

Gazette Project

Interview with

Carol Griffiee
Little Rock, Arkansas
14 October 2001

Interviewer: Michael Haddigan

Michael Haddigan: Okay. I'm sitting with Carol Griffiee, who's been a journalist, a former reporter, with the *Arkansas Gazette*, and it's February 1, 2001. The first thing I want to do, Carol, is explain that this interview is part of the Arkansas Center for Oral and Visual History's project on the *Arkansas Gazette*. We will transcribe this interview and make it available to those interested in Arkansas history. We'll give you the opportunity to review the transcript, at which time you will sign a release. All I need you to do now is to tell me your name and that you're willing to give the Center permission to use this tape and make the transcription available to others.

Carol Griffiee: My name is Carol Griffiee, and I give the Center that permission.

MH: Great. All right, Carol. First of all, can you give me some personal background?

Where were you born and who were your parents and what did they do?

CG: Well, they're the cause of why I'm where I am, that's for sure. My name is Carol Griffiee. I was born December 30, 1937, in Washington, D.C. My parents, however — my father grew up in Little Rock, my mother grew up in Stillwell,

Oklahoma, and they met and married while at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. During the Depression, my father moved to the East Coast. He was a newsman. He started his career at the *Southwest American* in Fort Smith, moved to Washington, D.C., during the Great Depression — in fact, 1933 — and, at first, he worked for the *Washington Post* and then he went to the *Washington Star*, which is where he was when I was born. He was the makeup editor there at the time. Well, yes, at that time, he was the makeup editor. During the war, he went into the military and held [laughs] two or three other jobs during that period. He was killed on June 22, 1946, at Perry Point, Maryland, when he was hit by a train. Mother moved us back to this area of the country, to Fort Smith. I graduated from high school in 1955 from Fort Smith High School and went to the University of Tulsa [Oklahoma]. By then, my course was already determined. I had been editor of my high school newspaper, and I was a very single-minded journalist [laughs], and that's all I've ever been is a single-minded journalist. I worked for the *Tulsa World* while I was in college — two years while I was in college. That is, my fourth and fifth year because my fifth year I stayed at the University of Tulsa to get my master's degree and continued to work at the *World*. And, then, after recovering from college, which took about seven months because I was so exhausted, I went back to Washington, D.C. I worked, at first, for a weekly newspaper called the *Fairfax County Sun Echo*, and [in] about three months, they made me editor of a new weekly newspaper that they started, called the *Annandale Free Press*. That's in Northern Virginia. I spent about two years

doing all that. Went to the *Washington Star*, starting there in 1963. I was assigned to cover Fairfax County and the Virginia General Assembly. I got disgusted — totally disgusted with the *Washington Star* in 1966 because, shortly before I arrived, the *Post* had surpassed it in circulation and completely cowed the *Washington Star*. It had been used to being the premiere newspaper, and it just devastated them when the *Post* passed them in circulation, and they became a very cowardly newspaper. If it didn't show up in the *Washington Post*, they weren't going to run it at the *Star*, and I couldn't abide that. So I left and after a brief stint with a congressman — it was brief because the minute he asked me to do something that I considered dishonest, I walked out on him.

MH: And who was that?

CG: His name was Hastings Keith, and he represented Cape Cod, part of southeast Massachusetts. He asked me to fudge something. He went to Vietnam in 1966 and, on his return, he got a letter from a civilian worker, American worker, at Danang where he was. In putting together the newsletter from his office, he wanted me to give the impression that this was a soldier who had written, and I said, "No way! I don't do things like that. We identify him as what he is, a civilian worker." Well, he wasn't going to give in, and I wasn't going to give in, so I left him [laughs] in September of 1966. Then I went to the *Northern Virginia Sun*, which was a daily, serving all of the Virginia suburbs of Washington at that time except Alexandria, which had its own daily newspaper. I stayed there and was city editor and then became executive editor. I took a leave of absence to run

for office in 1971, for the Board of County Supervisors from Fairfax County, and I lost by fourteen votes, which was okay with me because I found out during that time that it was not my cup of tea. Then I went back to the *Sun*, and the publisher completely botched the switch-over from hot type to cold type, and I was just — I was a basket case. I was so tired, so sleep deprived, just so burned out, that I finally said, “I’ve got to get out of here. It’s killing me.” In December of 1972, having lined up a job in Little Rock, I came back to Arkansas.

MH: Did you come directly to the *Gazette*?

CG: No, I did not. The job I had lined up — there was a lawyer in northern Virginia I knew, named Bill Stanhagen. He had married a daughter of somebody connected to the Walter Hussman, Sr., family. I had flown down here and interviewed with Walter Hussman, Sr., to establish a Little Rock bureau, the state capitol bureau, for WEHCO Media. So, when I came, I came back here with the job of being the state capitol bureau for WEHCO Media, working directly for Walter Hussman, Sr., and it was for that newspaper — for the five southwest Arkansas newspapers that he owned — that I covered the 1973 General Assembly. We crossed paths [laughs], meaning we crossed swords, in August because he had some very preconceived ideas, especially about the highway department, and he was absolutely convinced that his part of the state was getting short-changed on highway money — and he asked me to do some research, so I did some — about a month’s worth of extensive research at the highway department — and I found out, no, it wasn’t getting short-changed. The trouble is that the resources are just

not as great as Arkansas needed, and everybody was short. He didn't like the results of the research, and he wanted me to write a story saying what he wanted it to say anyway, so I said, "Bye!" And he knew I was looking. He fired me because he knew I was already looking for another job. I left there. I interviewed at the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, and they offered me a job on their urban investigatory team that they were just setting up, but I also interviewed with Bob Douglas at the *Arkansas Gazette*, and he said that I would be on the state capitol beat, and that's what I wanted. I wanted to be on the state capitol beat. Had he not offered me that, I don't know that I would have gone with the *Gazette*, but he did. I said, "Great!" Now, the story behind that is that when I was in northern Virginia, I had done, for that time, a lot of environmental reporting. In 1973, the environmental movement was raging in the country and the two reporters who were on the capitol beat at that time, who were Ernie Dumas and Doug Smith, didn't have any real interest in the environmental beat, so they were perfectly willing to welcome someone who had that background and that interest. And so that, I'm sure, played a large measure in why I got that job. So I joined the *Gazette* on October 1, 1973. I left on April 30, 1985. I resigned.

MH: Let me just back up a little bit and ask you some about the *Washington Star*.

CG: Okay.

MH: You talked about the paper, which you described at its worst. What was it at its best?

CG: I wasn't there when it was at its best, but it was, for years, the premiere

newspaper out of Washington, D.C. The *Post* was virtually nothing, and the *Daily News* was virtually nothing. But the *Star* got caught in that syndrome of the third generation of families. I remember [laughs] one of the assistant managing editors was named Rudy Kaufman. He was a trained field geologist, who had absolutely no business being in a newsroom, but that was the nature of the beast. That's what was going on and, like I said, I got pretty disgusted with the *Star* because it was only one or two years before I got there in 1963 that the *Post* surpassed the *Star* in circulation, but it just thoroughly cowed that newspaper. It really took the spirit out of it. I mean, I was at the *Star* at the same time that people like David Broder were there, Mary McGrory. And, of course, shortly after I left in 1966, these people all fled the *Star*, too.

MH: And, eventually, the *Star* closed.

CG: Yes, it did, in 1981.

MH: Now, as a child and as a young person, what impressions did you have of the newspaper business? I assume you saw your father go off to work and come home, but, other than that, did you get to go to any of the papers he worked at?

CG: Oh, he occasionally took me to the *Star*, but I only lived in Washington, D.C. — he was killed when I was eight-and-a-half. He was killed in June, and we moved in August.

MH: Did you read newspapers as a child?

CG: Oh, Lord, yes!

MH: All right.

CG: I read everything. I went into kindergarten at age four, and I was reading.

MH: I assume you read magazines. What magazines did you have at the house?

CG: No, we didn't, not during the war! No! Those were tough times. No, I remember reading newspapers, and I also remember reading books. I was a voracious book reader.

MH: Any favorites from then?

CG: Oh, the Nancy Drew series, of course! [Laughs] I just read everything I could get my hands on [laughs].

MH: So you developed an interest in public affairs just by reading?

CG: Well, you know, it's really odd. My mother and father would always — we'd hold these rather vigorous discussions at the dinner table [laughs]. My mother was a born, dyed-in-the-wool Democrat. My father switched to being a Republican while he was in D.C. because he got so mad at FDR [Franklin Delano Roosevelt]. [Laughs] And there was a heightened political awareness around my house and where I grew up in Kensington, Maryland, and you couldn't get away from it. [Laughs] My brother is also very politically active, and I used to be very politically active, but when I came back to Arkansas, I said, "No more. You need to fish or cut bait, Griffie. It's not politics and journalism. They won't mix. You choose one or the other." And, of course, it was journalism.

MH: Now, you were working in the Washington area there in the 1970s . . .

CG: 1960s and 1970s.

MH: Yes. I'm thinking of the early 1970s as a time — the 1960s and 1970s — when

the town was in tremendous tumult.

CG: Oh, 1960s! I swear — I'm often so glad that I survived. I covered the Neo-Nazis goose-stepping down Wilson Boulevard in Arlington, Virginia. I got trapped for three hours on the steps of the Pentagon during the Vietnam war protest with two other reporters. I got poked in the back with a nightstick, pushed down "M" Street in Georgetown. It was unbelievable! [Laughs] Like I said, I'm just glad I survived.

MH: And, at the same time, you said you covered the beginning of the environmental movement.

CG: Now, that I picked up on when I was with the *Northern Virginia Sun* because there is this huge, undeveloped watershed in Fairfax County, called the Occoquan Watershed, which fed into the Occoquan Reservoir, which was the water supply for Alexandria and other areas. And, of course, the board was under much pressure to open that up to development, and I said, "Not on my watch!" [Laughs] I beat them.

MH: So you covered all that?

CG: I beat them. I beat them. No, I beat them editorially through the *Northern Virginia Sun*. I was the editor, and I wrote the editorials, and we beat the bond issue.

MH: That was also a time when you had the Watergate stories.

CG: Watergate was just beginning to break as I left Washington.

MH: Really?

CG: I got out of there before that mess.

MH: After that, people took Woodward and Bernstein to be sort of the heroes of journalism, and a lot of people became interested in journalism. Did you see any difference in the quality or type of people who were in the business before and those who were in it after?

CG: By the time that Woodward and Bernstein — by the way, Bernstein worked at the *Star* when I did, [and he was] the most thoroughly obnoxious human being I've ever met in my life. I did not know Bob Woodward, but I did know Carl Bernstein. I was back in Arkansas by the time all that broke.

MH: Okay, so let's go back to where you had me before, at the 1973 Legislative Session.

CG: Oh, what a learning curve! Wow, that was a fun session!

MH: Where did you start from and what did you have to learn?

CG: Well, yes, the learning curve was just enormous because my previous experience had been a few days at the Maryland Legislature, filling in, but most of my time had been assigned to helping Alex Preston, when he was the lead reporter for the *Washington Star*, covering the Virginia General Assembly, and I went down to help him. When I was with the *Northern Virginia Sun*, I just assigned myself to cover the Virginia General Assembly, and I went and lived in a Richmond motel room for the time the Virginia General Assembly was in session. So I generally had an idea [laughs] of what legislatures were all about and what they did. I remember coming back here in December, 1972. I came into the worst ice storm,

almost equivalent to the ones we had last December. I rented a house in southwest Little Rock [laughs] that had a fence because I had my two cocker spaniels with me. I went down to — I looked up in the paper and saw that the legislative council was meeting down at the Capitol, so I just got in the car and trundled down to the Capitol and, bingo, there I was! I did a lot of reading and looked up on the map and figured up the areas that WEHCO Media wanted me to cover and who were their representatives and senators, and acquainted myself with the names of all that. I did all that in the last two weeks of December, first week of January.

MH: And then you started in the day-to-day coverage after that?

CG: Yes! Just, bingo. Just went down there and just walked in the door. The first person I met was Bob Steele [laughs] as I walked into the Capitol. I asked him where the legislative council was meeting, and he said, “Well, it’s up on the third floor in room 328.” So I just went up on the elevator and plopped myself down, and I haven’t left yet! [Laughs]

MH: Anybody who is still there from those days that you can remember — any legislative staff or legislators?

CG: No, none of the legislators are left.

MH: You were one of the originals, then?

CG: Oh, Ernie [Dumas] was there and Doug [Smith]. I still run into people, though, that I first met in 1973.

MH: Now, did you receive, other than the highway department situation, did you get a

lot of guidance on how you covered the legislature?

CG: No. I had the forerunners of today's fax machines. [Laughs] I had a bedroom at home that I turned into an office, and it was not unusual for me to turn out a hundred inches of copy a night. That was the session of the great stalemate, when Randall Mathis, representing the County Judges Association, brought the legislature to its knees for about six weeks in a stalemate with [Dale] Bumpers over what was known as the "seven-percent issue." The cities and counties wanted a guaranteed — a guaranteed seven-percent turn-back of general revenues. Bumpers was — "Oh, no!" — I mean, they went at it! And, of course, until you resolved that issue, you couldn't do any budgeting [laughs], and for six weeks we had this stalemate.

MH: And how did it finally resolve itself?

CG: As I recall, it resolved itself with Bumpers vetoing, and the county judges deciding not to try to override.

MH: What were your impressions of Bumpers at that point?

CG: Oh, man! Well, I didn't know what to think, at first. I sort of hung back for about a year, trying to size him up. I just sort of let it absorb. I mean, he was, without question, the smartest politician I had ever seen, and the most strong-willed, and I loved it because I had just come here from an atmosphere where the politicians just fawned over the media.

[Tape Stopped]

CG: At press conferences, he would look reporters straight in the face if we asked him

a question, in this conference room, and he would say, “I’m not ready to talk about that yet.” I loved it! I thought that was just great! [Laughs]

MH: So he was pretty self-possessed and well informed?

CG: Oh, mercy! Yes, indeed! Very impressive.

MH: What was your general impression of the Capitol Press Corps at that time? Were they very aggressive?

CG: Very.

MH: Anybody in particular you can remember?

CG: Yes, Ernie [laughs] and Doug. UPI [United Press International] had a little gal named Sylvia Spencer, who was assigned to the Capitol, and John Bennett was there for the *Commercial Appeal*. And I think George Douthit was there for the *Democrat*.

MH: Sylvia Spencer eventually went on to work for Morris Udall and one or two others in Congress?

CG: No, I can’t help you there.

MH: So they were very aggressive?

CG: Seemed to me like they were, yes.

MH: Now, when you made the move over to the *Gazette*, did you do anything differently? Did you have to do anything differently after you changed papers in terms of your coverage?

CG: Yes, I did, in the sense that it was made pretty clear to me that they wanted me to do largely the environmental stuff, so that’s what I did.

MH: And, at that point, was there anybody on the Capitol crew who was the chief?

CG: Don't I wish! That's one of my long-standing gripes. When you are a two-person bureau, you can work out things between yourselves, but when a third person comes into the mix, you need somebody to direct and call the shots. We didn't have that. I know it irritated to no end that I would show up at meetings that they thought they were going to be covering — Doug and Ernie — but nobody told me, and I just wanted to make sure that the *Gazette* got it covered. I was very quick if I saw either one of them move in the door to get up and leave. Nobody told me what to cover or what not to cover, so I was just trying to protect the newspaper. I know it irritated them, but all they needed to do was to talk with me.

MH: Did Bob Douglas or anybody from the newsroom apply any leadership there, or did you all just have to work it out yourselves?

CG: If they did, I wasn't aware of it. See, I got the wits scared out of me shortly after I went to the *Gazette*. Well, two things. Bill Shelton scared the hell out of me! [Laughs] He really did! He was a very intimidating man, at first. And then the second thing is that I got a call from Ernie one night, I remember. He told me that there was a union organizing effort at the *Star* — at the *Gazette* — that's a slip of the tongue because the *Star* was unionized, and I learned to hate the union when I was at the *Star* — so the *Gazette* wasn't going to have any problem out of me. I mean, I just could not abide this business of, "Oh, it's four-thirty. I'm getting up and walking out of the middle of a huge story." Believe me, the union reporters

in Washington did that! I was appalled. [Laughs] “How could you dare do that?” But it soured me on the unions in Washington, and I wasn’t about to have any part of it here, and then I was very disturbed when Ernie called and told me that some of the *Gazette* reporters were trying to organize a union. I wanted no part of it. That was the first thing I’d heard. We just sort of all held our breaths while that was going on.

MH: I’ve heard from others that that caused a lot of confusion in the newsroom, and the union certification vote was voted down.

CG: I guess. My memory of all that is hazy because I tried to ignore it. I’ll tell you one of the things that made us nervous, though. This was the time when Ginger Shiras got the hell beaten out of her by intruders. There was just a feeling of suspicion at the *Gazette* that maybe the fact that — twice got the hell beaten out of her — maybe that had something to do with the fact that she and Leslie Mitchell were the two union leaders. There was always that lurking suspicion that I would hear whispered around the *Gazette* newsroom. I never believed it myself because I — she was living in a part of the town or the part of the city that, at that time, was not a good neighborhood and, you know, I want proof that coincidences are tied. I’m not a conspiracy theorist.

MH: What year was that?

CG: It would have to have been 1974 or 1975.

MH: And the subject that everybody loves to talk about, tell me about Bill Shelton. What was your initial impression of him?

CG: He scared the hell out of me! I mean, he really scared me. I was eager to please. There were a lot of nuances at the *Gazette* that I was very slow on picking up on, to my detriment. I did not know that he and Bob Douglas hated each other, and they viewed that if you sided with one, you were automatically against the other. I had no clue that was going on. Shelton really did frighten me. [Laughs] He reminded me of a managing editor I had when I was with the Fort Smith paper in 1955. His name was Bill Barksdale. He would call out my name across the newsroom, and I would jump two feet out of my chair! [Laughs] I was seventeen years old, and I was very impressionable. Well, I had eighteen years of experience by the time I came to the *Gazette*, and he [Shelton] still intimidated me. But, actually, it got to the point — I probably, to this day, have more respect for Bill Shelton than any other editor I have ever had, bar none.

MH: Pretty steady. Didn't have a lot to say, very severe, very pointed in his criticism, and did pretty much what he wanted.

CG: Yes, but I knocked myself out trying to please the man.

MH: Did you ever get a pat on the back from him over your stories?

CG: Maybe once or twice. [Laughs] Maybe once or twice, but I knew that he respected me, and I'll tell you how I knew it. When he finally got me put back on general after the debacle — what I call the debacle — after he got me put back general assignment, I would go to him and say, "Well, I have some ideas for stories at this location and this location." He'd say, "Make a list. Give it to me." So I'd make up a list of these stories that I'd want to develop around the state.

He'd let me go off for a week at a time, traveling the state, developing these, and come back and put them together. That's tremendous.

MH: So he trusted you to do that.

CG: Yes, and he knew that I don't take advantage of situations. I don't abuse myself. Do you know what I mean?

MH: Right.

CG: In other words, when I go to work, I work.

MH: You don't have to look at the daffodils.

CG: Right, and my expenses are not padded. They are what they are, and he knew I was not going to abuse that. And he turned me loose.

MH: When you were talking about picking up on the nuances at the *Gazette*, you talked about the Douglas/Shelton dichotomy there. Were there any other nuances you want to mention, style things or ways of writing, or . . . ?

CG: Oh, there are many things. First of all, I was thrilled to be at the *Gazette* because they treated their people, for the most part, with respect. I wasn't used to that! [Laughs] I was not used to that. I thought it was the greatest place I had ever worked, bar none. But, as with everything, it was not all sweetness and light. From the very first time I had heard it, I was truly offended by it, and that was the attitude that if it wasn't in the *Gazette*, it didn't happen. I was truly, truly offended by that. I just could not understand how anybody could be that arrogant. I didn't have the attitude, and I didn't understand how anybody else could, but it was there. They admitted it. They said that. That wasn't something I dreamed

up, that was what was said. [Laughs]

MH: I've heard that, too, in my time there.

CG: And I was just so offended by that.

MH: Can you tell me more about that? You had the background. You had worked for these other papers, big and small.

CG: Yes.

MH: Is that where your feeling came from?

CG: No, I just don't like arrogance! To me, that's the greatest downfall of mankind: arrogance.

MH: Now, the *Gazette* was always very solid and very straightforward the way the stories were written. Did that come naturally to you? Is that the way you'd been trained?

CG: No, no, no. And, God knows, I could write on and on and on and on. I wrote the longest stories than any human ever wrote because I was fascinated by all this, and I figured my readers were just as fascinated as I was. Wrong! [Laughs]

MH: Well, obviously, some were. Let me ask you about the environmental issues in the early or mid-1970s. What were the "happening" issues?

CG: Well, the big one, and I think the one that Ernie and Doug didn't want to cover the most, was Arkansas Power and Light's application for permits from the PSC to build the two coal-fired power plants. They wanted to put both of them down at Redfield, or all four units down at Redfield, to begin with. Those hearings went on and on and on. [Laughs] Most of those hearings revolved around the

environmental impact. In fact, that's why they were divided, two at Redfield, two at Newark. Plus, the public policy that one county shouldn't get everything. And, at that time, one of the big environmental protection issues was prevention of significant deterioration where you wanted to spread things out so that the air quality in one given area . . .

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[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

MH: In later years, really did a tremendous job covering water issues.

CG: Yes, that was my favorite.

MH: And then continued to do a tremendous job of covering water issues. The Buffalo River fight . . .

CG: That had already ended by the time I came back here. It was the Cache River fight that was going on when I got here.

MH: Well, that's, in fact, what I wanted to ask you about. Can you tell me how it came to be and how you followed . . . ?

CG: I followed it *ad nauseam*, but it was already ongoing when I came here because a dentist from Stuttgart named Dr. Rex Hancock had formed the Committee to Save the Cache River, and he was raising old billy hell about the lousy job that the Corps of Engineers had done on the environmental impact statement on the Cache River, which was channelization — straightening, widening, and deepening it to become what, in effect, would have been another drainage channel in east Arkansas. The people downstream, the farmers downstream who would have

been inundated by all this water, plus the duck hunters [laughs], are the ones who got riled up, and, eventually, it was stopped. A lot of people date the stoppage later than this, but I know that it was stopped in 1979, when the woman head of Region 6 of the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency], named Adlene Harrison, refused to give them a 404 Permit, and that effectively blocked the Corps of Engineers. And then the Fish and Wildlife Service came down the pike with the idea of making it into a wildlife refuge, which, of course, it is today.

MH: Is it the Rex Hancock Wildlife Refuge?

CG: No, that's a state WMA [Wildlife Management Area].

MH: Now, the environmental issues and, in particular, water issues caused people to become really hot and . . .

CG: Yes! [Laughs]

MH: . . . really set people against each other. How did you find that in the course of your reporting? Were people really angry with each other?

CG: As long as you stick to the facts.

MH: I mean, were they angry with each other? Was there a lot of bitterness between . . . ?

CG: Ooh hoo! Ooh hoo! [Laughs] Remember in 1980 Texas started saber rattling about taking our water, and Frank White jumped on it. He never has updated himself past that time, by the way. In 1982, there was a Water Code Study Commission appointed, and I had covered every word that was spoken at those meetings. I must give them credit. That commission did the finest job of any

study commission I have ever seen perform at a state or federal level, and it produced recommendations based upon this extensive study that it did. They went to the legislature in 1983, and, oh, I have never seen such bitter fights in all my life. It extended to 1985, and there are some people today who still can barely speak to each other, like Owen Miller from Marked Tree, the representative, and Jodie Mahony, currently the state senator from El Dorado. Oh, man! I mean, they got into it so big that they could never trust each other and could hardly bear to speak to each other. I have just never seen such legislative fighting as took place on that issue, never before or since.

MH: Let me ask you about another water issue, Lee Creek.

CG: Yes.

MH: Can you tell us a little bit about that, how that played out?

CG: Yes. The environmentalists lost. [Laughs] Fort Smith got to build the dam on Lee Creek, but I always had my suspicions that that was not so much a water issue as a land development issue, and I know that a lot of the conservationists felt the same way. Fort Smith, this time, didn't consider phase two of Lee Creek for expansion. It went immediately and directly to another alternative, and it's now Van Buren that's looking at damming Lee Creek. I don't think Fort Smith wanted to take on the EPA or FERC [Federal Energy Regulatory Commission], or Oklahoma, again, on Lee Creek. I mean, most of the conservation groups, even en masse in this state, could be stopped with very little trouble, but if you take on some big boys, it's a different story, and FERC, Oklahoma, they are different

stories, so . . .

MH: Did you develop for yourself a guiding principle in environmental reporting?

CG: Sure!

MH: What is that?

CG: Same one I have for anything else, just tell what happened.

MH: Were you ever tempted to take sides in the issues?

CG: Sure! Sure, I was.

MH: How did you . . . ?

CG: And, privately, I did, but if you confine your stories to just telling what happened, I mean, then what you think about it doesn't matter. [Laughs]

MH: People can make up their minds for themselves when they read it.

CG: Sure. Sure. You betcha! I've got personal opinions on most everything that comes down the pike, but you confine what you write to just what happened and what you're told. Where do you come into it? You don't.

MH: Let me ask you about another aspect of this. A lot of times, gaining knowledge about environmental issues involves wading through documents and reports.

CG: [Laughs] Oh, come on, Michael! Somebody squealed on me! [Laughs]

MH: Yes. You're well known for doing the homework on all that stuff.

CG: Yes, I'm just . . .

MH: Is there any way you can get by without doing it?

CG: Well, it depends on how thorough and how accurate you want to be. [Laughs]

MH: So if you want to be thorough and accurate, you're going to have to do it?

CG: Yes, I've spent many an hour up at the *Gazette*. If I didn't have anything better to do, I was reading an environmental impact statement or papers written by — like, when the Vertac thing broke, I was bound and determined I was going to learn all about Dioxins [laughs]. So I went out and went to the medical school library and got these [laughs] huge journals and read them, and that kind of thing.

MH: You were involved in so much. I'm trying to at least touch on most of the things, and we probably aren't going to get to all of them, but I want to ask you about one of the biggest stories that the paper had in its last years, which was the McArthur case.

CG: Happened in 1982. Remember, it didn't die for another nine years. [Laughs]

MH: Right. Yes. How did you get involved in that story?

CG: Oh, unfortunately, because I hated that story with a bloody passion. Scared the willies out of me. I'm still traumatized by that. It was a Friday night, July second, if I recall correctly. James Scudder was our police reporter. James was a friend of mine, the late James Scudder. I was getting ready to go home because I had finished everything. There was something [that] came crackling over the police scanner in the newsroom, and James was on the phone. [It was] something about Inverness Circle, which, of course, because of the car bombing that had taken place the previous spring, was a familiar address to all of us. I volunteered to go out there because James was tied up on the phone and I was through, and, man, am I sorry! Mmm, mmm. I went out there, and I stayed and I stayed and I stayed, and the story that appeared the next day carried my byline, and the next

Sunday afternoon, all hell broke loose.

MH: What happened the next Sunday?

CG: I got a call from my then-neighbor, who said that she had just gotten a call from her cousin in Mississippi, who knew Alice [McArthur], and that — I can't remember all the details of it except that the person told me to go see Tommy Robinson, that that was the only person that this person trusted. Told me something about the little black book that Alice had been keeping. I called down to the *Gazette* and told them about it, the Sunday desk people. They said, "Well, go on out and see Robinson." I hardly knew where the sheriff's department was, for heaven's sake, and I went out there, and I plopped myself down, and that's where it started. Oh, I was told in that phone call that Bill McArthur — all this is coming back now — Bill McArthur was due to inherit a lot of money now that Alice was dead, her oil — that she had been keeping a little black book and to keep my eyes open for the little black book. Oh, and that her brother was friends with the Dixie Mafia, and he was en route up there and he was going to kill Bill McArthur. [Laughs] I mean to tell you, if he hadn't already, he was going to! [Laughs] I'm sorry, but from that point on, I was absolutely traumatized. I was way beyond my element. Way beyond my element. I regret to this day ever getting involved because of Mary Lee Orsini — running into that woman — and Charles Wools, that veterinarian from North Little Rock. I mean, that was the weirdest, craziest bunch of people I've ever seen in my life. Plus, the fact that I had never seen the establishment in Little Rock come as close to coming totally

unglued as they did during that case.

MH: Well, I want to make sure I ask you this question. There's an often-told story about you coming to work and walking across the parking lot with a shotgun.

CG: Absolutely!

MH: What was that about?

CG: I carried a double-barreled shotgun.

MH: Was that . . . ?

CG: I was being watched. No, this was just during the McArthur thing.

MH: Right.

CG: I was being watched, and I knew it.

MH: Who was watching you?

CG: I have a feeling it was Orsini, but I don't really know for sure. But I was quite aware of it. Not only that, but there was one day when John Woodruff had to come to the house to get me out of my house, that's how scared I was! [Laughs]

MH: Can you give me a little character sketch of Mary Lee Orsini, as you remember?

CG: I can't do that. I don't presume to know anybody that well. I maintain, to this day, Michael, that we do not know as the public and we will probably never know the full truth of that case. I do know that she called me and told me — the night of the day that she was convicted, she called me from the jail because she had full run of it. Thank you, Tommy [Robinson]. She called me at two o'clock in the morning, three o'clock in the morning, four o'clock in the morning — talked forever. She told me she was guilty, but she said that Bill McArthur had put her

up to it.

MH: Did you believe that?

CG: I didn't believe any of it! [Laughs] All I was trying to do was find out the truth.

MH: Now, what about Tommy Robinson? Do you have an idea of what his role was in the case? Was he simply . . . ?

CG: Oh, he was deeply involved. He was deeply involved. And the funny part of it is that the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] called me and warned me not to pay any attention to him. He used to call me maybe three or four times a day down in the newsroom at the *Gazette*. I never saw anybody whose moods cycled as fast as his. One call he'd be up here, and the next call he'd be lower than a snake's belly. And you couldn't — I just ended up screaming at him over the phone from the *Gazette* newsroom sometimes. He was so exasperating.

MH: So legislative coverage was a welcome relief.

CG: Well, like I said, I should never have been involved in covering that case. It just made a total nervous wreck out of me. I [laughs] nearly lost it a couple of times.

MH: What was the *Gazette's* — how did they approach handling this case as a news story? Were they sober? Were they frantic?

CG: I am tempted to say some things I can't prove, so I don't want to talk about them.

MH: Okay, that's fair enough. Now, I wanted to ask you about this period in the mid-1980s, early to mid-1980s, when the beginning of the end was kind of taking shape for the *Gazette*.

CG: Well, now, it died in 1991. I left in 1985.

MH: But during this time, the *Democrat* was gaining in circulation and . . .

CG: The war was on, in other words.

MH: How did the war strike you? Was it beneficial to the public?

CG: Well, I'm probably going to be an iconoclast on this. Not particularly. I think that the Little Rock public, the Arkansas public, was subjected to a lot of unnecessarily sensationalized reporting and a lot of trivia.

MH: Any examples that you can come up with?

CG: McArthur case was one of them. [Laughs]

MH: Right. And the trivia — what would be an example?

CG: Well, you know, trivia. It's hard to remember what trivia is. Trivia is trivia. A lot of the stories weren't really stories. Just because they were in a war and had big news holes. Now, do you want to know about the most traumatic experience I ever had at the *Gazette*?

MH: Sure.

CG: December, 1978. Bob Douglas called me into his office without any notice to me whatsoever and bounced me off the Capitol beat.

MH: Did he give you a reason for it?

CG: Not really. He put me on the federal beat, and then he proceeded to hire two white males to take my place.

MH: Well, that was another area that I was going to touch on. I was going to ask you — did you ever feel that you were treated any differently from the other reporters?

CG: Absolutely! Bob Douglas didn't like women being in the newsroom, even though his wife was there, and it was so patently obvious [that] it hurt. I fought back.

MH: Did you go to court?

CG: I went the EEOC [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission] route. No, I didn't go to court. I went to the EEOC because, actually, I felt betrayed on a couple of fronts because Carol Matlack was equally unhappy, but she sold out. They decided to bribe her, and she took it.

MH: That's when she went to Washington?

CG: Yes. And, of course, I wouldn't go back to Washington for all the tea in China [laughs], although they did send me back there for the Wilbur D. Mills story, and they did send me back there for weeks on end to cover the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. Well, that'll be one I never understood. [Laughs]

MH: Did you get anything like satisfaction on your EEOC [claim]?

CG: Not out of the EEOC, but, yes, I got satisfaction. [Laughs] What Bob Douglas did almost destroyed me because I'm a clinical depressive. I don't try to hide that. I am what I am, and I don't try to hide it, and my entire identity is wrapped up with my role as a journalist. I don't have any other identity, so he practically wiped me out with that. And then I fought at the EEOC, and I kept that complaint alive deliberately and deliberately stayed at the *Gazette*, I mean, with great deliberation, until he got exactly what was coming to him.

MH: Okay

CG: But somebody, one day, walked into his office and told him he was going to stay

managing editor, but he wasn't going to have any authority anymore, and I thought, "Now you know how I feel, Mr. Douglas."

MH: Who were the two people who went to work at the Capitol?

CG: Steele Hays was one and, for the life of me, I cannot remember the other kid's name. But, between them, they had about seven years of experience, and I had eighteen when I went to the *Gazette*!

MH: I was trying to think of who that might have been. I have a feeling that — it wasn't Chuck Heinbockel, was it?

CG: No. This kid later went to Memphis, I think. I mean, I just simply cannot remember anything.

MH: Now, you covered all the governors since [Dale] Bumpers.

CG: Bumpers.

MH: And you covered all the legislatures during that time?

CG: [Laughs] Yes. I barely covered the 1981 session. I was only out there two or three times.

MH: Who has been the most effective governor in terms of whatever their program was?

CG: Bumpers.

MH: And why was that?

CG: [Laughs] He was smarter than all the rest of them put together.

MH: Who was the most effective legislator?

CG: Good or bad? [Laughs] I would say for a long time it was Knox Nelson in the

Senate, in the sense that he could get what he wanted. John Miller was extremely effective in the House without being quite as dirty as Knox was.

MH: Now, the quality and the character of the legislators . . .

CG: Oh, oh! [Laughs] When I came back here, I was in shock. You've got to understand that my experience was with the Virginia General Assembly, where just to serve is considered the highest honor. You could hear a pin drop in the Virginia Senate or the House, and if you spoke, you could be thrown out, and that's media. In the 1973 session, I'd go home every day with a headache from the roar of the noise in the Arkansas House chamber. I also watched [Guy] "Mutt" Jones in his little red cowboy boots climb up on his desk at the rear of the Senate chamber. He was wild and wooly, I mean. And the 1973 session in the House ended in a fist fight! And I'm the one who got black and blue from it because my seat for WEHCO Media was right at the end of the press box on the House chamber floor, and when Julian Streett and Jodie Mahony came down and were heading for Buddy Turner, who was the speaker, Boyce Alford got up to stop them, and the state policeman came down the other aisle, and Boyce threw a punch [laughs]! My colleagues scrambled over me to get out to get a better view of the action. I got the worst of it all! [Laughs]

MH: You were in the way?

CG: Yes! [Laughs]

MH: Let me ask you about leaving the paper. When did you leave and why did you leave?

CG: April 30, 1985. I had been planning to do that. I set up my company, Editorial Services, Inc., on November 22, 1982, so I had been planning it for some time.

MH: Was there a precipitating event?

CG: There was not.

MH: You were just tired of . . . ?

CG: I was burned out. I had put thirty years into the newspaper business and, well, it was just a lot of things that were coming together then. I was just totally burned out. Bill Shelton was no longer the city editor. I really didn't want to work for anybody but him down there, plus the fact that I had spent a lot of time contemplating it, and I felt that there was no real future for the *Gazette*. It was perfectly obvious to me that we had a team in there that didn't know how to manage, at that point. I felt like the paper was going to be sold, eventually. I looked around and, of the two chains — there were two chains that I could have worked for — *The New York Times* and *Knight Ridder*, I figured it was too small a market to interest either of those, so I don't know. I don't want to go through that. Like I said, it was many, many things. I'm not one of these persons who is often moved to act by just one thing.

MH: Right.

CG: It was a lot of things coming together at one time, plus the fact that I was just beat. I was . . .

MH: Now, your company, Editorial Services, Inc. — you had clients already lined up, or you quickly got them?

CG: I quickly got them, which was surprising to me. I mean, the only fear that I had upon going freelance was that the market wasn't there, but I booked \$5,000 worth of work my first month.

MH: You've worked for the *Jonesboro Sun*. Were they on board at that time?

CG: No, they did not come on board until late in the summer of 1985.

MH: Who did you work for, initially, in that freelance stuff — your first couple of months, first year . . . ?

CG: Oh, I can't remember.

MH: Did you do national publications as well as . . . ?

CG: Oh, I still do. The *Wall Street Journal*, I'm a stringer for them. Southern Growth Policies Board, Game and Fish Commission. Game and Fish hired me right off the bat. No, not right off the bat, in the fall of 1985 they hired me. I did some manual-type work for Children's Hospital in the summer of 1985. I can't remember what it was. I just know I was busy as a tick and surprised to be so.

MH: Did you have an impression of the difference between daily newspaper work and freelance work? Was one easier than the other and one more difficult?

CG: No, and I never had any — well, now, in the sense that I knew it would take a lot of self-discipline as a freelancer, particularly, working out of one's own home, but I never had any concern about that because I am very structured.

MH: You were experienced enough that you had already been sort of an independent operator?

CG: Oh, and I just lead a very structured life. I make myself get up at the same time,

regardless of what day it is, and I work. I'm a full-blown workaholic. I work weekends even today.

MH: You have remained in the forefront of journalists covering the affairs of the state of Arkansas.

CG: I have? [Laughs]

MH: Yes, you have! I'm curious about some of the ways things have changed, the way the state government has changed.

CG: Oh, yes!

MH: The legislature has changed and also the office of the governor. What is your assessment for this change?

CG: My assessment is that term limits is a travesty. Ignorance reigns, and I hope that we survive any real crisis that comes down the pike.

MH: Now, what about the office of the governor? How has that changed?

CG: Well, we've always had, constitutionally, a weak governor, so, therefore, it's by dint of personality. Bumpers was extremely strong as a governor. Pryor was a caretaker governor because the money had run out [laughs] by the time he got there. His strong suit was in the people he appointed. Frank White was a joke, and then we had [Bill] Clinton come back. Clinton, in my opinion, was not the greatest governor we ever had, but he certainly wasn't the worst by any stretch. He let the state government get fat and happy, overblown. The trouble is that we've got a governor in office right now [Mike Huckabee] who ideologically says one thing and does completely the opposite.

MH: So . . . ?

CG: The state government has not ceased to grow! If anything, it seems to be growing faster under Mike Huckabee than it did under Bill Clinton. And, of course, [Jim Guy] Tucker — that was another shock to my system. July 15, 1996 — overnight, we went from all substance and no style to all style and no substance. [Laughs] I thought, “Whoa!” [Laughs] My head is still going around and around and around!

MH: You were down there at the Capitol that day?

CG: Oh, Lord, yes! [Laughs]

MH: It was sort of like a third-world coup? What was your . . . ?

CG: I was in the press gallery on the fourth floor [laughs]. I was in the house chamber, and I listened. The minute it came out of Tucker’s mouth, I knew what it meant — a lot of people didn’t — that he was just going to say that he was disabled for a while and he was going to stay governor. And I said, “Okay.” I shut my notebook, got up and left the press gallery, and you could just feel as the word traveled throughout the Capitol, you could just feel the rage [laughs] coming down, in my case, in the elevator. By the time I got down to the first floor, people were just aghast and just absolutely in a rage! I thought, “Uh-oh, here we go!” So I stuck around and covered everything that happened.

MH: I think you mentioned Clinton one time. Let me ask you about Whitewater. Did the vehemence of the opposition to Clinton surprise you? Did his actions surprise you?

CG: Yes, it did, but his actions didn't surprise me. I have never understood these Clinton haters.

[Tape Stopped]

CG: Now, this I definitely want to get on the record.

MH: So you were not at the paper [the *Gazette*] when it closed, but you did feel . . . ?

CG: Yes. Grief for my colleagues, for the death of the newspaper, but it took me two or three years to really mourn its passing — when I realized that the true role of the *Arkansas Gazette* was to keep journalism in Arkansas honest because it sure hasn't been since that paper went away.

MH: In what way? Why do you say that?

CG: Intellectually honest, in the sense that you couldn't afford to hide anything because the *Gazette* wasn't going to hide anything, and you could have egg on your face if you didn't step up to the plate and face things honestly. And, in my way of thinking, that was the *Gazette*. It kept journalism and Arkansas honest, and that was its greatest role, its greatest contribution to this state. One that we are sorely missing.

MH: So, its successor paper, you think, is not upholding the same standard?

CG: I will let my statement speak for itself.

MH: Okay. All right. Thank you very much.

[Tape Stopped]

MH: . . . with his limited perspective.

CG: In some ways, I think our current president [George W. Bush] is doing more

damage in the short time he's been in than Bill Clinton did in the whole eight years he was in. Missile Defense Shield, my eye!

MH: [Laughs] Well, when the *Gazette* closed, you were not working at the *Gazette*?

CG: No, I was not. I was six years removed.

MH: What was your response? Did you have an emotional response?

CG: Yes, I certainly did. It was one of sadness. I grieved for all of my colleagues, many of whom I was very fond of who were now out of work and at sixes and sevens.

[End of Interview]