

Gazette Project

Interview with

Fred Coger,
Reading Terminal Building
Philadelphia, PA
March 6, 2000

Interviewer: Jerol Garrison

Jerol Garrison: The date is March 6, 2000 and we are sitting in the Reading Terminal Building in Philadelphia, PA. This is Jerol Garrison and I am interviewing Fred Coger. Fred, this interview is part of an oral history project being conducted by the Arkansas Center for Oral and Visual History at the University of Arkansas Library in Fayetteville. The Center will transcribe the interview and you will have an opportunity to review the transcript and make changes before the document goes into the archives of the Library, where it will be available to persons interested in Arkansas history. The aim of these interviews is to shed light on what kind of a newspaper the *Arkansas Gazette* was. But before we go any further, Fred, I would like for you to give me your name and indicate yes or no that you are willing for the Center for Oral and Visual History to conduct this interview for the archives and to keep the interview on file for persons interested in Arkansas history. Is that okay with you?

Fred Coger: Absolutely, that is fine. If anyone finds any value in any of this, they are welcome to use it.

JG: And we have a form here for you to sign. Would you state for the record that you have signed the form?

FC: I have indeed.

JG: Thank you. Fred, please describe the work that you did for the *Arkansas Gazette* and the period of your employment.

FC: I was a copy editor on the copy desk for about two and one-half years I think in the late 1950's. ...During the time of the Central High School crisis and...

JG: What period would that have been? Would that have been...did you start, you think in 1956 or 1957.

FC: It was 1957. I was at the *Daily Independent* in Newport in 1956, working as a sort of one man staff. Ken Parker and I became acquainted at an AP meeting and he gave me a call and said, "We have an opening on the copy desk." I said, "I will be down."

JG: Great!

FC: I had a great time there. I enjoyed the experience.

JG: Well, do you remember the desegregation crisis of 1957?

FC: Oh, yes. Yes, I just happened to be living not far from Central High School and I came back from a visit one weekend and there were all these National Guard trucks and other vehicles and people wandering around. I will have to admit, I was not keeping up with that particular story. It took me by surprise, I did not

know what was going on until I got to the office the next day. We were in full swing by then the *Gazette* was on top of it and the rest of us had to try to stay on top of it too.

JG: I wonder if you could describe how the desegregation crisis ...how the news of that period affected the copy desk.

FC: Not too much; as citizens and residents we all had our opinions and they varied a lot. I remember the chief of the copy desk, a cracker from Georgia who was not too pleased about the *Gazette* stand for compliance with the integration orders, and his neighbors were even less pleased and they wanted him to move.

JG: What was his name?

FC: That was Tom Swint. A wonderful character, but definitely no integrationist. Most of us felt beleaguered, sympathetic, some perhaps even enthusiastic about what the *Gazette* was doing to try to stand up for law and order and the right thing, but it was difficult to be in Little Rock and work for the *Gazette* and face a lot of hostility, it really was.

JG: Can you remember some of the names of the people who were working on the copy desk in 1957?

FC: Now you are putting me to the test, because memory is not my strong point. I remember George Stroud, Tom Swint's deputy, and Jim Clark, who came on the desk while I was there; Deacon Parker. Yes, what was his first name?

JG: Everybody knows him as Deacon.

FC: Yes. There were about six or eight of us. One or two of the guys later went to St.

Louis. I knew all of those people well, though you wouldn't know it by my lack of memory of names now. We had a good copy desk. And we were expected to hew the line on a lot of different levels. One afternoon, when I had not been there long, all of us copy deskers were called into the office of the Editor, J.M. Heiskell, a legend at a very old age, still putting in a full day everyday and reading the paper, every line. He lectured us briefly on some specific things he wanted done in the way of editing. I do not remember all of them now, but one sticks in my mind. He put up on a little board a very short item from that day's paper; it must have been five or six lines only, and he showed us how one extra word in that item made it one line longer than it needed to be. This was important, he said, because if we eliminated that line, we would have just one line more for something important in some other story. He wanted us to be careful to that fine a point. This is how closely the man watched his newspaper, and he did it on so many levels for so many years. That is why I think the *Gazette* was what it was, a quality paper recognized and respected statewide.

JG: Now what about Harry Ashmore? Do you remember him?

FC: I remember Ashmore as a towering figure down the hall, an intellectual giant, a strong leader. He did not come around the newsroom much, but when he did, everybody loved to hear him tell stories. He was widely respected as a thinker and an editorial writer and the man who marshaled a really powerful position on the integration crisis. Even though some people thought him a little bit too liberal, he was a terrific editor, and I think he was right in his position. I think I

have to say that, he was absolutely right. It cost us a lot of support and personally I think the undermining of popular support showed up later when the *Gazette* wasn't able to fight the *Democrat* as well as it should have and that is unfortunate, but sometimes it is the price you pay for doing what you think is a proper journalistic thing.

JG: Do you remember A. R. Nelson?

FC: Arlie Nelson? Gosh yes. We had such a good staff, and A.R. had been a major builder of it. A. R. was a very quiet man, but he was hard as steel and you found that out when you crossed him. Bill Shelton, the city editor, was another quiet guy who was very competent and Gene Foreman was his assistant; Gene, of course, has gone on to great things here in Philadelphia as a top news executive at the *Inquirer*.

JG: He is over at Penn State now.

FC: Yes, he is now.

JG: Let's just stop for a second here.

JG: We are continuing with the interview with Fred Coger here at the Reading Terminal Market. Fred, we were talking about people at the *Gazette*. Is there anybody else that you would like to mention that you can remember among the people who worked at the *Gazette*?

FC: Well, I still remember sports editor Orville Henry, a legend in his field; Roy Reed, who covered the North Little Rock beat; Matilda Tuohey, a savvy political reporter, and Ray Moseley, one of the best writers I think that we had during the

time I was there. Ray was right in the middle of the Central High controversy. Unfortunately, Ray antagonized news editor Tom Swint, my boss. One night Tom [Tom also headed the copy desk] was walking past the city desk and Ray said something that Tom considered disrespectful. I do not know how it all started, but whatever it was that Ray said to Tom, Tom took it badly. Tom reached over and yanked Ray up out of his seat and clonked him on the head with a great big Georgia fist. Ray was sort of out of it for a bit, wasn't quite himself for a day or two. Tom left the *Gazette* shortly after that and went to Seattle. It was an unfortunate thing, they were both nice guys, but Tom did have a temper and Ray did have a mouth and I think that is about the size of it.

JG: Very good. I wonder if you could tell me your opinion of the *Gazette* news coverage back during the 1957 crisis and during that period when you were at the *Gazette*.

FC: Well, I think the *Gazette* in the crisis did exactly what it had always done in less exciting times. It tried to tell the story, it tried to be fair, it tried to be thorough, and I think it succeeded in those efforts. If it came to it, it tried to stand up for what was right even though it was unpopular. It fearlessly and brilliantly expressed its opinions on the editorial page as well as covering the news with equal brilliance and courage. It earned a number of awards and prizes. I thought it was an outstanding job by a very beleaguered staff going beyond themselves. I am very proud of having been there.

JG: Do you remember if the newsroom was crowded during the desegregation crisis?

FC: There was a mob of “foreign” reporters, foreign to us, mostly, not foreigners actually, but “outsiders,” reporters from major newspapers, networks, columnists. We had people in all the time. I remember network reporter Sander Vanocur broadcasting or taping a report, at least, from our newsroom. There were lots of others. Dorothy Kilgallen was there, among other big-name columnists. It was a circus in a lot of ways. Those people all relied on the *Gazette* and its staff and library for basic facts, and they came there and not to the *Democrat* because of our reputation. I do not think very many of them spent much time at the *Democrat*. But, they were in and out, in and out, and Mr. Ashmore, in spite of being very busy, took all the time needed to brief and help any and all of those people and entertain them into long night sessions of drinking at whatever that little club was over there. I cannot remember the name of it. They had a grand time. Ashmore was a great guy with a story.

JG: It was called The Press Club, wasn't it?

FC: Yes.

JG: Fred, I wonder if you could tell us about how you grew up in newspaper work in Arkansas.

FC: Well, I was in a newspaper family from the start. My grandfather Claude Coger at 18 was the youngest editor to own an Arkansas newspaper when he bought *Sharp County Record* in Evening Shade after the turn of the century. After about twenty years running that weekly there he moved to Hardy, also in Sharp County, and operated the *Hardy Herald* until he died in 1928. He was sort of a legend in his

area for crisp, incisive editorials and no-nonsense news coverage of his community. He was a pretty good success, although there was not much money in newspapering in either Hardy or Evening Shade. He ran a good newspaper. My father tried to follow in his steps. He operated a weekly there in Hardy and then one in Heber Springs and later one in Melbourne and did pretty well — at least, he made a living. But he had a hard time because of the Depression. Hard times dogged him for most of his life.

JG: Your father's name was?

FC: Claude Coger, Jr.

JG: Is that with an E on the end?

FC: Yes. Everyone called him Bill, so he is still known there as Bill Coger. My dad had me helping him in the print shops when I was in high school in Heber Springs and Melbourne. I would set type, I would run the press, and also write some things from time to time. He also got me started in business for myself as the *Gazette* carrier in Heber Springs, so in that way I have a long record with the *Gazette*.

JG: That was when you were in high school.

FC: Yes. I started reading the *Gazette* when I was in sixth grade. I remember reading about the war, World War II. Even then I was like most everybody else in Arkansas, we relied on the *Gazette* to tell us what was going on throughout the state and in the world. I believe one of the strong things about the *Gazette* throughout those years was how it unified people in Arkansas and helped us think

of ourselves as a community. We always in those years had the Arkansas “state news briefs,” at least a full page, maybe more, on an inside page. As in *USA Today*, a page of little things from each area. Of course, people in one area would mostly read their items and only be vaguely aware of most of the others, but even if you lived in the little northern town of Hardy, you knew that there was a place in south Arkansas called El Dorado. Even if you did not read all of those stories, you knew that down there were other parts of your culture and your experience as an Arkansan. Over a lot of years, that created a strong community bond, statewide. Nobody else was doing that. That was part of Mr. Heiskell’s notion, we are going to edit tight and we are going to make room for this community coverage. And we are going to carve out a place on page one for prime news briefs where a national or world story that ordinarily would take five or ten paragraphs would be done very concisely in four or five lines. Telegraph Editor Bob Douglas was doing that when I was there. He was good at it, very good. I admired him for how he packed so much into those little paragraphs.

JG: Some of those went on page one?

FC: Yes, all of them, a whole column of “In the News” briefs — world news, national news, no local news — local news would be someplace else in the paper. This took the place of lengthy stories about what was going on outside of Arkansas.

JG: Then the state news was back inside somewhere.

FC: Yes, back inside.

JG: Now you said you worked with your dad on the papers in Heber Springs and

Melbourne. Did you eventually move to Fayetteville?

FC: Yes, we moved to Fayetteville after I had attended one year at Arkansas College in Batesville. We moved to Fayetteville so I could live at home and attend the University of Arkansas. My dad gave up his editorship of the weekly *Melbourne Times*, where he had had the best time of his life. He gave it up for me. We moved to Fayetteville, where he worked as a Linotype operator at the *Northwest Arkansas Times*. I also worked as a part-time reporter at the *Northwest Arkansas Times*, finished college in 1953, then went into the Army for two years. Out of the Army, I came back to Arkansas. I worked for about a year and a half at the *Newport Independent* and from there I went to the *Arkansas Gazette*. From Little Rock, in 1959, I went to Phoenix, Arizona, and worked on the afternoon *Gazette* there, as a copy editor.

JG: *Phoenix Gazette?*

FC: Yes. And from there I went to Philadelphia.

JG: When did you start at the Phoenix paper and when did you start at the Philadelphia paper?

FC: I worked in Phoenix from 1959 to 1963. The missile crisis in Cuba occurred while I was in Phoenix, and it was a heart-stopper. I was on the telegraph desk there at that time. I moved to Philadelphia in 1963 and worked on the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* until it expired in 1982. I was Night Telegraph Editor seven years, Deputy City Editor one year, Telegraph Editor from 1974 to 1982, and head of the combined Copy Desk (additional duty) from 1976 to 1982.

JG: You were on the copy desk . . .

FC: We didn't have a universal copy desk when I first went to the *Bulletin*, we had a city desk which had its own copy editors, and we had a telegraph desk with its own copy editors to handle national and world news. I did telegraph copy for most of my time at the *Bulletin*. Later we did form a universal copy desk (local, national and world), and I headed the copy desk as well as the separate Telegraph Desk. That all ended of course, when the *Bulletin* went out of business in January, 1982. From there I went to New York in April 1982 and worked for *Newsweek* magazine until I retired in August 1996. About fifteen years.

JG: Fifteen years?

FC: Fourteen plus, actually. I was a copy editor at *Newsweek* also. Easier than newspaper work in terms of deadline pressure, but much more painstaking with respect to putting fine points on things. We had the luxury on the *Newsweek* copy desk of kicking things back and forth between writers and editors to achieve a polished product.

JG: You retired in 1999?

FC: No, I retired about three years ago, in 1996, I believe.

JG: Very nice and now your wife is Toni, T-o-n-i?

FC: Toni Coger, she is a New Yorker.*
[*Toni died of lung cancer on August 9, 2000.]

JG: And she has two daughters.

FC: Yes, our daughter Pam, a nurse, lives in Colorado. Susan is a paralegal working in

a law firm in New Jersey not far from us.

JG: And you and Toni have two granddaughters?

FC: That is right. One in Colorado and one in New Jersey.

JG: Fred, when you were on the copy desk at the *Gazette*, I wonder if you could remember some of the special things that went on during that time.

FC: Well, one special thing for me was that one day a week I got to be the slotman in charge of the other guys on the copy desk. To a young guy like me that was a thrill. I got the chance also to lay out a page once in awhile as acting news editor. Another special thing that I got to do occasionally was ordinarily the job of an almost retired copy editor from Chicago who each afternoon would go over to the brokerage and sit there for an hour or two and get the stock closings, write them down in longhand and bring them back to be part of the financial report of the next day's *Gazette*. It sounds kind of basic, but I guess our financial coverage was rather basic at that time. That was a pleasant little break in this man's day; instead of editing copy he could get to go out in the sunshine, walk a few blocks to the brokerage and then walk back with the data. He loved it. I found it a bit exotic but not stimulating.

JG: And there were probably twenty-five or thirty stocks on this list?

FC: Something like that, yes. Just the top, the most interesting listings of the day.

JG: They did not even have Arkansas listings of stock back then, did they?

FC: No, no. We did not have the stock market and I kind of doubt that very many of our readers were very much interested, although that has changed now. Those

who did follow the market probably did not rely on us for coverage of it.

JG: I wonder if you could go back to your dad who was a Linotype operator for the *Northwest Arkansas Times* when you went to the University of Arkansas and tell us a little bit more about him.

FC: Well, he was quite a guy. When he was running weeklies in Melbourne and Heber Springs — this is not a thing that you make a lot of money at and you work hard and the hours are long, but still he found time to organize a rather good high school band in Melbourne and served as its director all the time that he was there, four or maybe five years. During our two years in Heber Springs, he did the same thing, organized a marching band for the high school. So he is remembered there for that, as much as for the papers he put out. And he served as mayor of Melbourne for two years. His reason for wanting to be mayor was that he felt we needed a hospital and a waterworks and a fire department. Under his mayoral tenure, Melbourne got all three, and I am proud of that.

JG: Great.

FC: In Fayetteville he enjoyed working as a Linotype operator; it was less taxing and he was among friendly people there in the composing room. Unfortunately, while we were there, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis, which in those days was a more common problem than it is now, because we did not have the drugs that we now have. What you did then if you had tuberculosis was live at the State Sanatorium at Booneville until they could make you better to some extent or until you were no longer carrying the disease and no longer a danger to society. He was

there for three years maybe; his TB was arrested and he came back to work in Fayetteville for a short while. However, the disease flared up again and he had extensive surgery, which really crippled him by closing down most of one lung. After that he was unable to work much of the time. He and my mother went to New Mexico because they thought the climate would be good for him, and he worked there for a year or two. Eventually he and my mother moved to Phoenix so they could live with me there because he was no longer able to work at all. He wanted to be in a dry climate and Phoenix seemed to be the place, so until he died in Phoenix, that is where the three of us lived.

JG: And your mother later lived elsewhere . . .

FC: After he died in 1963, she came back to Sharp County, Arkansas, which she always considered her real home no matter where she lived. She lived in Hardy and then in Ash Flat and worked for quite a number of years as a clerk in the county Health Department (the county health nurse) in Ash Flat. She was also the organist at the Spring River Presbyterian Church in Hardy, which was to her the most important thing in her schedule. She also lived in Ash Flat after she retired, until failing health made it necessary for her to move to New Jersey to live with my wife and me for almost ten years. She ended up in a nursing home when her health got really bad, and she died at the age of ninety-one in the nursing home in Moorestown, New Jersey.

JG: Her name was?

FC: Her name was Lillian Coger. Lillian McLean Coger.

JG: Well, Fred, this has been a very interesting interview, I just wondered if there is anything else that you would like to add.

FC: Yes. I remember something that happened in Melbourne when I was still in high school and I think it might shed some light on the *Gazette*. Maybe not, but I will tell it anyway. We had a sensational murder in IZARD County. The sheriff of the county, Lawrence Harber, was shot down in cold blood by an uneducated hillbilly out in the sticks when the sheriff went to his home to serve a warrant on him. This fellow came out of his house with a shotgun and blew the sheriff away. It roused a lot of emotion in IZARD county and the trial was long and highly disputed and well covered by the press from everywhere. (My dad published an “extra” edition of the *Weekly Melbourne Times* to report the guilty verdict.) Joe Wirges covered the story for the *Gazette*. When it was a story about a murder, Joe was the best. I was lucky enough to meet Joe and know him years later when I worked at the *Gazette*. The story of the trial drew numerous reporters from Little Rock, including, for the *Gazette*, city editor John Fletcher. Fletcher frequently covered big stories himself, or shared the role with one or more others. He was a splendid writer. It was then becoming fashionable for journalists to cover not only the who, what, where and when, but also, if possible, the why. John Fletcher did that as best he could in this story, interviewing psychologists and other “experts” who tried to explain what Rupert Byler, the defendant, had done. This story was in the papers every day for a long time and for a good many of those days, to the chagrin of my dad and many people in IZARD County, there were stories attempting to

explain why would anybody do this? Or who was to blame for this --- this uneducated fellow or society? The Fletcher articles went into things like social deprivation, poverty, ignorance, lack of education. It was all valid reporting, but it infuriated some local people who thought it made our community look bad and, to them, it seemed to be excusing this fellow for killing a sheriff that we all knew and loved. The sheriff had happened to live next door to my family in Melbourne. So I knew him, and I knew his family. And my dad finally got enough of Fletcher's coverage and one day wrote a very caustic letter to the *Gazette*, which the *Gazette* published among its letters from readers. The *Gazette* would publish critical letters anytime. And it published this one. However, my dad was soon fired as the local correspondent for the *Gazette*. The state editor didn't like the tone of my dad's letter.

JG: What year would that have been approximately?

FC: That would have been in the 1940's, I guess 1943 probably. The defendant, Rupert Byler, was sent to prison, where he stayed until about 1954. I was working Newport at the time, and I remember that when the story of Byler's early release came across the wire, I was immature enough to think his release was big news in Jackson County as well as in IZARD County, so I put a big headline on it. And I was immediately criticized by my eighty-year-old Linotype operator who clearly knew more about newspapering than I did. He said, "The man paid his price. Leave him alone." And he was right.

JC: How do you spell that name? Rupert Byler?

FC: That's it. R-U-P-E-R-T. Whatever eventually happened to Rupert, I don't know, but I hope he did well and learned something from his time in prison. What interests me in retrospect is that the *Gazette* was taking the risk of arousing the ire of some of its readers. The *Gazette* didn't have vast numbers of readers in Izard County, so alienating them would not put the *Gazette* out of business, but still this is what can happen when you do a good job of reporting controversial news and also when you take a controversial stand on it. Your otherwise good and loyal readers take offense and might stop being your friends. What happened in Izard County was precisely what happened in the integration crisis, only the latter was on a much larger statewide scale. We not only had the rabid segregationists to worry about in Arkansas in the 1950s, but we had even larger numbers of good people of Arkansas who did not like all of the publicity, good people who were not necessarily opposed to people's rights but who did not like those out-of-staters coming in and writing bad things about the state. This attitude may not have been intelligent, I grant you, but it is the way people often react to bad news about who they are and where they are. They did not take it well, and I am afraid it may have had a fatal effect for the *Gazette* in the long term, because I believe that after the integration crisis the *Gazette* never again enjoyed as great a circulation or as full a loyalty anywhere in the state as it had before. There were doubts about its integrity and veracity, which, I believe, were totally unjustified but they were there and when it came time for the *Gazette* to fight its big battle for survival against a wealthier newspaper chain, the support and loyalty of readers and advertisers was

just not there.

JG: Thank you very much Fred.

FC: My pleasure.

JG: It has been very interesting and we appreciate it.

[End of Interview]