

Gazette Project

Interview with

John Woodruff,
Little Rock, Arkansas,
27 and 31 October 2000

Interviewer: Jerol Garrison

Jerol Garrison: I am interviewing John Woodruff at his home, 1800 South Gaines Street, in the Quapaw district of Little Rock. The date is October twenty-third.

John Woodruff: Twenty-seventh, isn't it?

JG: October 27, 2000. John, this interview is part of the oral history project being conducted by the Arkansas Center for Oral and Visual History at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. The center will transcribe the interview, and you will have an opportunity to review the transcript and make changes before it goes into the archives of the library, where it will be available to persons interested in Arkansas history. The aim of these interviews is to shed light on what type of newspaper the *Arkansas Gazette* was. But before I go any further, John, I would like for you to tell me your name and to indicate yes or no that you are willing for the Center for Oral and Visual History to conduct this interview for the archives and to keep the interview on file for persons interested in Arkansas history.

JW: Yes, Jerol, I am honored that you all would ask me to participate in this project.

JG: I've got a form for you to sign.

JW: Okay, all right. Yes, my name is John K. Woodruff, the third, actually, and I

would be glad to participate in this and want to help out in every way I can. Right up here? All right. Okay, I'll sign my name here. You want me to date that?

JG: If you would.

JW: Up here?

JG: Let's see, somewhere. The space down at the bottom. That's all right. We can add the date. I just wanted to get your acquiescence, and I think there is a place for you to sign at the bottom.

JW: I'd be glad to. Good luck with the project. There you are, Jerol, my signature and the date, October 27, 2000.

JG: Great. Please describe, John, the period of time you worked for the *Arkansas Gazette* and your duties.

JW: Yes, I started at the *Arkansas Gazette* on — I'm going to let that ring — August 11, 1969, as a general assignment reporter and continued there through the closure of the *Gazette* in October of 1991. I was in the midst of a story at my computer when the *Gazette* shut down, and it died right there. That, of course, story never came out, and we learned that the *Gazette* had been closed and sold.

JG: So, when you came to work in 1969, were you on a general assignment for a while before you were assigned to the North Little Rock beat?

JW: Yes. I covered some things in Little Rock, North Little Rock, some on the police beat — Model Cities in both North Little Rock and Little Rock. I covered several things in North Little Rock, so actually I covered activities and civic events and police and other assignments in North Little Rock for all twenty-two years that I

was at the *Gazette*, actually over twenty-two years. But I started out as a general assignment reporter and then after one year, I believe it was September or October of 1970, I was designated the North Little Rock reporter and was in that capacity until the *Gazette* shut down. In that capacity I covered city hall and the water commission, sewer commission, urban renewal, planning, all the different boards and commissions as well as the schools. I was also the education reporter for North Little Rock, and from the time that I started at the *Gazette*, I always took my own photographs as well — for the *Gazette*.

JG: So you were on the North Little Rock beat twenty years?

JW: Twenty-one. Yes, full-time twenty-one of the twenty-two years I was with the *Gazette*. As time went on and the *Gazette* specialized, I wasn't always an education reporter. We hired an education reporter, and later on we also hired a police reporter. So some of those duties shifted to others, and that allowed me to concentrate more on city government and those related things as well as features and other items that would come up, spot news.

JG: Do you recall some of your best sources of news?

JW: Yes, probably the — well, without naming, I guess some of the city employees. I tried to win over their confidence. One of my favorite stories is probably one of the shortest ones in the *Arkansas Gazette*, where former William F. Laman, who used to get put out every once in a while with different reporters, ordered all the city employees not to talk to reporters. And I found this out not by Laman, but from a city employee. So our story went to the effect of — it was only about a

paragraph long — It said something to the effect that “Mayor William F. Casey Laman ordered city employees not to talk to reporters,” and with a comma there, “a city employee told a reporter.”

JG: That’s funny.

JW: So, I tried to keep an open line with them without revealing my sources sometimes.

JG: Which of the mayors was the most interesting? Could you name all the mayors you covered? Maybe talk about some of them.

JW: Every one of them really had some, I guess you could say, strengths and weaknesses, and they were all — had their own character and rather interesting individuals. I started with the *Arkansas Gazette* under William F. (Casey) Laman, who went into office — I guess he was elected, I think, in 1957 – took office in 1958. I started covering the items in North Little Rock on a general assignment basis in 1969, as we mentioned. Laman’s final term ended in 1972, December of 1972, and a new mayor came in, Robert Rosamond, who won on a — he used to build churches. He was a contractor, and one of the themes that was credited with his victory was his little jingle: “pin a rose, pin a rose, pin a rose on me. I’m for Bob Rosamond for mayor.” Rosamond resigned — I am almost afraid to call the dates out — with threats really from the grand jury for some items that never were, I think, publicly disclosed. But some of the reporters got different information and covered the county courthouse beat. They threatened to charge him, I think, with fraud or a few other things unless he resigned, and he chose to

resign. That brought in — that was, I don't know, after a couple of years in office, something like that. Eddie Powell, a member of the City Council, came into office and held forth for a while. Eddie Powell, who worked in the food brokerage business with his uncle, had a difficult time spending the time that he needed in City Hall and hired kind of an assistant mayor, and that caused some dissatisfaction among city employees. Eddie came in really well liked and was popular and good-looking and all, but the oil embargo hit at that time and the electric rates started soaring. Then the city was transferring its computer — going on to computers from manual bookkeeping and all. The transition was done just a little bit too quickly. The consultants had recommended a parallel system where you maintained the existing books and then implement the computers step by step. To speed things up, Mayor Powell decided to implement it quicker. Well, some people who seldom turned their lights on got just enormous electric bills, and some who had huge mansions would get bills for just a few dollars a month, despite the high rates and all. The city had to just kind of shut down and start over. They lost, I understand, over a million or so in revenues because the city operated its own electric department and resold the electricity to its customers and had a little profit edge there to help run city government. The city went through some real strife there. Eddie was criticized a lot, but he did a lot for the city. A whole lot of it he said was buried. He did a lot of drainage work in the city and a lot of improvements like that. I believe that was where Laman came back into office after everything had kind of been shut down. The electric rates, which

were soaring, and they had the computer problems. An initiative was made, and they submitted the latest electric rate increase for the city to pay for some of these computer glitches as well as the increased electric rates from Arkansas Power & Light. They submitted that to voters and said, “Do you want to lower your electric rates?” Of course, everybody was for that. So the city went back to the old electric rates of some time many years before because the new electric rate increase had been defeated at the polls. It shut the city down. They had to lay off police officers, firemen. They had to shut down all the community centers in the city and take other drastic measures just to be able to continue the very minimal services such as police and fire.

JG: Do you remember the year that occurred?

JW: I’ve got it, of course, in my files which I just hauled up the other day, a few weeks ago, into the attic. I should remember all that, but I almost afraid to call out some of those numbers right now. Getting a little fuzzy right now. It would be easy to check on the *Gazette* files.

JG: That was in the 1970s?

JW: Yes, I believe so. My apologies for not having those figures in front of me.

Laman came back, and he started opening the centers just on a minimal type of basis and using volunteers and civic organizations. Like little logos on the police cars, instead of buying the logos, he had them made at the city sign company and pasted to the sides of the police cars. Things like that really went down to a basic city government. So they retained the very minimal just to keep things going. It

also helped to raise Laman's salary. It had been limited, I believe, to \$5,000 a year, wasn't it or something like that? You may remember, Jerol.

JG: That sounds about right.

JW: Yes, because of the state constitution, I think the governor was limited to about \$10,000. That was amended to allow city officials, after Laman left office, to increase their salaries. So his went up to — I think his salary went up to over \$30,000 a year, as I recall, something like \$32,000 or whatever. That increased his pension, which was based upon his last, I think, salary earned in a year in and a half or something. So he was in office another year and a half or so and used to be accused of — when his first term ended in 1972 — of running a dictatorship and all of that like Daley in Chicago. The two mayors were often compared to one another, but he didn't have that power with kind of an obstinate, you might say, city council that was in at the time. He didn't have that power, but he did raise his retirement considerably. So he had a comfortable retirement and got the city kind of back on keel there and got it operating and moving again even though it was a very sparse sort of way. He told me in an interview, "John, it's not as much fun as it used to be." That was kind of referring to a lot of the plans he had in his second time around — maybe that was around 1978 or thereabouts — that he couldn't get a lot of his measures accomplished. He said, "It just isn't as much fun as it used to be." He always would say that he didn't really control the council before, but they were, I guess, more open to his proposals. Reed Thompson, then a retired FBI agent who had been stationed in the Philippines in

the foreign service and all and used to be, many years ago, city attorney in North Little Rock, was elected mayor of the city. He had retired and returned to North Little Rock. He was a one-term mayor. He was kind of a status quo sort of mayor. He was not a real personable sort, and that was his biggest problem, I guess. I was surprised to find out when I would talk to school groups or schoolchildren they had no idea who the mayor was as contrasted to the many years that Mayor William F. (Casey) Laman was in. Everybody knew who the mayor was then. Everybody knew. Laman always made a point to really get around the city and visit neighborhoods.

JG: He was colorful.

JW: Quite colorful, yes. Reed Thompson was just the opposite, rather bland. Very nice fellow, but he was not a very good public speaker. He tended to talk too long, and go into too many details at civic clubs and groups. He kind of talked with a rasp because of his many, many, many years of smoking, which he finally gave up. Terry Hartwick, who got upset with some of Reed Thompson's policies, like, for instance, the operation of the city's incinerator. It was a kind of a constant thorn in the city's side because it was always needing upkeep and improvements and all. Terry Hartwick, who was a furniture salesman, formed a company with his brother and wanted to help clean, I think, the incinerator and do some other work. The city rejected that in lieu of somebody else. Hartwick, I remember from the back of the council chamber one time, was so irate over his bid being rejected and some of the other policies, shouted that he was going to run

for mayor and run Reed Thompson out of office. I'll be darned if he didn't do it. Terry was a furniture salesman, essentially. He was young and made kind of an attractive type of mayor. His English — he had some grammatical problems as I may have in this interview. Maybe he was not used to being quoted, like I'm not, but he was not a good speaker on account of that type of thing — not a real fluid sort of person when he would get up in front of people. But he tried to get his name around and did kind of rally the city. He was kind of a cheerleader. He was a salesman. He brought a lot of pride, really, to make the people feel proud in North Little Rock. Not that there was a whole lot accomplished there, but he picked up the ball that I guess some of the feelings that had been made during Laman's term, and then Reed Thompson went ahead with it, and Terry Hartwick completed it — to build a hydroelectric generator on the Arkansas River. He was proud of that, but it's had its problems over the years. So later it started gathering some criticism. Terry, during his administration, had a summer intern at one point working at City Hall, a young lady from the University of Arkansas. He was just fascinated by her although he was married at the time. During one of my routine checks of going through city bills, the statements and vouchers and things that I would often do just to check to see if anything unusual was going on, someone had indicated to me that I might find some of the city's vouchers interesting. — My grandson Grayson just walked into the room. He's fifteen months old, so he is sitting in on the interview here. — The girl that he started dating some on kind of the sly returned to the University of Arkansas. He started

calling her on city time on city phones and at the city's expense and long, long conversations. I noticed that a recurring number was appearing on the city's phone bills, and I checked out to see what number that was going to. I found out it was to a young lady at the University of Arkansas. As I recall, the bills at that point had amounted to \$800 and some odd dollars. All of them were during city hours. They also were costing the city not only time that the mayor was spending — I traced those calls back to his office — not only time that was being spent on the city's hours, but also at the city's expense on paying the phone bills. I told Mayor Hartwick that I had found those bills and the expenses and who they were going to and I was going to write a story about it. He became rather flustered about it and promptly wrote a personal check to reimburse the city and then said, "You're not going to write a story about this now, are you?" I said, "Yes, I am glad you reimbursed them, but that doesn't negate the need for the story to let the taxpayers know that this money has been spent on city time and how many phone calls over a given length of time." So we broke the story on the front page. We didn't name who the calls were being made to. The *Democrat*, the afternoon paper, picked it up and ran the girl's name. The *Arkansas Gazette* never ran the girl's name until the mayor himself used her name and ran a picture of the girl in her little, I think it was a sequin outfit of some sort because she was, I think, a pompom girl or one of those — it wasn't a cheerleader, but a pompom girl, I believe. It was at the University of Arkansas. We ran that in color on the front page. The *Gazette* tried to stick to the issues, that the mayor had misused city

time and city expense for his personal gain. The *Democrat* played it up that the mayor was dating this young lady and what her name was — she was eighteen years old as I recall — and replayed her name repeatedly and all. When he fessed up to doing all this and that he had paid the money back after repeated news stories and used her name during a press conference, that was the first time the *Gazette* used her name. We weren't trying to hold up the young lady for ridicule. I always respected the *Gazette* for those standards that they kept, sticking to the issues of city dollars being spent for personal gain. The *Gazette* always had those lofty standards I thought. Yes, that's generally the newspaper war when the *Democrat* and the *Gazette* were going to it. Sometimes it seems like ethics got bent during those times. Terry ran again for office and one of his major opponents was his ex-wife, who — they finally divorced, and the mayor married this young girl from the University of Arkansas. They have since had a couple of children. Pat Hays, a long-time, well, I guess, a lifelong resident, and his dad, Arthur Hays, who was on the Urban Renewal Commission — Hays, who had been a state representative, ran for city government and promised not to bring scandal upon the city. Hays was an attorney and ran against Terry Hartwick and beat him, I guess, because of the stories about this young girl. Pat Hays' really being in the state legislature with a good reputation, coming from a very stable family and a family who had really been active the city over the years, like his father, Arthur Hays, was on Urban Renewal. I covered his dad on Urban Renewal as part of my duties. So Hays came in and was later re-elected after the *Gazette*

shut down. At times, after the *Gazette* shut down, Mayor Hays would see me in the audience at City Council meetings and used to kind of tease me. We always got along quite well, as I felt I did with all the mayors that I covered. When he would see me in the audience, he used to point out that no mayor in North Little Rock was ever re-elected while John Woodruff covered the city of North Little Rock government from 1970 through the *Gazette*'s demise in 1991.

JG: Is that correct?

JW: Yes, that is right. After the *Gazette* shut down, Hays' term expired, and he was re-elected. Hays, to this day, has not caused any kind of scandal or whatever. Of course, I might point out that Laman wasn't re-elected during the time I was covering North Little Rock because he decided to retire from city government and didn't want to run again. That's why he was not re-elected. A couple of them, of course, had to resign. It was just fascinating. When I have spoken to journalism groups and other groups over the years, I have often said that I felt like city hall reporters got a bad press. Sometimes the young aspiring journalists don't seem to aspire to city hall reporting, but I found it fascinating, truly fascinating.

JG: Grassroots politics.

JW: Absolutely, yes.

JG: Well, what was it like covering the city council?

JW: Quite interesting. In 1971, I had to miss a City Council meeting because I participated in the Farkleberry Follies, the gridiron show of the Society of Professional Journalists, Sigma Delta Chi. The young reporter who was sitting in

for me wanted to know if it was normal when one alderman, Paul Duke, grabbed another alderman, John O. May, and hauled him up, literally carried him up the stairs and threatened to throw him off the balcony of the City Hall onto the marble floor below. They had had a disagreement of some sort. Paul Duke was an engineer on the Missouri Pacific Railroad, which is Union Pacific now. John O. May was a spry little guy, short and really thin. He had been a prize fighter, actually, in his younger heyday. Duke and May were always on the opposite sides of the fence. I told the reporter, no, that didn't happen at each City Council meeting. That was rather unusual and we needed to report that one alderman hauled another one up the stairs and attempted to throw him off the balcony.

JG: He did attempt to throw him off the balcony?

JW: I don't think he would have done that. Paul Duke was a very kind and sweet individual. I don't know if he did it in jest or what, but he did do it. It frightened other people, especially our reporter, who was not used to some of the antics going on.

JG: So it was a threat, but he didn't actually carry it out?

JW: No, he didn't carry it out, and I don't think would have because he was a kind man. The North Little Rock City Council meetings, like I say, did have a history of a lot of turbulence. In fact, the city clerk, Jackie C. Neil, who is now deceased, got caught because of the placement of her desk between, I believe, the mayor and an irate person in the audience. It may have been another alderman. I think she got caught between them in a fight and was the one that ended up being

struck. During the time I covered City Hall, one of the prevailing jokes was that they would check you for weapons on getting into the City Council chambers, and if you didn't have a weapon, they would give you one, so you could defend yourself.

JG: Well, what other characters did you bump into around City Hall? What about Percy Machin?

JW: Percy Machin had left City Hall before I came. I believe he was deceased at the time I started covering the city of North Little Rock. Percy Machin Drive is named after him in North Little Rock, and he was a very respected city clerk, as was Jackie C. Neil, who passed away a few years ago from cancer. But she was another respected city clerk. She trained under Percy Machin for many years. The current city clerk, Mary Munns, trained under both of them and really Jackie Neil as well. You were asking if I knew Percy Machin. I did not, but I knew Jackie Neil and Mary Munns, and Linda Marshall, who is now the assistant city clerk under Mary Munns. Even with the turbulence in City Hall — with the different aldermen and factions there as well as mayors who had reputations for antics or whatever — the city clerks always seemed to help stability in city government in North Little Rock. The city clerk is elected over there, so it was truly the people's representative regardless of who was in City Hall as mayor or alderman. The people seemed to feel a real closeness to the city clerk's office. The city clerk over the years, regardless of who it was, Jackie Neil and then Mary Munns, also Linda Marshall, had just an absolute open door. They kept their door

open and the books — all records, everything they had any kind of jurisdiction over — were open to reporters. There was never any problem there with access to government records as far as the city clerk's office was concerned. Sometimes that was to the chagrin of some mayor or two, but Mayor Laman was always very open. In fact, before I got over there, I understand some of the reporters would even help open the mail that he would receive or even take naps on his couch. But when I got over there, Mayor Laman was, as I had mentioned, on the outs with some of the reporters. He often pointed out he never had a problem with the *Gazette*. He invited me to go ahead and move into the City Hall pressroom. I said, "Fine, I would be glad to as long as other reporters also could move in." He said, "No, no, just you." So I wouldn't do it. I didn't want favoritism. He always tried to be open to reporters when they first started covering over there and, I guess, until he didn't like something they printed. He used to tell me, and still does to this day, that he never asked for a retraction from any reporter. But he sure had some disagreements with the way things were reported sometimes. One time he was irritated at something we had covered. I asked him for comment about it, and he said, "Well, just make up your own quote. You will anyway." I remember one time that he really was put out. He was mad at the police chief at the time, and all the city police cars were way up in mileage, and he was refusing to buy any more police cars because something caused him to be irritated with the police chief. I might point out that during his time some very big police scandals came about from gambling in the city. A couple of places were shut down, and

Laman was always able to keep his distance from that despite the reputation that he knew every little thing going on in the city. But his name was never connected directly with any of the gambling or whatever such as was in the 609 Club and some other places. Prostitution was found to be going on in the city, and some of the police officers were actually convicted for helping protect the prostitution. Also, during this time a rather large theft was made from the police pension and police fund. An alderman who sat on that fund had to spend time in the state penitentiary. Laman seemed to always have a distance between some of those scandals, and he escaped quite well. He really built the city from nothing. The city used to have signs on its city limits saying, "The city without bonded indebtedness." Laman ran for — he was on the School Board at the time — ran for office for mayor under the pledge that they ought to take the "bonded indebtedness" off of that, and they out to just say "a city without" because he said the city didn't have anything. He ran on a progressive platform and said he would build better streets, parks, and recreation places and get the city really going.

JG: That was when he first ran for mayor?

JW: Yes, it was.

JG: Back in the 1950s?

JW: Yes in the late 1950s. So he ran with the idea that "I am going to start selling bonds. We're going to get this city going." He's told me since in some interviews that I've had with him in recent years — we have lunch every once in awhile, sometimes as often as once a week. He talks about his time in office. He

really built the city from scratch and got a lot of people involved in city government. Reporters over there generally got along with him, but he would get put out with them every once in awhile as was the case when I started covering City Hall in October of 1970. One of the stories was that he got mad at the *Arkansas Democrat* and literally dragged the *Democrat's* desk from the press room through City Hall and out onto the sidewalk. Of course, I was hearing this second hand. The *Democrat* reporter, Bob Sallee, was told never to darken that City Hall again. Bob Sallee is a good reporter. He covered North Little Rock for awhile as did Roy Reed and some other very fine reporters. Of course, Roy Reed worked for the *Arkansas Gazette*.

JG: Both the *Democrat* and the *Gazette* had a desk finally in the City Hall pressroom?

JW: Eventually, after Laman left office, Rosamond, I think, established a pressroom, much to his chagrin later when he found out all their stories weren't to his liking. But the pressroom stayed. Both the *Democrat* and the *Gazette* shared a tiny little room together. From the time Bob Rosamond was mayor, reporters had a telephone in City Hall and a desk if they wanted it. The *Democrat* and the *Gazette* were the only ones that did that. *North Little Rock Times*, having an office over in North Little Rock, didn't find it feasible to have a desk in City Hall, but the *North Little Rock Times* was one of those papers that Mayor Laman got mad about. Of course, the big case is McCord vs. Laman, when Robert McCord, the editor, sued Laman and the city for meeting privately with a city attorney and won the case in an upholding in the state's Freedom of Information law. McCord

vs. Laman or Laman vs. McCord, whichever one it was, has stood the test of time. The city attorney could not meet in private with the city council without reporters from the public press present.

JG: Well, that suit was essentially the first big test of the state's new Freedom of Information Act, as I recall.

JW: Yes, it was. The *North Little Rock Times* reporters during anytime Laman was in City Hall really had to pay for that by not having real free access to the mayor. In fact, Mayor Laman was put out with reporters and eventually just got so he wouldn't even come to City Hall. He had his radio in his car and would run the city's business from his mayor's car. It was rare that you could find him. I'm an early riser and often would find him meeting before eight o'clock, somewhere around 7 a.m., with some of the department heads, and sometimes I would drop in on those meetings or check with the mayor. The Civil Service Commission used to meet at 7 a.m. Mayor Laman would go check on city projects early in the morning around seven or before. A lot of times I would find him there. I found a way of covering the mayor and would usually know where he was by way of the radio communications. So I would, through radio communications that I had access to, know where he was at any given time. If I needed a quote, I would just happen to be there. I think he wondered how I just happened to know where he would be. Sometimes he would be out washing a street down with city employees. I tried to keep an open line with him and get a picture — You know, I was also a photographer — of the hands-on mayor washing the street down. He

provided good quotes for me if he wasn't particularly mad at me. One time when he did get mad at me was when I was telling the story about the police chief who was on the outs with the mayor. Whether it was because of some of the police scandals or things that were going on, the mayor felt that the police chief wasn't controlling things properly. That was Chief Bowman. The mayor wouldn't buy any new police cars. I was sitting at a stoplight just after I had been to the police department checking the records — just as part of my normal day-to-day beat — when a tow truck passed in front of me, dragging a police car behind him, and underneath the car was the drive shaft dragging in the street. I had my camera available with me all the time. I quickly — it was in the summer or at least a warm day. I had my window down, so I grabbed my camera and got a picture of that police car being towed by the tow truck, and then I wrote a story about the new city budget being prepared that had a — it was, I think, way over \$100,000 dollars that I found was being set aside in the budget for everything from fertilizer to new plants and flowers and trees. We ran that on the front page under the picture that I took of that police car being towed. The city was setting aside money in the budget for flowers and fertilizers, but nothing could be found in there for police cars. The mayor really was upset about that story and didn't deny it, but did say that we reported a budget that wasn't in practice and that the Council had the opportunity to revise it and so on. But, of course, the story stood as accurate and so on. So he would get a little miffed at me every once in a while. I found out those details about the fertilizer and all from the so-called working

budget, and this was not available to reporters. We talked earlier about my sources being city employees, and some of my sources were also members of the City Council. Some, I believe, feared retribution because of the reputation that Mayor Laman had at the time and would slip me correspondence that wasn't available or this working budget. It was a line-item budget of what was proposed in every department. I was loaned a copy of that, I remember, one year, and that's where I found a lot of those details. The budget that was filed with the city clerk was just a departmental item, you know, the minimal amount allowed under the law. It was like police, \$1.2 million, electric, \$5 million, and so on just by departments. You didn't know where all that money was going, whether it was for personnel or whatever. I went in, and this line item that I went through broke down more in detail of how much was being spent for individual items from like clerical supplies by department or fertilizer and things like that. I added all of those up, and that's where the roof came off when that hit the papers.

JG: So you had access to that working budget at the time you did your story about the police car drive shaft dragging on the pavement?

JW: Yes, that's right. Other reporters, I guess, didn't have that close a working relationship with some of the individual alderman. The *Gazette* always assigned a reporter a beat, but the *Democrat* didn't have reporters that consistently covered a single beat for a long period of time. At least that's my impression. Over the time that I covered City Hall in North Little Rock or city government, I probably should say, many reporters came through there for the *Democrat* and also for the

North Little Rock Times. I was the only reporter that was consistently present year in and year out. People saw me as kind of a fixture over there for those many years, and I truly enjoyed that. I'm proud to say that I did try to report fairly, and the *Gazette* backed me on that. They didn't, I don't think, scandalize things, even in the throes of the newspaper war. When the *Gazette* stopped publishing, Mayor Hays declared a John Woodruff Day. Every one of the mayors who was still living — Rosamond had passed away — but Eddie Powell, Reed Thompson, Terry Hartwick, Casey Laman and Pat Hays, of course, all of them were there at a ceremony in which they thanked me for covering North Little Rock. I think they named the pressroom after me or something like that. That was nice.

JG: What did they do, give you a plaque?

JW: Yes. The mayor made me an honorary citizen — I think he meant to say an ornery citizen in North Little Rock, but the plaque said honorary citizen of North Little Rock. They named the pressroom after me, and some people say they probably meant to name the bathroom after me from some of the stories I covered over the years. Mayor Hays, I think, would say that John would “tweak” you every once in a while, but basically was fair. I tried to be, and the *Gazette* was always, I thought, solidly behind me to make sure that I kept my ducks in order and had good sources and was fair in reporting.

JG: When Gannett bought the *Gazette* in 1986, were there any changes in the North Little Rock beat?

JW: Yes, substantially so. I remember one of the editors was astonished that one reporter had been on a beat for so long. He asked me how I could stand that or whatever. Just some of the things I presented to you give you an idea how interesting the characters and the people who made up city government were. I haven't talked about all the features that I wrote about city government, about what makes the city operate. But they cut me way, way back, I remember, like a City Council meeting that may run a column and a half or two columns sometimes was cut back to like three to six inches. It was almost to the extent, "The City Council met last night, a lot of business conducted and was adjourned." It wasn't that bad, but I felt almost like it was that bad. We had more, you know, much shorter stories. Newspapering during the time I covered for the *Gazette* indeed had changed, and we didn't need those long, long stories that we used to have. We needed shorter more bullet-filled stories, and that's what really started taking place in the *Gazette*.

JG: So you saw a difference in the North Little Rock beat, that is, shorter stories and bullets?

JW: Yes, a great deal. There was a big change there covering city government, so there was a substantial change in reporting. Also, during this time may have been before Gannett took it over, I found a real need to get more things in the paper besides just something that would be a bullet type thing. Back to North Little Rock, I found an urge to get more in the paper than what was getting in there, which was generally bad news. It seemed like that was all we could get in of

substantial coverage. We had to cut way back on our City Council meetings, so it was the wild and furious things that happened at the City Council meetings or whatever it was. I continued covering water and sewer and all the other boards, but sometimes wouldn't get anything in the paper or I wouldn't even write anything, but save it for later stories. A lot of those took place in my columns. I began a column that lasted several years in the *Gazette*. They ran my picture with it. I usually tried to supplement, in fact, it was an exception if I didn't have pictures with my column that ran on Sundays. I would tell about the background of city government and some of the other things going on. That practice started among some of the other beats at the *Arkansas Gazette*. Some of the other reporters chided me on it, "Woodruff, why did you start this sort of thing? Now I've got to write a column." But I found a good following for the column because it was normally fairly good news. I covered everything from how they would televise the sewer lines to look for leaks to covering the guys who climbed the electric poles and repaired the city power lines during electrical storms. I didn't go out during an electrical storm, but I went up in some of the cherry pickers as they would call them and went way above ground and would take pictures. One of the pictures I took was for my first column, but the column didn't make it in because somebody on the Sunday desk didn't understand that was to be a column. It ran as news. It always was a column after that with a head and shoulders picture of my face and also a picture that I had taken to illustrate the subject that I was writing about. The column would be about one or two — at the most three

subjects — exploring some aspects of city government, which I always found fascinating.

JG: When did you start that column, about 1987?

JW: It may have been. I can't quite remember. I know it ran for years.

JG: It continued until the paper closed?

JW: Yes.

JG: Well now, what's your background, John? Where did you start out?

JW: Yes, okay. Well, I was born in Fort Smith, spent four years in California growing up, but basically was raised in Fort Smith. I went to the eleventh and twelfth grades at Van Buren High School. My dad passed away when I was in high school. I was 15 at the time and he was 47. I had taken up photography in the eighth grade before I moved to Van Buren. I knew some of the newspaper photographers because of taking pictures beside them at sporting events. I started selling pictures to our newspaper there in Van Buren. At that time it was the *Crawford County Courier*. I had a real nice editor there who is the father of the current mayor. My very first picture that I sold was about the upcoming football game between rivals Van Buren and Fort Smith. I got a picture of the cheerleaders jumping up in the air down on Main Street at a pep rally with a banner in the background going across Main Street that said, "Beat Fort Smith!"

JG: This is when you were in high school?

JW: Yes, in high school. I went back to my darkroom that I had set up in my house and processed the picture and gave the finished print to the editor, and he put it on

the front page of the paper, and I was locked into selling pictures to the newspaper. By the time I got to University, Armil Snow, who was going to be editor of the *Arkansas Traveler* that year, was looking for a photographer. I had found that out through my connections with the *Southwest American* photographer Buck Barnett in Fort Smith. So I applied to Armil Snow to be the *Arkansas Traveler* photographer and began shooting pictures for the *Arkansas Traveler* actually before I registered as a freshman. I went up a few days early for the Greek events and also for registration and things like that and became the *Arkansas Traveler* photographer in my freshman year and maintained that, I guess, through my junior year. I just ran out of time to do that because I was also shooting for the annual, the *Arkansas Razorback*, as well as all the student publications up there from the *Guild Ticker* to the *Engineer*. I was also selling pictures to United Press International and the Associated Press. So, you know, stringing and free-lancing for those. I really got my taste of journalism there. After I graduated, I had other plans. I wasn't planning on going into the newspaper business, so I was changing my plans from what I had studied. I was not a journalism student up there. I majored in philosophy, actually. I didn't take any journalism, but all my friends were the newspaper folks and that's where my life was, and I gave the newspaper a lot of tips and hints about news articles because I was always covering events in different places, and people would give me little tips about something like a demonstration for civil rights or whatever. I would tip the newspaper off, and we were able to get a scoop on other papers, like

for instance, a national publication or the state newspaper. They would read about it in the *Arkansas Traveler*. The editors once asked me how I got so many news tips, and I said, "Well, because I get out of the office so much and among so many people." I truly enjoyed my newspapering. So I went to school for an extra semester after I graduated in 1963 at the University of Arkansas with a BA in philosophy. The editor of the *Razorback* talked me into taking pictures for the annual for the fall semester. I did that and remember shooting over 3,000 pictures for the annual during that one semester to try to get as much taken for it so they would have them for the annual that would come out in the spring. Then I went to work in January of 1964 for the *Northwest Arkansas Times* and was there for two and a half years. For about a half a year or so, I lived in Springdale and covered Springdale, Rogers and Bentonville for the *Northwest Arkansas Times*. And, again, continued taking pictures. I had my darkroom at my office and would supplement a lot of my articles with pictures or just would take a picture in lieu of an article. Usually every time I sent a picture in, it made front page in the upper fold part of it. They loved my pictures and the articles that went with it. Whether it was opening of the city pool or whatever, I usually would — you know my editor would say, "We don't run that." I said, "Well, if I get a picture you like, will you run it?" "Yes, oh yeah." So one picture had a guy swimming under water in front of me. I got down on my belly and he came shooting out of the water with his goggles on and the water spraying every which where like a sea monster or whatever. That was the picture I got.

JG: That was at the Springdale pool?

JW: Yes, I think so. And that, you know, would land on the front page of the newspaper because it's such a weird-looking picture, and they would run it on the upper fold. You could see it across the street in a newspaper box, and people would go over and, "What in the world is that?" A lot of my pictures were like that. I tried to make them different by either composition or some weird thing like that. So they fired their photographer who seldom got a picture in the paper and moved me from Springdale back to Fayetteville and made me their full-time photographer. But I also wanted to continue my reporting, so I was a special writer and photographer or photographer and special writer. So I was able to write some feature stories and continue my writing. After two and a half years I left the *Northwest Arkansas Times* to go to Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, to study for my master's in journalism. They had a program during the summer that would essentially cover all the major courses in journalism in that one summer and get you on track for the master's study in the fall, which I did. I had gone back to the University during my photography days for the *Northwest Arkansas Times* and took writing courses. So, by the time I got to my master's studies, I had had some journalism education from the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville in basic news writing and that sort of thing. I jumped into my master's study at Northwestern. Part of that year was spent in the spring semester through their program in Washington D.C., where you write for two newspapers during the week, covering the capital, and on Saturday you attend classes

basically for the morning, so that was essentially five and a half days a week. Then I got a job, before I had gone to Washington D.C., and by then I had a wife and two children, so we all moved to Louisville, Kentucky, where I became a reporter for the *Courier Journal* in Louisville as a reporter for the urban affairs department because of my interest in municipal reporting. I essentially covered the planning commission and helped with other urban-related stories in that department which we called UAD, the Urban Affairs Department at the *Courier Journal*. I also wrote real estate developments, you know, about new malls and things like that as well as the planning and other aspects of city government. One of our other reporters covered city government, covered urban renewal and sewers and things like that. Another one was our pollution reporter. She covered air and water pollution, the water commission and boards like that. We had an editor that oversaw what we were doing and our assignments and also he covered stories and articles himself. Then in 1969, as I mentioned earlier, on August 11, I went to work for the *Arkansas Gazette*. I wasn't real pleased at the *Courier*. I enjoyed what I was doing, but I was kind of overwhelmed maybe and went back to general assignment reporting, which I love doing, and also, again, still shooting; a lot of times, my own pictures and things I wrote about. But I got kind of tired of general assignment reporting and longed more for the municipal government aspect of it. Went to work for the *Arkansas Gazette*. My last day at the *Courier Journal* was on a Friday, and I started to work at the *Gazette* the following Monday, August 11, 1969, as a general assignment reporter and

thoroughly enjoyed that till the *Gazette* shut down. It was kind of a mission rather than a job.

JG: What do you mean by that?

JW: You wanted to seek out what the truth was in assignments that you were given, and I was excited every day that I went to work. I guess one of the times I actually covered something in North Little Rock before I was over there full time was when they closed the River Market, the market place. It was a curb market where the farmers brought in their produce. They were to close it out to make way for urban renewal. I set my alarm for like four o'clock in the morning and went over there. Got there about five and watched them set up their stuff. Took my camera with me, got some pictures and really took pictures of the last curb market day over in North Little Rock. It was just like that. I got to visit and interview the people that had been doing it for many years. They were being displaced. They were going to have it some other place in town where they could sell their vegetables. I was interested in the people I covered, whether it was a feature or the day in and day out routine of city government. Like, for instance, when I became the full-time reporter in North Little Rock and covered some of the fires they had over there, police events. I, of course, got my own pictures, then I would make extra copies of those or copies the *Gazette* didn't use and give those to the various departments that I would take pictures of — a police event or fire fighting, and they would use those pictures in their training. That was one thing that helped me maintain an open relationship with them. They appreciated

those pictures. The fire department gave me a plaque on that day we talked about a while ago, when they declared John Woodruff Day. The fire department itself gave me a plaque for covering them all those many years. I enjoyed it and made a lot of friendships. I went through different police chiefs over there because of the time I was over there.

JG: What have you been doing since the *Gazette* closed?

JW: Well, after the *Gazette* shut down, I had no desire to work for the *Arkansas Democrat*. We had been in a pretty rivalrous situation. I enjoyed the *Gazette*. That was kind of a dream to go to work at the *Arkansas Gazette*. When it was gone, that relationship, too, died. While I love journalism, I love covering city government. I used that aspect of it and looked around. I thought about staying with Gannett and applied at a couple of places, but I wasn't real aggressive about it. I applied in, I think, Mississippi and Montana, a lot of different places. But I also asked Don Zimmerman of the Arkansas Municipal League if they had any openings, and they did not, but he was interested in hiring me, so I went to work for the Arkansas Municipal League and took over, within a couple of months, the production of their *City & Town* magazine. So I continued writing about cities, taking the pictures that I enjoy, editing the magazine, soliciting articles.

JG: Are you the editor of *City & Town*?

JW: Yes. I lay it out; I design it and write it and solicit articles. I even sell the ads that go in it, and I place the ads. I decide what goes in the magazine each month.

JG: Is that a monthly magazine?

JW: It is, twelve times a year.

JG: It is kind of like putting out your own weekly newspaper, where you get to do all the jobs.

JW: Oh yes, very much. It was like going back to the *Times* when I started out in journalism — going back to selling pictures. Also I worked for the *Van Buren Press Argus* for one of the summers that I was in from college and worked there in the printing department and taking pictures for the weekly newspaper there, the *Press Argus*. So I worked for both papers that covered Van Buren and Crawford County, the *Press Argus*, a historic newspaper, and also the *Crawford County Courier*. They both merged now. I think they call it something like the *Press Argus Courier* or *Courier Press Argus*.

JG: Your wife is Dianne Woodruff. She was a *Gazette* reporter too, wasn't she?

JW: Yes, she was. She covered the county beat. She used to be at the *Arkansas Democrat*, and she came to work at the *Arkansas Gazette*. She covered county government and then later federal government, succeeding you, Jerol, at the federal beat. I believe you covered it jointly for a while, both of you. She covered federal government and county government for awhile at the *Arkansas Gazette*. That's where we met and later married. When our son was born in 1978, one of us needed regular hours, and so she went to work elsewhere, and came back to the *Gazette* after Michael was older. But she really needed those regular hours, so went to work then elsewhere.

JG: Where does she work now?

JW: Thoma and Thoma Creative Services, advertising and public relations. She heads their public relations division.

JG: Michael, where is he?

JW: He is a senior this year at Emory University in Atlanta with a double major in political science and history. He hopes to go into law. He is also going to get his master's and his BA this year.

JG: He is going to finish his BA?

JW: Yes. There are about 11,000 students, I think, on the entire campus. Next month he is supposed to be inducted into Phi Beta Kappa. He has had straight A's all the way through.

JG: Holy Cow.

JW: So far. We're proud of him.

JG: Well, John is there anything else you would like to add?

JW: Not right now except to again express my appreciation for asking me to participate in this project and the municipal government I have been covering for these many years — I guess really from the time I was at the *Northwest Arkansas Times*, beginning in 1964, through the present as my job outside of newspaper reporting. I've been very, very fortunate to be able to do that. Good job and I am proud of the things this project hopes to accomplish.

JG: Thank you.

[Tape Stopped]

JW: John Woodruff again with — during my days up at the University of Arkansas at

Fayetteville and being a photographer for the *Traveler* as well as the annual. They assigned me one year when President Kennedy flew into Fort Smith, Arkansas, to land there to go over to Senator Kerr's ranch in Oklahoma. You know, it's the Kerr-[McClellan] navigation project on the Arkansas River. A lot of people know Senator Kerr from that name. President Kennedy landed in Fort Smith. I went down to take pictures. He was very much like President Clinton. He would break away from the group and go to the crowd and start shaking hands. President Kennedy did that, and I was on the front line up there as a photographer, and he was working his way down the line among people who had pushed away to the front past the press. I was still there at the front, however, against the fence, mashed up against it. I was taking his picture working his way toward me. My Rolliflex that I was using then for pictures, I realized it focused down to 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ feet. I couldn't get him in focus, and I realized, "Fellow, the president of the United States is standing in front of you, put down your camera, stupid, and shake hands." I did. I lowered my camera, shook hands with President John F. Kennedy, and he looked me right in the eye, you know, like. "Tell me who you are." Of course, I was totally speechless. But I felt that charisma — his looking you right in the eye, shaking your hand with a good solid handshake, and then moved on to the next person. I got a picture of that next person — a little girl looking up at him, looked like she was looking into the face of God, that expression on her face.

JG: That picture ran in the *Arkansas Traveler*?

JW: Yes, others did. Then when President Kennedy flew into Heber Springs to dedicate Greers Ferry Dam, the *Traveler* sent me and the editor of the *Traveler* to cover the event. We again got in a situation like that where we were right up there. He was getting ready to go right on over and get in his helicopter and was about through shaking hands. I told Marion Alford, who was the editor at the time, "You reach out over there and go shake his hand because I have had the privilege of shaking his hand before." You know, "Don't let this slip buy." She ran over there and shook his hand, and I guess I got a picture of her doing that. So I could have shaken hands with him again a second time. Then, of course, he was shot the next month. I believe that was in October of 1963, and he was shot on November 22, 1963.

[Tape Stopped]

[The interview resumed on October 31, 2000, at the Woodruff home, 1800 S. Gaines Street, Little Rock, Arkansas.]

JG: Today is October 31, 2000. We're continuing the interview with John Woodruff. John, you had a phone call one time, I believe, from another famous lady. Would you tell us about it?

JW: Yes, Jerol. The phone call was — I was working the police beat one night. It's interesting. You have a lot of unusual things happen unrelated to your job assignment sometimes. But I was working the police beat one night when I was gathering up my materials, ready to leave. It was right at midnight, time for me to close up, and I was the last person on the city desk. I kind of shut it down and told the news editor to go ahead and close out everything. As I gathered up my

little materials — I usually kept an almanac and a couple of other items handy in case somebody called up with a question. I gathered up my materials and was ready to leave when the phone rang. I headed back to the desk to answer it. Paul Johnson, who was working the news desk at the time, was the last person over there. He had kind of an odd sense of humor. We got along great. He said, “Woodruff, if you pick up that phone, I’ll kill you.” Of course, I just laughed and picked it up, and this person wanted to know if she could dictate a letter to the editor. I told her we didn’t do that sort of thing. She had to write it and sign it. The conversation went on like that. She was very insistent. Finally, she said, “You don’t realize who you are talking to, do you?” I said, “Well, Ma’am, it really doesn’t make any difference because we have a policy on that. You need to write your letter and sign it before we get it in the paper.” The conversation went on and on like that. I began to realize that what she was talking about were some of the events going on in Washington D.C. She was very knowledgeable, and I thought, “Whoops, I may have somebody on the phone here, “ and I didn’t realize who I had. I said, “I’ll tell you what. I’ll take your letter and I’ll give it to the editor.” She said she would tell me who she was then — “Just to show you I am being honest about it or whatever, I’ll take your letter and then you can tell me.” She dictated a short little letter asking that the *Gazette* should crucify, that was her terminology, Arkansas Senator J. William Fulbright for voting against the Carswell nomination by President Nixon to the Supreme Court. Fulbright had voted against it. She was just livid about it. It was Martha Mitchell. After she

dictated the letter, then she said, “That’s signed Martha Mitchell, wife of the Attorney General.” I nearly swallowed the telephone that I was holding. I told her we could get that in the paper probably not as a letter to the editor but as a news item, but we had to verify the telephone call. She gave me the White House number, and I called the White House, and they wouldn’t connect me with her, so I couldn’t verify it. In the meantime, we had decided to hold the presses because this, of course, involved a national person and a celebrity even. In the meantime, Mike Trimble, one of our reporters, happened to be drifting through to see if the first edition was out and stopped over and saw what was going on, and I had him go over and get my tape recorder out of my desk. We began tape recording the conversation, or were going to if she called back. She did call back. We thought we had lost the whole thing because we didn’t have verification, but she called back and wondered why I hadn’t called. I told her I called, but the White House wouldn’t put me through to her phone. I said, “I still don’t have verification.” So she finally broke down, literally, I guess because she — at times in our conversation, which was quite extended, she would at times cry and at times laugh. We had a lengthy conversation. She gave me the Mitchells’ unlisted telephone number, so when I was able to call that number, the White House put me immediately through and I was able to confirm that it was Martha Mitchell, the wife of the Attorney General. In the meantime, Mike Trimble started writing the lead to our story about Martha Mitchell, wife of the Attorney General, calling and asking the *Arkansas Gazette* to crucify J. William Fulbright for his vote

against the nomination of Carswell to the Supreme Court. But, you know, that happened just during a routine police beat. I also, you know, had to cover a plane crash or two or whatever because I was on the police beat. There were a lot of times, really, that involved the unusual sometimes, and that indeed was the unusual that happened.

JG: So, the story got into the paper that night?

JW: Yes.

JG: The edition for the next morning?

JW: Yes, we held the presses and it made front page. I promised a fellow associate [Kay Patterson] that I would play tennis with her the next morning about seven o'clock. We put the paper to bed with that story on the front page. We all gathered at one of our apartments and kind of talked about it and joked about it and listened to that tape recording that I had of the conversation. We went to bed. I got a couple hours sleep and went to play tennis. When I got back to my apartment from playing tennis, the phone wouldn't stop ringing. I had newspaper calls from my office and around the world, really. United Press International, Associated Press, ABC Television. ABC interviewed me later in their local studio, and I told them about the conversation. After the national news of it got out, Martha Mitchell denied that she ever called the *Gazette*. She finally fessed up that she had talked to a reporter, but that we had called her. But I had that tape recording, and in the tape recording she also said on it — quoting Martha Mitchell, “The reason I called you was that I wanted you to” so and so, you know,

write this letter or crucify Fulbright for his nomination opposition. So she finally quit denying it and then later on one of our other reporters interviewed her. Of course, Martha Mitchell was from Pine Bluff, Arkansas, and that's why she was calling the *Arkansas Gazette*. Somebody — I had it second hand that she actually meant to call the *Democrat*, which was not the liberal democratic newspaper that the *Arkansas Gazette* was. She forgot about that or whatever and called the *Gazette* instead. Luckily, we had somebody on duty at the time and ran the story in the paper and made front page in just a few hours, a couple hours or so after the conversation terminated, which was about two in the morning.

JG: Did you take over writing the story for Mike Trimble then?

JW: Yes after he wrote a lead or so, I picked up from there and went ahead and wrote the story.

JG: Well, was she calling from the White House or from the Mitchell's residence in Washington D.C.?

JW: I guess she was calling from the Attorney General's residence and all those phone lines went through the White House switchboard.

JG: Did you have other interesting experiences like that while you were at the *Gazette*?

JW: Oh sure. Different regular news events — when a tornado would come through the city, that provides some — the city of North Little Rock, for twenty-one of the twenty-two years that I was over there full-time when I worked for the *Gazette* — and we had those natural disasters that came and had some awful floods where

families and entire neighborhoods had to be evacuated. Some of the stuff that was even more exciting, though, came out of really dull type of stuff. One time the city created a housing facilities board to sell bonds to provide loans through the banks to help provide construction loans for low-cost housing for low- to moderate-income families. After that had been in operation for about a year or so, I was wondering if that money was actually helping out low-income people. So I went to the banks. They wouldn't let me see any of the records of actually where those loans were going because a lot of that loan information contained privileged information, such as social security numbers and how much people owed in debt and things like that. We still made arrangements for all of those loans to be copied through the banks. We went to two or three of the major banks that had been making those loans that had been made available through the housing facilities board. I had them copy those loan papers and black out the crucial information, that is the privileged information, not the addresses of the families, but their Social Security numbers. I went through those and wrote down the amounts and figures and all that. At the *Gazette*, we used our computer equipment there. I was one of the lucky reporters, I guess, to go from hot type of newspapering, where the paper was printed with hot type and made into the metal forms, to throwing out the typewriters to go into computers. I used a different kind of computer that would compute actually and add and subtract and all that. We filed all this information into a computer I borrowed from another department at the *Gazette*. It spit out the information that I fed into it and so on. We found

out that many of those loans were — in fact, I believe it was the majority of them — going to middle income to upper income families. The houses were being built in the price range of \$100,000 and over in some of the wealthier exclusive neighborhoods of North Little Rock and some of the nearby cities. It was rather astounding. We submitted that article in a competition, and I won an award for breaking that news. As a result, they had to change some of their policies. I don't think anybody went to jail over it, but it was a complete violation of the public trust.

JG: Did you have Casey Laman involved with the censor board, or what happened?

JW: Oh yes, Jerol, thanks for reminding me of that. I guess it was probably around 1970 or 1971, something like that, Casey Laman was still in office finishing up his few terms in office. He'd been in office since, I guess 1958, through 1972. Then he came back into office a few years later briefly. This was during his first term. A theater that had X-rated movies — or maybe that was before they were rated. I forgot what they were called back then. — It was obscene stuff to the normal type of fare. It opened up on Main Street and began showing some of these off-color movies. The mayor was adamantly against it. He couldn't stop them, so he created a censor board. But the first step he took was to build a fence on the public sidewalk in front of the theater, which was on Main Street just only about a block and half from City Hall. He started building a fence that was pretty much in the middle of the sidewalk and the fence was about fifteen to twenty feet long.

[Tape Stopped]

JG: Sorry for the interruption. John, if you would continue with your story about the theater playing the off-color movies, I would appreciate it.

JW: Okay. Jerol, as we were mentioning — this is, of course, October 31, and Jerol Garrison and John Woodruff talking about the days of the *Gazette*. We were discussing about this fence that I noticed. Of course, I didn't know what was happening when I stopped by and saw some city employees out working on a city sidewalk outside this theater that was playing X-rated movies. The public works director over there in North Little Rock, I had gotten to know him pretty well and he had gotten to know me well with the many stories that ran about street work and drainage work and other things. When I walked up to him, I noticed that the city crews were working on a city sidewalk for no apparent reason. I asked Charles Wrobleski, I said, "Chuck, what in the world is going on here?" He said, "John, don't ask me that. Go ask somebody else." He kind of grinned, and he told me after I persisted that a fence was going up there — a chain link fence with privacy slats in it. So he told me basically what they were doing, what they were erecting there, and then I got the information later from the mayor who had ordered it. I found out, from the mayor, that he was building this privacy fence that would block the visibility of the display boards that they had in the pictures, so people walking down the sidewalk would have a choice, as the mayor put it, in some pretty blunt language though. I won't quote that, but he said those who wanted to look at the pictures, and he had a name for them, could walk on the

inside of the fence and look at those obscene pictures about movies that were showing inside there. On the outside you would have that choice, walking next to the street and not having to look at those pictures. This would be particularly helpful for mothers who had their children with them while shopping downtown. They wouldn't have to pass this theater with the pictures showing there on display, the obscene pictures. Later he created a censor board and they raided the theater a time or two before it finally just shut down. It was tired of harassment, you might say.

JG: Is the censor board still operating?

JW: No, it didn't last too long, but it provided some excellent copy for the Farkleberry Follies later on. I was one of the members of the censor board in the Farkleberry Follies Society of Professional Journalists gridiron show. That provided some funny scenes about the censor board.

JG: What about the track that was built next to the high school?

JW: Yes, another time I noticed some city employees on a track that was located between the high school stadium, which was, at that time, North Little Rock High School. It's called the West Campus now of North Little Rock High School. The field, empty field, was between the stadium and the police and courts building in the Military Heights urban renewal project. I noticed some city employees out there — doing some surveying. I covered the school board at that time and also all City Council meetings, and I didn't recall anything coming up about city employees going to be on school property doing something up there. So I asked

again what was going on there and found out through — and it really helped to develop, as I mentioned earlier, relationships with the city employees who could tip me off about things going on. So I found out that they were looking into the possibility of building a track there — the city building a track on school property. Mayor Laman, who had directed that, gave me a little information on it. I called up George Miller, the school superintendent, and asked him about it. He stammered and hesitated. He didn't give me a real good answer. He apparently didn't know what was going on himself. I checked with him later, and he had an answer. "Well, they're studying the possibility of a track there." I figured, well, I guess he talked to the mayor about it. Sure enough, later on after details were worked out, the city used the school property and built one of the finest tartan turf tracks made by the 3-M Company in the state for a high school. The mayor was known for his recreation facilities in the city. I think it's had to be resurfaced several times, but the track worked out in the long run as a real fine recreation facility in the city. The mayor used to be on the school board, and so I guess that's why the idea came to him. Whether it was by coercion or what, the city ended up building a track on this school property. It ended up to where the public could use it when the schools were not using it. It's used to this day for people getting up there and walking around the track and running and, of course, track meets also are held there.

JG: I have seen people taking a stroll around that track.

JW: That type of thing, Jerol, helped when I would work in having a lot of contacts

with city employees. I know Jimmy Breslin, the New York columnist, spoke to our class at Northwestern University one time and talked about when he was asked how he developed so many contacts and had such great stories in his columns. He said, "It's done just by hanging around." I used to do a lot of that. Just hanging around. I would try to meet as many city employees as I could and develop their confidence, whether it was the garbage man or the head of the department or the mayor, whoever, and just kind of be there a whole lot. I used to go to all the commission and board meetings, not only for writing a news story that came out of those meetings — sometimes they didn't generate a story — but I would be there and be talking to different people and develop contacts and also would hear things going on that would give me ideas of other possible news stories. One time, for example, when they were trying to improve security in public housing I was one of — well, the *North Little Rock Times* had a reporter there, and I was there at a Housing Authority meeting, and they were joking about trying to enhance the security of public housing. They used some, I thought, language that wasn't called for, and it was not what should be spoken at a public meeting. I quoted some of these fellows directly. One was soon replaced on the board. This was, at the time, an all-white, all-male board who was in charge of public housing, which was predominantly minority occupied, and it was rather astounding. As a result of that story and quoting them on some of the language that was used about the type of residents who lived in the public housing, eventually not only minorities were added to the public housing board when

vacancies came up, but also women. So it ended up both genders were on there and also black and white races were represented on the Housing Authority.

JG: Explain to me a typical day. You reported to the *Gazette* sometime in the morning and then went over to North Little Rock, or did you usually start your day in North Little Rock and then call the *Gazette* city desk with information about what stories you had? And then you would write them back at the North Little Rock City Hall, or did you come back to the *Gazette* to write?

JW: Yes, it was kind of a combination of all that, Jerol. I usually always touched in, touched based with the *Gazette* — let them know I would be there during the day and that sort of thing. Let them know — my editor — what was going on, and if no one was there at the earlier hour, I would leave a note about what was coming up — what meetings — and I would head to North Little Rock. If I had a board or commission meeting or whatever going on, I would go to those. Otherwise, I would try to work on feature-type stories: the progress of urban renewal or what was happening on the progress of a community center that was being built or going through city records. I was always trying to check on city records for expenses. I tried to regularly check all the vouchers that were written in the city. I used to go regularly over those expenditures to see if anything unusual was there. I would touch base with the city clerk and elsewhere in City Hall. I'd do the building permits, too. That was an everyday sort of thing, and I would sometimes get some good tips there, somebody taking out a building permit for perhaps a major apartment house or a new store coming in. That would open up a

different story — not just reporting a building permit, but construction going on in the city. I would touch a lot of those bases as well as the police and courts and find out not only was crime going on there, but police maybe were irritated over their salaries or working conditions or something. I'd just kind of hang around and visit with them and would honor sometimes when they would say. "I don't want you to quote me on this, but so and so is going on." If I was reporting something for the record, of course, I would have to tell them, "I'm gathering information for this story and, you know, whatever you tell me may end up in the paper." But otherwise it was just private conversations. They would let me know sometimes what things were going on and that allowed me to go a lot times to a public record and find out indeed what was there. An example, one time I was working on some story, and I found out that a police lodge that was located on the river was built on, really, public property that had been donated to the city by the federal government and that was to always be used for public use. So I checked on it, and the police lodge had a fence built around it and it was locked. That was in violation of the federal agreement that this property would be open for public use. So I wrote a story on that and, of course, told the police I was looking into that. They showed me around, so I could find out what the police lodge was and what they used it for. I then wrote a story on this locked fence around what was really federal property donated to the city. I also noticed, as they were giving me a tour of their lodge facility, a beer dispensing machine, and I noticed it didn't have the required licensing permit on it. I mentioned that as a sidebar in the

article. The police later — a lot of them had become my friends — teased me about that. They said, “It was bad enough you’re writing about the lodge and our locked fence. We can understand that we weren’t really doing right, but did you have to tell about our beer machine?” So, as a result of that, I believe ABC had them get the necessary licensing for that, and until this day that fence has not been locked anymore. It stays open and the public, although they may not realize it, can use that police lodge with the proper reservations and things like that.

JG: So did you do your writing at the City Hall in North Little Rock, or did you come back to the *Gazette* and write?

JW: I would write the stories back at the *Gazette*, especially when the *Gazette* and the other news media did not have a pressroom. I would take all my notes back to the *Gazette* and pound them out on a typewriter and later computers. At first, though, we didn’t have that — that was when we didn’t have a pressroom over there, at least one all the media could use. Otherwise, I moved a typewriter in City Hall and would try to do a lot of my stories there and make telephone calls from City Hall. The advantage of that is that I — sometimes the city employees and others would come in and just shoot the bull, and a lot of times my being there a good deal of the day would open up my access to them, giving me little tips or news breaks or whatever might be going on. A lot of these city employees would say, “Now don’t quote me on this, but . . .” I knew they weren’t authorized to be spokesmen for the city or whatever, and I wouldn’t be quoting them anyway because they really may not know enough about what was going on. I would try

to get it from the sources that would know. I would find out about as much as I could. Another time in City Hall that my being there just happened in luck was the time Mayor Robert Rosamond slugged — hit, struck — one of the aldermen, Alderman Art Eastham, and actually knocked him to the floor. I came in to City Hall just seconds after that happened. Everybody was upset about what was going on, and I tried to check around and couldn't get anybody to talk or tell me what was going on or what was happening. Finally, I was able to picture, or get an image, of what happened. I found out that the mayor and one of the aldermen were in the public works department. The mayor got upset with Art Eastham's vote on something or another, and they got to arguing back and forth, and the mayor was larger than Art Eastham. The mayor just got infuriated and struck Eastham at least twice — knocked him to the floor even. Knocked his glasses off. That was in the morning, and the City Council was to meet that night, and I couldn't get ahold of that alderman or the mayor to tell me what went on. So I interviewed everybody in City Hall that day at that particular time and asked them what they heard, what was going on. Nobody would confirm what was going on, but they would tell me off the record what they thought happened. I crisscrossed several of these interviews like that, and I finally got a picture of what had happened that was consistent. I told the city desk that we had a story that the mayor had struck an alderman. They said, "Well, do you have absolute confirmation?" I didn't. That night at the City Council meeting the alderman showed up with his glasses patched back together. He had a bandage on his nose

and a black eye, as I remember. I, of course, always carried my camera, so I got a picture of him sitting on the City Council. I virtually had everything put together for the story. I had a picture and what went on, but I had nobody quoted in the story. That really had me worried. I knew that the City Council gathered at one of the local coffee places after the Council meeting to talk informally about the meeting or just to kind of shoot the bull. I followed them there and showed up where they were meeting. I had never done that before because I was always writing up my story. I went and sat down with about three of these aldermen, including the one who had been struck. As I was sitting there with my back to the door, the mayor came in and shook hands. He didn't see me sitting there. The mayor shook hands with the alderman and said, "Art, I am sorry about what I did this morning." Then he looked over and saw me, and I said, "Mayor, what did you do this morning?" He wouldn't comment any more, but his remark gave me confirmation that something had happened. So I went back to one of my original sources — actually the person who was in the office when all this happened. I gave him the entire story. He still would not go on record, and I said, "If I report this as I have told it to you, would it be a lie or wrong?" He said, "No." That's all I got for confirmation. I called my office then and said, "We've got our story." We put it on front page with my picture and the story about the mayor hitting the alderman and knocking him to the floor and I even had the words "No, don't hit me again" from the alderman. The next morning the alderman called a press conference at 9:30 at his furniture store, and he didn't tell our editor what it was

about. Of course, we all knew it was about this incident. So, with all three television stations and there all the newspapers represented, the alderman got up before everyone at this press conference, and he said, "Every word that you read in the *Arkansas Gazette* today was absolutely correct." I thought I was going to have a heart seizure before he got that "correct" out. He did not deny a word in the story. He elaborated on it and said he would not talk earlier because he didn't want that publicity.

JG: Very interesting. Now, that picture that ran was the one you took at the City Council meeting of Alderman Eastham. Is that correct?

JW: Yes.

JG: With the bruises?

JW: Yes, and the patched up glasses and the bandage across his nose.

JG: Well, John, you have recently undergone a rather severe surgery. I wonder if you could tell about that and also tell about your marathon running and how late you did a marathon right before you went into surgery.

JW: Yes, it's true. Reporters do have private lives, I guess, and when I came to Arkansas in 1969 to go to work for the *Gazette* on August 11 of 1969, shortly thereafter I took up running. I wasn't able to do that when I was a kid. Open heart surgery was my high school graduation present. I got out of the hospital on June 29, which was my birthday also. I was eighteen years old when I walked out of the hospital. My high school graduation gift and I guess my birthday present was open-heart surgery to fill a hole between the ventricles of my heart. I was

born that way. I guess that was another influence that directed me into journalism because I had in mind some other things I wanted to do in life but was unable to because of my heart problems. In fact, I had thought about going into the Air Force, which, of course, they wouldn't take me with that kind of a health record. So that was my preliminary to what I went through two weeks ago. I have been running ever since. In June I passed over 36,000 miles of running. My hours at the *Gazette* sometimes would run late. We had flexible hours. If you had night meetings or whatever, you could come in late. I would use those mornings to run or play tennis or whatever. In June, as I say, I passed 36,000 miles of running. On October 1, 2000, I ran my thirty-seventh marathon. Of course, marathons are 26.2 miles each, and on eight of those I've been up and down Pike's Peak out in Colorado. So I tried to keep myself healthy over the years as a journalist, and a lot of times it has come in handy with some of the long hours or whatever is involved with the energy that you really need a lot of times to be a reporter and keep going and going and really don't have time to be tired. That came in handy and the conditioning helped when on October 1 I did my thirty-seventh marathon and three days later we found that I had a tumor inside of me, and on October 12, twelve days after that marathon I had surgery to remove that tumor and some other infected mass tissue that had caused the tumor and then had to replumb as it were. I joked that they used some of the equipment from Home Depot to replumb me, I guess. But we are back up, and it's been about two weeks now since the surgery, and I am walking a couple to four miles a day now, so we are getting

back there.

JG: So you walk as much as four miles a day, right?

JW: Yes. I did a couple of miles this morning [October 31, 2000].

JG: All at once?

JW: Yes. I went and walked down to the bank and did some deposits. It's a little over a mile to the bank downtown and then walked back. Yesterday I did the same thing — walked that distance and back home and then around the neighborhood. Later I walked to my job, which is about three miles over in North Little Rock across the Arkansas River, walked on over there. That was my second walk of the day. So we are getting back.

JG: Did you stay over there for awhile before you began your return?

JW: Yes. I had my wife come pick me up. She didn't want me out walking late at night. So I did some work there at the office for about twenty minutes or half an hour before she came and got me. Then came back home. I had intended for her to pick me up though. I didn't want to do that walk back.

JG: In this surgery, what was removed?

JW: The bladder was removed and the prostate, and they put in the new plumbing for that and also the tumor was about the size of a lemon. The infected mass that I told you about that they removed, that was the size of a potato. The tumor was inside the bladder.

JG: You're doing well on your road to recovery?

JW: Yes, still sore, but we are trying to work that soreness out. Thanks Jerol.

JG: Thanks a lot John.

[End of Interview]