman just did not get along at all. I think both of them had good reasons for that.

[Laughter] I think they had sent him to the county courthouse. And, you know, there used to be kind of a succession. You'd start out as a general-assignment reporter, then you'd become a police reporter, then you'd go to North Little Rock, then you'd go to the county courthouse or City Hall. And if you lived long enough, you'd go to the state capitol.

AA: Yes.

RP: When I first went to work, George Douthit, of course, was at the state capitol, but they also had another reporter named R. B. Mayfield. I don't know what happened to R. B. in the meantime. [Laughs] When the legislature was in session, they would send Bobbie Forster out there, and she would cover one house [of the legislature], and I guess R. B. would cover the other. George

Douthit would cover the governor's office, and he was still covering the governor's office when I was the city editor. He was covering the governor's office and other stuff. He covered the supreme court every Monday morning. Every morning the decisions would come down, and that was something that—one thing we could always get first. [Laughs] Tucker Steinmetz was my assistant city editor. He had already been working there, and he had worked with Foreman in Pine Bluff [as well].

AA: Was Larry Gordon at that time over the copy desk, or did he come later?

RP: No, he came later. Larry, I think, actually replaced Patsy McCowan in North Little Rock. He had worked first at the *Gazette*, then he went to work for John Thompson in North Little Rock. Then he came over to the *Democrat*. I think that he might have worked first on the sports copy desk at the *Democrat*, but I can't prove that. [Laughs] Who else was there?

AA: Talk about some of the best reporters you had during your time as city editor, and some of the stories.

RP: Well, I've already talked about Martin Kirby. He was a fine reporter and a good writer. Foreman had hired him. Foreman became a managing editor and called up a friend of his and said, "I need a genius." [Laughs] So this friend of his recommended Martin, who was down in New Orleans doing God knows what. He came to work for us. I always remember Foreman said, "Martin Kirby is what happens when you send a journalist to medical school," because Martin had gone to Johns Hopkins [University] [laughs] for an undergraduate and graduate degree,

I think. [Laughs] One of the finest writers we had, of course, was James Scudder. The late James Scudder was a Methodist minister, actually. When he came to work for us, he had been managing that dinner theater out in southwest Little Rock. He had a dramatic flair and had written a little thin book of poetry. He was given a week's tryout, I think. And before the week was over, we knew we wanted to hire that guy, and we did. Al May, who was one of the fine reporters, still says, I think, that James wrote one of the best leads he ever saw, on the obit[uary] on that nut up in Eureka Springs that had the Passion Play—Gerald L. K. Smith. Anyway, he went up and did a piece that was wonderful. Bill Husted came to work from, I believe, Russellville. [Laughs] You know, we had these mailboxes and everybody had their names on them. Apparently, Bill's clippings at some point called him William Husted and other points Gordon Husted—William Gordon [Husted]. [Laughs] The week before he was to come, Foreman was trying to figure out what to put on his mailbox, so he just put, I think, W. G., or something. I don't know. Anyway, he ended up being Bill. Bill turned out to be a very talented writer and reporter. He and Gary . . .

AA: Rice.

RP: Gary Rice—did some great work on this poor slob [laughs] who had escaped from prison and moved to Arizona, I think. [Editor's note: the fugitive's name was Alvin Tyger] He started a new life under a new name and made the mistake of coming back to Arkansas over a holiday, or something, to see his family or somebody, and somebody blew the whistle on him—they told the authorities

where he was living in Arizona. He apparently lived an exemplary life out there. He had a family and everything, but he was brought back. They wanted to bring him back to Arkansas to finish out his sentence. I can't remember the guy's name, but Bill and Gary did all the writing about that.

AA: Didn't he want to turn himself in to the *Democrat*?

RP: He *did* turn himself in to the *Democrat*! [Laughs]

AA: That's what I seem to recall.

RP: He had a sponsor—a guy who was a friend from out there. The deal was they were going to fly from, I guess, Phoenix to Little Rock, and he was going to turn himself in. But when the plane landed in Little Rock, they weren't on it.

[Laughs] They had been on it when it left—they had gotten off at Dallas and rented a car. His friend had been in contact with me. I had arranged for him—he was going to need a haircut and a—so I got him an appointment at a barbershop under my name to get a haircut so he would look okay and all. And they didn't show up when they were supposed to. It was early in the morning. I got a phone call from this guy, and he said, "We're going to come in to the *Democrat* and give ourselves"—he was going to give himself up there, and, "When we get there, you can call them." So I agreed. I wouldn't call anybody until the guys were actually in the building. And they *did* get into the building through the back door, I think. Bill or Gary went out the front door for something, and sitting right in front of the building were two guys from the state police. It turned out that it was just a coincidence. It didn't have anything to do with this stuff. Anyway, they came

into the building—and I don't know why we ended up in McCord's office. By this time, McCord was editor of the paper. McCord just freaked out. He said, "You've got this *felon* in my office! This *fugitive*! You've got to get him out of here." [Laughs] About that time, the guy accompanying the fugitive passed out on the floor. [Laughter] I don't remember the details. We got the guy up, I think, somehow. Anyway, I ended up calling the state authorities, whoever it was, and saying, "So-and-so is here in the office." And they came and got him. Then they took him back to jail. That was probably in the late summer or early fall. And I had this bright idea that he should see his family at Thanksgiving. [Laughs] So I talked the authorities at the *Democrat* into paying airfare for his wife and however many kids to come see him at Thanksgiving. I remember there was a controversy about whether they were actually going to get to see him. I think they did. And I think he eventually served out his time. But, again, Bill and Gary wrote a lot of interesting stories about that.

AA: There was also, I recall, another fugitive story—a couple of guys who were killers. I cannot remember their names, but they went on a little killing spree across Arkansas. Ruiz and . . . [Editor's note: Paul Ruiz and Earl Van Denton were convicted for murdering two law enforcement officers in 1977 and were executed in 1997.]

RP: That sounds familiar, but I forget.

AA: Maybe that was after you left. Maybe that was . . .

RP: It might have been. I don't know.

AA: Ruiz and somebody else.

RP: Another big killing that I remember was in my first—no, it was in 1963, when I was working North Little Rock. I got a call before I left one Saturday morning from Rod Powers, who was assistant city editor. He said, “What have you got on the cop shooting?” [I said,] “I don’t have anything on the cop shooting. What are you talking about?” [Laughs] Well, it turned out that the night before, two guys had gotten into a hassle at a private club. They had two women with them. They started out east of North Little Rock. Two cops stopped them, and one cop ended up dead. I can’t remember that guy’s name, either, because he was in and out of court for years. He also escaped and was found out in Nevada somewhere. But the thing about—by the time I got to work, Bob Sallee had it all under control for that afternoon’s newspaper, and they sent me over to the police department to see if there was anything else. Nothing was going on, so Mr. Moon and I went out to where it happened on the England Highway [reference to US 165], I think, between Little Rock and England. There were shell casings still there on the ground, and I picked up some of them, and [kept them] for years. [Laughs] It was stupid of me, but it was stupid of the cops for them [the casings] still to be there.

AA: Yes.

RP: That fellow that they named as the shooter was convicted, and when I was working in North Little Rock at the *Times*, he got a second trial. I remember covering that trial at the Pulaski County Courthouse, and he got convicted again.

[Laughs] Somehow he found God while in prison. He had a lot of people supporting him. He got out at some point. He escaped and walked away from a work detail or something. I don't know. But he ended up in Nevada. I wish I could remember his name. He had three names. [Laughs] Somebody will remember him. I'm having difficulty with names.

AA: So you went back to work there in 1969.

RP: Yes.

AA: How long did you work with Gene Foreman? He left soon thereafter, didn't he?

RP: A couple of years. I don't remember exactly, but it seems like he left, maybe, in 1971.

AA: I know he left before I came to the paper, and I came there in 1973.

RP: Yes. I just don't remember. He first went to *Newsday* before he went to Philadelphia. I don't know. This fellow didn't work for me directly *ever*, I guess, but when I went to work there he was a columnist and he did work for me a little later on, I guess. The best writer they ever had there was named Bob Lancaster. He was the best writer in town, as far as I was concerned, and still is. He wrote a column about three days a week, I think—maybe more. On the front page—on the left-hand side of the front page. On Mondays that space was supposed to be taken up by a beat reporter—something about the beat—“What a way to get into the paper!” or something like that.

AA: Was there quite a bit of competition to get that space?

RP: No! [Laughter]

- AA: You had to brow-beat people! [Laughs]
- RP: You had to remind them it was their turn. [Laughter] It wasn't as bad as getting answers for the "Answer, Please" column, which was always a—everybody—and I did, too—I was as bad about this when I was a reporter as anybody else, I guess. There was a certain amount of space to fill there every day [giving] answers—you know, people who write in. I would not be surprised to know that some of the questions were formulated by the people who wrote the answers.
- AA: [Laughs] Make up a question to an answer you know.
- RP: [Laughter] That would not surprise me to learn that.
- AA: I recall you had a quota. I think you had to answer one a week, or something like that.
- RP: I think it was something like that. Yes. And after—I think McCord instigated this—one of the greatest things they ever did, as far as I was concerned, was to hire a person who did nothing but that, and nobody else had to do it.
- AA: And that was Julie Baldridge.
- RP: That was Julie Baldridge. She was the first one. That's right. Yes. That's right.
- AA: And the column got changed to "Ask Julie," didn't it? [Editor's note: It remained "Answer, Please."]
- RP: I think so. I think it did. And she had a successor, Kathy Flynn, a little, short, dark-haired woman. I don't know what Julie did, but . . .
- AA: She went off to work for the attorney general, didn't she? Or one of the state government people.

RP: Yes. When I went into the magazine business—this was in 1979—she was working for Bill Clinton.

AA: Oh, I think she went to work for Bill Clinton when he was attorney general.

RP: Yes.

AA: Then she followed him on.

RP: That's right. Yes.

AA: Who were some of the characters?

RP: When I first went to work there in 1959, there were people there who had been there a long time—I guess, since the late—there were World War II veterans. There are still quite a few World War II veterans working now. Marcus was one of them. One of my favorite characters was Bud Lemke. Bud Lemke's father [Walter J. Lemke] was the head of the journalism department at the University of Arkansas [Fayetteville] for years and years. Most of those guys and a lot of those people at the *Gazette* had gone to school under him in Fayetteville. Bud was the county courthouse reporter for the *Democrat* when I went to work there. I don't know this first hand, but I've been told that Bud's first love was the saxophone, and if he'd had his way, he would have been a saxophone player in a big band. Well, there weren't any more big bands to speak of. [Laughs] I'm not even sure that's exactly true, but it makes sense. But Bud liked to drink beer. Bud liked to drink beer every day. [Laughter]

AA: For breakfast! [Laughs]

RP: Every morning, I would watch him walk across the room to the . . .

[End of Tape 1, Side 2]

[Beginning of Tape 2, Side 2]

RP: . . . walk across the newsroom to a water fountain. [Laughs] Boy, he drank a lot of water. He always looked to me like he was walking on eggs. [Laughs] He was very deliberate about the way he moved around the room. One of my favorite stories about him is—this, you have to remember, was in the days before we had ethics. During the Christmas season, particularly—and this went on for years—but the utilities, for instance, would have Christmas parties for the press. For about two weeks in mid-December, you could eat [for] free and stay drunk for about two weeks without trying really hard. Another party was the party on the Sunday before the [horse] racing season started every year at Hot Springs. Oaklawn [Race Track] would have a press party. Well, the one in 1963 was right before Woodie and I got married. She and I went to the party, and I introduced her to everybody at the *Democrat*, including Bud Lemke. That was on Sunday. Well, on Monday, I found myself coming back for breakfast at Walgreen's [drug store] with Bud Lemke. In those days—this is unbelievable—for thirty-nine cents you could get an egg, a strip of bacon and a piece of toast—and grits or hash browns—for thirty-nine cents. Coffee was extra. And they also had on the menu—on the menu it said, "English muffin," and they never had an English muffin. [Laughter] Anyway, Bud and I were walking back from breakfast, and I said something about my fiancé. He said, "Oh, you're getting *married*?"

[Laughter]

AA: Total recall! [Laughs]

RP: Yes. John Ward was something of a character, too. He was the main general-assignment reporter, I guess, at the time. He did a lot of pieces about medical breakthroughs out at the med[ical] center [reference to the University of Arkansas Medical School]. One day he was talking, or was in the group of people in which the food writer at that time [was there]. She made some statement that she couldn't cook, or she couldn't do something in the kitchen. And John said, "You can't *cook*?" And she said, "No, can you *operate*?" [Laughter] I remember that! Gosh. I remember John Robert Starr from then. In those days, the AP [Associated Press] daytime bureau was on the second floor of the *Democrat*. He was covering politics, I guess. He was a young man then. [Laughs] Nobody ever knew, or I didn't know, or most people didn't know—I think he kept his opinions to himself in those days, or pretty much. Many years later, Orval Faubus taught him how to lie. [Laughter] We printed that in the magazine. Martin Kirby, of course, was a character. [Laughs] I'm trying to think of the older people. You know, the *Democrat* was always trying to do exposés of gambling in Hot Springs and liquor abuses and all that kind of stuff. There was a private club called the Playboy Club on Second Street, to which I occasionally went. This was before I went to work at the *Democrat*. It was actually owned by a guy who—I don't know whether he still worked at UPI [United Press International] at the time or not—Bernie Brown. He had been a UPI reporter. [The club] was jointly-owned by him and a guy who was in the [U.S.] Marine Reserve, only he worked full-time

in the Marine Reserve. I was in the Marine Reserve. One Sunday morning there was this big exposé about this private club [written] by John Ward. It started out talking about this obviously underage young man sitting at the bar. [Laughs] So when I went to work at the *Democrat* and they were introducing me—I knew John Ward's wife, but I didn't know him. She introduced me to him, and he said, "Oh, I know *you*. You were the guy sitting at the bar that night. We *were* going to put your name in the paper, but we decided not to." [Laughter] Shortly thereafter, the club got closed down and the guy in the Marine Reserve would always tell me I was responsible for it.

AA: And you were underage at that time.

RP: I was underage at that point. Yes. I probably wasn't the only one. It wasn't hard [laughs] to get in. Right across from the *Gazette* was the Press Club, which was a private club where people went to drink.

AA: When Gene Foreman left the paper, is that when Robert McCord became managing editor, or did he become editor then?

RP: No, he didn't become editor until Walter Hussman [Jr.] bought the paper.

AA: Okay.

RP: He was still at the editorial page. Marcus called me in and told me that he didn't think I was old enough or had enough experience to be the managing editor. And it took them a couple of weeks to find—well, not *find* somebody—got whatever deal they made with Jerry McConnell. Jerry McConnell came back to the *Democrat*. He had been at the *Democrat* years before, and came back as a

managing editor.

AA: How did you feel about that?

RP: I felt like I probably was old enough and had enough experience [laughs], but that's just the way it was. It probably turned out—it *did* turn out to be a good thing, at least in one respect, and I'm sure Jerry thinks of many more. And there are probably many more, but the most obvious thing to me was the way Jerry was able to handle the labor problem at the time. At the time, there was an effort to unionize the newsroom.

AA: That happened right around the time that Walter Hussman [Jr.] bought the paper.

RP: Yes. Well, it was going on *before* Walter Hussman [Jr.], and had been going on. He bought the paper knowing it was going on. He knew what to do about it. I don't think there had been much effort to deal with it. It really kind of started out before—well, it *did*—it started out before Foreman left. A petition was circulated by reporters and sub-editors—I remember Mary Lowe Kennedy was actually the one who presented it—about some things that they thought ought to be done. Of course, pay was one of them, and that sort of thing. But there were some really simple things, like they needed to paint the women's restroom. And, in fact, they got the women's restroom painted. We had a meeting over at one of the hotels one afternoon—everybody. [Laughs] It started out with Marcus telling one of his terrible jokes. I don't know why he did that, but I saw him do it afterwards, too. He started out by telling this terrible joke about, "How do you make a dead baby float? You take a dead baby and two scoops of ice cream." You can imagine the

reaction that people had to *that*. I mean, I'll never forget that!

AA: That's quite an ice-breaker! [Laughs]

RP: I'll never forget that as long as I live! I'll forget people's names, but I'll never forget that. Anyway, they presented this petition. They said, "We'll do what we can do." I remember Foreman was still there when that happened. He and Marcus and McCord, I think, were the three—well, maybe even Stanley Berry. That's Stanley's last name. Maybe even Stanley was there. Anyway, it kind of grew from there. And, in fact, I think—I don't know whether it was a guy from the [Newspaper] Guild or from the Teamsters. Anyway, they got involved with the union officials. You know, this had happened back in the 1940s at the *Gazette* and the *Democrat* [and] the publishers beat it down then. So that was still going on when Walter bought the paper. From that time until the [union] election, most of Jerry's efforts were involved in dealing with that problem in the newsroom. I remember we had several meetings in the basement of his house about how to go through each person on the staff—how do you think they're going to vote and—and there was a big hassle over Scudder. He was an assistant city editor. Well, both sides thought he—no, management thought he shouldn't vote, and the other side thought he should.

AA: Yes.

RP: I don't know how he would have voted, but it ended up—because he had a certain number of people working under him that he was in a management position, and he didn't vote. And I don't think it was close. I don't remember what the vote was

when they finally had a vote.

AA: Well, what I recall about it is about three-quarters of the newsroom signed the union cards to call for the election.

RP: Yes.

AA: But I think when the election was actually held, maybe three-quarters voted against it.

RP: Yes. It was a tense time in the newsroom.

AA: It was a *very* tense time. I remember Jerry calling me in for a "discussion." [Laughs] And I think he did this with everyone.

RP: I think he did that with everyone. I simply would not have had the patience to do that, and I would have blown it if I had. I remember there was a complaint about overtime pay, and a guy from the Wage and Hour Division came out one day. We were sitting there talking to him, and I just didn't have the patience to deal with that sort of thing. I didn't watch overtime like they wanted me to. I didn't do it at the *AJ-C* [*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*], either. I mean, if people worked, I thought they ought to get paid. If they turned in overtime, you should pay them. A lot of the union—I think some of the strongest union support was in the sports department. There were a bunch of young guys in there who really thought they deserved more pay [laughs], which, I'm sure they did, but . . .

AA: There were quite a few people on the news side, too.

RP: Oh, I'm sure there were.

AA: I attended some meetings. Bill Husted was one of the organizers.

RP: That doesn't surprise me.

AA: I'm trying to remember her name. Gosh, I can't think of her name. Lynda . . .

RP: Lynda Zimmer [Straw].

AA: Lynda Zimmer [Straw].

RP: See, her husband was in the union through the AP.

AA: That's right. So she was one of the organizers.

RP: Yes.

AA: And, truth be told, the wage situation and the working conditions . . .

RP: Oh, they were not good. [Laughs] They were not good. An interesting thing about that—and I won't talk about the *Gazette* very much, but I know that in later days the pay was much better at the *Gazette*. I know how that happened. I've been told how that happened. The then-managing editor convinced the publisher that they needed to raise the pay at the *Gazette*, and they did, and from then on there was quite a difference in pay. But in the old days, it wasn't. Bill Whitworth has told me that when he graduated from college—and I remember him coming back to interview with Gene Herrington, the managing editor, about coming to work there. I was afraid they'd fire me and give him [his] old job back, which—they wouldn't have done that. But he has told me that the difference he was offered was \$5 a week. He was offered the \$70 a week that they were giving a college graduate at that time, and the *Gazette* gave him \$75. Now, at one other place I've seen him say \$80, but it wasn't \$100 a week or anything. Both papers, until the early to mid-1960s, weren't that much different, but it jumped up quite a

bit at one point. But there were good reasons to be concerned about your lifestyle. [Laughs] The *Democrat* had no health care until after Mr. Engel died. We had a six-day week. That was another difference between the *Gazette* and the *Democrat*. When I was at work covering North Little Rock in 1963, I was making \$70 a week. The fellow from the *Gazette* covering North Little Rock was making \$75 a week, but he was only working five days a week and I was working six days a week.

AA: And you really were making substantially less for your time. [Laughs]

RP: Yes. The net take-home pay wasn't that different, but the time involved was. On the other hand, they didn't get much work out of anybody on Saturday. In those days, you didn't write big Sunday blockbusters like you do now. You put out a Sunday paper on Saturday night—late Saturday afternoon and Saturday night. And there might be a little feature here and a feature there. I had to write a little Sunday piece on North Little Rock, but it didn't have to be very big or important, it just had to acknowledge that we covered North Little Rock. Once the Saturday paper—it was still an afternoon paper—once you got through that at about noon, there wasn't much activity in the newsroom until about 5:00 or 6:00 that afternoon. [Laughs] And there wasn't much activity after the first edition was gone, either. It was competitive, but as far as a Sunday paper—it wasn't like they do at the *Journal* or the *Constitution*, or probably even the *Gazette*.

[End of Recording on Tape 2, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 2, Side 1]

AA: So the union was voted down, and John Walter bought the paper.

RP: No, Walter Hussman [Jr.].

AA: Walter Hussman [Jr.] bought the paper. [Laughs] I got my Walters mixed up.

RP: Well, I can understand why you might.

AA: Walter Hussman [Jr.] bought the paper. What changed then?

RP: Well, the first thing that changed, I guess, was the editorship of the paper. Of course, the day that Walter bought the paper, I don't think he knew who was going to be the next editor. He asked me. [Laughs] I don't know why he asked me. I had met him before. I told him I thought he ought to make McCord the editor. There was about a two-week lapse there, I think. I think he actually flew to Philadelphia to talk to Gene Foreman, but they didn't offer him the job. Gene told me later he didn't know why he was talking to him. But he did make McCord the editor. Of course, again, the union thing was still going on. That luncheon hadn't been held yet.

AA: Oh, that's right.

RP: Walter was very systematic about buying it. He put a notice up on the board that said that anybody who did not belong to a bargaining group as of such-and-such a date would become part of the—whatever the company's name was—pension plan, which is, of course, a real effort to gain support against a union. And, in fact, when I left the paper a few years later, I got a check for \$800 [laughs], which wouldn't have gone very far in keeping me in gin and tonic. Also, he was very interested in reducing the number of people working in the composing

department, and he did that rather systematically. He was very interested in all the electronics and the new technology. In fact, he flew James Scudder, Larry Gordon and me down to El Dorado or Texarkana one Sunday to watch them put out the Monday morning paper on the new equipment they had. He began bringing new equipment into the building. And for every piece of new equipment that came in, a printer left. He was in negotiations with the pressmen, I believe, and at some point the pressmen decided to picket the paper and not work. I don't know. But they neglected to tell any other unions. I had printers tell me that they never knew what the pressmen were going to do, and if they had, they might have joined them, but they were kept in the dark. That was the end of the pressmen's union at the *Democrat*. They brought in people from somewhere else.

AA: Eventually, they voted to decertify, didn't they?

RP: I think they did. By the time I left the *Democrat*—when I first went to work at the *Democrat* in 1959, there must have been sixty or seventy guys up on the third floor—Linotype operators, printers, stereotypers, engravers, and that didn't count whoever was down in the pressroom.

AA: And they were all unionized.

RP: They were all union. Everybody in the plant was unionized except the white-collar workers. All the blue-collar workers were union.

AA: And they were all making more money.

RP: And they were all making more money. Sure. Sure. And through their unions they had benefits that we didn't have. When I left in 1979, I believe there were

maybe two or three people in engraving, and there were nine printers stretched over seven days a week. It was really strange and quiet. [Laughs] And cleaner. But not as much fun.

AA: Talk about the technology revolution. When I came to work there in 1973, we were still using manual typewriters. That changed vastly by the time you left in 1979.

RP: Yes. By manual, do you mean electric or non-electric?

AA: They were not even [IBM] Selectric typewriters at that point.

RP: Okay. [Laughter] Well, that was the first thing—the Selectric typewriters. I have in my basement the typewriter I had when they—I bought it from the company for \$10 when they brought in the electric typewriters, and a scanner, which worked about 53% of the time. I'm guessing that they had about three or four terminals at the time to edit on after the story went through the scanner. You'd edit the story with a red pen, and there was a keyboard on the scanner. Every time it would see something red, it would stop, and you'd have to tell it what to do next—type in the right word or put an insert in, or whatever it was. And it started over there in a corner of the room near the photography—they had maybe four terminals.

AA: They had four. Exactly four.

RP: For the whole newsroom. And, you know, at deadline time it was a madhouse trying to get on a terminal over there. Sports and business. Actually, it didn't go much farther than that in my time. I don't remember much past that, or any past

the scanner and the four terminals. I guess they maybe added a couple more terminals.

AA: They added some more terminals, and eventually reporters were sharing terminals, but nobody had their own terminal because the theory was that somebody would be out reporting and someone else could be writing.

RP: Right.

AA: Which really works fine until everybody's trying to write their story on deadline.

RP: Well, when I came to work at the *Journal-Constitution* in 1983, the only terminals were supposed to be editing terminals. They were still using scanners and electric typewriters, but nobody was using them. All the reporters were running to a terminal as soon as a copy editor would get up out of his chair.

AA: We went from a hot-type process where there were Linotypes and big trays of type to a paste-up process.

RP: Exactly. Yes. And at one point the room—when you came to work, the library was probably back in the back of the newsroom.

AA: Yes.

RP: See, that had been where the AP bureau had been. When the AP moved out, that became a training room for the printers to learn paste-up. They were learning that before we ever started doing it. And I don't remember whether that was before or after Walter came and bought the paper. One of the first things that Walter did was—he had a brother-in-law who's an architect. They redid the first floor and got new desks and everything. And they redid the second floor. But they tore

down the library. That was one great, big room. They moved the library back to what had been the AP [area]. I remember when you were the wire editor, they had some strange way of capturing the wires.

AA: Oh, it was a punch tape [a paper ribbon in which holes representing data to be processed by a computer are punched].

RP: Yes.

AA: And you had to pull out the story you wanted. The punch tape actually ran upstairs.

RP: Right.

AA: So you would take the story that you wanted to run and rip it out, and they would hunt for it on the tape upstairs.

RP: Yes, right.

AA: They'd be sorting for this tape—reams of this yellow punch tape, looking for the number that started the story.

RP: Right.

AA: Then they'd run it through a machine.

RP: Right. I remember that. But even after that, there was some strange thing that they tried to capture on a disk or something the *Times Post* and . . .

AA: No, I don't remember that.

RP: But I remember you, or somebody, would have to come in on Sunday afternoon to make—somebody had to make sure on Sunday afternoon that the damned thing was working so you'd have a report on Monday morning.

AA: It wasn't me who came in. I wound up—the way it was set up was when we got this huge computer that took up a whole room . . .

RP: Down in the basement.

AA: Yes, down in the basement.

RP: Yes, right.

AA: We had one computer guy who was supposed to be in charge.

RP: Yes, I remember that.

AA: And he could *never* be found. *Never*. Everyone who worked on the copy desk, which I did at that time, had to learn how to . . .

RP: Reboot the . . .

AA: Reboot the computers.

RP: Right. I remember.

AA: And we had this whole—each [of us] had a cheat sheet, and it was a long series of steps. You had to throw this switch and throw [that] switch. And if it came back and said this, you threw another switch. And if it came back and said that, you threw . . .

RP: I had forgotten about that.

AA: Oh, it was so frustrating because none of us were very technically inclined.

RP: Right. Talking about the wires reminds me of some characters, though. When I went to work there in 1969, the wire editor was Bill Terry [laughs], who qualified as a character, I believe.

AA: Maybe even a nut case. [Laughter] Oh, okay, you didn't say that. [Laughs]

RP: I didn't say that. [Laughs] He always had a pocketful of stuff in his shirt pocket. I never knew what it was, notes or—it was just *full* all the time. He was loud, and he would react to the stories. The slot man was Paul Neilson. Anyway, [he] had been brought up from Pine Bluff. Foreman had hired both of those guys. I remember Bill Whitworth one time talking about Bill Terry. He said, "He's one of those guys who knows all the Greek gods and that kind of stuff." [Laughs] He had also gone to Yale [University], I think. He was a classic case. You can always tell a Yale man, but you can't tell him *much*. Anyway, Paul was the slot man. He was divorced. He had some kind of deal, I think, where half of his income went to his wife, so he didn't have any money. He wasn't making anything to start with, and half went to his wife and kids. He wore overalls all the time, and he was *loud*. My back was to the both of them, and I just never liked having my back to both of them. [Laughs] They were both characters.

AA: I remember when I first came to work there. Something upset Bill Terry. I didn't know him, and I didn't really realize that he was quite a character because I think I had been to work there maybe a week or so. What I recall was he jumped out of his chair yelling about something, and picked up his typewriter and just slammed it to the floor. [Laughs]

RP: Yes. I was always afraid I was going to get hit in the back of the head with a typewriter from one of those two guys. Paul, of course, would storm up to the composing room after all the copy was moved, to go up there and oversee the edition. One day he just left in the middle, and that was his last day at the

Democrat. He just got so frustrated with the composing room that he just quit. I mean, he just left. I think he thought he'd be back to work the next day, but he never came back again.

AA: Did they ask him to not come back, or did he just decide not to come back?

RP: Yes, he was asked not to come back. There was much discussion about, "Should we let him come back, or what?" People decided that you can't operate a newspaper without knowing that the guy who's supposed to be putting it together is there.

AA: Is going to be around.

RP: Yes. That's when Bill Eddins became the news editor—the slot man. He went off—the next slot man, I think, was probably Richard Allen, whom I saw in Paris [France] last month. [He's been] at the *International Herald Tribune*, it turns out, for twenty-three years. I can't believe that.

AA: Time flies. What do you think the strengths were of Bob McCord as an editor?

[Tape Stopped]

RP: I think there are several. One, I think his knowledge of the community where he lived all his life was a strong point. He had made himself a reputation as a newspaper man that made him well respected by people who worked for him. He had great instincts and still does. He had great instincts about what should be in the paper and what shouldn't be, and how we should comport ourselves [laughs] and how we *shouldn't* comport ourselves. I don't think even he would say he was the greatest writer in the world, but he was a good writer. He knew how to edit a

story. I learned that really quickly when working for him in North Little Rock. I remember he sent me out to do a story on some educational thing. I came back and wrote it, and I handed it in to him. He said, "At what point did you lose interest in this story?" [Laughter] And he was perfectly right. He said, "All right. Here's what we're going to do. We're going to take this part of it and make it the first of three parts." That's what we did, and it turned out all right. I remember another time—one of my duties was to go down to North Little Rock criminal court every Tuesday morning to see what was going on. [This] guy was accused of assault or something, and he was testifying. He testified to something, and from the back of the room, this woman shouted, "That's not right!" The judge said, "Who are you? Come up here!" She had been his ex-girlfriend, and he had been involved in fighting with her parents, and she had a tattoo on her shoulder. And, of course, the tattoo was not . . .

[End of Recording on Tape 2, Side 2]

[Beginning of Tape 3, Side 1]

AA: Okay.

RP: Anyway, the whole story of the relationship came out. It was really funny. I went back and wrote it, and I thought I wrote it pretty well. He ran it through his typewriter and put it on the front page. It was . . .

AA: It was considerably different? [Laughter]

RP: It was considerably different and a lot *better*. McCord also was able—and still is, I think—he's not parochial. He always knew and could write about international

and national stuff and still conduct an editorial page that was intelligent in regard to local issues, I think. I think at the *Democrat* I didn't always agree with what he wrote because the *Democrat*, I think in those days, purposely was conservative as opposed to the *Gazette*. Now it's just purposely conservative. And he told me [that] when he left the *Times* to go to the *Democrat*, he wrote some white papers on various issues that he felt so strongly about and presented them to Marcus and Stanley. I don't know how they reacted to them or not. He said there were a bunch of others that he just didn't have any feelings about one way or the other, and he could write about them on either side of the issue. I think there are probably a lot of editorial writers like that. Respect. The fact that he had the respect of not just the people in the newsroom, but the people outside in the community. I think that's a really strong part of his career.

AA: So he was one of your mentors.

RP: Yes.

AA: Did he help you later after you left the *Democrat*? I know y'all [you all] have stayed in touch. I guess that's why I ask that question.

RP: Correct. No, not really. He was one of my two mentors. Foreman was the other one. I learned a lot from Foreman about just how to run the desk every day. [There's] a lot of difference in a weekly paper—a daily, afternoon paper with several editions that you're trying to . . .

AA: And competition.

RP: And competition. And, a lot of times, not many people to do the work.

AA: So why did you leave the *Democrat*?

RP: Why?

AA: Yes.

RP: I left the *Democrat* because I wanted to go into business for myself. I wanted to operate a magazine. I actually delayed doing it. I started to do it once and I got some initial financing lined up. McCord and I went and had a drink and I told him that, and he told me that there were going to be some changes at the *Democrat* that he couldn't talk about, and that he wished I would stay and see how that worked out. About a week later, Walter Hussman [Jr.] bought the paper. McCord also told me at that time that he knew there was going to have to be another executive in the newsroom, an assistant managing editor. It had never [had one]. I think they've probably got several now, and that I ought to think about that. So I decided to stay to see what happened after Walter bought the paper. About a year later, they made me an assistant managing editor [AME].

AA: And how long were you an AME?

RP: A couple of years, I guess.

AA: Yes, it seems right.

RP: That seems about right. I don't remember. Then I got anxious again. I wanted to do something different. I didn't see myself as having that much of a future at the *Democrat*. And, in fact, at one point—I have to tell you—I talked to Bob Douglas at the *Gazette*. I was still the city editor at that time, I think, but I'm not sure. He offered me a job as assistant city editor. I decided—and he offered me a

slight increase in pay. A *slight* increase in pay, which really didn't have anything to do with it. I just decided I didn't want to have to wait for Bill Shelton to die, or whatever. And if had done that—I am glad I made the decision I did because I would not have thrived [laughs] at the *Democrat-Gazette*.

[Tape Stopped]

RP: The magazine lasted about a year and a half.

AA: And after that, you went to . . .?

RP: After that, I went to the only job I could find in the area, which was a managing editor of the *Bentonville Daily Democrat*, which was still owned by Sam Walton at the time. What was then is now—notorious in that the company doesn't pay the highest wages and, in fact, to pay me what I said I had to have, they had to go over to the Wal-Mart office and get somebody to okay it. [Laughter] And we didn't like living in Bentonville. I didn't, and Woodie didn't, particularly. I don't think the kids did, either. So I was there about a year and a half, and I saw an ad—I got the bulletin every week of the Southern Newspaper Publishers Association. I saw where there was an opening there as associate director, and I knew the director because I had been to their seminars before. And, in fact, when I was president of the SDX [Sigma Delta Chi, the Society of Professional Journalists] in Little Rock, I brought him there to make a speech. So I wrote him and came down here for an interview, and got the job. I didn't realize he was crazy, but he was. He fired me after a year, which is all right because I wasn't that good of an association guy, anyway. I didn't really like the idea. I liked the

part about setting up and directing the programs that had to do with journalism, but I didn't like the ones having to do with business. [Laughter] And I think that may be all of it. Anyway, he fired me after a year, but at one of the seminars I met Eddie Sears, who was managing editor of the *Journal-Constitution*. The two papers had just merged less than a year before. So when I was out of work, I called Eddie. He said, "Come down for an interview." I took a copy-editor's test. About a month later, they called me and said they needed a copy chief in features. I worked in various jobs there for the next twenty years and six months. [Laughs] Then I retired!

AA: When did you retire?

RP: I retired on the last day of April in 2004, a little over a year ago.

[Tape Stopped]

AA: What is the most positive thing you can say about your years at the *Democrat*?

RP: I think not just my years there, but years before there—I don't know about after, but the *Democrat* was a place that gave you a chance. It hired people [who] might not have been able to get a job any place else. At that point, I was twenty years old and had no experience, and I went to work there. And I wasn't the only one like that. It was a place that you could go and learn whether this is something you wanted to do or not, and you could learn, to a certain extent, how to do it. That held for a long time. James Scudder is a perfect example of that—of giving somebody a chance and then turning out to be good at what they did.

AA: Yes. [He was] a really fine writer.

RP: A really fine writer.

AA: Whose clips, when he came to work, were some poetry.

RP: [Laughter] Exactly. I'm not sure that that was a conscious thing on the part of the editors. It was just a fact of life.

AA: It may have been partly because of the wages, I think.

RP: I'm sure it was. I'm sure it was.

AA: You were not going to hire a reporter from *The New York Times* for the city desk.

RP: No. No. That was important. I came from a two-newspaper family. In those days, I think a lot of people were. We took the *Gazette* in the morning. We took the *Democrat* in the afternoon. And that's the way it was. [Laughs] I think people in the circulation department—well, it was an afternoon paper. Look at what happened to afternoon papers. That's the problem. But back in those days, it wasn't that much of a problem. I was really fortunate. I was fortunate to go to work there when I did, under the circumstances. It was kind of an exciting time. It was 1959. I remember when Central High School reopened. [Laughs] I was doing something important. I was running film from Central High back to the office. In those days, they had a lot more editions. It seems to me that they had about five editions a day. [Laughs] They just kept changing stuff and putting new stuff in the paper. It was fun. It really was.

AA: So you look back on those days with a great deal of fondness?

RP: I do now. [Laughter] I think there was a long period when I didn't, but I do now. And a lot of that has to do with having worked at the *Journal-Constitution* for

twenty years and six months. I *never* had as much fun there as I had at the *Democrat*.

AA: Yes, there were some crazy people there. You never knew what was going to happen.

RP: That's right.

AA: As you said, there were some real characters.

RP: There were some real characters.

AA: What do you think was the biggest shortcoming of the *Democrat* when you were there?

RP: When I was there at first—well, I would have to say that every time I worked there, I think the management, whoever it was, from Mr. Engel to Walter Hussman [Jr.] and people under them—they had management flaws, as far as I'm concerned. [Laughs] I don't know. There was never enough money. Never enough money. Again, going back to it being an afternoon newspaper—the way the world changed, the afternoon papers just didn't have a chance. And nowadays, I'm not sure morning newspapers have a chance. There are declining circulations all across the board, so I'm not optimistic about the future of the newspaper business. That's another reason I think I was lucky to get into it when I did. It probably would have been better even twenty years before that, but it was still a viable business when I got into it, as I said, about how they treated television, for instance, in those days. [Laughs] They just didn't pay much attention to it.

AA: CNN [Cable News Network] changed a lot about how people get their news.

RP: Oh, it did. It did.

[Tape Stopped]

RP: I don't know what's going to happen. I probably won't live to see the ultimate demise of *The New York Times* [laughs], but even *The New York Times* is changing in an effort to try to keep old people—the fact of the matter is that I've never seen a color newspaper photograph that looked as good as my television set does.

AA: And they don't move, either.

RP: And they don't move. [Laughs] I have gotten in the habit of watching Lehrer [the "McNeil-Lehrer Report"] every night. That started when I was working and watching him on Friday nights, and now I watch it almost every night just to get that news.

[Tape Stopped]

AA: One thing we didn't cover that I should have covered is—tell me what a typical day was like when you were city editor. When did you get to work, and what would happen?

RP: Well, Tucker Steinmetz would pick me up at 6:30 in the morning, and we would drive and pick up Foreman about ten minutes later. We lived in Park Hill and he lived in Lakewood, so we'd get downtown at about 7:00 and try to find a free parking place [laughter] and then walk to work. From 7:00 to 8:00 I would be putting together the local budget based on assignments I had made the day before,

or what I knew had happened overnight. Foreman would go through the *Gazette* and make a little list of the stories that he saw in the *Gazette* that he thought we should have—just on a piece of scratch paper. He would bring it to me when I was making up the budget, and I would compare it against what we had. I'd see what the AP covered that we hadn't covered. And, to be honest, a lot of time of it would just be rewrites out of the *Gazette* that would end up in the first edition, or if we didn't have coverage. At 8:00 we would have a budget meeting in Foreman's office, which would last fifteen minutes or so, I guess. And that would be the sports editor, me, the wire editor, I guess—primarily, me and the wire editor. Sports pretty much knew what they were—they didn't have much to do with that. It was a news operation. Then we'd go out and start moving copy, checking the reporters, and seeing that they had what we wanted, and tell them what we needed, and that sort of thing. A lot of the reporters wouldn't even come into the office. The geographic reporters, for instance—the cop reporter, George Douthit, or whoever, was out at the state—"Let me go out there." And they'd call in and tell me what was going on whenever I asked them what needed to be done. Or sometimes they'd check in and sometimes they wouldn't. [Laughs] And it seemed to me like our first-edition deadline was at about 9:30 for the state edition—somewhere in there, I guess. And that edition would also have stories in it that were held over from the later editions the previous days. One of my jobs every afternoon was—the composing room would send down proofs of the city edition stories that hadn't been in the state edition, and I would update them or kill

them or say, "We're going to have a new story," or whatever. And whatever was left—there would be a night copy editor-layout guy who would come in at about 4:00 in the afternoon, I guess. One of his duties was to put that stuff together in the paper. And there would be a page designated for that, pretty much, I think. We'd get that first edition out and start in on the next edition, which would be—in my day as a city editor, the primary edition was the city edition because that's what the bulk of our circulation was. We would really fight to get stuff in that edition. The deadline was about noon, I think, for that edition, although I think we could run up to 12:30, or something. But that was a typical day when I was first city editor and Foreman was the managing editor. Foreman edited all of the page-one copy himself, laid it out, and wrote the headlines.

AA: Really?

RP: Yes, on the days that he worked. He worked Tuesday through Saturday. He didn't put out the Sunday paper because we still had a Saturday afternoon paper. He put that paper out, and then took a look at what was happening for Sunday, and the news editor [slot man] also worked the same day, so he was responsible for the Saturday and Sunday morning paper. McConnell let the slot man—but the slot man laid out everything else. And you probably did that, at some point, didn't you?

AA: Yes, I did it, at some point.

RP: I occasionally did it when I was assistant managing editor. When somebody would be on vacation, or off or something, I would work the slot. But after the

city edition, I started thinking about the next—you know, go to lunch and come back and start making out assignments for the next day and leave them in people's mailboxes and that sort of thing. And go to whatever meetings I had to go to or whatever. [Laughs]

AA: When did your day typically end, unless there was a big story going on?

RP: Probably about 4:00. I remember that after my wife, Woodie, went back to work, I always got home before [she did], on most days, and that's when I started cooking. And it dawned on me that if I also shopped, then I could eat whatever I wanted to. [Laughter]

AA: So that's how you became a renowned cook!

RP: Well, that's how I started cooking, anyway, and I've been doing it ever since! [Laughter]

AA: And Woodie is happy to let you.

RP: And she's happy to let me. I was with a group of older people not too long ago. A guy said, "My wife won't let me in the kitchen." I said, "My wife won't let me out!" [Laughter] When I was managing editor or assistant managing editor—I don't know what I did then, except I spent a lot of time in the composing room. When I became assistant managing editor, I kind of took over the responsibility of going to the composing room every day and overseeing that operation from the newsroom point of view.

AA: That was not a really friendly place to be at that point.

RP: It was not friendly at all. It was not friendly at all. You never knew what kind of

reaction you were going to get when you went up there. They took out on us the resentments they felt on people up above us.

AA: It was a pretty hostile environment on some days.

RP: Yes.

AA: Depending on what was going on. Is there anything that we haven't covered that you'd like to talk about?

RP: I wish I could remember some more of those people and their names, particularly from the old days, but I can't. [Laughs]

AA: Who was the lady who was the obituary writer for years?

RP: Oh—Mabel Berry.

AA: Mabel Berry. I couldn't remember her last name.

RP: McCord told me not too long ago that she had died. She was from Redfield. She drove a little Volkswagen Bug up from Redfield every morning. She got there before anybody else.

AA: And she was very particular about her obituaries.

RP: Yes, she was. She really was. Her title, I guess, was head clerk, but she did the obituaries. She and another clerk or two would take the dictation from reporters over—phoning in their stories. That reminds me. I'm proud of this, too. I hired Deborah Mathis.

AA: Wow!

RP: Her early experience [was that] she had been editor of the [Central High School] paper, *The Tiger*. She had been working in a jewelry store or something like that.

I hired her as a clerk, and she wasn't a clerk very long. She became a reporter pretty quickly.

AA: I remember that. It may have been Deborah, or it may have been someone else, but I remember Mabel grousing about someone who had been hired as a clerk and them being promoted to reporter, and why wasn't *she* promoted to reporter?

RP: I'm sure it was Deborah, because as far as I know, she was the only one.

[Laughter] I'm proud of some of the hires I made there and at the *Journal-Constitution*—you among them at the *AJ-C*.

AA: Well, I'm very glad you hired me at the *AJ-C*. I'm not sure I could get a job there now.

RP: You're too good, probably.

AA: I'm not sure that I could.

RP: Now I'm retired. [Laughter]

AA: And you just say that with the biggest smile on your face!

RP: Well, I go back in that building every once in a while because I do some work part-time on a contract basis with COXnet. Every time I go in, somebody comes up and tells me how *relaxed* I look. [Laughs]

AA: Well, I think there's a lot to be said for retirement.

RP: I do, too. I can't think of anything else. I'm sure I will later.

AA: Is there anything that we've talked about that you'd like to go back to?

RP: No, I guess not. Not really. [Laughs]

AA: Okay. Nothing we didn't cover. Well, thank you for [your] time. I appreciate

you being part of the project.

RP: Well, thank you for interviewing me. [Laughs]

[End of Interview]

[Transcribed by Cheri Pearce]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]