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## ***Arkansas Democrat Project***

Interview with

Van Tyson  
Russellville, Arkansas  
19 April 2006

Interviewer: Robert McCord

Robert McCord: This is Robert McCord. I'm interviewing Van Tyson for the [University of Arkansas, Fayetteville] Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History Project on [the *Arkansas Democrat*]. This interview is being held at Arkansas Tech University on April 19, 2006. We will transcribe this interview and make it available for those interested in Arkansas history. We will give you the opportunity to review the transcript, at which point you will sign a release. All I need you to do now is state your name and indicate that you are willing to give the Center permission to use this tape and make the transcription available to others. And you have to say yes or no.

Van Tyson: Yes. My name is Van Tyson.

[Tape Stopped]

RM: Van, you were born in Arkansas, weren't you?

VT: Yes.

RM: Where?

VT: It was a hospital in Morrilton, Arkansas, on May 22, 1937.

RM: And you went to school where?

VT: I went mostly to the Atkins Public Schools, but I started the first grade in Grenada, Mississippi, during World War II, and [spent] part of the ninth grade in Fort Smith during the Korean War. My education includes four years at Arkansas Tech [Russellville], where I majored in English and journalism. I have a master's degree in English and a PhD in English from the University of Arkansas . . .

RM: In Fayetteville?

VT: . . . in Fayetteville, and I did one semester of graduate work in journalism at the University of Iowa, in Iowa City, Iowa.

RM: What was the first newspaper that you ever worked at? Which one was the first?

VT: It was the *Atkins Chronicle*. I was eleven years old, and I started working as a printer's devil. My grandfather, Ardis Tyson, owned the paper, and my Uncle Leroy [Tyson] was the editor and manager.

RM: And that paper was started . . . ?

VT: It was started in 1894.

RM: Are there very many in Arkansas that old?

VT: I think there are a few. The oldest newspaper in Arkansas is right here over at Dardanelle—I think the oldest weekly. I think it goes back to maybe the 1870s or 1880s, but there are not many that are older than 1884.

RM: And it's still operating, and you own it.

VT: Yes, that's right.

RM: Is it pretty much the same as it used to be? It's still a weekly?

VT: It's still a weekly. Circulation had kind of gone up and down. Right now, our circulation is about 2,400.

RM: Boy, that's a lot for a weekly newspaper, isn't it?

VT: Yes.

RM: Anywhere.

VT: Yes. The town is a little under 3,000, but, of course, that's total people. We like to point out that that's one newspaper per family, and, also, like most weeklies, we brag about our pass-along readership. [Laughs]

RM: Where did you go to work after you graduated—at the one the family owned?

VT: Yes. My first job after graduation was as publisher. I had been helping edit the paper for a couple of years, but when I graduated from Tech in 1959, my grandfather, who had maintained ownership, sold it to me. So I became a twenty-two-year-old publisher [laughs] in 1959.

RM: How long did that last?

VT: I ran it for two years, until August of 1961. Then I sold it to Tommy Gillespie, and I went to graduate school at Fayetteville at that point.

RM: After you finished graduate school, what did you do?

VT: I think right after that I went to the University of Iowa for one semester. I had applied for a job and been turned down. I had a couple of friends at the University of Iowa, [Iowa City] so I went up there. I took some exams, and they gave me a job teaching [laughs] beginning reporting labs. At the end of that semester, I went to work at the *Des Moines Tribune* in Des Moines, Iowa.

RM: And you stayed there how long?

VT: About two and a half years.

RM: What did you do up there?

VT: I was a general assignment reporter.

RM: And after that, where did you go?

VT: The first thing I did was [go] back to graduate school for a year and started work on a PhD.

RM: Oh, I see.

VT: Then, from there, after a year of graduate school, I went to Wayne, Nebraska, and taught English and journalism at Wayne State College in Nebraska. By that time, we're into the mid-sixties [1960s]—along about 1966 to 1968.

RM: Then you. . .?

VT: Then I moved back to Arkansas. For six months, I was either unemployed or I helped with a reassessment of property in Pope County for several months. This was in 1968. I worked for the reassessment board in Pope County for several months. Then I read in the paper that Gene Foreman had been made managing editor at the [Arkansas] *Democrat*. I knew Gene. We were in the Army Reserve together, and he had been state editor of the [Arkansas] *Gazette* when I was running the *Chronicle* back in 1959 to 1961, so I applied and was hired at the *Democrat* in 1969. I believe it was December of 1969.

RM: At first, what did you do when you went to work at the *Democrat*?

VT: I was a reporter. Foreman did subject-matter beats, so I was the municipal affairs reporter [laughs]. That meant that I covered both Little Rock and North Little Rock City Hall, and other things relating to municipal government, such as the Municipal League. I did that, I think, for about six months—I think from Decem-

ber of 1969 up until the middle of 1970.

RM: Foreman was a fine newspaper man.

VT: He was.

RM: He still is.

VT: Yes. He was really a good mentor. I was really impressed with the work he did improving the *Democrat*. After [being] a worker there about six or eight months, I became an editorial writer.

RM: Yes. Working with me.

VT: Working with you. Yes.

RM: It was just the two of us, wasn't it? For a while, we had Bob Fisher helping us out for a few months, I think, in the middle of that.

VT: Oh, we had Karr Shannon.

RM: Do you remember the difficulty I had with him?

VT: Oh! [Laughs]

RM: I told him he couldn't use those old hillbilly things he used to write, and that he could only write his column five days a week instead of seven.

VT: I think the thing I remember—he said, "You mean I can't make fun of the niggers anymore?" [Laughs]

RM: Oh! Some of the hardest times being editor I ever had were dealing with him.

But, you know, he was one of the finest copy readers.

VT: Yes.

RM: He caught every little mistake. I mean, he could do it better than anybody in the building.

VT: And he proofread the editorial page.

RM: The whole page. He sure did. Your work, my work, everybody's work, because he was the best one on the staff. There's no question about it.

VT: [Laughs]

RM: So, you stayed there . . .

VT: . . . until 1974. I had been offered a job to teach here at Tech, and my last year—well, let's see, it was the 1973-1974 school year. I taught two courses at Tech and worked four and a half days a week at the *Democrat*. I commuted [laughs] from—I kept my house at Atkins. I think the way that worked was that I was given a half a day off in lieu of a raise [laughter], and I taught the two courses at Tech. I was hired as an assistant professor, not as a visiting lecturer, so that was kind of neat. But, anyway, for that year, the 1973-1974 school year—that was just for nine months—of course, I was off for Christmas. That summer, and somewhere along about there—the spring of 1974 I moved off the editorial page and started covering state government and politics. I always say for my last six months, but it may have been less than that. But I covered [Dale] Bumpers—the special session of legislature for Bumpers in 1974 and covered the election when Bumpers was elected to the Senate over [J. William] Fulbright.

RM: And was that when [Bob] Fisher came over and kind of took your place on the editorial page? Yes. I think that's when it happened.

VT: Yes.

RM: Well, let me ask you—all your life, you've been looking at the *Democrat* and the *Gazette* and all the newspapers here—don't you think that little period—or I shouldn't phrase it that way—do you think that in that period that you and I were both there, and particularly with some of the other people who were there, did you

think that the *Democrat* really improved itself over what it had been?

VT: Yes, I don't think there's any doubt about that. I think that under Foreman's guidance, the news coverage was greatly improved. He brought in good people and did a good job of planning and designing it. [Laughs] One of the neat things was that he actually put in a copy desk—you know, a curved copy desk. The *Democrat* had not even had a real rim and a slot before that. Another thing I remember—Foreman was really good at giving people titles. I don't guess I should mention any names, but there were some people on the staff there who were not really good at what they did, and Foreman was good at giving them a different title, like Sunday features editor, or something like that, in order to move them to a different position [laughter] so he could put somebody else in that job who would do a better job.

RM: Yes, he's a fine newspaperman. There's no doubt about that. Well, my memory is not nearly as good as yours. So you left before the—well, before the end—the [newspaper] war [between the *Democrat* and the *Gazette*] hadn't really started, had it?

VT: No, but the Hussmans bought the *Democrat* while I was there. I was there right during the transition and—I'm not sure—for several months. It must have been in 1974 that it happened. I moved off the editorial page. The policies were changing, so there were fewer editorials that I felt comfortable writing.

RM: Had we had air-conditioning by the time you left?

VT: Yes. Well, I'm thinking—did we not have air-conditioning before that? I know the windows would open before.

RM: [Laughs]

VT: We had those little glass panes, you know, inside the windows to keep the wind from blowing papers. [They were] little vertical pieces of glass at the bottom.

[Laughs]

RM: Well, it's a different world there now. You lived in Little Rock. Didn't you get married just before you came to the *Democrat*?

VT: No. I got married back in 1963.

RM: I didn't realize that it was that long ago.

VT: Yes. Ginnie and I got married in Lafayette, Louisiana, right before I went to work in Des Moines. Ginnie taught a year at Southwestern Louisiana University, and we got married in Lafayette in 1963, right before I went to work in Des Moines. We got married June 3, 1963.

RM: You have how many children?

VT: We have two daughters. They were born in 1972 and 1974. They were both born while I was working at the *Democrat*.

RM: Yes. And you were living in North Little Rock?

VT: Yes. We had an apartment in the basement in the house that Ginnie's parents lived [in] on Skyline Drive in North Little Rock. We fixed up their basement into an apartment. We stayed there during the week, then spent weekends up at our place north of Atkins. [Laughs]

RM: When you left the *Democrat*, what did you do? Where did you go?

VT: Well, I just came here to Arkansas Tech full-time after that nine months of half-time. They hired me full-time in the fall of 1974.

RM: That driving back and forth was tough.

VT: It was. And during part of that, the interstate [I-40] wasn't finished. I had to get

off at Morrilton and go up Highway 64 and get back on at Conway for part of the time, anyway.

RM: When you left Little Rock, did you think the newspaper war was going to really increase and leave us with only one newspaper in the city?

VT: At that time, I didn't see that happening. I thought we were going to continue to have two strong newspapers at that point.

RM: You know, all of us were hoping that that was what was going to happen. In fact, I really think the owner of the *Democrat* might have wanted it to stay that way, too.

VT: Yes, I didn't see him as wanting to . . .

RM: No, I sure didn't. The war just really kind of sneaked up on us. It became so bitter, and I expect you were glad you weren't there when all that happened.

VT: Yes.

RM: Well, you really liked teaching, anyway, didn't you?

VT: Yes, I've always enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere. And, of course, the one reason I came here to the college is that it paid better than newspaper work. [Laughs] And it was close. I wanted to live out in the woods there. I wanted to be closer to home. And I kept my hand in—I continued to do some writing all along. I never did really get completely out of newspaper work.

RM: What kind of writing did you do?

VT: Well, I did some stringing for the *Democrat* for a while. Managing Editor Ralph Patrick would give me assignments and I would cover [them]. He had been city editor when I was being a reporter. The other thing I did after about a year—the *Russellville Courier* approached me about covering Atkins's meetings, so I started

covering Atkins City Council and School Board [meetings] for the *Courier* and for the *Chronicle* both. I was covering those meetings for both newspapers.

RM: And teaching at the same time?

VT: Yes.

RM: Boy, that must have kept you busy. [Laughs]

VT: Well, they'd just meet once a month, so it wasn't too bad. [Laughter]

RM: So, then, what happened? You went back to newspapers, didn't you?

VT: In 1992, Tom Gillespie—whom I had sold the *Atkins Chronicle* to in 1962—decided to retire and offered to sell it back to me, and we negotiated a price. So I have owned it again since 1992.

RM: Walk me through, now—who started the paper, and so on, down the line? Can you do that?

VT: Yes. It was started by a man named George Parker in 1894, and he sold it just a few years later to W. F. Turner. Then, in 1917—I know the exact date on this—Turner sold it to my grandfather and my great uncle, a man named Hugh Matthews. Then a couple of years later, my grandfather bought out Hugh Matthews, who was his brother-in-law. So my grandfather owned it from 1917 until he sold it to me in 1959. My father was editing the *Chronicle* 1937 when I was born. My father and my uncle both majored in journalism at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville under Walter Lemke in the 1930s during the depression. Leroy operated the Linotype up there, and Daddy did things like make beds and stoke furnaces to pay the bills. They bought day-old bread. They'd really tell some horror stories [laughs] about struggling through school during the thirties [1930s]. Papers were hand-set until 1920. My grandfather bought a Model L Linotype in

1920, and in 1929 he traded up to a Model 14, which we still have. The paperwork shows—this was in 1929—he bought a new Linotype. And you know what happened that year [reference to the beginning of the Great Depression]. So, what I learned was that during the thirties [1930s], they couldn't make the payments, [and] the manufacturers couldn't sell the Linotype to anybody, either, so they just let them stop making payments during the thirties. Then there's paperwork that's on up into the early forties [1940s]. There's this letter that says, "While this transaction took a little longer than we originally anticipated, you have now paid [laughs] for your Model 14 Linotype. I'm happy to inform you that it's now [paid in full]."

RM: [Laughter] That's a great story.

VT: Yes. I think Michael Dougan has got it in his book. There are a lot of other stories. My dad and my uncle were running the paper, and they would take anything in trade for a subscription or advertising. Stacked firewood and vegetables and stuff. One time, they took a jug of moonshine [homemade whiskey], unbeknownst to my grandfather. He wouldn't have approved. But they made the mistake of putting it back behind the wood stove in the wall [laughter] and it got too hot and exploded. [Laughter] But this man, Ellis Reynolds, who comes in—he's ninety-four I believe—he comes in and proofreads for us every Tuesday—drives to town. He still does that. Anyway, he started working at the paper as a Linotype operator, and even edited it for a couple of years, I think, during World War II.

RM: Is the circulation now at its highest in its history?

VT: I take it that it may be down a little bit.

RM: Oh, really?

VT: I haven't really looked at it. I think maybe at one point it was up over 3,000, but maybe 2,600 or 2,700 now.

RM: Well, Atkins hasn't really changed in its size, has it?

VT: Well, it was back in 1960 that the population was about 1,500, and now it's about 3,000, *but* they expanded the city limits.

RM: Oh, I see. It was the same amount of people. [Laughter]

VT: The city took in a lot of pasture land around the edges to keep the other cities from encroaching on them.

RM: So, now, one of your daughters has worked on the paper.

VT: Yes. My daughter, Gail, became managing editor after she graduated from college 1996. We had another managing editor, a guy named Dave Weber, who had been a student of mine.

RM: Gail was with you, though, until just recently.

VT: Yes. She just left a couple of months ago.

RM: And your wife has worked on it ever since you've been up here, I guess?

VT: Yes. Ever since we bought it, yes, she covers the school board and she does the bookkeeping—the billing out, and just a lot of odds and ends. But she has taken over the bookkeeping.

RM: Among the weekly newspapers that you're in contact with in the state, what seems to be going good? Is it going good for the weeklies, or are they sort of suffering like the dailies are, too, these days? How can you tell?

VT: It seems to me that the weeklies are in a good, strong position—particularly the weeklies that have a whole county, like Clarksville and Morrilton. The ones that

are in a county seat and have the whole county seat seem to be prospering with their advertising.

RM: Is there another weekly in this county?

VT: No, but we have the *Courier Democrat* and—oh, yes, the *Dover Times*, which we own.

RM: I wanted to get to that. Now, when did you take that or when did you start it?

VT: I didn't start it. A woman named Susanna Bewley started it in 1992, then she came to me. She wanted out. She didn't know anything about journalism. She didn't even know what a column inch was. She told me about that one time. [She] struggled [with] it with it for two or three years, then came to me and essentially made me an offer I couldn't refuse [laughs] to sell it to me. I didn't really want another paper, but I decided it would be a good business measure to keep somebody else from getting into competition with me.

RM: How close is Dover to you?

VT: It's just five miles north of Russellville, and Atkins is thirteen miles from Russellville, so they're eighteen miles apart by highway. Dover is smaller than Atkins. It's under 1,000 people, has less business, and no industry to speak of. The only thing that makes it profitable for us is that we can sell combination advertising.

RM: Yes.

VT: And we have to have Russellville businesses to survive. There isn't enough in Atkins to survive.

RM: Has the Dover paper been there a long time?

VT: No, it was just started in 1992. Then we bought it in 1995. Now, there was a

previous *Dover Times* back in the twenties [1920s], and my great-uncle, Hugh Matthews, is the one who started it. [Laughs]

RM: I see.

VT: I have another interesting connection with Dover. My grandfather, Ardis Tyson, the one who owned the ancient newspaper, was a graduate of the University of Arkansas [Fayetteville] with an LI degree—licensed instructor degree—and he was superintendent of schools in Dover from about 1910 to 1915 or something. My Uncle Leroy was born at Dover. He was called principal there, but he was the equivalent of a modern superintendent.

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

RM: I had forgotten about the fact that you moved into Karr Shannon's office when you came to the *Democrat*. If I remember correctly, we had an awful time cleaning that out. [Laughter] Karr was a real character.

VT: And a really nice man.

RM: Oh, yes, he really was. He really admired you. He thought you were the only good newspaperman in the building.

VT: Oh, really? [Laughs]

RM: Yes, because all the new young ones were coming in, you know, and he didn't like it a damn bit. But of you he said, "That boy is good." And, as you said a while ago, he read all of our copy work for us and got it in the paper; he was a marvelous copy reader. Well, we really had a pretty good staff up there. We got to stay there for a while.

VT: Oh, yes, no question about that.

RM: What did you think caused the *Democrat* and the *Gazette* to come down to the *Democrat-Gazette*? Was that the only answer that could have been approved, or did you expect one of them to have won and that would be all? What did you think?

VT: Well, I thought the people who were managing the *Gazette* made some stupid errors. Of course, I hated to see the Pattersons sell it to the Gannett chain. I assumed that was due to the people wanting to get a lot of money for it. But, particularly after Gannett got it, they never knew what they had. They kept trying to turn it into—I don't know what—a *USA Today*—and they didn't realize that they were the newspaper of record of Arkansas that had the prestige and the validity. And if they had stuck with that—and I've always thought, too, that even before they bought it, if they had to gone to their advertisers with the pitch that we have a quality readership. It seems like there was a better way to keep the advertising kind of even. But, anyway, I think mainly it was that the Gannett people just never did know what they had and kept bringing in new managers who made bad decisions.

RM: What kind of a newspaper do you think the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* is now?

VT: I think they're doing a good job. They do a thorough job of news coverage. I think that they're not scrimping on staff, and they seem to have plenty of reporters and photographers. They are doing a pretty fair job of covering the state. I have some problems with their editorial page, but they seem to also try to strike a balance there—running Gene Lyons's column and some others.

RM: With what little contact I have with them, I have found out that they're paying people a lot more than they used to in Little Rock newspapers when you and I

worked. [Laughs]

VT: Yes. I'm sure that they are.

RM: Well, that's what it takes these days.

VT: Yes. I think Walter Hussman is committed to putting out a quality newspaper.

RM: Yes. I do, too. Are the weekly papers doing pretty well in Arkansas now? Like you said a while ago, I think they're doing better than the dailies are, that really seems to me. Is that going to continue, do you think?

VT: Yes. I think that the weeklies are least vulnerable to the Internet because the readers are not going to get what they get from a weekly—the local news. The society news, the community correspondence—the more details of local coverage—that they're just not going to get, certainly, from the Internet, and really not from the big-city daily paper, [either].

RM: Do you find that fewer and fewer people are interested in studying journalism? Are you getting fewer people to teach up here—students?

VT: No, our enrollment has been increasing.

RM: Really?

VT: Of course, I'm looking over the long haul. I've been here thirty-three years, and our number of journalism majors has increased from about twenty-five to over 100—110 or 115. Now, they're not all going into newspaper work. I don't even know how it would break down, although I could figure it out. Probably no more than a third. We have three emphases. We've got print, broadcasting, and public relations. I'd say at least a third of those are planning on careers in print journalism.

RM: Well, when you run into owners of other weekly newspapers at your conventions

and talk to them, are they all kind of holding to the mark and doing pretty well or are they suffering like the dailies seem to be?

VT: My honest impression is that they're all feeling pretty confident so far, and I think we're all looking to the future. In fact, we already have a Web page, and we're kind of poised to increase what we put on the Web, but I think that's mainly for the people who live out of town. Like, *The Chronicle* sends 150 to 200 papers out of state. At one point, I counted forty-one different states—and, of course, they're dying off. [Laughs] And their children—every so often, we'll get a letter saying, "My mother took this paper. She's dead and I don't know any of these people. Please cancel our subscription."

RM: Oh, sure. Well, now, let me be sure I understand—your paper is on the Internet?

VT: Yes.

RM: Wow!

VT: Oh, yes. We have been for seven or eight years.

RM: Do many of the other weekly papers have Web pages?

VT: I think a pretty good percentage of them do.

RM: Really? Well, exactly how do you do that?

VT: I have a high school kid who comes in. It's updated every week. One of my students here kind of dragged me into it. We had it before the *Russellville Courier* did. He created a Web page for us. So this high school kid comes in and puts the new stories on. We don't put the whole paper [online]. We don't put the community correspondence or the society news, but we do put the front-page stories, the major sports stories, and the obits [obituaries]. We have some classified ads. The big feature of our paper is what we call "Memories," our news from the older pa-

per that goes on back to 100 years ago. We've got those on microfilm in the library, and we've got bound volumes that we can still use back to the 1920s, I guess. We still have all the old papers. There are two stacks, and I hate to throw them away. They are too rotten to open. But they were all microfilmed by the History Commission.

RM: Now, this man who comes in to do this, that means that he has [to] type . . . ?

VT: He doesn't have to type. Our paper is all electronic. All of our pages are laid out on screen and e-mailed to Conway to the printer. There is no paperwork anymore. All he has to do is just copy and paste the stories in. He doesn't have to re-type them. Our front page is on there. It will get to the point where you can call up the whole front page and the whole editorial page and print it out if you want to, or look at it on the screen. All of our pages are in this electronic format, so we could put the whole paper online in digital format.

RM: A lot of it, they wouldn't care about it.

VT: But unless somebody paid to subscribe to that—and that may be the future. That may be someday what we'll be doing—selling the paper as an online edition. We have the technology to do that right now.

RM: But, now, if I were living in New York and I came from here, I would pay you?

VT: No, we don't charge. It's all free.

RM: Well, that's amazing. [Laughs] And I bet you have them, really, all over the country.

VT: Yes. There are some people who just read it online, and probably if we took the "Memories" off of it, that would maybe cause some of them to subscribe. But the mail service is so bad out of state now.

RM: Oh, yes.

VT: It takes them two weeks to get the paper in other states sometimes. I'm thinking that that may be the future. There are some weeklies in Arkansas that actually sell the whole paper online.

RM: Well, that is a real plus that the newspapers [are] able to do that. I really didn't understand that.

VT: Yes. I think probably the majority would have an online edition.

RM: Yes. A lot of newspaper literature we're reading now is saying just what you're saying [about] the weeklies. Some of them are going to turn into twice a week and some of them maybe even three times a week. But they're not worried.

These are the professional journalism people who are always looking forward to what's going to happen. But they're saying time after time that while the dailies have fallen, the weeklies, as it stands now, are standing their own and maybe even gaining.

VT: Yes. I've read that some of these daily companies are buying up suburban papers in the state.

RM: Exactly.

VT: And I think that's why. I'll show you that in a minute here.

RM: It's amazing. I thought [      ].

VT: No, it's just all digital. All stories are all written on Word—the word-processor—and we put them in a directory on one of the computers, and to make up the pages they just go and pick up the [electronic] files and stick them on the page.

RM: I'm curious. Van, how long do you keep these editions?

VT: They're all saved on disk. We don't keep them on the computer. One thing I'd

like to do—we could sell the whole year's papers in digital form if we wanted to because we have it. I'm not sure how many disks it would be.

RM: But anytime you had to, you could . . .

VT: Go back and look at the pages just as they were printed. They're in a folder on a disk. I'm not even sure how many editions we have on disk, but we are archiving them. And our Web page, now, has major stories and obits going back four or five years.

RM: Do you think there are going to be more weekly newspapers started? I don't mean dailies going to weeklies, now. I'm talking about new people saying, "Well, maybe we'll start a newspaper there." Does that seem to be happening anywhere?

VT: I don't think it's happening in small towns. But what I'm thinking is that there are going to be more suburban papers around the big cities.

RM: Yes. Sure. Isn't that something? And if there was a story in there about somebody, you'd click on it and print it out on the printer and hand it to him.

VT: Yes.

RM: Think how much trouble that would have been the old way. [Laughs] You just couldn't do it. [Laughs]

VT: Then we have special things, like highlights and special events. There's my column. You can read my column online every week.

RM: I'm going to start reading that. I surely had no idea. [Laughs]

VT: And we're doing a thing called "The Ghost of Tom." People talk about missing Tom Gillespie, so each week we pick up a little segment out of his old column and we print them on there.

RM: That's amazing. People appreciate stuff like that. Do you think that the *Democ-*

*rat-Gazette* comes up this far?

VT: Yes. Oh, yes. Well, I get it delivered at home. And it's sold—they've got racks all over Pope County.

RM: And friends that you know up here subscribe to it?

VT: Yes, I think it's got pretty heavy circulation . . .

[End of Tape 1, Side 2]

[Beginning of Tape 2, Side 1]

VT: . . . they've got racks all over Pope [County]. I think somebody told me that Clarksville is the dividing line between the central Arkansas edition and the Northwest Arkansas edition. I think the Clarksville people get the Fayetteville/Fort Smith news . . .

RM: Well, that's pretty smart.

VT: Some of them complain because they'd rather have the Little Rock news.

RM: Well, we're seeing another competitive thing—it's not anything close like it was in the Little Rock war, but the Stephens people are putting on a very good attack up in northwest Arkansas. Those newspapers are doing a good job.

VT: Oh, yes, the *Morning News* in Springdale.

RM: Yes. It's a very good newspaper. And they have this big ad—and their reporters right across the street from the state capitol, and they're giving the *Democrat-Gazette* real opposition in that part of the state.

VT: Yes. You know, the *Democrat-Gazette* is in kind of a circulation game operating up there. They own the Fayetteville paper. My sister was caught in that. She was editing the *Pea Ridge Weekly*, and suddenly she became an employee of the *Democrat-Gazette*. She was with the Bentonville group, and the *Democrat-Gazette*

Company took it over.

RM: Is she still up there?

VT: No. She is now the city editor of the *Log Cabin [Democrat]* in Conway.

RM: Is that right?

VT: For about the last three months. Her name is Becky Tyson. She moved about two months ago. And they had no managing editor. She was the city editor. Right after she was hired, the managing editor, David Keith, resigned. So they're in the process of hiring a new managing editor.

RM: Well, this interview is going to go into the history of the *Arkansas Democrat*, and you had a piece of it, just like I did. I guess it would be appropriate for me to ask you what you think about the time you spent there and what you think about it now. Does anything come to you that you think you could say about it—good or bad?

VT: Well, I think, just in terms of general quality, it has continued to grow and improve. As I said before, I generally think that Walter Hussman is committed to putting out a quality newspaper. And I think that that movement toward quality began with, of course, a tribute goes to Marcus George and Stanley Berry for making that commitment and deciding to hire a fine newspaperman like Gene Foreman and make a movement toward quality. So, I think it has been a continual process, and, just because I disagree with the editorial page, I don't think that should be a reason for me to have any disrespect for the quality of the paper.

RM: You are retiring from teaching, so are you going to miss your teaching?

VT: Well, no, I enjoy the teaching, but I'm tired of grading papers.

RM: [Laughs]

VT: And I'm tired of having so much time committed to it, so I'm looking forward to having more free time. I'm not going to quit writing. I've got historical projects that I've been putting off because I haven't had time.

RM: Of this area?

VT: Yes. I'm vice president of the Pope County Historical Association. I've written several articles. In fact, I just made a presentation at the Arkansas Historical Association meeting last month [laughs] at Mountain View. But I have my own projects. One thing I'd like to do, maybe, is collect my grandfather's column. You know, he wrote a column called "Down on the Farm," starting in 1937.

RM: Oh, I bet that would be terrific. I bet you could put that in bookstores.

VT: Yes.

RM: Well, you'll have time to do that now.

VT: Yes. And they're all there. They're in the bound volumes and in the library on microfilm.

RM: But you're still going to teach one class?

VT: Yes. It's an online course in community journalism.

RM: Well, thank you very much for talking with me.

VT: Okay. Well, I thank you for the opportunity.

RM: If you think of anything else you'd like to say about this, why, now is a good time.

VT: Oh, two other stories from when I was working at the *Democrat*.

RM: Sure. Please.

VT: I moved into Karr Shannon's cubicle after he went in the hospital and then died. One thing that I remember is I was looking out the window one day during a thunderstorm—my window faced the Christ Episcopal Church—and I saw the

lightning hit the cross on the top of that, and that cross fell to the sidewalk  
[laughs] right outside my window.

RM: That was a bad omen, wasn't it?

VT: Yes. And the other thing that I like to say—and, of course, you have to take this not completely seriously—but I always felt, toward his later years, Karr Shannon had some dark sides to the things he wrote that we talked about earlier. So I always felt like his spirit haunted that corner of the building where my cubicle—my cubicle and the one on down at the end. So I always kind of suspected that his spirit was something that was working on. Like John Robert Starr, when he began as editor and started writing his column. I thought there was some of the spirit of Karr Shannon inside that, and possibly now in the writings of Paul Greenberg. [Laughter] His office is over on the other side of the building now.

RM: Well, he could have gone around.

VT: It may just follow the editorial page. [Laughter] But I've always suspected that there's the spirit of Karr Shannon that's still abroad in that building.

RM: [Laughs] Well, that's great. Thank you very much.

[End of Interview]

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