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*Arkansas Democrat* Project

Interview with

Julie Baldrige [Speed]  
Little Rock, Arkansas  
29 June 2005

Interviewer: Mel White

Mel White: My name is Mel White, and I'm here interviewing Julie Baldrige today. It's June 29, 2005. We're speaking at my house in Little Rock, and we're talking about Julie's time at the *Arkansas Democrat*. Julie, I need to get you to understand, and your permission for the fact that this is an interview being conducted by the [Pryor] Center for [Arkansas] Oral and Visual History archives at [the] University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, and the things we say will be in those archives there available to the public, and also on the Internet where the public can see it. You understand that?

Julie Baldrige: I understand.

MW: You okay with that?

JB: I agree to that.

MW: Okay, also, when they transcribe this interview, we'll both have a chance to look at it and fix facts and cut out the slander and stuff like that. You okay with that, too?

JB: Yes.

MW: Okay, good.

MW: Okay, all these things start the same way, which is I'd like you to talk a little bit about your background—family background—where you're from, your early life, and anything else that's relevant, interesting, et cetera.

JB: I'm almost a native of Heber Springs. I was born in Virginia, but my parents are both from Heber Springs. We moved back when I was nine. Daddy was in the navy for thirty years, and retired when I was nine, and we moved to Cleburne County. I went pretty much all the way through school there.

MW: Can you give us your parents' names?

JB: Olive and Bill Baldrige.

MW: And what was your mother's maiden name?

JB: Olive Biggs.

MW: Biggs? B-I-G-G-S?

JB: That's correct.

MW: Okay. Proceed.

JB: Do you need dates and stuff? [Laughs]

MW: No, no, not really. So you were born in Virginia [and] came to Heber Springs when you were nine?

JB: When I was nine, permanently—we went back and forth some. When I finished high school, I went to college at Arkansas Tech [Russellville]. I was an English literature major. I went to graduate school at the University of Arkansas [Fayetteville] [and majored] in English literature, and did not ever take the exam. So I don't have a graduate degree, but I have thirty hours toward a master's. Then I came to Little Rock—actually I came back to Heber Springs and looked for a

job and after about five or six months—it was during the [President Richard M.] Nixon recession. I was able to find a job at the *Arkansas Gazette*, and worked there for three years until the newsroom became involved in an attempt to form a newsroom union. I left in the middle of that process and took a job at the *Arkansas Democrat* as a columnist. I was a copy editor for the first three years or so that I was at the *Gazette*. Jerry McConnell, who was the managing editor at the *Democrat*, had been the assistant sports editor at the *Gazette*, so we'd known each other. He called a couple of times about jobs and the columns that—he just happened to call about a column proposal that appealed to me, and, also, it was a time when I was unhappy with the atmosphere at the place that I was working, the *Gazette*.

MW: You said Nixon, [so] this would have been early—around [the] early seventies [1970s]?

JB: I went to work at the *Gazette* in 1970, so I must have gone to work at the *Democrat* in 1973 or—I believe it was 1973.

MW: Okay.

[Tape Stopped]

MW: So we're talking about—can we back up a little bit? When you were a child, did you have any inkling that you would end up in journalism or newspapers, or something similar to that?

JB: No, but my family subscribed to the newspapers—to the *Gazette* actually—and read the newspaper every day. They were interested in news and current events

and politics, so I had an exposure to newspapers and to the notion that people should read them every day. I had grown up around them.

MW: Your parents took the *Gazette*. Did you have any feelings about the *Democrat* when you were a kid? How did you look at the papers?

JB: I'm not sure when I first realized there was a *Democrat*, because it was an afternoon paper. It was such an underdog at the time I was growing up that it wasn't much of a factor. Also, given my parents' politics, we were inclined toward the *Gazette* because of the work they did during the [1957] Central High School [integration] crisis.

MW: Your father was in the navy, [and] later he was sergeant at arms of the . . .

JB: . . . of the Arkansas Legislature—of the Arkansas House of Representatives.

MW: Right. So you were hooked into politics as a teenager—at least you were around . . .

JB: Daddy was mayor in 1960, when I was twelve.

MW: Oh, mayor of Heber Springs?

JB: Yes. Mother had always been extremely active in the Democratic Party, and I was—some of my earliest recollections are of being taken in the August heat to the courthouse lawn to watch the votes come in and be counted up on a big blackboard at the front of the courthouse, at the top of the courthouse steps. People would bring picnics and quilts and sit out until late at night and watch the votes come in to see how the elections turned out. That was always an exciting time for my parents, so it was exciting for me.

MW: This would have been when the Democratic primary was tantamount to being elected.

JB: That was the election—that's right.

MW: There was no need to worry about November because the . . .

JB: Unless it was a presidential year, there was no need to worry about it.

MW: Right. So news, current events [and] politics were a big part of your life, an everyday part of your life.

JB: Right.

MW: Why did you major in English, then? [Did] you just like English?

JB: I like to read, like to write. I was good at it, and I liked to excel, so I drifted into it.

MW: This is supposed to be about the *Democrat*, not with the *Gazette*, but what was your experience like at the copy desk at the *Gazette*? Was that a good learning experience?

JB: It was a wonderful learning experience. I think I got there at—maybe not the best time—but it was sort of the beginning of the end because I was there before Omnibus and before Gannett and before there was ever any shadow of a change at the *Gazette*. And they were extremely rigorous in their requirements. There were a lot of expectations as to how we would turn each article out. I didn't even edit my first page-one piece for a year. I left after three years and was still the junior-most member—or one of the junior-most members—of the copy desk. Whereas at the *Democrat*—at the early period that I was there, three years would have been a long time for most people to be . . .

MW: Oh, yes.

JB: . . . in a position like that.

MW: Were there many women when you were on the copy desk at the *Gazette*?

JB: Actually, no. When I arrived, there were only three women in the whole newsroom. There was Matilda Tuohey, Ginger Shiras and me. We were the only three.

MW: And this would have been, like you said, 1970, 1971, 1972?

JB: 1970.

MW: So you really got a solid background in style, accuracy, all of the . . .

JB: Newspaper of record, that sort of thing, and the importance of things being correct. We had to learn everybody who was a news maker. We had to learn their middle initial. We had to learn their exact title. We had to know the difference between Chairman of the Board and Chief Executive Officer. We had to know all the members of the different courts and exactly how to spell their names and what their whole names were. All of that was a very big deal and it was emphasized just so—I don't think they had that luxury in the years—in later years—before the *Gazette* disappeared.

MW: You had to learn that Broadway was not a street or avenue. It was just Broadway, right? Stuff like that.

JB: That's right. [Laughs] I had to learn—what's the name—I want to say Hays Street—I had to learn what the name of University was before it was University Avenue.

MW: Right. It was Hays Street.

JB: Hays Street. That's what I thought.

MW: Okay, so Jerry McConnell was at the *Gazette*, then he moved over to become managing editor of the *Arkansas Democrat*.

JB: At the time that Walter Hussman [Jr.] bought the paper, he hired Jerry away as managing editor.

MW: Are you sure about that?

JB: I'm not absolutely sure, but it was—no . . .

MW: I think Jerry went first.

JB: . . . Jerry went first. But it wasn't too long.

MW: No, it wasn't too long because I'm pretty sure when I joined the *Democrat* in 1974 that Hussman had not bought it yet.

JB: No, Hussman owned it when I was there.

MW: I know that, but . . .

JB: Were you there before I was?

MW: No, you were there before I was, but I think it was shortly after I joined that the paper [was] sold. I could be wrong.

JB: No, because I didn't go over until Hussman had bought the paper.

MW: Really?

JB: Yes.

MW: I'm going to have to do some fact checking on this, but I'll take your word for it.

JB: No, take my word for it.

MW: Since you're the fact checker here. You're the former *Gazette* copy editor.

JB: I'm the copy editor. You don't want to disagree on these kinds of things.

MW: Okay, well it's been proven to me on previous interviews that my memory's not always what it should be. All right, Jerry McConnell went to the *Democrat*, and he wanted you to come over to be a columnist. [Editor's note: Jerry McConnell returned to the *Democrat* as managing editor in August, 1971.]

JB: Columnist, yes.

MW: And what did he want you to do?

JB: Well, there was a column that ran and had been running for a number of years called "Answer, Please". It was just this little light piece of froth. People wrote in questions about, you know, "I've got this weird looking flower in my yard and I don't know what it is, and I'd like to know what it is," or, "I bought a new refrigerator and it stopped working, and I can't get the company I bought it from to fix it," or, "I think my violin is a Stradivarius. How do I find out if it really is?" What they'd been doing was doling these questions out to reporters across the newsroom, all of whom hated doing it. Consequently, it was the last thing on your list—they screwed it up a lot. They were constantly having errors in it. I think the decision was, "Well, we're either going to have [to] fix it, or get rid of it." Jerry decided that he would offer me this column, and that would be my whole job—to write the daily column seven days a week for just little factoids, you know, and [a] little human interest—"Somebody cares about me because they answered my question."

MW: So it was a popular enough column, even when it was not being done all that well, that they wanted to keep it. But they wanted to [do] it better.

JB: They decided to keep it, and they wanted to do it better, and I think—I could be wrong, you'd have to ask Jerry, but I always kind of had the feeling that he wanted to hire me and he was looking around for something I would take. I wouldn't transfer over to copy desk because I was already doing that.

MW: Right.

JB: But when he offered me this, it appealed to me more, so—and I—and it—you have to call it a particularly important time in my work.

MW: Because you were upset at the *Gazette* management, because of this union business?

JB: I was upset at the management because of the owners, because the editorial page professed one thing and their behavior toward their employees was quite a different matter.

MW: Yes, that's pretty funny, because the *Gazette* was the liberal paper. The *Democrat* was the conservative paper, and yet the *Democrat* had women and African-Americans before the *Gazette* did, at least in any numbers.

JB: Yes

MW: Which was sort of interesting.

JB: Yes.

MW: I didn't realize you were only the third woman in the . . .

JB: Well, I took the place of another woman . . .

MW: Yes.

JB: . . . so I was not the . . .

MW: I don't mean that you were the only [one], but you were one of only three.

JB: I was one of three when I was hired, yes.

MW: So in approximately 1973, you went to the *Democrat* to become, as I recall, the “Answer, Please” Lady.

JB: The “Answer, Please” Lady. That’s right. And they made a big deal—they did full-page ads with photos. I mean, if it had been 1995 they probably would have put up billboards. But thank God it wasn’t, so [laughs] . . .

MW: Your column ran front page, did it not?

JB: Eventually. You know, I try to remember when it transferred over, but it was fairly soon. It may have been at the end of the first year or so. They moved it at some point fairly quickly to the front page. About the same time they started running green papers.

[End Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning Tape 1, Side 2]

MW: Okay, the tape just stopped. We just turned the tape over. We were talking about the—at one point, the *Democrat* ran green pages, was that to show the latest edition?

JB: I don’t have any idea. It was one of those things that I didn’t have any curiosity about because somebody else made the decision. It was green [and] there was nothing to be done about it. So I just made up my mind not to care one way or the other, and I just didn’t ever ask.

MW: I wonder if it was to—I do remember that. I wonder if it was to show the final, or something—that it was the latest . . .

JB: I don’t think so.

MW: No?

JB: Because I think the one in Heber Springs was green, too.

MW: Oh, well, that's something for someone in the future to . . .

JB: . . . take it [up] [laughter] . . .

MW: . . . because frankly we're just too lazy to care.

JB: . . . to care about it. [Laughter]

MW: Maybe, maybe they were just trying to get attention. But anyway . . .

JB: That wouldn't surprise me. It was certainly different.

MW: So, if we can be bluntly honest here, as I recall your setup [laughs]—you were able to do just pretty much whatever you [wanted], whenever you wanted.

JB: I didn't have any supervision so long as I turned out a column. And the only—I don't believe I ever made a mistake—that anybody ever called me on, at least. Except my first year, when I took a two-week vacation, they turned it back over to the reporting staff, and I was running corrections for, like, [laughs] a month. I just had a fit, and they let me do reruns—recycle—like Ann Landers.

MW: But it would have been too much to ask you to do it in advance, right?

JB: Right. I mean, I didn't need to do seven days a week.

MW: Yes. So you came to the—you waltzed in—I mean you . . .

JB: [Laughs]

MW: You showed up at work every day at some hour and you sat at your desk, and had coffee and made a few phone calls?

JB: I had an answering machine. Remember I was the only person in the newsroom who had an answering machine?

MW: Oh, so people could leave a message for you?

JB: People could leave messages and ask questions, that's right.

MW: Okay.

JB: I would just get them by mail, and I would pick the ones that I thought were . . .

MW: Easiest—I mean, most interesting.

JB: . . . most interesting. As a matter of fact, they did a readership survey after I'd been here about a year and a half, and found out that I was the second most-read feature in the paper, right after "Dear Abby," as a matter of fact! [Laughs]

MW: I hope you marched in and demanded a raise from Jerry.

JB: No, but it did—that's [telling you something about their?] news policies.  
[Laughs]

MW: Well, people love that kind of stuff.

JB: I know, [ ? ] can't I?

MW: And it really is. If I can be, you know, totally sexist here, there was this beautiful, I mean, cute little picture of you— [ ? ] picture of you that you made—you were a face that people could say, "This woman is going to answer my questions, is going to solve my problems."

JB: Right. That's right. I was the Katie Couric perky little person.

MW: Well, I mean, I was there at the *Democrat* at this time, and I recall that I didn't ever see you, shall we say, sweating too much at your job.

JB: [Laughs] Well, actually . . .

MW: In fact, I think that sometimes . . .

JB: . . . my last year, at least—maybe a little longer than that—I only worked four-day weeks.

MW: I recall your biggest problem was actually having to find ways to look busy for eight hours a day. [Laughter]

JB: Eight hours? You think I was . . .?

MW: No, you did a great job. You were very popular, and that was the whole point.

JB: If another person had done it, and had done it as well—most would have had to work more than eight hours a day.

MW: That's right. You shouldn't be penalized for your . . .

JB: Efficiency.

MW: Efficiency and competence.

JB: And competence, that's right.

MW: And, as I recall, you didn't ever—did you ever answer the phone, or did you just let the answering machine pick it up?

JB: I just let the answering machine [laughs] . . .

MW: Because you didn't want it to be some crazy person.

JB: I had some fans who were . . .

MW: Stalkers?

JB: I don't think we knew the term at the time, but I didn't want to encourage them. I had one fan who came by to see me from time to time who was an emerging transsexual.

MW: I remember that person!

JB: Yes. And he would come in—she would come in. He would ride the bus down from someplace around Fort Smith and come to see me in his dress and his hat and his gloves with his bag. You remember—and he was, like, six foot three [inches]?

MW: Yes, very large

JB: [And had] a prominent Adam's apple, but he was on the way to having surgery and he would come to see me.

MW: I remember that because I went into the bathroom one time—the men's restroom—and he was in there in his dress and hat, and all that, yes.

JB: [Laughs]

MW: It was disconcerting.

JB: He [was] an interesting person—a very dear person. The only reason I bring him up is not to ridicule him—or her—but to point out that there were people who—I mean, I had readers who sent me postcards when they went on vacation. So there were people who felt they had a connection to this created image that wasn't really me, but I appreciated that and respected it, so I—but at the same time there were—some of the attention was unwanted.

MW: So, how big was this column? I forget—was it two columns?

JB: It was about twenty-one inches. I mean, it was about . . .

MW: But it was just one . . .

JB: It was . . .

MW: But it ran as a two-column thing, didn't [it]? Or not?

JB: They split it in half. I mean—and it ran . . .

MW: Right, right.

JB: It ran as two columns, but sometimes—when it went to page one—my recollection is that they just stripped it all the way down to one side.

MW: Really?

JB: That's my recollection.

MW: Well, once again...

JB: With photo.

MW: . . . anyone who cares about this can go look up a microfiche of the *Democrat*.

[Laughs]

JB: I have them all at my house.

MW: You do?

JB: I do. We have a catalog, or index, that I created.

MW: As you were doing it?

JB: As I was doing it.

MW: So you could look things up and not repeat your—whatever.

JB: No, so I *could* look things up *and* repeat it. [Laughs]

MW: And repeat it. [Laughs] Now when someone calls and leaves a message saying,

“You answered this same question in December of 1976,” you can just go,

“Delete.”

JB: [Laughs] No, I mean, sometimes they would ask for facts that I would have already looked up in a different context, so I would—I didn't have to figure it all out again. It was all ready. I could find it.

MW: So if people ask some sort of—you would get a question, and you would think, “This is a good question,” then you would maybe call up a public official, or call up an expert, or . . .

JB: Actually, I think that I had the instinct—I had the impression—although no one ever said it to me—I had the impression that they wanted it to be a good news kind of thing. They wanted me to be a positive—no muckraking, no hard-hitting investigator stuff. For example, I would call the appliance store where the lady had bought the refrigerator that didn’t work, and I would tell them who I was and what I was calling about, and, of course, it was before the Privacy Act [of 1974] and before all of this concern about whether or not you could act as someone’s agent. I would call the Social Security Administration and say, “Mrs. So-and-So didn’t get her check,” and they would actually talk to me about it—or the Veteran’s Administration, or whoever it was. I would say, “What I would like to be able to do is give you a week and a half to work this out, and I would like to be able to say that there is really good news and that the answer is that your refrigerator is going to be repaired, or your Social Security check is in the mail,” or whatever. That way, everybody I worked with—almost—I mean, I rarely had to roast anybody, because almost everybody I worked with—I gave them a chance to do the right thing. And [I] ended up being positive about their business or their agency, or whatever, because it was a happy ending sort of thing—because I gave them time for there to be a happy ending. I think that that format was somewhat artificial in that most people couldn’t have gotten that outcome. First of all, it had the implied hazard to whoever this agency or business was that

they had two choices: they could fix this, or they were going to get their names in the paper as being bad guys. I never said that, of course. I was always as friendly as I could be, but there it was. And, also, I was able—because of my good fortune to be well-educated, I was able to communicate what the problem was, whereas a lot of people would not have known how to ask for relief. So it was not as easy—it was not as easy for people to do that for themselves as it was for me to do it for them.

MW: Yes.

JB: Way too long an answer. [Laughs]

MW: No, no, it's an excellent answer. I was just sitting here thinking that—how that relates to when you—which we'll get to later, I hope—moved on to the overtly political sphere where you were working with public officials. This way of making it in people's best interest to do the right thing served you well in that regard, too. That is, part of our politics is convincing people to do the right thing without being too overt about it.

JB: A strategic thing. You learn strategies to get cooperation. And you learn how to ask for things in ways that makes them—the medicine easier to go down.

MW: Yes. I just happened to think of that because, as we'll get to later, you did move on into being the person who needs to fix things and handle things for people—politicians—public servants, I should say.

JB: [Laughs] Hard-working . . .

MW: Hard-working . . .

JB: Self-sacrificing . . .

MW: Self Sacrificing public servants, they all were. Yes, and your answers—I mean, you answered quirky, off-beat things as well as these serious, “My Social Security check didn’t come,” types of questions.

JB: Or, “I’ve been fighting with the Internal Revenue Service for two years and they won’t give me my refund.”

MW: Yes, yes. Because—I’ll tell a story—one time—that you may have forgotten—I was sort of—I was interested in birds—I still am, I guess—so I was the person who people asked bird questions [to] a lot. And one time you came to me and said that one of your readers wanted to know how fast a hummingbird’s—you remember this story—how fast a Hummingbird’s wings beat.

JB: We actually had art with it. I tried to remember the person’s name who did my little drawing.

MW: Don’t know.

JB: Del . . . [Editor’s note: It was Deb Polston.]

MW: Oh, oh, I can picture him, but I can’t think of his name.

JB: I’m so sorry. It’s just been so many years. He was such a sweet person.

MW: He was one of the editorial people, art people.

JB: Yes, and he did all the drawings for my column.

MW: Right, right, right. Well, anyway, I went home that night, I guess, and looked up something. I came back the next day and told you that it was fifty-five—it could be up to fifty-five wing beats a minute. And you—naively—trusting me, put that in your column. And what was funny was one of the composing room people was

reading your column and said, “This can’t be right,” and he saved us both from embarrassment because it should have been fifty-five beats a second.

JB: A second.

MW: And I was just—you know, my brain went haywire.

JB: Your mouth didn’t match what your brain was saying.

MW: Right, right. So this composing room person saved us both from embarrassment by catching this factual error in your column before it ran.

JB: No—it just—it was absolutely the reason that—I said I don’t think I ever really made a big error—it was just the grace of God. [Laughs]

MW: Well, that wouldn’t have been your fault. You trusted me, and [I] told you the wrong thing.

JB: I never knew any of those answers, though. I got them from other people most of the time. [Laughs]

MW: Another thing I remember, one time, there were these weird-looking contraptions around the Hillcrest neighborhood that kind of—these weird modern sculpture-looking pipe things that stuck up beside the sidewalk around Hillcrest. I really wanted to know what they were, and you found out that they were something [to do] with the gas company, some kind of regulator or something, and you ran a picture of one of them, which meant nothing to anyone else but me, probably.

JB: No, no, there were probably hundreds of people out there who were curious, but just not quite curious enough to ask, but, I mean, I got . . .

MW: Who knows, maybe even dozens.

JB: I got—maybe a dozen—I got questions—I had regular correspondence with—when I say bank presidents, I’m talking about big Little Rock bank presidents, with supreme court justices . . .

MW: You mean asking you questions?

JB: Yes, and they would ask me things like—I remember one from a bank president—one of the Little Rock bank presidents—was “I bought a loaf of bread, and it was wheat bread, and it didn’t have a list of ingredients on it. Can they do that?” [Laughter]

JB: And I thought, “This is an interesting thing; who ever thought this person would be in a grocery store, buying a loaf of bread, and then looking for the ingredients on it?” It wasn’t about banking at all. It was about bread ingredients.

MW: We should talk about the paper, I guess, here, too, as well as what you did. Who did you report to? Anybody? Jerry?

JB: Sure. Actually, I reported initially to the city desk, and the city desk edited my column. Once they were satisfied it went to the—and it didn’t come back to me—it went to the copy desk. Then it went in the paper. I always was really unhappy with that arrangement because, first of all, nobody—I mean, I guess lots of reporters went through two sets of editors, but they had tendencies to make changes that—because the column was in my voice, my name was on it, my picture was with it—they seemed to change my tone from time to time, and make it less friendly just with a few alterations. It felt to me like—and I’m not as sensitive about—I’ve no pride in authorship, but—I was concerned about—I didn’t think they were making it better. This was the city desk. One day I wrote a

column about birth control, and I went through all the various methods of birth control, and I said, “For those who do not choose mechanical or chemical . . .

[End of Tape 1, Side 2]

[Beginning Tape 2, Side 1]

MW: Sorry, the tape stopped. You were talking about birth control.

JB: I said, “For those who do not choose the mechanical or chemical methods of birth control, there is the rhythm method.” And I described what that—technically, what that meant. The people at the city desk changed it from “choose” to “like.” Which, in my mind, put me in people’s bedrooms and was unsavory. I didn’t care what they—I didn’t want to think about what people liked, I only wanted to talk about the facts. It was embarrassing. It made me unhappy; it was an unhappy change. And I marched into Bob McCord’s office—pacing, probably yelling, I’m not sure. He was always amused—or looked amused—at me. I had already fussed about their changes, too, several times. I just showed him what I had written, and I showed him what the change had been, and told him—I remember my words were, “I know I’m a *prima donna*, but I thought that’s why you hired me.” And he said, “You’re right, that is the reason we hired you,” and [laughs] the city desk never touched my copy again. It went directly to the copy desk where they simply edited it for mistakes.

MW: Not style, probably.

JB: No—well, they were going to let me do the style, and, you know . . .

MW: You should have been competent to do that, for sure. And when we say “style” here, we’re talking newspaper terms of style, not writing style, but . . .

JB: Tone.

MW: Well, we're not talking about tone. We're talking about where to place your commas, and punctuation and capitalization—that kind of newspaper style, not writing style.

JB: Yes, I see what you mean. Yes, that's all I thought—if they saw me misspelling a word, I appreciated it if they would change it.

MW: Right. Well, it seemed odd. It seems odd that they wouldn't have let you look at it after they got through with it just to make sure that they hadn't screwed something up. That's very weird. But, I guess in those days, that kind of thing didn't happen.

JB: I think they were trying to keep me in my place, which is impossible.

MW: I'd like to point out that she said that, not me.

JB: [Laughs]

[Tape Stopped]

MW: Okay, let's talk about the paper as a whole in those days. It was down at the corner of Capitol and Scott, and we were up on the second floor. That's where the editorial offices were.

JB: You came up the stairs, directly through the front door, or you took this rickety old elevator, which may still be just the same. In the newsroom there was this circular staircase—one of those sort of cast iron staircases that circle up into the ceiling, which is how you got to the printing area. Do you remember that?

MW: Yes.

JB: I'm assuming that's gone. My recollection—I've been there once or twice since then, and I don't think it's there anymore. I think they've got this all new snazzy newsroom.

MW: I haven't been there in years, but when I was there maybe five or six years ago, it was quite a bit different than when you were there. When we were there, it was just all—I shouldn't say it was all open, but it was pretty much just one big room.

JB: Except for those little corner offices . . .

MW: Right

JB: . . . right in the front and the side.

MW: Right, where Bob McCord's office and Jerry's office and . . .

JB: Executive editor and the managing editor, and the . . .

MW: Editorial page people.

JB: . . . that man who was the editorial page person. What was his name?

MW: David Hawkins.

JB: David Hawkins. Yes, who was . . .

MW: A lunatic.

JB: Yes. [Laughs] Well, I don't want—he certainly acted like a lunatic.

MW: He was actually a pretty nice man, personally, but his views were lunaticish.

JB: Well, in the beginning, also, he'd go off. Don't you remember how he'd go off sometimes? I was sitting—I sat right outside his office.

MW: Right, you did.

JB: He would just—he would yell and scream and, you know—spaced out—and it was like he was just on another . . .

MW: I don't recall that myself, but then I wasn't as close. I should say that at the time Julie was there, I was there for a large part of the time either on the copy desk and later I was a reporter—later I was the “TV columnist,” or entertainment editor, I guess. So we experienced some of the same things during this period. We were—in fact, my desk was pretty close to yours at the very end there . . .

JB: Yes.

MW: . . . when I was the entertainment editor.

JB: And you know that from that end of the newsroom you had a different perspective than when you were over at the copy desk.

MW: Yes, your perspective would have been different from anybody else's, really, because you probably were the most independent person on the editorial staff.

JB: Absolutely. I had one thing to do, and I came in, did it, and left. I knew people, and I observed what was going on, but it wasn't nearly the same as it was at the *Gazette*, where I was sitting around a desk with a bunch of other people, interacting with reporters. At the *Democrat*, I really didn't have to talk too much to anybody unless I felt like it.

MW: Right. You were very independent. You came in when you wanted to, so it wasn't like you were a reporter who had to report to the city editor or the assistant city editor. It wasn't like you were a copy desk person who had to deal with the slot person and the whole business.

JB: No, and it wasn't even as if I got an assignment. As long as I continued to produce columns that they were happy with, nobody said anything.

MW: Right. What about the personalities who were there? Do you remember any people that you dealt with a lot or that you wanted to talk about?

JB: All right—remember—what was that man's name with the beard who was the city editor?

MW: Bill Husted? No, Larry Gordon. No, Ralph Patrick!

JB: Ralph Patrick.

MW: Yes.

JB: I liked him.

MW: Yes.

JB: He was really nice to me, and he used to have parties in his backyard that had all the ferns, I remember that. It was just a really nice family, and I liked him a lot. I liked George Boozey. Boozey—everybody called him. What was his name again? Am I making that up?

MW: I don't remember.

JB: George—oh gosh. I'm sorry, I can't remember his last name, but he was . . .

MW: George Douthit?

JB: No, no, no, no, no.

MW: He was with the *Gazette*.

JB: He was a younger guy. And he lived . . .

MW: What did he do? What was he . . .?

JB: It was back in the newsroom. I guess he was like a copy editor or something, but it was with—he may have been there before you came.

MW: Yes, because you were there for a year or so before I came. . . .

JB: Yes.

MW: . . . to the *Democrat*.

JB: I may actually be getting the *Gazette* and the *Democrat*—I mean, there were people in and out, and there were a lot of people in both worlds. Sheila Daniel came over from the *Gazette* after I did. She came over to the *Democrat*.

MW: Yes.

JB: And there were others. Mary Heffron—didn't she come over?

MW: I don't know who that is.

JB: Okay, maybe I'm wrong about that. I know she ended up with Sheila at the Chicago paper.

MW: Well, as I recall, Bob McCord was the Executive Editor, Jerry McConnell was the . . .

Both: Managing Editor.

MW: Ralph Patrick was the City Editor. Larry Gordon was the Assistant City Editor, I think.

JB: Yes.

MW: Bill Husted was something, some kind of editor.

JB: He may have—turn that off for a second.

[Tape Stopped]

MW: Okay, we just had a little short break where we went and “Googled” and determined that Walter Hussman—The Hussman Group—WEHCO Media—whoever it is—bought the *Democrat* in 1974, which is—and you determined that you went to work there . . .

JB: . . . in the spring of 1974.

MW: . . . and I went to work there sometime later than that, probably the summer of 1974, as a copy editor. My recollection is that it was after I came that they held a big meeting in the newsroom and announced that the Hussmans had bought the paper. You don't remember that?

JB: My recollection was that I was there for that announcement, but my recollection also [is] that I was, I believe—my recollection is that I was made aware that Hussman—Mr. Hussman—was buying the newspaper before I actually came to work there.

MW: Okay. Well, that—if you came to work in April 1974, it must have been in the works for some time. I mean that . . .

JB: Yes.

MW: . . . it wouldn't . . .

JB: It wouldn't have happened overnight.

MW: Right, right. So you knew it was going to happen?

JB: I knew it was going to happen, and you just weren't as interested in it. [Laughs]

MW: I recall that they had this meeting, and I had no idea what it meant or anything. I mean, I was so naïve, I had just started working there and I guess they probably assured us that everything was going to continue the way it was, which it basically did.

JB: Yes.

MW: Except they brought in probably new editorial people and stuff like that. By editorial, I mean editorial page people.

JB: Yes.

MW: Anyway, we need to talk about—I mean, you grew up—your family grew up reading the *Gazette*, probably feeling proprietary about it, as so many people in Arkansas did. I mean, it was such a good newspaper. Then you actually worked for the *Gazette*. Did you have a sense that you were sort of going over to the wrong side of the tracks or something when you—oh, well, as we discussed, though, you were kind of upset at the management.

JB: I was disillusioned, yes, over—and so I—and I was, you know, just—I mean, it was a better job. I think it was much more fun in some ways because I was just, you know—trivia—like trivial pursuit sort of. And [it was] easy for me to do because of my particular skills set, and a lot more flexible hours, way better money, so I was happy there.

MW: Yes.

JB: And they treated me really well. I don't think I was old enough to pay enough attention to realize—I think now, looking back, that I was way better off than a lot of the people in the newsroom were as far as the way I was treated. But I don't think I was sensitive enough to realize that at the time.

MW: Plus, I would imagine that [as] a copy editor at the *Gazette*, you probably were working weird hours, right? Until, like, 11:00 at night or something?

JB: Yes, I was one of the early people, and I worked from 2:00 [p.m.] to 11:00 [p.m.]. I was the first one in on the days when I came in.

MW: Wow, 2:00 to 11:00. So that was a huge change in your schedule to change . . .

JB: I think I worked—and I loved the idea of working days. Also, I had—I believe I worked through all Christmases at the *Gazette*. And that, you know—I mean, that . . .

MW: No fun.

JB: Well, yes, I'm an only child and I missed it with my parents and stuff. It was nice to get into a more normal life.

MW: Did you ever have any problems with anybody there or were you pretty much left alone all the time? And we discussed the issue of the . . .

JB: We discussed that I was annoyed at the sort of—what I thought were arbitrary changes by the city desk. I got into trouble once—there was a question that came in about employment agencies. Actually, I got—I think I got more than one call over the course of several months from people who said, “Can they do this?” And what they were specifically referring to was that, in some instances, employment agencies asked for a contract that required the person for whom they found the job to pay a percentage of the salary that they were going to be getting—to pledge that over a six month period—and the catch was whether or not they kept the job. And it appeared in these instances—although I have no idea if this was true, and I certainly didn't even imply that it was true—but it appeared, from my perspective, that there were at least some—one or two employment agencies—I doubt that it was most of them—who perhaps had some kind of a deal with certain businesses and they would get the people to sign the contract. [They] would go over for a job, the job would last two or three weeks, then they'd owe all this money. So I wrote—I answered somebody's question about that, and it turned out—

unbeknownst to me, because it hadn't occurred to me, because I'd never really seen an employment agency ad—I hadn't thought about the classified ad section. And they, at the time, were one of the biggest classified advertisers in the newspaper. I was called in and roughed up pretty good about [that], and I remember being surprised because you can be so idealistic when you're that age. I remember being surprised because I knew that the rule was that editorial and advertising sections were supposed to be completely segregated, [but] it became clear to me that they were not, through that conversation. [Laughs]

MW: Because you had upset . . .

JB: I had offended a bunch of advertisers.

MW: Yes.

JB: I wasn't ugly about them in what I said. I just said, "You need to be really careful [with] what you sign. If you're going to use an employment agency, you need to understand that you may face this set of circumstances and you need to read the fine print because this is the situation." The thing that made them upset was—I don't think that I portrayed them unfairly, but they didn't like it that I had clarified that issue.

MW: Yes, they didn't like it that you had brought a fact to light.

JB: Yes.

MW: That was unflattering for them. Well, who called you in? Who was upset about it?

JB: I don't know if he was upset personally, but Bob McCord called me in. I got the feeling that the people who were upset about it were the people downstairs in the advertising department. But that certainly held weight.

MW: What were you supposed to do about it? You'd already written the column.

JB: I was warned to think before I wrote the next time if anything, even [a] similar circumstance came up, that I needed to be careful not to . . .

MW: Wow, so much for editorial independence.

JB: Yes, you know, except that it was clear. To be fair with McCord and others, it was clear that I wasn't—that I was more an accoutrement than a news operation. I was a . . .

MW: Entertainment or something?

JB: I was entertainment, yes, and I needed to be careful.

MW: Wow, that's interesting. Are there any other instances of, not necessarily bad or negative, but any—I'm trying to say, which questions . . .?

[End Tape 2, Side 1]

[Beginning Tape 2, Side 2]

MW: Changing tape again. I was just asking if there were any other instances of quirky or odd responses to questions, or questions that were the most popular, or got you the most reader response.

JB: Everybody loved plant questions. And consumer—of course, the consumer issues were really hot at the time. Consumer protection was kind of a new thing, and people loved to ask questions about, "Can they do this, can they do that?" I think

the Consumer Protection Act in Arkansas had passed in the mid-1960s. It was when Ray Thornton was attorney general. So people were asking about that.

MW: Yes. I should say that I've known Julie for thirty years and I've made a few little jokes here about your column, but you did a lot of—I mean, it wasn't all silly, quirky stuff. You did a lot of consumer-oriented serious questions, really helping people out.

JB: And even though it was, in a way, kind of a copout, because of the way I did it—I mean, I tried to always have something nice to say about the business. I'd say, "I'm happy to report that Ed's Auto is very concerned about your carburetor, and they intend to put in a brand new one." I think, indirectly, at least, people got information about how to complain—[how to] complain positively so that they could ask for what they needed because if you're going to complain you can't just walk in and go, "I'm mad at you." You have to say, "This is unfair. What I think would be fair would be for you to do this." If you ask people for something specifically, that is reasonable, then they're more likely to repair or help or respond in a positive way. It was before—the law is not particularly powerful now—the consumer laws—but they were almost toothless at the time because—not through any fault of the people who passed the law, just because they had to start slow. The business community had a very—what is that term? I'm having—it was sort of whatever the market—buyer beware.

MW: Laissez-Faire?

JB: Yes, Laissez-Faire kind of thing.

MW: *Caveat emptor* ["let the buyer beware"]?

JB: Yes, that's the word. [Laughter]

JB: So I think it was sort of a changing time, and people were trying to feel more empowered.

MW: That's interesting. We take that for granted nowadays so much that if you buy a faulty product you can get something done about it. Or if there's a business out there that's cheating people. But in those days, it wasn't really so true.

JB: No, no.

MW: And you were a very visible presence on the front page of the paper that said to people, "If there's a problem, you can fix it."

JB: You can fix it. And you deserved for it to be fixed. It wasn't just bad luck if you got a total lemon of some sort.

MW: Right, and again, we've been joking about the column and all, but I remember you were quite serious about a lot of these issues and trying to help people out, and tracking down what was right and wrong. And, as I said, because it was such a popular—as you said, the second most popular thing in the paper—a lot of people saw [that] they could [do] something about injustices or being cheated by businesses or something.

JB: Somebody in the attorney general's office, when Jim Guy Tucker was attorney general, said—as I was leaving and coming over to work for Bill Clinton—that I had gently radicalized the consumers of Arkansas. [Laughs] I always liked—I thought that was the most wonderful compliment because it made me happy that maybe I had roused people to action, even if it was on a very small front.

MW: Yes. Well, the reason you had the independence you had in the newsroom and were left alone to do what you wanted was because you did a good job. I mean, obviously, if you had been messing up a lot and had not been doing a good job and hadn't been so popular, you wouldn't have had the degree of independence that you had. So that's testimony to what kind of job you were doing with the column.

JB: It was fun to do. People in newsrooms, at least in my experience back in the 1970s, were just the most—it was just a gift to be in a newsroom because everybody—almost everybody—was smart, well-informed, funny, and there was a sort of a heave-ho mentality because every day you were putting out another product. Every single—it was not like—it was an ongoing thing. You walked in in the morning [and] there was nothing; you walked out at the end of the day and there was a newspaper. There was a sort of—we were all pulling it together. We were—somehow we've got to get this sucker out before deadline, and it just had to get done. So there gets to be a sort of a camaraderie that's different from other places. It's odd to me now, looking back at it, that that many brilliant, bright, interesting people were willing to slave away—sometimes their whole lives doing it, their whole careers—for really not much in the way of money or, in a lot of cases, even recognition.

MW: Especially—I've talked with other people about the importance of [the] copy desk for a newspaper.

JB: Oh, absolutely.

MW: At least if you're a reporter or columnist or something, your name's in there. The people who work on the copy desk don't even have that recognition, yet they have an extremely important job. It should be—it can be extremely important to do a good job on that.

JB: Well, when I was a copy editor at the *Gazette* I spent a week trying out at *The New York Times*, and found out—much to my surprise—that the *Times* and other big newspapers pay their copy editors more than they pay their reporters because they consider it a “notch above” kind of job because the copy editors made the difference between adequate and exclusive—in some cases—they changed the nuances and made things, you know, in addition to accurate. “Did you really mean to use this word here?” You know. [Laughs]

MW: Right.

JB: And at the *Times*, at least, copy editors did two, three, four articles a night—that's it. In a work day, that's all they had to do. I think the copy editors here in Arkansas were just as good, and they excelled and they made a difference, [but] they just weren't as recognized as they were at some of the more sophisticated newspapers.

MW: Yours was a different experience because you were hired for a specific job, and you had a great degree of independence when you came over from the *Gazette*. Many of us got our start with the *Democrat* because it was the underdog in those days. They didn't pay a lot of money. They weren't picking and choosing the best and brightest all the time. I mean, Jerry McConnell gave a lot [of] us our starts in this whole business just talking to us and believing we were smart or had

some talent or had potential. We could never have gotten a job, probably, [at] a really big fancy newspaper in some big city, yet the *Democrat* gave us the chance to do that.

JB: And a lot of people went on from there to big city newspapers.

MW: Oh, yes.

JB: Yes. I think McConnell is, and was, such a congenial person, but he also did have the ability to discern talent.

MW: Well, yes.

JB: Like yours. [Laughs]

MW: We'll edit that out.

JB: Oh, I mean, not only could you write, but you were *really* funny. [Laughs]

MW: Well, yes, some people didn't think so. So, that's all you did at the *Democrat*. . . .

JB: That's all I did.

MW: For three years. What transpired to make you move on?

JB: Actually, it was toward the time I was leaving, although I didn't know I was leaving. It was really a kind of sad thing that I left because I loved those four-day weeks. One of the things—one of my primary sources, because of all the consumer columns, consumer related questions, turned out to be the Consumer Protection Division over at the attorney general's office. Jim Guy Tucker was the attorney general. We were not personally close, or even very well acquainted, but he became acquainted with my work because I gave him good publicity. I'd say—I mean, credit is infinitely divisible; everybody can get a hundred percent. If somebody asked me a consumer-related question I would say—if the attorney

general got me the answer, you know—“What are your rights if such and such happens?” I’d call him up and say, “Well, what about this?” Then I’d give them credit, and I’d say, “According to the office of the Attorney General, Jim Guy Tucker, Consumer Protection Division.” He appreciated that credit that I gave him, I guess. I ran into him someplace, or went by his office to pick something up—some—there was some reason—and I said—he had just been elected to Congress—and I said, “You know, I’d really be interested in being considered for a job in your congressional office.” Of course, I didn’t know—I didn’t have any idea what I was talking about because congressional offices are tiny. They have twelve or fourteen staff people. He said, “Well, all my positions are filled. In fact, I can’t even take everybody from this office that I’d like to take. But I’ll tell you what, I’ll be going on a plane trip tonight with [William Jefferson] Bill Clinton—who is the newly elected attorney general—and I’m going to mention you to him.” He did, so I got the—it was just sort of a happenstance thing that I got this interview with Clinton. Clinton hired me to be Director for Consumer Affairs in his office. He made an offer—it was a lot more money. When we started to talk, I suspected that he was going to make an offer, and I went in and talked to Jerry McConnell because I really liked my job. I said, “I think they’re going to offer me a job, and I think this is about what it’s going to pay, and if you all can just match this amount, I’d be willing to stay here.” They weren’t willing to do that, and when the job offer came in, I resigned and went over. But I felt I had given them a chance, at least.

MW: I'm trying to think—surely everyone knows, but—we're talking about William J. Clinton, the eventual president of the United States who was—at that time, had been a congressman.

JB: No. He ran for Congress, but he lost.

MW: Oh, yes, he lost to [John Paul] Hammerschmidt.

JB: Lost to Hammerschmidt.

MW: Then he ran for attorney general.

JB: Ran for attorney general and won.

MW: Would [that] have been 1978? No, no, 1976.

JB: It was 1976, and it was in the summer. My first interview with him was in July [and the] second interview was in October. He hired me the Sunday after Thanksgiving—called me at home.

MW: Thanksgiving of 1976?

JB: 1976. I went to work on December the—I would say—the twelfth. And Jim Tucker—a lot of his people had already cleared out, so they just put me in one of their salary slots. I was actually the first person to show up in his office. I was the first Clinton person to arrive at the attorney general's office.

MW: So, you were at the *Democrat* from April of 1974 until December 1976?

JB: Yes.

MW: Looking at your life since then, you worked for Clinton in some capacity or another for quite some time.

JB: Three years—two years in the attorney general's office, and one year in the governor's office. I was his first gubernatorial press secretary. Then Maggie was

born, my daughter. That was twenty-five and half years ago, and I stopped working two or three weeks before she was born.

MW: You eventually ended up also working with Ray Thornton, who was a congressman . . .

JB: That's right. Then it—well—I worked—well . . .

MW: We're skipping things here.

JB: Yes.

MW: [Laughs]

JB: I worked for the University of Arkansas, [Fayetteville] in the Old Main Campaign.

MW: Oh, that's right, in Fayetteville.

JB: And that's how I met Ray. Well, I had met Ray Thornton, but that's how I got to know Ray Thornton, because he was president of the university system. When I moved to Little Rock, I finished up the Old Main Campaign and Ray Thornton called me in and asked me to come to work as director of communications for the university system, which I did. John Ward was leaving. I took John Ward's job after he left, then Mr. Thornton ran for Congress and I left the university to work for him in his campaign, then ran his congressional office for six years, then went to work at the law school where I am now.

MW: The University of Arkansas Law School [in] Little Rock.

JB: The UALR [University of Arkansas, Little Rock] William H. Bowen School of Law. That's correct.

MW: That's what I meant to say, really.

JB: [Laughs]

MW: So your public relations skills still continue to serve you well.

JB: Actually, what I would say [is] that I could've gone on forever as a copy editor at the *Gazette* and it was in great years, and that would have been—that was a wonderful, very—as far from a journalism perspective—a much more prestigious job. I don't think I would ever have gotten an offer from Bill Clinton if [I] hadn't had the column. I think the column in the *Democrat*, which he was familiar with, somehow sort of was higher on the scoreboard. It probably shouldn't have been, but it was.

[End of Tape 2, Side 2]

[Beginning of Tape 3, Side 1]

MW: We're talking about the *Arkansas Democrat*. You were there during the transition when the Hussmans first bought it. Walter S. Hussman, Jr., I guess, was the publisher—still is. But you left before the “newspaper war” started getting heated up.

JB: Absolutely. I never knew of—I mean, it was basically just a rebuilding effort and Mr. Hussman, I think—he probably had a plan all along, but he realized it was going to take some time just to sort of pull things together—bringing in the computers and going from hot type to electronic.

MW: How did you—when you started writing, there were no computers. You would type your material out on just a regular typewriter.

JB: Type it on a typewriter and turn it in.

MW: Did you ever—at one point, when I was there, we got these scanner things and you would—we all had to get IBM Selectrics [electric typewriters] so it would be the exact same typeface, and you would feed your actual typewritten sheet of paper which would read it and put it into a computer. Did you do that?

JB: Yes, I did.

MW: Okay, so you were there when it switched over to that.

JB: Yes, and although I think one of the things—my memory may fail me on this—but I think I already had an IBM Selectric. [Laughs]

MW: You were the princess.

JB: I was the princess, that's right.

MW: You were the *prima donna*.

JB: The *prima donna*. But I remember thinking it was peculiar. And, of course, nobody knew. One of the great things about having worked in newspapers, and I'm sure you will agree with this, is that you had to learn to write on typewriters, and it was so much trouble to erase or to fix something that was screwed up. So [we] got to be pretty good at typing really fast in first draft, and now there's computers, and we're probably the best people in the world on computers because we . . .

MW: [Laughs]

JB: . . . we [laughs] could buzz through stuff on a keyboard. But I think he [Hussman] was in a building period, and when I left—shortly after I left—and I don't know if it was a week, or a month, or a year, but in fairly short order, Jerry

McConnell went to Oklahoma to work. And Bob Starr came in as managing editor.

MW: John Robert Starr.

JB: John Robert Starr. He had been at the . . .

MW: Associated Press.

JB: Associated Press for a million years, and came to work over there. Because I was working for Clinton, and Clinton was such a media magnet, I had a lot of dealings with newspaper people—I was the press person—fairly quickly. The attorney general's office didn't have an official press person when Jim Guy Tucker was there, but it—the job sort of made itself because Clinton was getting a lot of media coverage—not just local, but national—from the very beginning, and it really wasn't something that he had to generate. It sort of happened on its own. So, I had to start dealing with Bob Starr, and that was interesting. You know, he must have—he deserves a lot of credit, I guess—because he created the newspaper war, fought it, and somehow managed to prevail—that and the economics of the situation. I believe he really liked me, which was very—my very good fortune since I had to work with him. But he was very difficult to deal with—very scary. I remember one conversation when he called me [at] the governor's office, and—middle of the day—and said that he had reports of criminal activity by Governor Clinton. And he—if I couldn't—if I didn't tell him something right that minute to refute it in a convincing manner—that he was going to run with it. It was really pretty close to deadline, as I recall. And I said—because we were up there until all hours working—I just sort of held my

breath and punted and said, “Have you ever met anybody that you thought was more politically ambitious than Bill Clinton?” Of course, he said, “No,” and it was a—it was in sort of an angry tone, even though I knew he wasn’t angry at me, but it was frightening. And he—I said, “Well, can you imagine he would do anything to risk his political future? Anything, anything?” And he said, “No.” Then I said, “Then why would you believe this story?” And there was this sort of pause on the other end of the line, and he said, “That’s the only thing that you could’ve said that would convince me to kill this story.” Then he hung up the phone on me. And I don’t have any idea if he was just having a little fun, or if he was really serious, because the subject never came up again. But there were episodes like that. I’ll bet I spent an average of an hour and a half a day on the phone with him.

MW: An hour and a half a day with Starr.

JB: Yes, just to keep him on an even keel.

MW: Well, he pretty much hated Clinton, didn’t he?

JB: He didn’t start out hating him, but he always seemed to have it in for him. It was more of an edgy thing. I was there for the first year of his governorship, and, of course, I had talked to him some during the two years in the attorney general’s office—less so. But it just sort of—the relationship just sort of built up, built up. And when Maggie was born—the child that I had when I left the governor’s office—he came to my house and brought me a baby gift. You know, we had a—in his mind, I think—a cordial relationship. I mean, I don’t imagine he had that

kind of—I can't imagine that he went around delivering baby gifts [laughs] to people very often, and so I . . .

MW: Shocks the heck out of me.

JB: Yes, so I do think that he thought we had a kind of cordial relationship, but I found it very nerve-racking because he had so much power—at least from my perspective, in what I was doing—and he came across as sort of a loose cannon. You just never knew when he was going to lower the hammer, and I always felt like I kind of held it off.

MW: He would create these vendettas against people in his column. And he—again, he worked for somebody who bought ink by the barrel, and he would just go after people.

JB: I confess—one of the things I will tell you is that my recollection is that he didn't—he might have had a column—but I don't remember. I remember him being more a managing editor at the time. I don't remember the column popping up at the very—when got he first got there. It might have, but I will tell you that I never—when I left Clinton's employ—I never read him again until I went to work for Ray Thornton. And that was—I left Clinton's office in 1979, at the end of the year, and didn't go back to work for Ray Thornton until 1989. So there was a ten year period that I didn't read anything he wrote because it made me too nervous. I was [laughs] in post-traumatic shock.

MW: Yes.

JB: [Laughs] Because he could be very malignant, although he never directed it at me.

MW: You have an interesting perspective because you worked for both newspapers . . .

JB: Then went to work for the . . .

MW: . . . then you went to work for . . .

JB: I became a “Flack.”

MW: Well, that’s not what I was going to say. What I was going to say was you became a press-person. Your job was to deal with press for Bill Clinton for three years. Bill Clinton was a rising star, even in those days, of the national political scene, so you dealt not just with the *Gazette* and the *Democrat*, but all the little newspapers around the state, and also [the] national press. What was your perspective on the two newspapers in those days—the *Gazette* and the *Democrat*—in your dealings with them? You just discussed it with Starr, but generally speaking.

JB: I really thought that—and, of course, part of this has to do with the *Gazette* changing so much from the time I had been there, and I was there when it was sort of the Golden Days, and it was going through—I mean, I loved Bob Douglas, so, I thought his work was always good and pure.

MW: He was?

JB: He was the Managing Editor at the *Gazette*. I just thought that the *Gazette* had lost its quest for accuracy, perfection, [and] thoroughness. It was—they were—and perhaps rightly so—I mean, everything’s changed; we even have reality TV now—but it certainly didn’t fall under the standards that were in place when I was there. Consequently, I thought it was a lesser product than it had been. I could have been wrong—it could have—that could have just been my opinion.

MW: You're talking about things like doing more "featury" stuff . . . ?

JB: And Omnibus stuff . . .

MW: . . . and they created the Omnibus section, and . . .

JB: . . . and they seemed to be more inclined to sort of pander to the less intellectual side. Rather than setting the standard and hoping the readers would live up to it, they lowered the standard so that more people would read, or at least I think that's a possible way to look at it. I really didn't see much difference in the two. It was important to me that Governor Clinton got good coverage in both newspapers as much as possible. And he did pretty well for the—you know, we had the speeding incident, but I was out of state.

MW: In other words, the PR [public relations] would have been handled better, possibly, had you been there.

JB: Actually, I screamed at somebody just before he went out and lost his temper. I said, "You need to get him in his office." It's like, "Listen, if you want to scream at somebody, scream at me!" I said, "He's going to go out in that conference room!" I really did. I was in Santa Fe [New Mexico], and I was on the phone.

MW: I don't really recall the speeding incident.

JB: He—a newspaper photographer—he went from one speaking engagement to another . . .

MW: Clinton did?

JB: Yes. It was here in Little Rock, and a newspaper photographer happened to be behind him and clocked him going like—he was driving one car, and the trooper

was driving in front of him. He was driving his own car, and they clocked him at, I don't know, eighty-five or ninety miles an hour on the freeway. [Laughs]

MW: This must have been before he got his reputation for being an hour late to everything. [Laughter] He must have still cared.

JB: No, actually, his story was—and I had no reason to doubt him—that the trooper knew where they were going, and he didn't. The trooper was going fast, so he went fast . . .

MW: Just to keep up?

JB: Just to keep up; however, he didn't add, "Actually, I always go fast, but in this particular instance that's the reason I was going fast." [Laughs]

MW: So you feel that, had you been in town for that . . .

JB: No. I don't know. I can't say that.

MW: . . . you could have handled the repercussions better?

JB: I was willing—having grown up in a house with a navy guy—a naval officer as my father—it didn't perturb me much for someone to yell and scream and stomp around the room. So if he had wanted to do that before he went out—composed himself, and went out—it never bothered me because he certainly—I knew he certainly never was going to act—it wasn't material, it was just a venting process.

MW: You mean—I'm still confused here. He went out and, like, screamed in front of the press?

JB: Yes, he did.

MW: Which made it probably worse than this . . .?

JB: Way worse. Oh, it was the second day story that killed it; the first day story was just “Bill Clinton Went Fast.”

MW: Yes.

JB: The second day story was “Bill Clinton Yelled at People in the Pressroom.”

[Laughs]

MW: Yes.

JB: But, you know, it was just a . . .

MW: But again, when you were Bill Clinton’s press secretary, you didn’t see material differences in the way that you were covered—the reporters . . .?

JB: No. It was really starting to sort of even out. There were some really good reporters at both newspapers, and some really sorry, sloppy reporters. I always liked category B better, from my perspective, because they were easier to . . .

MW: Manipulate?

JB: . . . get them to see my way [laughs], to see things my way. I could feed them things, and they would not be so likely to rewrite them or second guess them or ask too many questions.

MW: Well, this has been interesting. Did you have anything else you’d like to talk about [regarding] the *Democrat*, or your time there—or your perspective on the *Democrat*, post your time there? Did we cover everything?

JB: Well, I think that the—I think that the only other thing that I’d like to say is that there’s a lot of complaining that goes on about local newspapers in Arkansas, but if you travel, you realize that we’re pretty well served. I think that by today’s standards, newspapers are just not—they’re not the same creature that they were

forty or fifty years ago. So I think that I feel pretty happy with the newspaper in Little Rock now, the *Democrat-Gazette*, even though I miss the old *Gazette*. But I have looked all over the country, and I haven't found the old *Gazette* anyplace else, either.

MW: Well, Julie, thank you for your time. You've been very enlightening. I'm sure people for generations to come will be enjoying your perspective.

JB: Hanging on my every word.

MW: Or every other word, at least. [Laughter]

[End of Interview]

[Transcribed by Jake Edwards]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]