

Gazette Project

Interview with

John Hanchette,
Washington, D.C.
29 January 2001

Interviewer: Annie Farris

Annie Farris: This is — make sure this is on, yes — January 29, 2001, and this is the interview speaking with John Hanchette, the interviewee.

[Inaudible] Were you there when they questioned [President Bill] Clinton about the . . . ?

John Hanchette: Yes, I was. That was . . . [Vice President Al] Gore had a newsmaker there, and — the one that caused the most trouble was Pat Schroeder [former House member from Colorado]. We're in the middle of the [Monica] Lewinsky thing. She said that she thought — and [her comments] are all on the record, and it's well known on the record, about forty-three microphones [were there]. And she said, "I think Clinton needs psychological help."

AF: Wow!

JH: And, you know, I was the only one that led with that. She was pushing her book. She was retired from the House.

AF: Right.

JH: It was *Thirteen Years in the House, and It Still Isn't Clean Yet*, or whatever her book was. The *Denver Post* takes our wire and put it on the front page. And she called up the *Denver Post* and the radio stations and said she never said it.

AF: It had been documented, hadn't it?

JH: I had it cued up, just coincidentally . . .

AF: Right.

JH: And I was going to do a little follow up and stuff. A guy calls me and says, “Hey, this is Top 29 in Denver in the Rocky Mountains. You’re on he air live!” You know, you ever get called by one of those jerks?

AF: [Laughs] Right.

JH: I said, “Okay.” He says, “You’re not actually on the air live, we just wanted to see [your reaction].” I said, “Oh, okay, what do you want?” He said, “Are you John Hanchette?” I said, “Yes.” He said, “Did you write this story?” I said, “Yes.” He said, “Well, Pat Schroeder just called.” He said, “She’s here in our studio, and she said she never said it.” I said, “Wow! This is the only chance I’ll ever have to do this.”

AF: Right.

JH: And I knew the tape was good at that juncture, though, because I had already set it.

AF: Yes.

JH: So I hit the button, and I said, “Well, maybe she recognizes the sound of her own voice,” and it was her saying, “I think the president needs psychoanalysis.”

AF: And was she there in the studio?

JH: Yes, yes.

AF: And what did she say? What did she think?

JH: She got up and left. Drove her from the field of battle.

AF: Oh, my gosh. I’m surprised she would deny that.

JH: Yes. I guess she thought nobody was taping her. I don’t know what her deal was.

AF: That's interesting.

JH: But this was sort of like a conservative radio station, so they all thought it was great.

AF: Right, right.

JH: You know they wanted me to be on everyday after that. I said, "I've got other stuff to do."

AF: [Laughs] All right, let's talk about the *Gazette*. When did you first hear about the *Arkansas Gazette*?

JH: Well, I campaigned for that job. I heard about that . . .

AF: Really?

JH: Yes, when we bought it, yes. When Allan H. Neuharth bought it, everybody was surprised because it wasn't thought he was likely to get into the middle of a newspaper war. And I was in the Washington bureau of Gannett News Service, and they first offered the job to Mindy Kirnen, who was the managing editor for news at that time.

AF: Oh.

JH: And she turned it down. She was a protégé of Walker Lundy, now at the *Saint Paul Pioneer Press*, [and had] come up through Knight-Ridder and stuff. She, for whatever reasons, you'd have to ask her, didn't want to go there. I think she wanted to stay in Washington. When I heard that, I kept thinking — I was living in Annapolis. I'd been up here since 1980. I'd been in Washington for eight years. And I thought it seemed exciting and adventurous to me, and I sort of needed to reinvigorate my pattern, and I'd been editor at a couple of places for Gannett. So I wrote to Charles Overbey. He had said something in public that they were going to fill it soon, but they had many candidates. That means they

didn't have any. So I said, "I can solve your problem in Arkansas." Well, for one, I know [inaudible] over there, he was the head of the news division at that time. He's not [inaudible] anymore. And he got back to me. He said, in his Tennessee way, "[inaudible]." So he called Walker, and Walker had me down there to mark up the paper and all. And I did, and the interview went well, and they offered me the job. After some negotiating about when I'd start and all that stuff, and the salary and everything, I did go down there. And I loved it. I didn't like leaving Annapolis, but I didn't mind leaving Washington. This was in late summer of 1988. I had been covering the Bush campaign. So I went down there, I guess, September of 1988. I was there 1988, 1989, and in 1990 I left — I guess late summer of 1990. So, in actuality, I was there for two years.

AF: Right. Let's go back to when you said people were surprised when you first bought the paper. Why did you buy that paper? It was bleeding. It was, you know, it was losing money.

JH: Well, that's what surprised me because — Stuart was perceived as a bottom-line guy . . .

AF: Right. Why did he buy that?

JH: I think that he felt — I don't know. And you know, I've never really asked him outright. I think he felt that it was one of those deals that if he turned it around, he'd be perceived as a huge genius. You know, that there was an old and honorable paper and it needed somebody with deep pockets, like Gannett had, to win that war.

AF: Right.

JH: And that it was winnable he thought. I think there was a miscalculation. I think that war was probably lost [by the time] we got into it. With, you know, the

turndown in the JOA [Joint Operating Agreement], and Walter J. Hussman's [Jr.] brilliant stroke of giving away classified ads — that brought us into the gutter pipe, you know, the financial [inaudible].

AF: Right.

JH: It was very hard to — and I mean in a long-term deal. That meant that it would become a war of attrition in terms of pure business. And that we would have to stay it out for many, many years. And I don't think they went in there with that idea in mind. I think they brought all the publicity like—you remember Witt Stephens, when he was alive, saying, "Well, Gannett's got deep pockets. Hussman, I don't think you can outlast them and spend any more." You know, that sort of stuff.

AF: Right.

JH: You know there was a lot of public feeling for that. And I think Hussman realized that Gannett wasn't really being a bottom-line company that could last that long. If they couldn't get a victory in five, six years they probably would leave.

AF: Yes. Well, you know, I think that the money's [so much that you'd be] off your rocker to go in there and take [the debt] on.

JH: All my friends, my friends did though.

AF: But what a challenge.

JH: Yes. Well, I like challenges. And I thought . . .

AF: But did you go down there with an idea in your mind of how you wanted to try to turn this newspaper around? Or did they send you armed with [nothing].

JH: I went down there with specific instructions from John Hurley to concentrate on local news, to strengthen the local news product as Gannett tries to do in a lot of their places. Nobody ever told me to worry about the money.

AF: No?

JH: We were able to hire when we needed somebody, and, hell, I don't know, I just knew we were losing ten to eleven, twelve million a year.

AF: Right.

JH: And, I never got chastised for that — despite the rumors about Gannett, and my own assertion that it's a bottom line company. I've never really been chastised for spending too much. It's always been too little, I thought. It's the fact the job wasn't getting done.

AF: Right, right, just whatever it takes to get the job done.

JH: That changed of course . . . [Laughs]

AF: Right. [Laughs] Well, some people were critical towards the paper just becoming, you know, a local *USA Today*, you know, the format, and there were changes within content and graphically. And, you know, some people said changes were good, and some of them not for the good. They devalued Arkansas' reputation. What is your reaction to those comments?

JH: Well, Gannett was handicapped in one way by going into a traditional area where people — the paper had reputation of being the great gray lady of the South, *The New York Times* of the South, as one [led by] Harry Ashmore.

AF: Yes.

JH: [It was known] for public service, as being brave . . .

AF: Right.

JH: It was honored in the culture of the South. I remember the first time I met James Carville, later on when, in the 1992 primaries coverage. And he said, “Oh, you worked for the *Gazette*. He’s got that Louisiana accent . . .

AF: Yes. Boy, that was hard to imitate.

JH: It was, “I tried to get there after I got out of the Marines and they wouldn’t even hire me.” And so to answer your question, I think that some makeover was obvious and smart without tearing up the paper too badly. It’s kind of hard to say Arkansans didn’t like color on their front page or something. I didn’t notice any great screaming about that. I did notice a tremendous interest in story play and what belonged on the front page and what didn’t. And I can think of several different scandals. The day after I got there, I believe it was, the [University of Arkansas] Razorback cheerleaders came out with new uniforms made of Spandex. And Walker [Lundy] put it out on the front page. And here were these sexy cheerleaders cheering in Spandex uniforms. And that caused a tremendous turmoil back then. Up in the Northeast it wouldn’t do that, but it offended some people. There were some mistakes that we made. Walker also put on the front page — I blamed him for this squarely. [Laughter] I’m trying to remember her name — the old lady that used to say, “Where’s the beef?”

AF: The Wendy’s burger [television commercial spokeswoman]. “Where’s the beef?” I don’t know her name. It was a commercial for Wendy’s.

JH: She died and it turned out that commercial had never run in Arkansas! Walker was of the mind that anything on television was news for print. So, and he threw it out on the front page. Claire Pellar [was her name].

AF: Good, good, I would not have remembered her name. [Laughs]

JH: The coffee's kicking in. And people were calling up. I'd say for two whole days people called. I had to field these complaints, you know, "Who the heck is Claire Pellar.?" You know, "Why did you put that lady on the front?" "Where's the beef?" So there was a lesson learned right away that you had to pay attention to what went on the front. You just couldn't slap stuff up there willy-nilly. And I think I told you before about [the time] when a dog shot a guy. He was pumping gas and then [the dog] bumped into—it was up in Conway I think—bumped into the shotgun that he shouldn't have had loaded in the back of his pickup truck. And it hit the side of the truck, went through it, and it lodged in the guy's shoulder. Didn't hurt him very badly, but the sheriff, being a wiseacre, threatened to charge the dog with illegal possession of a firearm. Kind of a funny little story, but lot of people took umbrage because . . .

AF: Dog shoots man.

JH: Well, yes, that's what I thought [every] journalism text [uses that as an example]. But [I thought] that would make him look bad to the rest of the country. And then the second thing was one lady told us, "Well, that happened up here in Jonesboro twice last year." [Laughs]

AF: It's not newsworthy because it happens all the time. [Laughs]

JH: Exactly. Good laugh out of that one. What was the original question? Oh, the makeover.

AF: Yes. I mean, I guess the response to the criticism about the [changes to the paper].

JH: I think some of them were justified. Let me expand. We got to a point where the paper looked pretty good. And people . . .

AF: There were improvements graphically.

JH: Yes. And we hired Monica Moses from Alaska, and she's now the head designer at the Pointer Institute. We hired several other good people. And it wasn't just spiffy. It was easy read, and circulation was going up. And we started to impress [inaudible]. But we — and throughout this I'm going to protect my reputation because I'm on the record. I don't think focus groups are that good an idea, and I'll tell you why. You rarely learn from a focus group what's really on peoples' minds. You've got to make sure you have the right people. Because a leader always comes forth, and it turns into a mini-game of "Survivor," like on television, where everybody's sort of afraid to assert [themselves, believing] they don't know enough about newspapers. They think it's a mysterious operation to really tell you what's on their mind. So the first person who speaks will say something like, "Well, I think you ought to redo that business section and make it into a tabloid," and some of the others will follow along. And then they will just sort of parrot those views. If you have a good, select group . . .

AF: With a lot of independent thinkers.

JH: That's right. And that rarely happens. I've seen this, you know, people complain about something they read twenty-eight years ago. That sort of stuff. We started doing these focus groups where people would say, "Oh, I don't know, I think," like I mentioned, "the business section ought to be a tab." Well, maybe eleven other people in the group would say, "Wait, the business section — you've re-done it, the facts are easier to read. You've got alphabetical breakers in there. You've got a lot of stuff about commodities," which is important in the South. You're agriculturally — " Tim Hopkins was doing this. He's now with *USA Today*.

AF: Right, right. He was great.

JH: Silicon Valley bureau chief now. And we'd make the damn thing over like three weeks after we'd made it over before. We just kept changing sections on people. I think that was the heart of the criticism. Socially I used to run into that. I'd go to a dinner, a party, or talk with friends I made down there. They'd say, "You know, you've got it just about right. Quit tinkering with it."

AF: Right.

JH: And, because I was a content man more than a style, design man, I sort of agreed with that. So we used to have pretty gruesome arguments about that.

AF: Right.

JH: And as far as I know we just kept changing it right to the end.

AF: Yes, well [there were] a lot of changes.

JH: So, I mean, I sort of sided with the [readers] — this isn't just revisionist history. I sort of sided with the readers on that one. I'm more of a stick-in-the-mud traditionalist myself.

AF: Yes. Well, what about the content? What about the changes in tinkering with content?

JH: I can remember going to the American Press Institute, 1989, taking the *Gazette* up there. People were awed. They thought it was sort of a little local paper type thing, but there was so much news in it. That we were covering everything that twitched. And to be fair, the *Democrat* was too. I didn't like the way they covered it. Sometimes they put stuff that — they were matching us sort of tit-for-tat. They were covering their marketing ploy, because they played on that "we're all 'Arkies' thing. Well, you've got to buy us. We're the home team."

AF: Right.

JH: And that may have been a factor. They were the home team. I felt like we were sort of in Vietnam. We were in an area where we were viewed as the interloper. Gannett was viewed as a great, big eastern company that . . .

AF: Tell me that story about you being the Yankee coming to town. Remember when . . .?

JH: Yes, I do. I was surprised that the normal greeting was different. [In the North, you say], “Hi. What’s up? Hi. What’s going on? Hello. How are you?” Inquire about your health or something. In Arkansas I noticed, predominantly, it would be, “Hello. I was born in Jonesboro. How about you?”

AF: Regionalism already from the first sentence.

JH: Right. And it helped me [learn] about where they’re from. But then I realized there’s a comfort zone that it [brings]. “You know, I came from Eureka Springs and made it to Little Rock when I was twenty-five or something.” Everybody had moved to either Little Rock or Fayetteville.

AF: Yes.

JH: And then they would know that you were an Arkansan. And people were not only tremendously proud of being Arkansans, but also if you have an Arkansas license plate and you were driving through Georgia stopped at a motel and somebody else saw it, they’d come and knock on your motel room door and ask you, you know, “I just wanted to talk to a fellow Arkansan.” And they want your local history. It’s amazing.

AF: [Laughs] That’s right.

JH: So it was more of an identification with the state down there than — place, birth territory — than any place I’ve run into in the United States. And I got to answering that honestly, “No, I’m a damn Yankee.” But . . .

AF: But take me in anyway.

JH: But I'm a friendly, you know, and they liked that. Folks thought that was not only sort of sassy but it was an admission of truth. And then they would get to know me. And I have no more loyal friends than the ones I made in Arkansas. Once you got past that "Where are you from?" stuff, they were very friendly and very loyal. I talk weekly with people down there that are still there.

AF: But I meant their loyalty penetrated or soaked even into their newspaper. And they didn't want anyone coming from, you know, outside to run their newspaper. You had the moment you arrived in town. That's a hard battle.

JH: The moment I arrived in town, maybe within . . .

AF: Two hours?

JH: Walker [Lundy] ran me into a meeting with the staff. I literally hadn't taken my coat off. I remember Claire picking me up at the airport. She was making little comments about, "You're going to start working right away."

AF: Little did you know she was right!

JH: And it wasn't the normal, "What are you going to do to change the paper?" I mean those were part of the questions. The questions really were, "What makes you think you're such a big deal?" They wanted my credentials. It was almost like being a [at a job interview] somewhere, you know. I had to go through what I'd won the Pulitzer [Prize] for, and how I'd won it, and whether that was legit. What other awards I'd won. What other papers I'd turned around. I had to really establish [myself]. And they asked tough questions like, "Well, what do you know about us?" And I had read Margaret Ross's book. So I knew lots [of] history about it. And I got Eddie on my side. He was impressed by that, because he liked that book. When I showed them that I had studied up before coming in

there and wasn't just taking the job as another posting for the Dutch East India Company or something, I think I won some people over in that meeting. Ron came up to me afterward and shook hands and said, "Well, that sounds good, that sounds good."

AF: Right.

JH: He just didn't know I was sincere about it. Now the content side, they weren't quite sure with this idea of stressing local news was a good one. Because the *Democrat* cleverly was running ads right from the get-go counting the number of international and national stories that each paper would run. I remember they'd put a big globe with pins in it right on their promotional page. And [they would] say, "We have thirty-nine stories about the world and the *Gazette* had forty-two." Well, you pick up the *Washington Post*, and they only got ten sometimes, you know.

AF: Right, right.

JH: One of the things I did to get to know the state is I accepted every speaking engagement that I was offered. I would drive to Blytheville at nine in the morning to make the Kiwanis Club. Or go all the way down to El Dorado or Texarkana. I spoke in a lot of small towns. I spoke in [Hope] once.

AF: Really?

JH: And I enjoyed that. It got me to know the state and people. But I had a standard line, and it was to convince them that there was a newspaper war going on. And that one party would win. The economy of the state, the economics of the situation could not support two newspapers forever. And I had a hard time getting that across. And people would say, "The *Gazette*'s not going to go away. You all are rich. And I [suspect] Hussman's so proud he'll keep the *Democrat*

going.” [And I said], “No, that’s not going to happen. You’ve got to make a decision which paper you’re going to support.” Because they wouldn’t read two of them. Generally, they’d read one or the other.

AF: Right.

JH: You go into some towns and boxes were all blue, that was a *Gazette* town. Boxes were all yellow: *Democrat* town, you know. And they never did believe that. I don’t think I succeeded in [convincing them].

AF: Yes.

JH: And the state leaders [either]. I don’t think Jack Stephens or any of that bunch thought that either. I think they thought that the *Gazette* was an altruistic project of Gannett.

AF: Right. That they wouldn’t be abandoned.

JH: We won’t be abandoned.

AF: Politicians would accept it either.

JH: Well, you know, politicians are the same anyway.

AF: Yes. Politicians are politicians, right? [Laughs]

JH: Never look at reality.

AF: That’s true.

JH: We started sticking more international news back in.

AF: Right.

JH: One reason is television in Arkansas was terrible. You couldn’t find out what was going on in the world from television.

AF: Right, right.

JH: So people did rely on the papers for their news. That’s one reason I liked it so much down there. That’s what happened in the 1950s and 1960s, and early

1970s. People would get their news out of newspapers. That was refreshing. I liked that.

AF: Well, you know, you all hired a lot of good staff. You mentioned the graphics department and the newsroom, too. You were bringing young, smart reporters from all over the nation. Not that they hadn't come to the *Gazette* before because of its reputation. But [there was] so much more diversification in the staff as far as racial, or ethnic, or even an age element. And that helped the content.

JH: Well, I think so, too. And I was proud of that. I frankly enjoyed the hiring function of the managing editor almost as much as anything. I thought we had a pretty good mix of native Arkansans — good, talented people in the state, and people that we did bring in from the outside. We had a lot of women managers. We hired a lot more minorities. We were encouraged by Corporate to do that. Gannett's always been honest about that, pushing for that. And frankly, this was late 1980s going into the 1990s. There were good people out there that didn't have jobs. And it wasn't as if it was in the mid-1990s when things were booming that everybody was complaining about searches for good people. That wasn't the case. People would walk in the door with their resume. You'd be very impressed.

AF: Right.

JH: You'd say, "Well, wow! You don't have a job yet?" You know, you'd actually think there must be something wrong. It was economics. And, yes, I'm proud of some of the folks we hired there. They've gone on to do very well, too.

AF: Right.

JH: When Deborah [Mathis was put on the editorial board] — that was Walker's idea. Deborah rattled up the editorial board pretty good, you know.

AF: Right.

JH: Boy, you know, Mathis — what's on her mind comes out off of her lips. I mean, she'll tell you right to your face what she's thinking.

AF: Yes.

JH: And that was refreshing.

AF: Right.

JH: Because the editorial meetings tended to be sort of a ritualistic dance of politeness, sort of a debating society. It had an English club cast to it, you know.

AF: [Laughs] Did you expect them to go out hunting with the fox and hounds after work?

JH: Yes, well, sort of. But she'd say, "What the hell is this?" And, bang, you were off and running.

AF: Right. Do you want to talk about Walker Lundy?

JH: Yes, I'll talk about Walker.

AF: Yes, I mean can sort of give an appraisal or a summary of his tenureship and leadership there.

JH: Walker was considered a Texan because he came from Fort Worth to Little Rock, but he's a Floridian. And he always resented that. He didn't like Texas any better than anybody. [Laughter] And finally he just quit complaining about it. I had known Walker in Tallahassee when I was Florida Bureau Chief down there, and Walker was at the *Tallahassee Democrat*. He was known as a good, hard newsman. But, I had some complaints about him. We butted heads on a couple of things. I thought he spent too much time letting John Robert Starr distract him. He spent half his time writing a column to rebut Starr. Starr knew he could get his goat.

AF: You can't rebut Starr. I mean it's hard. [Laughs]

JH: You had to think of Starr as just sort of a local anomaly. He gave me, I think I told you, the greatest compliment I've ever had in print after we beat them on a couple of local stories right after I got there. He called me the, in print, the [Gannettoid spawn of Satan.]

AF: [Laughs]

JH: So I had T-shirts made up and if there was somebody who did a front page byline [then I gave them one] of those T-shirts.

AF: That's right. Well, why did Walker [get] lured in? Did he see John Robert Starr as a big enough threat that he had to?

JH: I don't know. I think so. I mean Starr was so outrageous in some of the things he would write.

AF: Yes

JH: But people loved it. Starr was gleefully outrageous.

AF: Right.

JH: That's what a columnist is supposed to be, you know. They'd complain to your face, but I'd say, "How do you know what he wrote?" "Oh, I read him every morning."

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

AF: So I guess we're going to talk about Walker [Lundy].

JH: Right, Walker. You also wanted to know why Neuharth bought it.

AF: Right. Why he bought it.

JH: Well, why don't I take it from where we were talking about Neuharth, and why he would be interested in the *Arkansas Gazette*. I thought Lundy felt it was an

opportunity to make a splash. That he could be a turnaround expert. Win a newspaper war with a major paper. He had won some smaller ones.

AF: How did he learn about the *Arkansas Gazette*. I mean he didn't have any real, vested interest emotionally.

JH: I think Patterson was shopping it around.

AF: Yes.

JH: Because he got tired of the war. I know that because he told me. Patterson told me in a conversation at the Afterthought. We were talking about — I digress here, right? We were talking about the impressions I got of the place, of Little Rock and the state. Little Rock was a very sophisticated town. I, like most Northerners — people today will talk, even people in the Clinton Administration. You ask them, you know, they think Little Rock is sort of Dogpatchy or something, you know. It's not. It was a nighttime town because of all the financial outfits, big brokerage houses and the lawyers, and a university town, too. But it was more of, to me, even than a state capital, a financial center where things went on at night. It had a healthy nighttime which I liked. I go up to the Afterthought, a jazz club, and Hugh Patterson would be in there. The first week I was there. No, it had to be after that because it was cold weather. Probably about the second month I was there. John Brummett came in, our political reporter, and he said, "I need some help out here. There's been an accident." And I thought he meant a car accident. I went outside with several others and nothing seemed amiss. But you could hear this little voice saying, "Can't you see I've fallen. Help, help me!"

AF: [Laughs]

JH: Patterson had slipped on the ice and fallen under his Mercedes and couldn't get out. [Laughter]

AF: He was a big man.

JH: He was a big man. And a bunch of us hardies lifted up the back of the . . .

AF: Mercedes?

JH: Mercedes, right. Well, somebody dragged poor Mr. Patterson out from under his car. He dusted himself off and said, "This stands for a round." We went in and he bought us all a drink. [Laughter] That's the sort of stuff I love about Arkansas.

AF: That's a great story.

JH: You know, Little Rock was sort of a small town. I mean you'd be thinking of somebody, about the last time you saw them or something. You look up and they'd be jogging in the street in front of you. You run into people you know all the time. Easy to make friends.

AF: Well, let's make sure we get the anecdote about John Robert Starr on there, about what he called you. I can't remember [if we] taped it on the first side or not.

JH: We were talking about how John Robert Starr drove Walker Lundy, the executive editor, the guy who hired me, crazy, because Walker liked to write columns to try to answer and refute John Robert. John Robert figured that out pretty quick in the game and would make wild, intergalactic charges about something we screwed up, even perceptually we screwed it up. And Walter would spend a whole week going detail by detail through how we had bullet-proofed the story.

AF: Yes.

JH: And it was distracting. It took a great deal of time. In one way it was flattering to me because Walker would spend so much time on that, he'd let me run the daily news operation. After I was there about two or three weeks, we'd beaten the

Democrat on a couple of news stories. I think the story about the man who was going to make magnet schools, or who had invented magnet schools.

AF: Right.

JH: I had known him in Buffalo, yes, actually he was a friend.

AF: Oh, really?

JH: And he told me he was coming down there, and we were all over that story. And John Robert Starr called me the “Gannettoid spawn of Satan” in one of his columns. Which I considered the nicest thing anyone’s ever said about me in print.

AF: [Laughs]

JH: And I had T-shirts made up and handed them out for front page by-lines. People still tell me they have them. But John Robert would taunt us, and to great effect, and of course the populous liked it because he was their hometown boy. Even though a lot of them would say they didn’t like his political views, or his troglodyte stance on race and everything else. They liked to read him because he was what a good columnist should be, and that’s evocative and outrageous.

AF: Right.

JH: And Walker, to the end, would always want me to take up John Robert on his stupid challenges like the Toad Suck Frog Days, Toad Suck Jump Days or whatever it was where you go out there for this local festival. If his frog won, I would have to carry him on my back fifty yards to the finish line or something. John Robert, not the frog. John Robert was nudging about two-eighty at that time and rising, so I turned that down. I didn’t want a hernia!

AF: [Laughs] Tell Walker, “Go do it yourself.”

JH: I did. That’s exactly what I did tell Walker.

AF: So do you think Walker wallowed in too deeply in that war-of-words with John Robert? Maybe people liked that and it helped circulation.

JH: I think people got used to it and did like it. He spent a lot of time on it. I know that. I guess my complaint was whenever I'd go out on the street, people in Arkansas would always tell you what they thought. They thought John Robert was winning that war of words.

AF: [Laughs] Right.

JH: So, it seemed to me to be bad tactics.

AF: Right.

JH: If you let him stew in his own juice, then he would get stupider and stupider.

AF: Yes. Tell me about that last months of the paper.

JH: I saw him go down there. He's a friend of mine, a really able journalist. But usually when he [came to] a paper, [it was] to wrap up things.

AF: Right.

JH: That was an indicator to me they were going to [close the paper].

AF: Yes.

JH: And I take it they that they weren't very forthright with the staff in telling them that — telling people right up to the closing hours and minutes. Some people, as you mentioned, were working on their stories on their computers. They thought everything was hunky-dory. You know, it took some people, I guess, months to even reclaim things they had in their desk, personal items and stuff.

AF: Right.

JH: That's not the way it should happen.

AF: Right.

JH: Although it happens at a lot of papers whenever they closed.

AF: But I asked you before, is that the way Gannett usually did things, or was this one unique?

JH: Oh, I don't think so. Gannett usually doesn't close too many papers.

AF: Well, that's the thing. It doesn't. They usually go in there successfully.

JH: Sell it at a profit.

AF: Yes.

JH: Actually, they didn't make out too bad on that deal, either, you know, the press and everything else.

AF: Right.

JH: They probably wished now they had sort of kept that building some way so the name could still — downtown Little Rock's undergoing a boom and the Clinton Library's going to revitalize that whole area, the river walk and everything is booming. It was just warehouses before.

AF: Right.

JH: And that building's probably going to be worth something.

AF: They should have put the foundation library in the old *Gazette* building. But it's going on to a new building.

JH: Yes. I think somebody suggested that or Bob McCord said somebody suggested that, but they wanted it in a brand new building. Have you seen the new building?

AF: I saw the *New York Times* picture.

JH: Yes. It's a big glass building. Clinton's going to have a penthouse.

AF: Yes. They call it an apartment, but apparently it's quite a spread. Well, also go back with me and recap a day in the, you know, one of your normal days of

having editors meeting in the morning and making your way down to the press room by the evening.

JH: Well, we tried to start out about mid-morning, usually with an informal meeting out in the newsroom proper at Max Brantley's desk. Max was sort of the engine.

AF: How did you get along with Max?

JH: Well, he was very resentful at first. He wanted the job.

AF: Right. He had his eyes set, yes.

JH: And that it had gone to some hotshot from the Northeast. He never questioned my credentials for the job. I think that, to his credit, he was very forthright about that. I mean he didn't — Max is not a back-stabber. He's not a guy that will try to — but he made it very clear that he had wanted the job. So we went out for a series of lunches at the Excelsior [Hotel], no, at the Capital Hotel, and we realized that we had the same goals. We could work together. He was like other Arkansans, although he's from Louisiana.

AF: Yes.

JH: He was very loyal. He's one of my best friends today. Max and I talk a lot. I just quoted him, as a matter of fact. And Max certainly could have been managing editor. He knew the territory better than native Arkansans. He knew the town. He had excellent news judgment, and he drove the paper. And he was very, very reliable. If you wanted something done, I would either give it to Max, or [Kate Marimont?], or Bob Stover, and usually Max, and he wouldn't [blow] you off. If he didn't think it could be done or should be done, he'd tell you right there. That's a great time saver in a paper. Most sub-editors will tell a managing editor, "I'll get right to it, boss!" and it goes in a drawer somewhere. That wasn't Max's way.

AF: Right. Yes.

JH: He and I differed on some things. Coverage of the Civil War was a big deal in Southern states. Max thought it was just — his view is becoming more and more popular — that it's just a bunch of old, white racists celebrating a long-gone era which they viewed as Camelot, but which was a mark of shame upon the nation. I thought there was some news value to the historical celebrations: coverage of reenactments at Pea Ridge, the South had a spy named [David O.] Dodd who's buried in a cemetery down there in Little Rock.

AF: Right.

JH: You know, the Daughters of the Confederacy are news, too. I mean we cover a lot of different outfits.

AF: That's an interesting difference.

JH: We would argue about that from the newsroom into bars, into restaurants, back into the newsroom. [Laughter]

AF: And who won?

JH: Max usually won.

AF: Yes, but there was an article on Dodd, I remember.

JH: Well, it was — Jerry Russell, who was the head of a Civil War Roundtable that's nationally linked in Little Rock, he was a political consultant, too, and he was always in trying to get space. And he told me I was, actually, the first editor to give him any space at all. So you couldn't get much by Max with executive [fiat]. You had to justify it, which was good. And we came to some accommodation. We would—not as much as the *Democrat* gave them. [They gave a] full page to the Civil War every week.

AF: Yes.

JH: Lapsed over into *The Washington Times* uses the *Democrat* as a farm team.

AF: [Laughs]

JH: Wesley Pruden, who grew up in Little Rock, he gives a full page every week here in Washington.

AF: Right, right.

JH: But I was prejudiced on the other side because I'm a Civil War buff as a history buff. I've always worked in places where something happened.

AF: Yes.

JH: I was in Virginia not too long ago. A hundred and forty-two major battles took place by an actual town a stone's throw away from where we're actually sitting.

AF: Right. Well, you mentioned, too, that at that point there were five journalists covering . . .

JH: That was Walker's idea. That was a good idea. Conway, Hot Springs, Fayetteville, Jonesboro, and, help me with the last one — but the idea was to . . .

AF: Fort Smith?

JH: Yes, that's right, Fort Smith. Good for you. The idea was to make an actual bureau, one or two person bureaus, and bring in everything that was happening there, and actually we were covering everything that [moved].

AF: And the *Democrat* didn't have actual bureaus. They might have sent someone down there.

JH: Right, right. And I thought we had that full state page. It was sort of like every little burgh would have something in there every day. And people started to notice. The circulation did go up, but of course the advertising wasn't concomitant with that. But we'd get a lot of advertising from Fort Smith.

AF: Right.

JH: I noticed that Hussman's bought a new plant up in Fayetteville, you know, so he thought that was a good idea.

AF: Yes. Well, you know . . .

JH: We didn't finish with the day, though, I wanted to get in there. We tried to get . . .

AF: Right. That's what I was going to say.

JH: As most morning papers, you'd try to get things pretty well shaped up by 4:00 in the afternoon, and we would have a formal meeting then in Walker's office around a big table deciding on the front page and two, on the covers on the other pages. And we'd usually invite one or two reporters into that to get their view, too. Reporters usually have a pretty, you know, they're out there on the front line. They have a pretty [good idea of what's important].

AF: Well, that's really unusual.

JH: Yes. That gained a lot of good good feeling because they felt they had a hand in it. They did. A lot of times they'd overturn a decision because somebody told them, "Hey people are talking about this."

AF: Yes. Who's idea was it?

JH: It was mine, but Walker thought it was good.

AF: Yes.

JH: And in fact, he had been doing it on a sporadic basis. So, I guess it was his idea, but I got one everyday.

AF: Yes.

JH: You were asking about stories. We learned about Jerry Jones purchasing the Dallas Cowboys from that. We had a sports reporter in there that dropped that. Walker went nuts, and said, "We've got to get that in tomorrow's paper."

AF: Yes, yes.

JH: And we did. And that week we had the *Democrat* beat by two or three days on every aspect of that story.

AF: Wow.

JH: I even helped the art department design a helmet. I had an idea. The Dallas Cowboys had a big star on their helmet, and I have a Razorback hog coming out of that star.

AF: That's a good idea.

JH: And it came out looking so good that it was ripped off by a hundred different T-shirt makers. [Laughter]

AF: You should have copyrighted it "intellectual property."

JH: Well, we actually did, but then if you're going to sue those folks it takes so much time.

AF: Yes. And you probably wouldn't get anything out of it. T-shirt dealers . . .

JH: You end up with . . .

AF: A truckload of T-shirts.

JH: Yes. A dozen gross of t-shirts you've got to peddle.

AF: So anyway, so you have these four o'clock meetings and then . . .

JH: Well, then I always tried to stay late, at least for the early days, to get to know the paper and know the people. Especially to know the printers because any paper I've been in, the printers have been some of the most knowledgeable people and articulate people and great copyreaders. They read the paper so that there's something to do while they're putting the papers [together]. And they were impressed when I would come down there and spend time there, and then when I showed I cared about the paper. The clean-up — I mean, you know, one little

verb disagreement I'd make them rip the line and do it over. Sometimes you do surgery on these pages. You've got to be pretty innovative. And I used to do that back in the hot metal days in Niagara Falls where I could read stuff upside down. That impressed everybody, too.

AF: [Laughs]

JH: But after awhile, they got into it. And they would notice mistakes and correct them. They would point them out to me. So it became a pretty clean paper.

AF: Right.

JH: By the time I left there, I was very proud of it. It was an excellent paper, and the copy reading had been improved. And it was easy to read, and it had very few mistakes in it. The other thing that pushed that was the *Democrat* would always point out the mistakes. If you had a headline mistake, John Deering would've been on it. Draw cartoons about it. I've never been in a situation like that before. Of course, they made plenty of their own, but we were above the fray, you know, being the more tasteful paper. We didn't point out or even recognize that there were [errors]. We probably should've gotten down in the gutter with them and duked it out on that level, too, but

AF: But you had [other tactics]. Kind of like we had spies at the *Democrat*. Did the *Democrat* have spies?

JH: Well, we recruited a lot of people from the *Democrat*, or actually, they just walked in, asked for jobs. One, we were the better paper. Two, some of them didn't like John Robert Starr, some of them didn't like other editors over there. And that was a little intelligence operation that we set up. They would tell us people over there who were friendly to the *Gazette*. Now, they [spied on us], too, though.

AF: Yes.

JH: I think we got into talking about Craig Moon. Penny and I — if he held a big staff meeting, then not to give away his business plan. He'd be fairly vague, because he never could tell who was going to call up the *Democrat* the next day. We had some suspicions. He just stopped at that. Gave out what he going to do business wise, and the next day it was on the front page of the *Arkansas Democrat*.

AF: Right. You said you held the meeting at the amphitheater-type room at the Excelsior.

JH: Yes. And he was, you know, telling us, "All right, I'm going to go visit old man Dillard, and when I come out of there, I'm going to have fifty million dollars worth of advertising back and . . .?"

AF: Yes. For the record, sir, I have tell you that I asked you who your moles were, and you didn't reveal your sources. [Laughs]

JH: That's more of a [reportorial] instinct than . . .

AF: As far as the people from the *Democrat*, you know, trading jobs for information. They would come with . . .

JH: Well, now that was a regular pattern intelligence operation where we would debrief those people for hours . . .

AF: Yes. What about . . .

JH: Take notes . . .

AF: Right. [Laughs]

JH: Shine a big spotlight in their [mouth].

AF: [Laughs]

JH: That type of thing.

AF: You were [with Keith Moyer] there for two or three months at the end of your time. Talk to me about why you left and than also about [how Keith Moyer] confused you with [David Petty].

JH: Yes. He used to think I was [Petty,] who's much taller than I am, and [he used] to think [Petty] was me. And it would infuriate [Petty] and sort of amuse me. I didn't get to close to him. I still know him today. He's a publisher in Nashville. But he seemed to me to come in there, sort of the guy there that was sort of the regular metropolitan paper. But he didn't make wholesale cuts or anything. I think he knew he was in a newspaper war at the time. The atmosphere changed for me. Before, Gannett had always termed this and treated it as an all out newspaper where there's no question about resources or anything. I sort of read the handwriting on the wall and I didn't ask to get out, but I knew that Keith Moyer would want his own people. That his idea was to have a managing editor who was local. They got Bill Webster who was a friend of mine. I think I mentioned Webster was so loyal to me. He called me up and asked me if he could take the job. [Laughter] Bill was a very great friend. He worked about fourteen hours a day. Great newsman. Sorry he died of cancer. And Webster did have a great feeling for the community. Not that I didn't. It's just that he was a native and had roots and everybody knew him. It didn't help win the newspaper war — at least for Gannett anyway they want their own people.

AF: Right.

JH: The old crew sort of [tendered] its resignation. I had a place to go, because they wanted me to come back and cover Clinton.

AF: Yes. Well, did Moyer ask you for advice when you handed over the responsibility? Did you give him any?

JH: No.

AF: Hand him the key. [Laughs] What happened . . . ?

JH: [He's a] publisher in Fresno.

AF: Oh. Fresno. Is he still with Marilyn, his wife?

JH: I don't know. I don't know the answer to that.

AF: Because she came on to work with him. You got two for one.

JH: Yes. I heard about it.

AF: Yes. How about the Dillard's account?

JH: Well, I guess I dodged the bullet on that, because when that happened . . . still spinning?

AF: It's still going. I'm watching it carefully now.

JH: I was in West Virginia after Washington at the American Press Institute. I was a seminarian. They were teaching me. I've been to four now. [It was for] managing editors. [Laughter] [inaudible]

AF: I thought that it was during the . . .

JH: Yes. Early 1989. And Walker called me up there. This took the low key manner, said, "Something happened today I thought you ought to know about that might affect the future of this newspaper's viability." I said, "What would that be Walker?" And he told me that Chuck Heinbockel, a business reporter, had been looking at Dillard's 10K's and 10Q's and their SEC forms. And he had written a story that he and Walker considered bullet-proof. Dillard's owed a lot of money, according to the IRS [Internal Revenue Service], on corporate income taxes. And Heinbockel thought he'd caught them fudging their reporting to the IRS. Nobody at the IRS would say that. And it turned out later, from all I could reconstruct, that they had divulged in their 10K form as much as they had to

divulge. Of course, nobody at Dillard's would comment publicly. The tone of the *Gazette* story was accusatory, and [you go with] a big news story down there. This is the sort of thing that happens in every major American city where a corporation negotiates its tax liability with the IRS. There's hardly ever agreement on the first get-go. And both the companies and the IRS are . . .

AF: And that's what they were doing. Not the sort of investigation for some criminal evasion.

JH: No. So the story fell apart, and Dillard got so mad that he withdrew advertising. And many view that as a key part of that newspaper war. That Gannett was doomed. I don't buy that explanation. I think that the *Gazette* may have lost that war even before Gannett got involved in it. I don't say that as exculpatory. I think one of the key decisions, and I know Walker agrees with me on this, is that Hussman's brilliant decision to give away classified advertising, which made it a real [losing proposition for the *Gazette*].

AF: Right. Yes.

JH: Because that's a major part of your income in a paper. And we had to match them. Therefore, that made it a guerilla war. Turned it into a guerilla war.

AF: Yes.

JH: It was a bold, much criticized, and audacious [move] for Hussman to do that. Walker likes practical jokes. When you place no monetary value on a classified ad, then you have no incentive to check the classified ads.

AF: Everything gets in.

JH: All the jokers in Arkansas and a few other states calling in phony ads, half of them salacious. You know, farmer wants to sell [stump broke] cow, you know, stuff like that.

AF: [Laughs]

JH: Some joker, and I have no connection to this, put John Robert Starr's address in one of them asking if anyone had any extra cow manure, for gardening purposes, just to dump it on this address at five in the morning. My understanding is that . . .

AF: Anyone respond to it?

JH: There was a response, and he ran them off. He'd get up early, you know.

AF: [Laughs] Probably with a shotgun, no less.

JH: Yes.

AF: Let's see if there's something on here we talked about before. No, we did everything . . .

JH: You were starting to ask me at one point about [huge] stories.

AF: Yes!

JH: The thing I get asked about a lot is where we had Whitewater. I think both the *Democrat* and the *Gazette* had intimations about Whitewater.

AF: It was published in [1978?].

JH: Published in [1978?], but we both sides sort of bought Clinton's adamant denial that he had anything to do with the loans and stuff. Well, actually the independent counsel sort of bought that, too.

AF: Yes. Well, yes.

JH: I think it should've been covered more forcefully, but who knew? You know, it falls in that category. [James] McDougal, we had McDougal to a fair-thee-well. The *Gazette* was the first to run McDougal shenanigans.

AF: Right.

JH: Kept ahead of that.

AF: A larger question, too, not just on Whitewater but just on Clinton. The criticism from the national media post-1992 has been that the *Gazette* went too easy. The [fact is] he had the *Gazette* in his pocket. You know, he had his way with the press.

JH: Well, to some extent, he didn't have anybody in his pocket, but he was charming enough and smart enough. He would have, about every two months, an editorial board meeting with both papers serially. He'd have first the *Gazette*, then the next day he'd have the *Democrat*.

AF: Right.

JH: They were on the record, which was a great stroke on his part because we'd thought, "Well nothing will get past us if it's on the record," you know.

AF: Right.

JH: But what we came too late to realize was that he was smarter than anybody that was interviewing him. For example, on policies he could — and he's a good interviewer. He could get more out of you than you could get out of him. And he would find out what you were going to editorialize against, and then he would sometimes just switch his view to go along with your editorial. So, of course we thought . . .

[End of Tape 1, Side 2]

[Beginning of Tape 2, Side 1]

JH: Of course, we got very prideful, I think, on both papers, whenever he would switch a view to . . .

AF: Well, and I think he knew if the [interim?] decision . . . if anybody would act on it before even, you know . . .

JH: And then he'd preempt your bad publicity. Some of those criticisms are wrong. Because to have started, for instance, another investigation of Whitewater when there were only a couple of questions ten years before would have been for both papers something that looked to them to be casual, and cavalier, and unfair. These things only got triggered by him running for president and being president.

AF: Right. Well, there's no tie.

JH: If we had known Webb Hubbell was embezzling from the Rose Law Firm, that would have been a story. If we had known Hillary was accusing him behind closed doors of other affairs besides Jennifer Flowers, that might have even been a story. Although a couple wouldn't get in the paper.

AF: Right.

JH: If we had known about Juanita Broderick. Her charges. A lot of these things came out only because he was in the White House, and they were brought out by political enemies. I found that the tenor of [harassing] Clinton in Arkansas to be, "Well, he's fun to watch. He's our boy. And y'all haven't seen nothing yet. Wait until he becomes president. He's going to be even more fun to watch. He may be a rogue and a charming [cad], but he's our rogue and our charming [cad]." As a lawyer in El Dorado told me, "You know, Clinton is a smooth guy on some things. I never did go for his whole plan. But I like sort of like being able to pick up the phone and call the White House and have the president answer." You know, that sort of thing. It tremendously boosted the spirits of a whole state to have a president when everybody's been telling them they were inferior all these years. The state had a tremendous inferiority complex. In some cases it was a simplex, because the rest of the nation would dump on Arkansas and Mississippi and those states.

AF: Right.

JH: People were tremendously prejudiced against that state. I found the people to be better at current affairs than I find in Virginia or Maryland. Where a lot of them aren't paying any attention at all because they're so close. The government breeds contempt up here.

AF: Yes.

JH: They paid attention. They knew it affected how you lived.

AF: Right.

JH: And I [envied] many Arkansans.

AF: [Laughs]

JH: Fifteen years I've never moved out of the state.

AF: That's right. Any big stories that were exciting at the time or that, you know, you felt sort of changed the complexion of the *Arkansas Gazette*?

JH: Well, I think we got a reputation for covering education better. I am proud of that. I remember this API [American Press Institute] conference I went to, and we took some *Gazettes* up there. Everybody brought their paper with them. And some of the sessions you'd spread it out on a great big corkboard, and then the other seminarians from all over the country would dump on your efforts and try to tear it apart and stuff. The other people were from papers all over the place. From every chain and every — they're all about the same size. They have those same sized dailies and stuff.

AF: Right.

JH: A guy that won our news hole, which could be explained by a being a news war. But too, by the depth of coverage of education and a couple other social issues that we were really giving comprehensive coverage. Telling people what was

going on. And one reason for that is Max Brantley, who I described as sort of the engine of the paper, was always interested in education. But both Walker Lundy and I had come to that state with the idea, as many Americans had, that everything had been fixed in 1957 when [Dwight D.] Eisenhower sent in the National Guard. [Reference to the Little Rock Central High School desegregation crisis.] It had been resolved.

AF: Right.

JH: And I was astounded to realize that Hillary Clinton, in praise of her — I discredit many things she's done — in praise of her, was going on in a really tough job consolidating school districts which should have been done decades ago.

AF: Right. Way ahead of her time. Now it's one of the hot topics.

JH: Way ahead of her time. Of course. And it was viewed as some bureaucratic backwater then. It was sort of boring, and I think we made that interesting, you know, and reported on it comprehensively. And I was astounded still at some of the holes in education in Arkansas. The joke was thank God for Mississippi, because they come in fiftieth and we come in forty-ninth. Not necessarily on the testing, but you get outside the city areas, and there were some terrible injustices going on. I had a reporter down there, a black reporter, who had trouble with the expense account. And I brought him in one day, not criticizing him, but to tell me why. He said, "Well, when I was a kid I driven by three white schools to get to a black school, and I never got to school earlier than 7:00 in the morning every day of my life in grade school. And I could barely add and subtract because the math class was the first class of the day. But when I got there, I was in time for English class and reading and writing, and that became my forte."

AF: Right.

JH: And that guy's still working there, and he's one of the best reporters. He's a bureau chief.

AF: Wow.

JH: And that was a wrenching story for me. It showed me that I lived in an America where there were still great injustices. Here I was in my forties, you know, having these little epiphanies, the tragedies in other people's lives.

AF: Right.

JH: So we determined to try to do something. That wasn't the triggering anecdote, but it was an avalanche of anecdotes like that.

AF: That bolstered your efforts.

JH: Yes.

AF: Yes.

JH: And there really was really some heavy lifting on that stuff, because she was still running into a lot of resistance to consolidating schools. And as I mentioned, this guy [Jamyn Rowe?] who died shortly after he got to Arkansas. Fell out of a car in Arizona.

AF: [Inaudible]

JH: Yes. That was one of the stories we put a lot of effort into it. Beat the down crowd on. He'd done a wonderful job up there creating magnet schools, improving their educational system.

AF: Right. Well, also it seemed like the emphasis on covering education by the *Gazette* was not just statewide but also looking at a school district that had begun desegregation to keep up with white flight. A lot of schools across the nation were not. But they had remained fairly consistent in trying to maintain that level of desegregation. And the *Gazette* covered that very well.

JH: That's correct. That's correct. Another thing that we tried to cover, and I think both papers failed on this — we started covering it, then the *Democrat* got into it. I was surprised when I got to that state that timber was such a big deal.

AF: Yes.

JH: And I remember driving to Hot Springs. The first time, I remember, all this very colorful [beauty] down there, Hot Springs. And along the road there were beautiful stands of timber. It looked like I was in the Black Forest or the Alps or something. I got out of the car to sort of look into the woods. And it only lasted for like two trees, eight rows. And behind it was a moonscape. It looked like Mars or something.

AF: Yes.

JH: It had been clear-cut, de-wooded.

AF: A new definition of electric cutting.

JH: Yes. And I went back and looked at who owned it, and I think it was Weyerhaeuser there. But they weren't the only company. I mean, Georgia Pacific is in there big time. It owned a couple of towns, you know. Champion. There's a lot of big outfits. [Inaudible]. So, you go back and find out what the legislation was on this and there's a history to it. Steve Smith, teaching now at the University of Arkansas [Fayetteville], had tried to get Clinton to do something about it in the early days. He was one of the bearded hippies that Clinton was so criticized for hiring.

AF: Right.

JH: Basically, Clinton said, "Yes, I'm going to do something about it." And he went inside a closed room with the timber magnets, and came out of there a timber man, basically.

AF: Right

JH: And we wrote a lot about that. I don't think to much effect, however. I don't know, I'd like to think maybe Clinton had a sort of a sense of guilt about that because his last year [as president he set aside] more park land than Teddy Roosevelt.

AF: Right. I think he finally started [to act]. I remember when we were flying, Clinton and I were flying, across the state on some campaign trip that I was covering for the *Gazette*. And you'd look out the window, and it was the same sort of scene you're describing. Just huge swaths of land completely denuded. I mean like bald hills with one or two little oaks they had left as part of their selective cutting. And Clinton looked out the window and he was just [appalled]. You know, shaken and moved by the sight. He said, "Oh, my God! Look at that. It's horrible." I'll never forget [inaudible] when he said, "Somebody should do something about that." [Laughs] Here's a governor that sold out to timber time and time again. And I said, "Well, yes, who do you think that somebody should be?" You know, he didn't like my response. But I do think he felt some [guilt, but] not enough guilt to do anything about it, but I think anyone would be shaken by that sight.

JH: Yes, yes.

AF: But you're right. I think in this last year I've been watching him wrap up his executive orders.

JH: Executive orders. Yes.

AF: To reverse the trend nationally. Maybe trying to make amends for all those years of [inaction]. [Laughs]

JH: We were also, I think, pretty good with on the spot news. Max had a good feeling for individuals. Say McIntosh is a good example.

AF: Oh, yes.

JH: He was a publicity hound. There was a black guy who was a community activist. He made the best sweet potato pie in the state and all this stuff. But he had been complaining about some injustice, and he'd run for office every once in awhile. We tended to discount these guys as, you know, fringe candidates. And Max said, "You ought to cover that guy. He's going to make news tonight." So we sent a photographer. And that was the night that we had an awarding winning picture on the front page of him duking out a white supremacist onstage.

AF: Right.

JH: Sort of tabloidee, but still the most talked about picture of that year in Arkansas.

AF: Right.

JH: And that was because we had a good mix of local staff, and, as you mentioned, bright, young people we brought in from outside.

AF: Yes. Well, it seems like, too, that the *Gazette* wasn't scared of touching emotional issues.

JH: No. And I think that came from back in Harry Ashmore's day.

AF: Right.

JH: The first thing anybody ever said to me when I got here to that paper — the first day I got there they ran my picture on the front, and said I won a Pulitzer Prize. And they said, "Well, we've won Pulitzer Prizes." And I was well aware of that.

AF: Right.

JH: But they were always impressing on who Harry Ashmore was and I knew who Mr. Heiskell was.

AF: Yes.

JH: It was hard not to, because people [talked about them].

AF: [Laughs] What else? Is there something else we need to touch on?

JH: You're going to get in trouble with this question. [Laughter]

AF: I am?

JH: No. I mourn that paper. I mourn that period of my life, because I have had ulcers all my life. I have had a lot of stress-related diseases in the gastrointestinal tract.

AF: Right.

JH: Being in journalism, which is common for journalists. When I was in Arkansas, I worked for fourteen hours a day under the most pressure I've ever been in my life. I never went to the doctor. I never had a stomach ache. I never had heartburn. I felt more invigorated and more energetic than any time in my life.

AF: Why?

JH: Because the adrenaline was flowing, and I'm, I guess, an adrenaline addict. I felt alive. I felt that what I was doing was important, and I made great friends. I actually love the state. I still go back there.

AF: Yes.

JH: I know many people who have stayed. I wrote a Clinton legacy piece in December, and I took a couple of days out in the middle of all the election mess, recount, and went down to Fayetteville. Made new friends. I talked to people from the university and stuff. Still, it's a very beautiful state. Still a lot of problems, but they're [working on their] problems. Certainly is an ill-deserved reputation that the elite editorialists at the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* and a lot of big metropolitan papers paint them as goobers, backwater charlatans. That's not true. They're tremendously educated people. Very fundamentally

honest people. People would look you in the face in Arkansas and tell you what was what.

AF: Right.

JH: And that's so fresh. When you're dealing with time . . .

AF: Yes. Saves you a lot of time.

JH: Yes. Especially as an efficient measure. I mean, this time we've got to figure out the roll.

AF: [Laughs] Well, when you go back now, do you feel like people are still mourning the death of the *Gazette*?

JH: Oh, definitely.

AF: Or have they gotten over it?

JH: Oh, I don't think they've gotten over it. First thing they say to me is, "The life you lead." I mean, that's friends say that. And there are some folks who say, "Good riddance."

AF: Yes.

JH: [They lament] especially how to run a newspaper down there. I had people say, "Ah, you warned me, man, [about the] *Democrat*. Yes, they cut back on a lot of stuff. They're sure not giving me the news I was getting then."

AF: Right.

JH: I don't know why. To Hussman's credit, I think he's put a lot of money into that paper.

AF: It's got to be a better paper than it was.

JH: Yes. He's not just become a profit hound.

AF: Right.

JH: I think he's tried.

AF: They've had some problems.

JH: They've had some problems.

AF: Right.

JH: I always thought Hussman was [astute]. And I think he was underestimated greatly by Gannett. They went down there. They thought that some local wouldn't [be able to compete].

AF: Right. I think they underestimated how [astute] was, too. Would you say that people wouldn't listen, or what . . .

JH: Well, I think they listened to some degree. I would send back reports and say, "This guy is no dimwit." I think that there was a popular kind of view he was being backed by Sam Walton. I find no evidence for it. Because Walton had like a big interest in [the *Democrat*]. I could never prove it, but I always had the feeling he was getting help if he needed it from the Forbes family. When he was a young man, he had interned at *Forbes* magazine.

AF: Oh.

JH: And was a friend of Steve Forbes.

AF: That's really outside money, I mean that's . . .

JH: Yes. But you know the big titans of communications. They amuse themselves by making loans to people who tease some of their friends. You know, even Malcolm Forbes wrote a friend of [inaudible] said he would be backing them. He actually considered Walter Hussman [a friend]. He took him under his wing at *Forbes*. Hussman had gone up there. Actually ran away from Arkansas because his father hollered at him so much for trying to make a paper in Camden—that was the first paper Walter had that he started improving, and the old man jumped on him for making too many changes that were expensive.

AF: Huh.

JH: Went down there and hollered at him. Hussman left the state for about three years.

AF: Oh. What about the possibility of other backing in Arkansas, like Tyson or J.B. Hunt Trucking. Was there any?

JH: If it was, it was cleverly masked. I don't think J.B. Hunt Trucking. I knew some people over there. I think they were sort of rooting for us.

AF: Yes.

JH: I think I told you once, Witt Stephens said to me, I used to go over there for the history tutorials he'd have.

AF: Yes. Tell me about the lunch. Yes, yes.

JH: God, he was such a colorful old guy, you know.

AF: [Laughs]

JH: He said that he was amused because I had won the Pulitzer for — my partner and I had uncovered a Catholic scam, and here I was a Catholic. He couldn't get over the fact I had won the Pulitzer by getting a bunch of monks shipped back to Europe.

AF: [Laughs]

JH: And he introduced me to people by saying, "This boy put a priest in jail, won the Pulitzer for it, and he's a Catholic." I didn't put a priest in jail. Right after that he said, "You give a million dollars, and I'll tell you how to beat Hussman in this newspaper war." First time he ever saw me, and I said, "Done and done." And he said, "[Really]?" And I said, "It's well worth a million dollars to know how to beat Hussman." And he said, "Well, I'll figure something out." [Laughter] He never did though. Another time he suggested that I, he said, "You ought to get

you a bear, and I said, “What?” He said, “Get you a bear and take it around to different towns, and your circulation will go up.” I said, “I don’t understand, Mr. Stephens, what you’re talking about.” He said, “Well, when I was a young lad, the *Arkansas Gazette* sold for a dollar a year.” He said. “Well, the circulation people would bring a circus wagon to town with a big tarp over it. And you got your mamma to subscribe for a dollar a year and then they’d open the tarp let you see what was in there. And there was always a great, big, old bear.”

AF: [Laughs] Subscribe to the *Arkansas Gazette*, you got a peek at the bear.

JH: Well, I actually went back and suggested that at an organizational meeting!

AF: [Laughs]

JH: I got the coldest stares, like, “Oh, God this innocent idiot. I mean, where is this guy coming from?”

AF: [Laughs] Oh, I love it!

JH: And [Bill] Malone got thinking about it and actually almost went [for it]. I thought, “Geez, you know, that might stir up a little turf war.”

AF: They probably would’ve loved it. That’s great, and you liked Malone?

JH: I did like Malone. Yes. He was a gentlemanly sort. He was sort of the old school. But he was a circulation expert. There’s never anything wrong with that circulation.

AF: Yes. [Laughs]

JH: I think I mentioned briefly on part of the tape segment that when I would take speaking engagements in different towns. And Malone would line some up. These people are always going to the publisher’s office and asking where Walker was. When they got to know that I wanted to do this because it helped me learn the state.

AF: Right.

JH: You know, I'd get up at four in the morning and find myself in El Dorado or Hope. When I'd get there, it was usually at Kiwanis club or something of this nature. Sometimes it was a school function, like the Deer, Arkansas, Latin Club.

AF: [Laughs]

JH: But I always tried to give them the same message: that this newspaper war isn't going to last forever, but only one side will win. The economics dictate that both sides won't keep going forever. So, if you've got a favorite you like, you're going to want to pick it. The only group I was never able to convince, because they saw both newspapers as really striving and they had a warm spot in their heart for the *Gazette* because it was so old. They had a cold spot in it, because it was owned by out-of-staters. They also viewed it as something traditional that could never go away.

AF: Right. It's immortal. Both papers were.

JH: Yes. And I've had people, on a frequent basis in recent years, say, "You know, I remember you talking to me and saying that, and I wished I had listened."

AF: Oh, that's interesting that they'd say that.

JH: Some of them would pick one side and some of them pick the other.

AF: [Laughs] That's right. That's enough for the [tape]. Well, this has been invaluable. I'm mean really great.

JH: Well, the last thing I said about feeling good when I was there. I felt very involved.

AF: Right. Well, you couldn't help but be involved.

JH: Right. You were swept up into a [the war].

AF: Right.

JH: That was adventurous, and altruistic, and fun.

AF: There isn't much of that kind of journalism anymore?

JH: Well, less and less. I worked for the *Buffalo News* when they put the *Courier* out of business. And it was quite honorable. Warren Buffet bought it. Everyone knew if they started a Sunday paper, the *Courier* would go down.

AF: Right.

JH: And finally they did, but there's really nothing fun about winning a newspaper war.

AF: No, no. Because you're always putting somebody out.

JH: When I saw that movie "The War Room," which was made in the *Arkansas Gazette*, and I'm in that movie interviewing — I'm standing behind Carville hollering at him or something. It was my little head. I'm in a cameo scene where — summer of 1992.

AF: Oh, really. But why were you there?

JH: Because I was covering the 1992 campaign.

AF: Oh, because you were — okay. I see. Right. Oh, so you were back in the old newsroom [which was the Clinton campaign's "War Room" during the 1992 election].

JH: It's in a scene where I'm peeking over Carville's shoulder hollering in his ear.

AF: Yes.

JH: But the point is that when you see a newsroom — because there aren't even ghosts there, you know. I drove by it when I was down in Arkansas on business.

I drove by there. The parking lot was empty. You know, you remember going in there. You get a real empty feeling. You get a sickening, empty feeling. This was organic. Newspapers are not only familiar, they're organic. They

evolve daily. And when it dies, it's not only a death in the family, it's a personal death. The group past dies, too. If you worked for them.

AF: Right.

JH: There's no real way to mourn, you know. It's not like you can go back and visit a cemetery. People think you're crazy when talk about this sort of thing. It's very strange. And so many of them have gone.

AF: Right.

JH: You meet very successful people in journalism. Often the first paper they worked on no longer exists or something.

AF: Yes.

JH: They tell you everything about it, you know.

AF: It's the best job of your life.

JH: Yes.

AF: Yes, yes.

JH: Some of that is romanticized, but not all of it.

AF: Right. And there's no closure. There's no closure there when you need it.

JH: Yes. It's the cruelest [sort of loss].

AF: The tenth anniversary of the closing's coming up. I was there in October. Somebody said, "Oh, everybody should get together." But [it would be too hard].

JH: I talked to Deborah about that. And as you pointed out, there's some resentment toward Gannett the way it was done.

AF: Right.

JH: Very abrupt. [Nobody leveled] with each other.

AF: Yes. A bad break-up.

JH: Yes.

AF: Well, great.

JH: Yes, this has been fun.

AF: It's been great. Thank you.

[End of Interview]