

Gazette Project

Interview with

Tom Davis
Fayetteville, Arkansas,
7 August 2000

Interviewer: Roy Reed

Roy Reed: This is Roy Reed and Tom Davis, on August 7, 2000. Tom, if you would, just state your name and that we have your permission to turn this interview over to the Arkansas Center for Oral and Visual History at the University of Arkansas.

Tom Davis: I am Thomas D. Davis, now of Fayetteville, Arkansas. I give my permission to turn this over to the Arkansas Center for Oral and Visual History, if you like.

RR: I appreciate that. Let's just start at the beginning, when and where you were born, your parents. Just kind of sketch your biography up to the time that you joined the *Gazette*.

TD: I was born September 24, 1920, in Oxford, Mississippi. My father was a farmer and an oil driller with a third-grade education. He had to quit school and take over the Missouri farm at age nine when all the men folk died.

RR: What was his name?

TD: Wentworth Thomas Davis. My mother was Myrtle Naomi McElroy. She was about twenty years younger than Dad. When she graduated from high school, they kept her on as a schoolteacher for a couple of years. I understand that was pretty common in the South. After that she was a housewife. My parents were divorced when I was three and a half. I grew up in Kansas City, Missouri. I was raised by an aunt, my father's sister. She was a registered nurse. She and her husband raised me until I was fourteen, through my first year of high school. I

then moved
to Oklahoma City.

RR: What were their names?

TD: Nell Field Davis Brown.

RR: Nell Field Davis Brown.

TD: Her husband was James Alonzo Brown.

RR: Okay.

TD: He had an auto supply store in Kansas City.

RR: An auto supply?

TD: Auto supply, yes.

RR: You weren't raised by either of your divorced parents. Is this correct?

TD: Correct. When I was fourteen, I went to live with my mother. She was then remarried and lived in Oklahoma City. From there after high school, I went to the University of Oklahoma. I majored in journalism and got my bachelors. There was an interruption of war. I spent four years in the army.

RR: Talk about that some.

TD: I could type, so they kept me at the reception center for about three years. Then I applied for OCS Medical Administrative. I went to Texas and trained for that.

RR: OCS is Officer Candidate School?

TD: Officer Candidate School, yes, Medical Administrative Corps. I suffered a separated shoulder during training. I had to resign. Of course, also contributing to the fact was that we had a victory in Europe. That persuaded me that it was a good time to get out.

RR: Where was your first service? The reception center was whereabouts?

TD: Fort Sill, Oklahoma. From there and after OCS, I went into a medical malaria control unit. It was an eleven-man unit. We ended up in Okinawa when the

atomic bomb was dropped.

RR: Really?

TD: Nobody in my unit had much education. They didn't understand what an atom was. I barely did from high school chemistry. I had to explain it to them what I thought had happened. A great power was released from the splitting of an atom.

RR: You were close enough to it. I don't suppose you were close enough to hear it?

TD: Oh, no. We shared a lot of celebration when it was announced. Our troops were out firing tracer bullets and live ammunition. It was very dangerous to be out. We found out about it when it was announced about Hiroshima.

RR: What about the Okinawans? Did you have a chance to see their reaction to it?

TD: They were all in compounds. No, no direct reactions. We used them on work details to clean up the villages. On malaria control, we were killing mosquitoes with spray and cleaning up debris with breeding places.

RR: We had already conquered Okinawa, hadn't we?

TD: We arrived in the harbor the day before the island was declared secure. As a result, we got a battle star worth five points toward shipping home, which was very worthwhile. There was still fighting in the south of the island and in the north. A lot of it was with Japanese soldiers who were trapped. They would mingle with the Okinawans, who are Japanese. They were filtering through. One of our units ran into several of them escaping. They were injured from hand grenade shrapnel. They got it in the rear ends, so they got their Purple Heart for that, although, it was in the purple rear end. After I got out, I went back to the university and finished school. I worked in Altus, Oklahoma, at the *Altus Times Democrat*. It was in southwestern Oklahoma. It was a small daily, about 5,000 circulation. I learned a lot of good basic newspapering there. The editor's father died and one of his helpers was his sister. She handled the society and some

proof reading. I was the reporter. The three of us put out this daily paper. When their father died they went off for the funeral, and I had to put out the paper. It was pretty hectic. I had to make a quick run on the beat and write three stories. I worked the wire. I didn't even have a headline schedule. I typed under old heads to be sure they fit. I was really pretty frantic about it trying to meet the deadline. I stopped at the water fountain and tried to sharpen my pencil -- I was so confused. That broke the ice for me and I started laughing. From then on, there was nothing to it.

RR: That was your first editing experience?

TD: Oh, yes. I had a little in school. We had a daily at the University of Oklahoma. It was the first real newspaper.

RR: You got it out?

TD: I got it out. I worked several days like that before they came back.

RR: How many pages a day would it run?

TD: It would run anywhere from six to eight and some days ten. It was a small paper.

RR: Was it an afternoon paper?

TD: Yes. There were early deadlines.

RR: It was not a relaxed thing.

TD: Oh, no, it wasn't. I had to get it out in a hurry.

RR: You probably had to have it all ready to go by twelve or one o'clock.

TD: I think it was a twelve-thirty or one o'clock deadline.

RR: That was an amazing performance.

TD: It took a lot out of me.

RR: You were there for about how long?

TD: About eighteen months. I applied for graduate school at Columbia University at New York City. I was accepted. I was in the class of 1949. It was a one-year

master's.

RR: Do you remember any of your fellow students from that year at Columbia?

TD: Mort Stern, who later worked at the *Arkansas Gazette*, was there. We organized a little campaign to get him elected as class president. It worked. It didn't take much for a class of fifty-five. All you had to do was get about ten in a clique. People didn't know or care or whatever. It worked.

RR: Were you there the same year that Bill Shelton was?

TD: No, Bill came a year after me.

RR: Any other memorable names in your year there?

TD: Marvin Stone was there. He later became editor of *U. S. News and World Report*. He was later an assistant director of United States Information Agency.

RR: After Columbia, what did you do?

TD: I went to work for the Lubbock, Texas, *Avalanche Journal*.

RR: I wonder where they got that name?

TD: I don't know where it came from. There were certainly no avalanches out there. The land was pretty flat. When I first looked it up on the map, it showed McKenzie River running right through the town. I was a fisherman at the time. I thought, "Great, I can go fishing." When I drove into Lubbock, where the river was, was a city park. It was dry and no water of any kind. It was a dry land river. Occasionally, about every ten years, they would get some water in it. Four hundred thousand acres were in the county, I think, and 300,000 of it was in cotton. It was an interesting paper. We did a lot of chasing fires and police and that kind of work. Not very much depth with governmental coverage.

RR: You were reporting there?

TD: Reporting, yes. I had a lot of fun. We would carry cameras—the old speed

graphics. Our job on the weekend was covering high school football in addition to everything else. The reporter had to contact the officials and bum a ride to the game. It might be fifty or sixty miles out. It was big country out there. We would go to the game and keep our own statistics. We had to work the sidelines with no stands. The people behind you would tell you to get down. Your legs would give out the first quarter. The line markers were always obliterated. You would have to get back when the guy was punting to run down the field. Of course, if the punt was blocked, you had to run back up there. You had to find out who scored and the name. You couldn't get any help from anybody. You had to run out on the field after a touchdown and ask the guy his name. [Laughter] After the game, you had to visit both locker rooms. By that time you hoped you could keep your ride with the official. He was done and ready to go home. You would hope you could hold him around until you could get through. Then you had to go back and write out your story and make your own print. It was all in an evening. This isn't really what you need for history on the *Gazette*.

RR: It is a good insight on how the newspaper used to be done. You mentioned speed graphics, for example. Describe the size and appearance of a speed graphic camera.

TD: It was a watermelon. It was at least a foot high with the flash attachment. I would say about eight inches wide and had a bellows that extended out for focusing. You had a double plate that had slides. You would put a plate in and pull the slide. When you opened the shutter, it would expose the image. You then had to put the slide back in. You could turn it over and get the shot on the other side.

RR: Those plates were about what dimension?

TD: It was four by five inch negatives. The frame had to be a little larger than that.

- RR: In other words, by today's standards, it was a pretty unwieldy instrument.
- TD: You had to carry extra flashbulbs. You always had to lick the flashbulb to be sure it had good electrical contact. I had forgotten that until now.
- RR: I remember a cartoon that appeared once in the University of Missouri humor magazine, called "Showme." The cartoon showed a race at a track meet. One with the hurdles. There were three runners just neck and neck. The cartoonist has captured the runners in the act of jumping over the hurdle. Off to the one side going over the same hurdle is a photographer dressed in a suit and necktie wearing a hat. In mid-jump he is aiming this speed graphic camera across to get a picture of these three runners.
- TD: The thing was heavy. I don't know what it weighed. Lugging it around, we went out to fires or murders. Quite often we would hear about it over the police radio, and we would be near it and get there first before the firemen or police. We, again, had to carry cameras. There was no union, of course.
- RR: Reporters were expected to carry cameras in those days. I suppose they still are on small papers.
- TD: Yes, I suppose.
- RR: How long did you stay in Lubbock?
- TD: Nine months.
- RR: And then where?
- TD: Then to the *Arkansas Gazette* in Little Rock.
- RR: Were you married by that time?
- TD: I was married while I was in the army.
- RR: Tell me about your wife.
- TD: Jane Smith Davis, born in Bentonville, Arkansas. She is a year younger, born in 1921. We married in July, 1942.

RR: You did not meet in Arkansas, I assume.

TD: No, we met at the University of Oklahoma. We were introduced by one of my roommates from Muskogee, Oklahoma. That was where Jane moved to after Arkansas.

RR: Did you have children by the time that you came to the *Gazette*?

TD: Yes. We had a child before I graduated from the University of Oklahoma.

RR: Eventually you had how many children?

TD: Four.

RR: Their names are --- ?

TD: The oldest is Bren Field Davis. The Field is a family name, related remotely to Eugene Field. Anne Elizabeth Davis, now married to F.A. Nerone. Dean Stuart Davis is our youngest daughter. Stuart is a family name on Jane's side. It is connected to the House of Stuart in Scotland. Mary Queen of Scots was a Stuart. I say, "For me, it is tough living with royalty." They have nailed it down pretty well and have done some genealogy work in the states. We were trying to get some done in Scotland but needed more information. Our youngest son is Kent Wentworth Davis. Wentworth is another family name, my father's name. It is from the family that founded Wentworth Military Academy in Missouri.

RR: Okay, you went to the *Gazette* in what year?

TD: 1950.

RR: As a reporter?

TD: As a reporter.

RR: Tell me about your career there.

TD: The reason that I went was because Mort Stern contacted me. He suggested to the *Gazette* that I might be a candidate. I got a letter from Harry Ashmore. I don't know how many letters that he sent, maybe two or three. I was quite tempted by

the offer, but I had just been in Lubbock for nine months. I didn't really want to move again.

RR: It was sort of an unwritten law that you stayed at least a year, as I recall.

TD: At this particular paper, they gave a month's salary as a bonus if you stayed there through January 1st. People would stay and then after January 1st would leave. I think you had to have at least six months in before you could get the extra month's pay.

RR: This goes to a problem that small papers have, hanging on to employees. There is a lot of movement in papers.

TD: The old philosophy was to get a job, hang on and stay. In time, all good things will happen to you. But, later as I watched the operation, I told people to stay a year at the most. By that time you had done a complete cycle and had done everything that you are going to be doing. You are going to know about all you are going to learn. Maybe just a few more experiences but not much on the technical side. If you want to get more money, you have to move on. I would tell my students not to stay too long, to move along. That doesn't mean that a lot of people haven't found great careers working all their life at one paper.

RR: I have told mine the same thing. I try to encourage them to stay a year. I, myself, have violated that principle.

TD: I was eighteen months at Altus, but my other employment was seven years at each paper.

RR: What did you start off doing at the *Gazette*?

TD: As a reporter, general assignment. Very soon I was moved over to cover City Hall. I don't remember for exactly how long. One thing I do remember about my start at the *Gazette*. I was driving from Muskogee to Little Rock. With me were my wife, Jane, and our first child, Bren, and Jane's mother. On the way on

Highway 64, we came into Clarksville, and the highway was blocked. The hotel was burning down. It was an old hotel, a landmark. I got out and covered the story. There was a stringer there for the Associated Press. She had her speed graphic and took pictures and asked me to take them in to the Associated Press. The *Gazette* had the use of AP pictures. I had to unload my wife, child and mother-in-law. I had to go back down to the paper to write the story. I got two by-lines on page one the day before I went to work! [Laughter] It was a great start. Who is this guy that is coming in here taking over the front page?

RR: Well, anytime a hotel burns down . . .

TD: It was for that town. It was a pretty big story.

RR: And the *Gazette* covered the whole state at that time.

TD: I knew enough about the paper to know that. Another thing that sort of enticed me to come was that I was encouraged politically by Sid McMath and the revolution of Arkansas politics. I thought, "Well, things are opening up. The old guy is moving out and here comes the new guy — a veteran with new ideas." That had a lot to do with it.

[Tape Stopped]

RR: Before we get to going again on your particular career at the paper, I would like to double back a minute. You mentioned that you came there at the urging of Mort Stern, a fellow you had known at Columbia [University]. Can you think of other times during your newspaper career when what came to be called "networking" came into play? All of us, at one time or another, came to rely on a friend at such and such a place to send word about such and such a job.

TD: I think it was fairly common to check with somebody in that town or the area of that paper. You would find out what the work positions were and the work conditions were.

RR: In my own case, I went to the *Gazette* because I had a friend in the back shop, a printer that I had grown up with in Hot Springs. Later on after I went to *The New York Times*, I remember, many times, recommending some younger person for a job because I had met that young reporter out and around and had been impressed by him. The same thing happened to me. Claude Sitton hired me for *The New York Times*. I am sure that you have had similar experiences.

TD: I tried to get you out to the *Detroit Free Press* once. I remember when I left the *Detroit Free Press* and went to the *Delaware County Daily Times* in Pennsylvania, I had been recommended by a fellow that I used to work with on the *Free Press* who had gone on to be the executive editor of the Pennsylvania paper. He was leaving for another job in Hammond, Indiana. He had recommended me to take over his job. A fellow reporter at the *Detroit Free Press* also had gone to Chester and then came back to the *Free Press* also. I felt them out about what the situation was in Chester before I went to that one. I think it was fairly common to deal with the people that you know. I remember one time the *National Observer* was looking for people. They called me about someone else, and they became interested in me, but I turned them down.

RR: I guess we develop something like a nationwide fraternity of newspaper folks. Nowadays, you would have to have sororities because women have become a great force in the newspaper. I know in my own case, I could name several dozen people that I consider friends of mine who are working for various newspapers all over the United States. I am sure that you could, too.

TD: The fellow at the *Inquirer*. Gene Roberts.

RR: You met him at the *Detroit Free Press*, I guess. We were talking about the *Gazette* and your career there. You started out as a general assignment reporter and then moved to city hall.

TD: It was the city hall beat. Also, it included a few state departments, like the welfare department and health department.

RR: You had your hands full.

TD: Yes, I was pretty busy. It did not include the county beat.

RR: So you had city hall and a conglomeration of state agencies that were downtown. What sort of stories did you run into later on at city hall?

TD: Of course, we covered the council and all their various maneuverings. I remember I had a great deal of difficulty with the mayor, Sam Wassell. Sam had his department head meetings, and the press was allowed to sit around in the room. Sam would whisper, and they would whisper with each other to where you couldn't hear what they were saying. If you were there, you would ask them to speak up, and they might for a little bit. I got dramatic one day. I crawled up and sat in the middle of the table. It was quite a stunt, and I shamed them. It got a little better after that.

RR: That is why reporters need to be young.

TD: I guess so, to be able to climb up on the table. One of the things that I liked to cover there was the city parks department headed by a fellow named W. K. Amo. The zookeeper, if I remember, was Raymond Gray. Wasn't that his name? For kind of some fill-in stories, he would tell me some interesting things about certain animals. Just as a sideline, I would write these feature stories about different animals. Larry Obsitnik, one of the great photographers, would always come up with a great picture of these animals. It was a fill-in feature that would run when the news holes were large and the news was small.

RR: City editors always tried to keep stories like that in the bank.

TD: They seemed to, yes. Most papers have to, or they should. There is no news in it, strictly entertainment. I generally believe in reporting the news and not

entertaining.

RR: An ordinary reader not familiar with the newspaper might ask, "Why do you need those local stories in storage backed up when you always have a lot of wire copy that you could fill the paper with?" What is your answer to this?

TD: If you fill up the paper with wire stories, pretty soon you do not have a need for reporters. If they decide to cut salaries, then you are gone. You can fill it up with wires at any time. You have to have reporters in the house to cover other news. That was just something to fill in a dead day. It was easy to do.

RR: I guess a newspaper that is concerned about its quality must make sure it maintains a certain balance between local coverage done by its own staff and the easy stuff coming in over the wire.

TD: I guess I just think that people will take a news magazine if all they want is wire coverage. The local news is why you take the local paper.

RR: What did you do after the city hall beat?

TD: They put me on as assistant city editor at the city desk two days a week. I worked as a general assignment reporter three days a week.

RR: Was that at your request?

TD: It was supposedly a promotion. That was about the only way to move up in those days. I had another child after [moving to Little Rock]. Before I left, I had three. Eventually another one in Detroit. The only way that you could move up financially was in that fashion. I never did like the desk that much. I think I was a better writer and reporter than a desk person.

RR: That is interesting. I wonder how many newspaper people made that same choice even though they preferred reporting.

TD: I was still enjoying it. I was still in the newspaper business. It wasn't like I left the business and went off into advertising or something like that.

RR: I guess as assistant city editor -- Bill Shelton was the city editor. How did you like working at Bill Shelton's elbow? Quite literally as I remember.

TD: He was certainly thorough. Sometimes I thought he was a little hard. By that, I mean he was a bit of a martinet in some regards. He was always focused on getting the paper out and done properly. There was nothing evil about the man. He did not put up with a lot of nonsense. I say that as a good thing. He wasn't that easy going. There wasn't much humor or entertainment.

RR: Did you ever hear him laugh?

TD: Oh, some. I know it sounds like he was a pretty negative fellow. I admired Bill and the job he did. He was very dedicated, and it is what we need more of.

RR: I think that Bill probably knows that we all referred to him as "The Great Stone Face."

TD: I don't know. Maybe I have heard that. He wasn't the warmest of people.

RR: He was the best city editor that I ever expect to know.

TD: I think I would have to make him my best. He did his job and did it well.

RR: Do you remember how he went about teaching young reporters the art of reporting and writing?

TD: I didn't really see that much. I always felt that most of my training, everywhere that I was, was from reading my stories and seeing how they had changed and what had been done. I looked to see how they were condensed and what paragraphs were changed. I paid a lot of attention to what happened to my copy. Sometimes it was for various reasons. It was due to time, space, and other things. I didn't see Bill do that very much -- No one had time to sit and lecture. I think he was pretty good at getting to the point of a story. So many reporters that I have seen coming in would have their notes and everything else, but they couldn't tell you what the lead or the essence of the story was. I don't know if I got it from

Bill or from doing it myself – I used to tell them to give me a budget note when they came in. They would be sitting back there and a lead wouldn't be coming and wouldn't be happening. I would finally say, "What's happening?" They would say they couldn't get the lead. I would say, "What did you tell me when you came in?" I don't know if Bill ever did that or not. Maybe I picked the habit up from him. Whatever, it worked.

RR: I don't remember him ever using that particular device. I do remember that now and then I would write a lead, and he would hand it back to me. He would say, "I don't think this quite captures the thing. Try again." Maybe we would chat about it a minute. He would suggest that I try this other approach. That had the effect of making a reporter sharpen his thinking about the story.

TD: One thing that Bill did that I thought was admirable, he took the time to clip everything that happened and kept his own clip file of stories. The library was impossible to find anything. So often in the newspaper you don't have time to keep up with everything like the background. Bill would always have a file and could refer to it with the information there. It was good for summarizing or for names, spelling, dates, background.

RR: I had forgotten about that, but it is an important detail. When he would give you an assignment, it would be typed out on a piece of copy paper. It was paper clipped to however many clippings there were on that very subject.

TD: I remember that we had a great succession of librarians. Usually, they had no newspaper training at all. I remember once that I was looking through the files and came across a picture file. The file said, "Fat People." I thought, "This is crazy." I looked at it, and sure enough there were three or four fat people. When I put it back, there was another file that said, "Fat People." In parentheses, it said, "Fat People (Really Fat)." That was the file system. I pulled it out and there was

a 700 – 800 pounder. I couldn't find anything on the Little Rock Air Force Base. Finally, someone found it several days later under the "J's" for jet bomber base. It was difficult to find anything.

RR: Let me interrupt this for a minute. I had to insert a new set of batteries. We were telling library stories. You had become assistant city editor, working on the desk with Bill Shelton for two days a week and general assignment reporter for three days a week. For about how long did that arrangement go on?

TD: I think I had been there for a year at least when it started. I would say a total of four to four and a half years.

RR: That was as assistant city editor?

TD: Yes.

RR: Was it before you moved into news editing?

TD: Yes.

RR: About when did you become news editor?

TD: I think I was into that for about fifteen months or so. I left in August of 1957.

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[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

RR: Talk to me about the news editor job.

TD: That is probably the unhappiest job that I have ever had. I never was a very good headline writer. It was all kind of a knees-and-elbow job. It wasn't really enough time to think. You were putting stories out to copy editors for editing and headlines. You were having to do the layouts for the inside pages as well as Page One. We had to keep a very exact log of how much type. They didn't allow much overset. If you had a galley or two of overset, you are wasting money. You had to keep a record of size heads and how many one paragraph stories and that type of thing. You had to pick the photographs and size them.

RR: The news editor does that?

TD: Yes. To me it was a high-pressure job. Some people could handle it and not sweat it. I worked at it pretty hard. I don't think that was my best hour as a newspaper man.

RR: How many copy editors did you have working for you?

TD: Usually five to seven.

RR: This would have been a Monday through Friday job for you? Did somebody else fill in on the weekend?

TD: I worked it five nights a week.

RR: Coming in at what time of day?

TD: I think I would come in around two or three. I would usually get out around 1:30 or 2:00 in the morning.

RR: It was long hours.

TD: Sometimes I would come in at three. It was at least a ten-hour job.

RR: Were you paid overtime?

TD: Oh, no.

RR: You were management.

TD: I was management. I had a copy editor who would get two hours of overtime, which was easy for him to get. Very often he would be making more money than I was.

RR: How important was it for the news editor to be there until one or two?

TD: I suppose he could have gone home, but he started a show and so he stayed with it.

RR: The first edition came out at about ten, didn't it?

TD: I think it came out a little earlier than that, about nine-thirty or so.

RR: We had four editions, so you would stay and make sure they were all clean.

TD: Sometimes it was until there were makeovers of some others, but not too often.

RR: Late breaking news and such. Do you remember ever having to make over page one for a particular story?

TD: Some bad headlines. I can't remember any particular story. I can't remember any big tornadoes or international stuff.

RR: How did dirty words get in the headlines?

TD: Oh, I don't know.

RR: Inadvertent.

TD: Inadvertent.

RR: At least no one would ever own up to it. Who were some of the copy editors working around the rim while you were there?

TD: Webster, what was his first name?

RR: An older fellow from *The New York Times*.

TD: He would have to count every headline, and sometimes it didn't make sense. Earl King was one of the brightest. He was with the *Daily News*. He was quite good at headlines. Georgia Dailey was there a while, and she was really good. She was from Texarkana. Somebody gave me a book on bluebirds that she had edited. Deacon Parker was there a while. He had a drinking problem and was somewhat unreliable. Jack Trimm -- didn't you work with him? He was there for a short time. George Stroud was there.

RR: Was it George who filled in for you on weekends?

TD: Yes, and Tom Swint.

RR: All right, I want you to back up a little bit and talk about a couple of these fellows in particular. Deacon Parker, what do you remember about Deacon?

TD: Mostly that he wouldn't show up for work a lot of times. Ralph Leach, did I mention Ralph?

- RR: He was your predecessor.
- TD: Yes, I believe that is right.
- RR: Deacon, didn't he get fired more than once?
- TD: Yes. He and the managing editor, A. R. Nelson were long-time buddies. Nelson was pretty forgiving and understanding. There was a little favoritism there. He would fire him, and then he would take him back.
- RR: Was he a good copy editor?
- TD: Adequate I would say. He wasn't the best.
- RR: I am seeing the face of another guy, middle-aged and baldheaded.
- TD: Hiney Loesch.
- RR: I think it was Leon Hatch.
- TD: Leon was baldheaded and a great guy, but he was with the Associated Press.
- RR: He didn't come to work for the *Gazette*, later on?
- TD: If he did, it was not while I was there.
- RR: I think you are right.
- TD: The whole time I knew him he was with the Associated Press.
- RR: You mentioned Hiney Loesch, too.
- TD: Hiney was a predecessor. I think he went to work there when I was there.
- RR: Do you know how to spell his last name?
- TD: I think it is L-O-E-S-C-H. It is a German spelling.
- RR: Tom Swint. Were you there the night that Tom jumped on Ray Moseley?
- TD: No, I was not. It was such a dramatic thing. I think it was my night off.
- RR: I didn't see it.
- TD: Ray was working the city desk as a fill in. Swint at that time may have been working as the back shop guy, doing the trims and fits. I think that was what he was working at during that time. I have no idea what caused it or happened to

cause it.

RR: You stayed there until August of 1957?

TD: August of 1957.

RR: How did you happen to leave?

TD: I had proposed to the *Gazette* that I have a four-day work week and be off three days. I had no retirement and felt like I wasn't being paid adequately. It was too long hours and too much sweat and strain. I proposed that because it is done at a lot of papers. In fact, after I left, I understand they went to a four-day and three-day. I had worked for Southern Education Reporting Service for Pete McKnight of the *Charlotte Observer*. He was taking a leave to direct the Ford Foundation project of Southern Education Reporting Service, which was founded to keep up with developments after the Supreme Court decision in 1954, to keep up with the happenings in all the southern states. I was doing the Arkansas report for the monthly publication out of Nashville. We would summarize what had happened in the legislature and different school boards in our state. I was doing that and had covered the school board some as a general assignment reporter. I got acquainted with McKnight, and he got acquainted with my reporting and my capability. I asked him if he had any openings there in Charlotte. He was back there then. He said, no, he didn't, but would shop around the Knight chain. It turned out that *Detroit Free Press* had an opening. Frank Angelo called and flew me up there for an interview. They offered me the job and with higher pay as a reporter. I started out reporting and wound up as day city editor. I was back at the desk again.

RR: This was still the Knight chain? This was before it became the Knight-Ridder?

TD: Yes.

RR: Let me back up to one more thing before we say good-bye to the *Gazette*. Do you remember the night that your wastebasket caught fire?

TD: I heard you tell that story. I don't particularly remember it. I think the story was that I continued to take care of the copy and took care of the fire later.

RR: You didn't have a thing to do with putting out the fire. Some copy boy got some water and put on it. I took it to be testimony to the power of concentration. How did it catch fire?

TD: Everybody smoked then.

RR: Did you smoke cigarettes or cigars?

TD: Cigarettes— three or four packs a day. I was working the city desk at that time.

RR: Everybody smoked. In fact, I remember being one of the very few non-smokers. It was just a common thing like you saw in the movies where everybody lights up a cigarette.

TD: You may be trying to wind this down, but I have made some notes here about J. N. Heiskell. One thing that I take great pride and credit for is getting the air conditioning in the newsroom. J. N. Heiskell wanted to get to know the employees, so he started inviting us and our wives to go to the country club for dinner. It was one of those 103- and 104-degree days in Little Rock when we went. I took it upon myself to complain about the lack of air in the news room. The story always would be that we couldn't do it because it would make the printers unhappy. We can't afford to try to offset the heat of the Linotype and the hot metal pots and all the heat going on back there. It was also the word from his son-in-law, Hugh Patterson. Anyway, I told him it was pretty bad. The copy would blow away, and you would have to have spikes and weights all over the place. Notes would be blown away by the big fans, and the buzz was just terrible. J. N. was moved by it and called Hugh. We had dinner either Thursday or Friday night. He called Hugh and told him to put it in the next day. He said he couldn't do it because it was nowhere in the budget. It would be double time on Saturday and

triple time on Sunday. J.N. said to take it out of his personal funds. That is the story that I heard later. The air conditioning was on when you came in.

RR: It sure was. About what year would that have happened?

TD: Well, it was in long before I started city hall.

RR: They had also stopped going to the country club with Mr. Heiskell.

TD: I went because they were going alphabetically, and Davis was one of the first ones on the list. I thought a few others did.

RR: When I came in 1956, they weren't doing it.

TD: One of my favorite stories about J. N. was that about the street signs. We had a street named "Fillmore." The city had misspelled it, and it had only one "l" in it. J. N. complained about it. He asked the council to redo the sign. The council decided it would cost too much, and, besides, what difference would it make? Unfortunately for them, the councilman in charge of that committee that said it was silly to change was Arthur Mills. Mr. Heiskell said, "Okay, then let's spell Mr. Mills with one "l"." It turned him around in a hurry. It did make a difference. You know, Mr. J. N. had his own little style book on certain things. One of his favorites was tug boats. People were always writing about tug boats in the river. J. N. said that in the river it was a tow boat, and in the ocean it was a tug boat. He was very specific about that. Another one he really hated – Stories would say that they "evacuated" two hundred people from a town. He would say that you could evacuate a town but not people. We don't do that. He couldn't stand the phrase that four thousand volts "coursed through somebody's body." He said that voltage could not course through somebody's body.

RR: What would he want the story to say?

TD: I think that it was a four thousand volts line.

RR: If you were wanting to put it through the body, what would you say?

TD: They received a shock from a four thousand volt line. I never did really understand it. I remember another one that he had was very extreme about turning out the electric lights. I assume it was from the depression days. He would come out from using the men's restroom right there off the newsroom. If he had found the lights on with no there, he would say, "I have an agreement with AP&L. They said they wouldn't charge me for electricity if I have the switch off. They would only charge me if the switch is on and I am using it." There also was a rumor about him—I don't know if it was true – he was working for Associated Press in Memphis, a flash came through late at night about the *Titanic* being sunk, and he wouldn't move the story over the wire because he said it was unsinkable. Have you ever heard that story?

RR: There is a very similar story about the sinking of the *Maine* in Havana Harbor when he was working for the Associated Press.

TD: Maybe that is the story, and it got turned into the *Titanic*.

RR: In fact, I ran that one down with Margaret Ross. She had looked into it and found it wasn't true. He wasn't even physically in the AP Bureau or not in that job when the ship sank.

TD: What about the line when someone asked him if the *Gazette* had only endorsed Democrats for President? He said, "No, I think we went Whig once."

RR: Yes, I did hear that one, and I believe it. He was embarrassed about it.

TD: Dateline – that was used to start a news story. – Some might not know the newspaper term. – Dateline once had the date and place of the story, but now it is only the place. One time we were having fun at the *Gazette*, and there was an Indian coming down the Arkansas River. He was in a canoe called the *Coronary Thrombosis*. We decided to manufacture a dateline. We sent Dean Duncan, a reporter, up to Toad Suck Ferry. He got out in the boat with the Indian and pushed

off the sandbars and stuff. The dateline was, "Aboard the Coronary Thrombosis off Toad Suck Ferry." I don't think anybody ever beat that on a dateline.

RR: I remember that dateline and the story. It was wonderful, and the story was beautifully written.

TD: Dean had a terrible time that day and came in sunburned and weary.

RR: He spent several hours on that boat as I remember. That was an inspired piece of tomfoolery. I am glad that you remembered because I haven't been able to come up with the exact name. Including the name of the Indian. Dean is on our list to be interviewed. Any other memories from the *Gazette*?

TD: I remember I worked for the *Gazette* when it was a good newspaper. I am one of those who refuse to call it the *Democrat-Gazette*. I call it the *Democrat*. In all honesty, for some reason lately, it has gotten better. The news coverage is better than the old *Democrat* was.

RR: I agree with that.

TD: It doesn't quite measure up with the heart and soul of the old *Gazette*.

RR: Let's talk about some of the people who were there. You mentioned Harry Ashmore. What is your memory of Ashmore?

TD: Very good memories. He was high-minded, personable. He appreciated good writing. There was a story I wrote that got buried on an inside page. Harry put a note on the bulletin board praising it. It was about some convicts who had escaped and held some people hostage in their house for several hours. I believe it was overnight. It was a pretty harrowing experience for the family. Harry noted that I asked them about what they did and what did they say. He said I let them tell it in their own words.

RR: It should have been on page one.

TD: Things happen. Part of my reputation at the *Gazette*, there were several times

where I would fight the advertising department, which would violate its deadlines. In one particular case, an ad man named Philip Back. Do you remember Philip Back?

RR: An ad man? I do remember him.

TD: He was a representative of Winthrop Rockefeller. Winthrop was bringing in a load of Zoysia grass. The Gazette had the ad ready, and all of a sudden the grass showed up, a trainload of it. Back came in and it was late at night, maybe seven or eight. He wanted that ad to run. It was a big ad. Unfortunately, I had some things that J. N. had asked for. It was some subject that he was interested in. I had this layout, and I wouldn't throw it out. I said, "No, it can't run." Back got the ad guys, and I think they got Hugh Patterson. I don't know how far it got on that side. I said, "Okay, I will put it in. I will finish tonight, but I won't be here tomorrow." It was that much of a principle to me. Nelson wouldn't back me. Word got to Ashmore, and he said to pull the ad. He backed me. I will forever appreciate that.

RR: How long did this take to play out over the course of the evening?

TD: I don't remember, several hours.

RR: There were a lot of people involved.

TD: I don't know how long it took. At first they couldn't reach Ashmore. He was off somewhere. It was fairly late when they found him.

RR: That is a good story. I don't remember ever hearing it.

TD: I was kind of ready to get out of there anyway. But I didn't have anything lined up. RR: Did that put a stop to the late ads?

TD: I doubt that. It certainly stopped that one. It let Back know that he couldn't do that. He thought it was an ad, so it was money. There are several different businesses working in a newspaper. It is always better when you have a publisher

who is news oriented and not business side oriented. It is always better to keep the advertising part separate from the news department.

RR: Did you deal with the back shop much as news editor?

TD: Yes, quite a bit.

RR: Who do you remember from the composing room?

TD: I remember a young kid who sat at the headline machine. I don't remember his name.

RR: Was it Wayne Bullock?

TD: Sounds right. I also remember the foreman Dodd. Earnest Dodd. He was difficult, but I usually didn't have any major run-ins with him. I did have one. I don't remember what the situation was. The page just had to be changed, but Dodd was going to roll it anyway. I just stood in front of the dolly that carried the form and type. They could have just pushed it over me.

RR: This was a page form?

TD: Yes, the page form. It was metal and from that they made a metal plate in a half moon or half circle to fit the press.

RR: What was the problem with that page?

TD: I can't remember what the issue was. It could have been that the headline was bad and had to be changed. It had to be reset. It just had to be redone. It wasn't a big delay, but it was past the deadline.

RR: This tape is running out.

[End of Interview]

[Additional information added by Tom Davis]

After I left the *Gazette* in August, 1957, the *Detroit Free Press* sent me back to Little Rock twice to cover events after federal troops were sent to Central High School. My family had not yet moved to Detroit so I was living in my own house and driving my own

car while on expense account for out-of-town assignment. Along with the other foreign reporters, I used the *Gazette* newsroom, typewriters and telephones. I filed daily articles to the *Detroit Free Press* and the other Knight papers—*Miami Herald, Charlotte Observer* and *Akron Beacon-Journal*.

During my seven years at the *Gazette*, I covered, among others, President Truman, President Eisenhower, Eleanor Roosevelt (my favorite), General Douglas MacArthur, Senator Fulbright, Senator McClellan (my least favorite), Governor Faubus, assorted congressmen and three of the four Rockefeller brothers.

After seven years at the *Detroit Free Press*, I worked seven years as executive editor of the *Delaware County Daily Times*, Chester, Pa., a 50,000-circulation daily. The paper won the statewide competition as the best medium-size daily in five of my six contest years. Thanks to a newsroom-oriented publisher who allowed me to hire quality staffers. I retired in 1971 at the age of 50.

Seven years later while living in Russellville, I was recruited by Dean Duncan, a friend from our *Gazette* days, as an emergency replacement in his journalism department at the University of Central Arkansas, Conway. I commuted three days a week to Conway, and discovered I loved teaching. The next year, I applied for and was appointed the Gannett Distinguished Professor at the Marshall University School of Journalism, Huntington, West Virginia. After four years, I re-retired and moved to Fayetteville.

In our idle years, Jane and I have audited many courses at the University of Arkansas, including two trips to China, two to London and one to Italy and France. On our own, we have spent time in Manila, Rome, Madrid, Athens and Paris. For 12 years, we have spent

a month each year in Grindelwald, Switzerland, an alpine village at the base of the North Face of the Eiger.