

Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History  
Special Collections Department  
University of Arkansas Libraries  
365 N. McIlroy Ave.  
Fayetteville, AR 72701  
(479) 575-5330

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## ***Arkansas Democrat Project***

Interview with

John Deering  
Little Rock, Arkansas  
15 August 2007

Interviewer: Jim Bailey

Jim Bailey: Testing, one, two, three, for John Deering interview conducted by Jim Bailey—August 15, 2007, in Little Rock for the *Arkansas Democrat* and *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* project by the [David and Barbara] Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History, Special Collections Department, University of Arkansas Libraries [Fayetteville]. John, do you grant permission for this interview to become part of the *Democrat-Gazette* project?

John Deering: Yes, I do.

JB: Well, let's go back to the beginning. When and where were you born?

JD: I was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, January 15, [19]56.

JB: And what was your father's occupation?

JD: He was a fireman and a city manager for the city of Cammack Village. By the time that I came along and my brother—my mom and dad had us sort of late in life, you might say. They were in their forties by the time my brother came along,

and they were in their mid-forties when I came along. He had been a contractor and a plumber in the 1940s, among a lot of other things. He had moved back up here from Texas with my mom to—so that they could live next door to his in-laws on Longwood Road in Cammack Village or in what is now Cammack Village. It wasn't even an incorporated town in the late 1930s or early 1940s when they moved up here from Texas. And so they lived next door to my grandparents on Longwood Road. My dad's father-in-law, my maternal grandfather, was already involved somewhat in city politics in Cammack, and he sort of got my dad involved in it, too, and it became a lifelong association between my dad and the city of Cammack from that point on. He did a lot of work helping to lay sewer pipe, you know, clear roads, and anything else that needed to be done in the 1940s, and basically helped develop the town. And then in the mid-1950s, when I was about two years old, the city asked him if he would take over as the twenty-four-hour man to man the telephones and go to fires if necessary, and actually live at the fire station. So when I was two, we moved from Ohio Street over to the Cammack fire station. And there was a fairly good-size apartment back behind the fire and police offices there, and I lived there from age two to about age seventeen.

JB: And that's when you moved to Texas?

JD: Yes, we moved to Texas then and I attended Christian Center High School. A lot of my dad's family still lived down there, and so he kind of went into semi-retirement at that point. And so we—for the next few years, we kind of moved back and forth from—from Fort Worth, Texas, back up to Little Rock. And he'd

come back—occasionally, the folks at Cammack would ask him to come back and do some work, so we would move back for several months at a time.

JB: At what point did you get interested in cartooning?

JD: Well, I had always loved to draw, from about the age of three—and used to get in trouble in school for it, as a matter of fact, because I would be drawing when I should be, you know, doing my math or science or whatever. So I was drawing cartoons of—or caricatures of my teachers in junior high, and a friend asked me to do caricatures of the principal, the vice principal, and our science teacher, who was also the homeroom teacher. And I did these cartoon drawings of them and they wound up on the bulletin board in the school office. So I got called to the office one day and went in there and the principal was sitting there laughing—Mr. McGee—he was laughing, and he showed me these drawings, and somebody had made a mimeograph of the drawings that I'd done for this friend of mine and they put them on the bulletin board. And so I think that was the point where I thought I might have a career in this. Then . . .

JB: Excuse me. Junior high was still in Little Rock, right?

JD: Yes, that was still in Little Rock. That was Forest Heights Junior High. That would have been about 1970—1969, 1970.

JB: Well, where did you go to college?

JD: I came back here and went to college at UALR [University of Arkansas at Little Rock].

JB: And what were the circumstances when you originally joined the *Arkansas Democrat*?

JD: Well, I left college to work, you know, various jobs, and I tried freelancing, which means I was starving, basically. And while I was taking some drawing and painting classes at UALR, a job came open at the *Democrat* in the advertising department doing layout and paste-up. And I applied for that job and got it, and the fellow that hired me was Freddie Campbell, Jr.

JB: I knew Fred.

JD: Yes, Fred Campbell, Sr.—of course, he was the old-school guy that worked back in paste-up and he . . .

JB: Yes, in those days we went to the same church they did.

JD: Oh, okay. Yes, they were good folks. And Fred, I guess, back in the old days—he had been a Linotype operator, I imagine.

JB: Yes, apparently—an old-time back shop man.

JD: Yes. Well, he was an interesting guy and he was very no-nonsense. I was always a little bit intimidated by him, but you know, his son was very affable and just kind of an easy-going guy. He hired me to do paste-up. I worked in paste-up for only three months because while I was in paste-up, I saw some of the cartoon originals that were being done by Jon Kennedy and Deb Polston. Jon Kennedy, was, of course, the *Democrat's* editorial cartoonist since the 1940s, and Deb Polston was the op-ed [opinions and editorials] page cartoonist, and he did a feature called “What’s Your Line?” And he also did illustrations for features like “Action and Answers” and illustrated columnists’ pieces with caricatures. And so anyway, I saw these originals laying in the out basket that had been photographed back in the production room—composing department. And I was fascinated by

them because I'd never seen any cartoon art in original form that was that polished and professional. And this would've been in 1981 or probably . . .

JB: It was about 1981 when you joined up here?

JD: Yes, it was—it was March of 1981, and I remember it because some of the ads that we were putting together said, “Saving of the green”—things like that. It was St.-Patrick’s-Day-targeted ads. So it would’ve been around a week before St. Patrick’s Day, 1981, that I came to work here. I went to the second floor to talk to Mr. Kennedy and Deb Polston, and told them I was interested in cartooning and in illustration, and Mr. Kennedy asked me to put together a portfolio of work and bring it back up and show it to him because, as it turned out, one of the other cartoonists on staff, Bruce Plant, was getting ready to leave. And he was going to leave the staff and they were looking to expand the art department staff and at least maintain the folks they had and possibly expand it beyond that. So I put together some samples—showed them to Mr. Kennedy and he said he’d think about it. And then I came back up one afternoon just to talk to him about my work, and he was on the horns of a dilemma that afternoon because he was trying to come up with a cartoon about Bill Beaumont, who was the [Pulaski] County Judge at the time.

JB: Feuding with [Pulaski County] Sheriff Tommy Robinson.

JD: Yes. I had drawn a sample editorial cartoon of Bill Beaumont as a cavalry officer at Custer’s Last Stand, and he’s behind a horse shot full of arrows. And Jon Kennedy really liked the idea and it—I guess whatever cartoonist’s block he was having that afternoon, he asked if he could sort of appropriate that idea, and he

did. And what it wound up to be, actually, was Bill Beaumont lying in a back alley in downtown Little Rock being inundated by water from drainage pipes and—and, you know, gutters and things like that—downspouts. And all of these different spouts of water were labeled different problems that he was having with county government and with Tommy Robinson and probably budgetary shortfalls. So I think that made Mr. Kennedy more interested in my potential on the staff, and so he hired me the very next day. And he came down to where I was doing some paste-up, and I had just had an accident because the Exacto knife that I was pasting up an advertisement with rolled off the table and fell and landed right into my knee. And I was limping to the bathroom to pull it out. And Kennedy came up and, you know, asked me if I was okay, and I said, “Yeah.” And he said, “Well, you’ll be happy to hear—it’s some good news.” He said, “I’ve decided to hire you for the art department.” And so that made the knee sting a little bit less.

JB: [Laughs]

JD: Well—so that would’ve been July of 1981. And . . .

JB: Well—excuse me—John Robert Starr was already the managing editor at that point and the paper had been acquired by WEHCO Media—the Hussman family .

. .

JD: Yes.

JB: . . . I think in 1974—somewhere along there. Okay, go ahead. I’m sorry.

JD: Well, I guess at the time that WEHCO had acquired the paper, I would’ve been living in Fort Worth, and so that particular time period is kind of lost on me. I wasn’t that aware of what was going on, but I did know that when I came back to

Little Rock—I had always read both papers. Even as a kid I, you know, would read—spread out the Sunday comics from both papers read them, you know, all morning. And so I did notice a change in the *Democrat* which, at that time, would've been the evening paper. And I noticed that the “bulldog” [early] edition was printed on green paper and I was kind of interested in the fact that the paper seemed to be changing—getting a little bit more aggressive in its news coverage. And so I was vaguely aware of something going on at the paper at that time. But when I came up to work in the art department, I was introduced around, and I met John Robert Starr and [then-Associate Editor] Meredith Oakley. And they were the first two people that I was introduced to and I began being assigned maps and charts and illustrations—that kind of thing.

JB: At what point did Mr. Kennedy retire as the editorial cartoonist?

JD: He retired in 1988. And so I worked as a staff cartoonist and illustrator from 1981 to 1988, and only a couple of months after I went to work for the art department, I started doing op-ed page cartoons—editorial cartoons for Meredith Oakley's Voices page. And in 1983, after I'd been doing cartoons for a couple years, I entered the Arkansas Press Association newspaper contest and won first place in editorial cartooning for that. And so I think that that really sort of got John Starr's attention, and he was impressed by that. And he started asking me to illustrate some of his columns on a regular basis. Deb Polston had left to go to work for *Playboy* magazine. He had a really lucrative contract with them and was drawing a lot of cartoons—gag cartoons for *Playboy*. So he'd left. He had been doing the illustrations for Starr's column, and so I took over that duty.

JB: Well, at what point did Vic Harville fit into the cartoonists' mix?

JD: Vic came in I think about 1990—maybe as early as 1989 or 1990. And he came up from Texarkana. He had lived in Arlington, Texas, about the same time that I was living in Fort Worth. And he was working for the Global Group doing engineering schematics and technical illustrations. He left that job because of just the high pressure and the demanding nature and the artistically unrewarding nature of that type of job because he loved to draw cartoons. And so he got a job with the *Texarkana Gazette*, and they were impressed with the quality of his work. So he came up in I guess 1989 or 1990.

JB: Did you ever get acquainted to any extent with [*Arkansas Gazette* cartoonist] George Fisher?

JD: Oh, yes. In fact, I went over and talked to George a number of times and asked him for advice about my own work. And George became a good friend and was really a mentor, also, as was Mr. Kennedy. You know, I think I learned various different aspects of the trade from both of them because they had very different personalities.

JB: Yes.

JD: They were both very quiet and reserved individuals, but I think George was a little bit more of a showman. And, you know, he was involved in the Rackensack Society—one of the founders of it—and, by nature, was more of a showman than Mr. Kennedy. [Editors Note: Rackensack Society members performed folk music and kept up Arkansas folk traditions by passing down folklore and music to audiences]



JB: Yes, yes.

JD: On the other hand, Jon Kennedy seemed to be very knowledgeable in different ways than George was about the personalities of the politicians that he drew. And a bit of showmanship on Kennedy's part—he did a really good, dead-on impersonation of [Arkansas U. S. Senator J. William] Fulbright.

JB: [Laughs] I can imagine he could, yes.

JD: Yes.

JB: So when did you start the strip now called *Strange Brew*, originally called *Too Much Coffee*?

JD: That came about in 1995, and originally it was called *Too Much Coffee*. And I drew that just for the *Democrat-Gazette* at first for almost two years. And I decided after that that, you know, I was going to retire that and really concentrate more in my spare time on my painting and sculpture. And so I laid off of that for a couple of years. Well, in 1997, I was at the National Press Foundation Berryman Awards dinner. And I'd won the [Clifford K. and James T.] Berryman Award in November of 1997 for editorial cartooning. A lot of the cartoons were focusing on the presidential race just prior to that. And I met Rick Newcombe at the dinner, who was the president of Creators Syndicate and still is. And he saw my political cartoons and asked me to send him some samples. And a couple of weeks went by after I'd gotten back here to Little Rock. I got a call on the phone and he said, "Hey, I really want to see your work. I'm really serious. I'm thinking about, you know, syndicating your cartoons if you're interested." And so I sent him a sample pack. And only a couple of days later, Creators Syndicate

called and offered me a syndication contract. And so I became syndicated in, I believe, the fall of 1998, and only a few months after that, I got the idea of pulling out all these *Too Much Coffee* samples that I had back in a file cabinet and sent those to Creators and said, “Do you think you’d be interested in syndicating a single-panel cartoon feature as well?” And they looked it over and I got a call back from them, and they said, yes, that they’d like to syndicate that. So that’s been in syndication since 1998.

JB: Well, I thought it was a pretty funny story, and I’d like for you to tell it, about the *Too Much Coffee Man*.

JD: *Too Much Coffee Man* is the reason that *Strange Brew* is not called *Too Much Coffee*. And what happened was there was this fellow named Shannon Wheeler, and he was living in Austin, Texas, at the time, and he was doing a cartoon feature called *Too Much Coffee Man*.

JB: *Too Much Coffee Man* was like an offbeat sort of superhero or something.

JD: Yes, and with a little coffee cup on his head . . .

JB: [Laughs]

JD: . . . that was always sort of teetering, and he always looked very—kind of nervous and like he’d had too much coffee. Well, when the first press kits for *Too Much Coffee* came out—what a syndicate does when they’re going to distribute a feature is they’ll put together a slick folder that has some art on the cover and some samples of daily and Sunday strips inside in a sleeve that editors of newspapers that these things are mailed to can just pull out and examine and decide if they want to buy the feature. Well, Shannon Wheeler saw this and he

called Creators Syndicate and said that he was concerned and he felt like that his copyright was being infringed upon, and I think that, you know, they examined the issue and they didn't feel like that—they felt that it was two very separate features. But he felt like it was a threat to his copyright and might cause confusion between the two features, and so when he was dissatisfied—left dissatisfied with Creators Syndicate's response, he had his attorneys contact me directly.

JB: Yes.

JD: And that's when I became aware of *Too Much Coffee Man*. I, of course, brought my own attorneys into it and our various attorneys had a good time with all these things. And the upshot or the final result was *Too Much Coffee* is now *Strange Brew*.

JB: Yes. Well, one of my favorite *Strange Brews*, and actually, it was called *Too Much Coffee* at that time—you had a lunch counter or little diner or something.

JD: Yes.

JB: And there was a big, prominent sign on the wall that said, "No shirt, no shoes, no service." And there was a guy standing at the counter. He had on a shirt and he had on a pair of shoes, but he had on nothing else—no pants or anything.

JD: No pants.

JB: And the bemused counter person was saying, "Looks like you got us on a technicality."

JD: A technicality. [Laughter]

JB: Which, to me, that particular cartoon is kind of the enabling spirit of *Strange*

*Brew*.

JD: Yes, if it has any sort of consistent thread or connecting theme it is that I try to sort of examine the potential for absurdities in language and double-speak, double-entendres. And so the end result is, you know, people that like *Strange Brew* have picked up on that and, unfortunately, I sometimes, from very well-meaning friends and colleagues, get some suggestions for *Strange Brew* that are usually puns.

JB: Yes.

JD: I try to stay away from that.

JB: Well, I think people that like *Strange Brew* appreciate the aspect of jumping on absurdities, and people that don't do that just flat out don't understand it.

[Laughs]

JD: Yes. Some of them get pretty surreal. The little press catalog that *Editor and Publisher* [magazine] put out this year ran sections from all the different syndicates that have samples of the features that the syndicates offer. And this year the little color sample they ran of *Strange Brew* shows one that I actually like, and it was a fellow that was the same character that had no pants on, but this time he's standing out in a big wasteland or a desert and there's nothing around for miles. But in front of him are two glass doors side by side that you can actually see through, but on each one is a big glass panel. He's standing in front of one that has a little sign on it that says, "Use other door."

JB: [Laughs] Well, at what point did you start cranking up *Zack Hill*?

JD: That would've been in 2003. And I decided that—I had always thought that I

would never want to do a regular conventional comic strip with continuing characters because the freedom that *Strange Brew* affords me is that I can sort of reinvent the wheel every day—come up with a totally different theme or different scenario. I always thought that doing a continuing feature or comic strip with regular characters would be too confining, but I got the bug. I decided I wanted to try that because I'd never tackled anything like that. And so *Zack Hill* is sort of vaguely autobiographical. It's similar to the way that I was raised as a kid because Zack is in a single-parent household and he's living in the midst of all these boarders in the house. His mom, you know, rents rooms to boarders to make ends meet, and so that's kind of similar in a way to my experience in living behind the Cammack Village firehouse because we had all these small-town politicians, like council members, the mayor, policemen, and residents of Cammack coming through. It was just sort of like Grand Central Station. And I think today that's why people are surprised that I can draw in my office with the door wide open and people coming in and looking over my shoulder. So that's similar to Zack's experience in the comic strip. He's got all these boarders that sort of—some of them serve as surrogate parents.

JB: Yes. Well, when did you take up painting seriously?

JD: Well, I did that all along. At the same time that I was cartooning, I was actually a fine arts major in college, and probably wound up taking about eight units of drawing from Fred Shepherd there at UALR, and took a number of painting classes and some design classes from Rocky Sapp there in the late 1970s, early 1980s. So I've always loved to paint, and that's why I wanted to do the

Perspective [section] color illustrations that run on Sunday[s]. Illustration is really my first love. I've always loved to do paintings that are based on objective realism and that also have a narrative quality.

JB: Well, you've had some of your own shows, haven't you?

JD: Yes, I've had shows at Cantrell Gallery here in Little Rock and some other galleries around the state.

JB: And what about the sculpturing part of it?

JD: Well, the sculpture—the public art pieces that I've done, I consider those to be, in a way, offshoots of my editorial cartooning because a lot of them deal with social issues or American historical themes. I've done three monuments that are at the state Capitol now, starting with the Vietnam [War] veterans' memorial in 1987. And so I think that a war memorial, by nature of its approach, can actually make a political statement, of course. And in 2000, I did the Medal of Honor monument and was asked to design that entire monument as opposed to just doing the centerpiece sculpture. And then in 2005, I did the Little Rock Nine memorial. [Editor's Note: The sculpture is titled "Testament," the Civil Rights Memorial Sculpture honoring the nine African American students who integrated Little Rock Central High School in 1957] All these things are, of course, public monuments, so they're going to be dealing with historical themes and I think that as an editorial cartoonist, one thing you really have to be is fascinated by American history.

JB: That's right. Well, you did the Father Tribou thing at Catholic . . .

JD: Yes.

JB: [Little Rock] Catholic High [School] there.

JD: Yes.

JB: Tell them briefly who Father Tribou was and what the situation was there.

JD: Well, Father Tribou was the priest that was principal of Catholic High.

JB: John, as our tape was winding down on the other side, we were talking about the Father George Tribou memorial or display or statue. Would you explain what it looked like or what it looks like?

JD: It's a life-size statue of Father Tribou and a freshman student. And so he's welcoming the student to the school, and it was an interesting sort of a theme because Father Tribou was someone whose reputation preceded him, and he was such an able leader of that school and such a larger-than-life figure. But also he could be very authoritarian. I think he was sort of a surrogate father figure, but he was a little bit intimidating to some of the kids at times. I mean, he was someone that—that was legendary to the students that attended there when he was principal. I think every single one of them would have a Father Tribou story—and also a very beloved figure. And I think that what his life was all about was trying to set boys or set young men on the path in life, and basically teach them how to be young men and prepare them for life and going down the right road. And so I've got Father Tribou with one hand sort of behind his back and he's holding his trademark cigar. And he's welcoming his . . .

JB: And he—excuse me—he was possibly the last person in the country who was able to smoke cigars in a [laughs]—in a school office.

JD: In a school setting, yes. [Laughs] And, you know, it's interesting how things like

that work out because that was so much a part of his persona that everybody just said, “Well, that’s just Father Tribou.” I believe, though, that in the last couple of years of his life, if I’m not mistaken, he gave up smoking cigars. And I may be mistaken about that, but I could swear that I’d heard that that was the case. The student in the sculpture is carrying a backpack and he’s looking up at Father Tribou with kind of a mix of the type of excitement and apprehension that any freshman student would have on his first day of school anywhere.

JB: Yes.

JD: But more so, meeting this larger-than-life figure. And Father Tribou is, for his part, looking on very, you know, kindly and welcoming the student to the school.

JB: How did the Little Rock Central display come about?

JD: That was actually started by my own initiative. And the way that that happened was in 1997 at the fortieth anniversary of the 1957 crisis, I got the idea that it would be a really good idea to honor the Nine with some type of public art or public display or monument because I had never seen anything—to my knowledge, I’d never seen anything like that—any type of artistic depiction of the Nine. And with all of the photographs that [*Arkansas Democrat* photographer] Will Counts had taken in the 1950s, I’d never seen any paintings or illustrations or anything of that nature. I know now that there were some that were done for the covers of paperback book versions of some of the books that a couple of the Nine did, like Melba Pattillo Beals’s *Warriors Don’t Cry* and some other things. But those were very limited in scope as far as what they depicted. So with the interest in history that I have, I think just the natural progression of fleshing out a



concept seemed like the way to go to show the Nine as a group as they looked in 1957. And, again, I'd never seen anything like that done. And from there, the concept was refined a little bit to show them walking as if they were walking into or filing into the school, possibly past an unseen crowd. And that's left to your imagination, but your imagination is sort of pointed in that direction because of the way that the figures in the monument are positioned. They're looking—they're not all looking straight ahead. One or two of them are, but most of them are glancing around apprehensively or they have sort of a mix—a mixture of . . .

JB: Yes.

JD: . . . reactions or emotions on their faces. Terrence Roberts, who's positioned right next to Elizabeth Eckford, is looking with a slightly focused head almost in amusement at whatever it is that he is looking at. In the very back, Ernest Green is sort of prompting Gloria [Ray] Karlmark on to hurry along, and he's looking back over his shoulder, possibly out of concern at whatever it is that's behind them. So the part of the concept that became an important part of the monument was to actually show them like they are filing into school, and they're all carrying schoolbooks.

JB: Yes. Well, of your *Democrat-Gazette* editorial cartoons, just off the top of your head, can you come up with one that public resentment to it just floored you? And maybe can you come up with another that positive public reaction to it surprised you?

JD: Yes, I think there is one that the reaction to it did not surprise me that much, and that was a cartoon that I drew that referenced the Susan Smith murders, where she

had driven a car into the lake and drowned her kids [two boys, Alex and Michael Smith].

JB: In South Carolina.

JD: In South Carolina. I drew a car being pulled out of a lake that had a bumper sticker on it that said “pro-choice.” And I think, using the tools that a cartoonist has at his or her disposal, that would be sort of like you might say using the nuclear option. And although I got some very, very heated responses—one of our own staff here who had recently moved here from California, who was liberal and obviously on the other side of that issue, said that he wished that there was somebody on his side of the issue drawing cartoons that were that effective at looking at the other side of the issue. I’ve quite frankly gone back and forth on that issue, and what it has led to is that I feel like that the only fair and consistent position that you can take is that if you are going to be pro-life, then you also need to be anti-death penalty. And part of that comes from my own faith as a Catholic. The response to that, again, was not that surprising. The response that I got to a cartoon that did catch me off guard a little bit was one that I drew shortly after Paul Greenberg took over as the editorial page editor, and that would’ve been in 1990. And that was when President [George Herbert Walker] Bush—the first President Bush—met with a group of MIA [missing-in-action soldiers] families from [the] Vietnam [War]. They were very frustrated with the lack of progress or the apparent lack of progress in being able to find or locate any of their missing from the Vietnam War—the MIAs. And so they got very vocal in a meeting with President Bush, and that was the meeting where he shouted at them to sit down

and shut up. And, you know, readers sometimes complain to cartoonists—me included. But we need to respect the office of the president. Whether we respect that president that's seated or not, we need to respect the office. In that case, I felt like that was a case where a president wasn't acting very presidential. And, sure, the people in that meeting needed to treat President Bush with respect. At the same time, he needed to remember that, sure, he's president, but that doesn't mean that he's got the right or the authority to tell members of missing-in-action families that they should shut up, because they were there to voice their frustration.

JB: That's been a while that the issue had bothered them. That had been several years. [Laughs]

JD: I think that at the time that that was going on, there actually had been a lot of—there had been a lot of mention in the news—in the national news about the MIA issue. And, in fact, about that same time, that was when some sort of an SOS [save our souls; a signal of distress] message was found in a rice paddy in Vietnam from aerial photography. It was discounted by the military authorities. And Vic Harville drew a very good cartoon about that that showed a Pentagon general pointing at this aerial photograph and saying—you know, and in the cartoon, the message in the rice paddy says, “American MIA. SOS. Please send help.” And the general was saying, “Well, this is just a natural formation in this rice paddy.”

JB: [Laughs]

JD: All of that is a backdrop to this meeting that these families had with the first

President Bush. And as a result, I drew a cartoon that showed President Bush pointing his finger at the ghosts of some MIAs, and saying, “Sit down and shut up.” And the response to that was just—it was very surprising to me because a lot of people didn’t take it very well. They were very angry that I showed President Bush in that light. So that caught me off guard, I think.

JB: I know labels have gotten to mean virtually nothing, but do you consider yourself basically conservative to moderate or moderate to liberal or what?

JD: I’d say it would have to be moderate to liberal. And I know that it’s not real—you know, it’s not considered real politick to label yourself liberal in this day and age, but that’s my heritage. That’s the way I was raised, and my dad was a Southern Democrat and, of course, you know, that basically meant that he identified very much with the blue-collar working man because that’s who he was. And it’s kind of ironic that I would do a monument for the Little Rock Nine when both my mom and dad were big [then-Arkansas Governor] Orval Faubus supporters.

JB: Yes.

JD: But as Southern Democrats, you’ve got to look at it in the context of the times—not only those times, but the times they were raised in.

JB: Well, the thing that has struck me the last twenty years or so—the country has seemed to get so polarized that if you ask somebody, “What’s your opinion about gun control?” let’s say. Well, when he gave you—he or she—gave you their opinions about gun control, you could almost unerringly figure what their positions would be on eight or nine or ten other issues.

JD: Yes.

JB: Or abortion or anything.

JD: Well, I pride myself on not being that predictable because—and I've said this to groups that I've spoken to and many other times—that if you fall in line too predictably with one rigid ideology or another, I think you lose your effectiveness as a spokesman. And I think that what you have to do—and in my case, what I try to do is look objectively at each issue on its own merits. You know, I have sort of modified or changed my views a bit on gun control in the last few years, just like I have on the right-to-life issue and on the death penalty issue. And I think that if you go through your entire life without ever being surprised by anything or changing your opinion on anything, I think you haven't learned anything.

JB: Well, the cartoonists that I've enjoyed the most over the years are—and not only editorial cartoonists, but also editorial writers—you check their cartoons regularly or you read their editorials regularly, and you can see that they like this certain incumbent president . . .

JD: Or don't. [Laughs]

JB: . . . or dislike him. [Editor's Note: Reference to then-President George W. Bush] But then, on the other hand, when the good editorial cartoonists and the good editorial writers see that president they clearly favor in general terms really botching something up, they nail him for it.

JD: Sure. And you know what—when that happens and you open the paper in the morning and see that, it's like a breath of fresh air—it really is, because you

realize that this spokesman or commentator whose work you've been following is not just a talking head, but is actually responding, just like you are . . .

JB: He's—he's . . .

JD: . . . to events as they happen.

JB: He's not like either Fox News or [MSNBC's] Keith Olbermann. [Laughter]

JD: Extremes on both sides, yes. Yes, you know, along these same lines of thought, one thing that I find kind of disturbing—I guess this is a pretty long-term trend, really, in electronic media and also in quite a bit of the print media is if you have somebody that you would label a pundit or a talking head or an “opinionator” that reaches sort of a franchise level of distribution or maybe descends to a franchise level, where their work is very widely distributed, I think that—I'm thinking of people like Ann Coulter and Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity—people like that—it's almost like they become a brand, and so therefore, they're like McDonald's, say. And this is just kind of a pet theory that I have. Instead of actually being objective and commenting on the news as it happens from an objective standpoint—in other words, if the president messes up, you point out that he messed up. What they do is they try to develop a consistent brand of opinion—and I guess Rush Limbaugh would fall in this category, too.

JB: He's almost the preceptor of it.

JD: He'd make a big splash. Yes, he'd be the preceptor of it. They become a brand so that you comfortably know when you walk into this McDonald's of political opinion, you're not going to get any surprises. You know exactly what they're going to say, essentially. You tune in to Rush Limbaugh to get validation,

basically. You don't tune in to get any surprises. And you know what he's going to say about the speech that Hillary Clinton made that day or what [Democratic Senate Majority Leader] Harry Reid said or . . .

JB: Yes, that's right. They're just like a football game and the fans on the Texas Longhorns side—they see it only one way. And over there on the other side—things on the Arkansas [Razorbacks] side—they're altogether different. And it doesn't matter whether the game official on the field [laughs] called it right or not.

JD: You just made me think of something that happened when I was in junior high. I was in the band and I was watching the game. It was almost the end of the game. It was the last couple of minutes of the fourth quarter. And we were getting beaten really, really bad. I mean, we were going to come away smeared that afternoon, and it was very clear. But our cheerleaders were down on our side of the field saying, "We're going to whop them up the side of the head." Well, we weren't, either.

JB: [Laughs]

JD: But they were doing their job being the cheerleaders.

JB: Right. That's right. It's just blinders on.

JD: Yes. And I—you know, I guess that people that do this in the media, they serve some sort of function. I guess it's mainly just to reassure people about their own world views, but I'm not sure how valuable a function that is because I think we've—as a people, I think we've become very uncurious about the world around us.

JB: Yes, I think you're right. I think you're right. Well, okay, you've got two syndicated comic strips. Some of your editorial cartoons in addition to appearing in the *Democrat-Gazette* also appear in *USA Today*.

JD: Yes.

JB: *Newsweek*.

JD: Yes.

JB: You've got your painting. You've got your sculpting. Do you ever sleep?

JD: No. [Laughter] That's why I'm drinking this coffee. No, actually, what I've done in the last—just in the last four or five months is—if I seem more rested it's because I am—I used to pull all-nighters as a matter of course, on a regular basis. I'd do, like, one or two all-night sessions a week. And I discovered that—well, if I'm ever asked to do a sleep study, I can already tell them what the results are of sleep deprivation. It gets dangerous because you lose your coordination.

JB: Yes, I'm sure it does.

JD: And so it's not a good thing. So what I've tried to do is just improve my work habits and, as the cliché goes, work smarter. But the main reason that I was working late at night was because of the interruptions I get. I should consider myself fortunate because I do get a lot of phone calls during the day from people that want to respond to cartoons or actually people who want to lobby me for one thing or another and take me to lunch, and that, you know, is very time-consuming. But if you open yourself up to that kind of dialogue with people—while it's time-consuming—it can be enlightening. You can learn some things about your community. So what I now do is a lot of the editorial cartoons that I



do—I'm still occasionally impeded by daily interruptions, and so I just draw my cartoon very, very early in the morning.

JB: Well, I've liked quite a few of them, but the only one I asked for and you gave the original to me was the vision of John Lee Hooker, the blues singer, and Carroll O'Connor, who was the bombastic Archie Bunker . . .

JD: Right.

JB: They died within probably twenty-four hours of each other, and you visualized them hitting Heaven's gates at the same time and . . .

JD: Yes.

JB: And Carroll O'Connor as Archie was saying, "Oh, gee!" [Laughs]

JD: "Oh, gee!" [Laughs] Do you mind if I over-analyze something for a second?

JB: Help yourself.

JD: Well, when you follow the news really closely every day like we all do, and you basically stay tuned in all the time, and you're aware of everything that's happening in this news cycle or that news cycle, you notice some interesting things. For instance, a lot of times—not always, but a lot of times—prominent people do tend to die in twos and threes. And so when that happens, I think that cartoonists try to kind of make some sort of order or sense of what's going on out there in the ether by showing sort of—or pointing out some sort of irony or some sort of comparison or similarity between various people that die. And in the case of John Lee Hooker and Carroll O'Connor, that seemed to be a natural.

JB: Yes, that was a great one.

JD: There've been—there've been some other instances . . .

JB: Actually, the real Carroll O'Connor was a fervent liberal.

JD: He was, yes. And, you know, the media persona, though, was a little more entertaining.

JB: [Laughs]

JD: I always kind of thought of Carroll O'Connor as sort of a poor man's Rod Steiger, you know? He was a . . .

JB: Well, of course, this goes back to when Carroll O'Connor was still alive in good health—if they ever made a movie—a fictionalized movie about the *Democrat/Gazette* war, Carroll O'Connor could've probably won an Academy Award as John Robert Starr.

JD: Oh, my God. Man!

JB: [Laughs]

JD: He absolutely could've. And he wouldn't have needed much makeup or anything.

JB: [Laughs]

JD: I'm not sure who they'd get today but . . .

JB: I don't know.

JD: That would make a heck of a movie. That was an interesting time.

JB: Yes, it was—interesting, turbulent, crazy.

JD: I know we were all pretty much consumed by all of that, and I went down and watched the court proceedings a couple of times and went down and watched as the verdict was read. That was the antitrust suit that the *Gazette* brought against the *Democrat*, and, you know, we were all in fear of what the future would bring and if we would have jobs the next day.

JB: Well, looking back, the *Gazette* was still leading in circulation, advertising revenue, so forth—but all the free papers that the *Democrat* had been throwing . . .

JD: Yes.

JB: Free classifieds and all that sort of stuff. So it would be awfully tough for an attorney to convince a jury that the leading competitor in the market was being wronged somehow by the trailing competitor.

JD: Yes. And, you know, I think in that case, the Pattersons [owners of the *Gazette*] knew probably that their family makeup and their organizational makeup was different in such fundamental ways that—that it was going to really hurt them in the long run. In other words, you know, the cliché was when Gannett came in, they had deep pockets. But . . .

JB: They had stockholders, too. [Laughs]

JD: They had stockholders, too. So there's the depth of your pockets. But there's also your willingness or ability to reach into them. And where Walter Hussman [Jr.] did not have the stockholders to answer to—of course, Gannett did.

JB: Yes.

JD: And it was a really interesting dynamic there.

JB: Yes, it certainly was. I may be not quite correct, but I believe at that time in newspapers—of course, Gannett has TV stations and so forth, which is a different kind of competition, really. But I think that the only competitive situation Gannett was in, was in Little Rock. Because other places either they had the total ownership or they had what they call a joint-operating-agreement with a

competitor.

JD: Yes.

JB: And, bless their hearts, they just weren't ready to come down here and compete in a world they never made.

JD: Yes. You had, you know, just as one kind of anecdotal example—the editors that were imported by Gannett to come down here, and one of the things they did at the *Gazette* was they got rid of the lake—the water tables. I mean, the news of the lakes.

JB: Oh, yes. The “In the News” column that the *Gazette* stripped down the side of the front page and the *Democrat-Gazette* does now—they wanted to dump that. But some cooler head got them to poll their readership, and they found that 97 percent liked it: “Don't do that.”

JD: Yes, and thank goodness.

JB: They wanted to replace it with a little gossip about Debbie Reynolds or something, you know?

JD: Well, did they think that it was too “old school” or something?

JB: I don't know what they thought.

JD: You know, it might've been they looked at those little boxes of type all the way down the side of the page—and one thing that they used to do—I don't think they do it so much anymore, but they—at least in *USA Today*—they really used to underestimate their . . .

[Tape Stopped]

JB: Okay, John, this is another side. I believe we broke off with the last segment—we

were talking about the newspaper war and the antitrust action. And it's my impression that the Patterson family almost immediately started looking for a buyer for the *Gazette*. And, of course, in a matter of a few months they found one with Gannett in, I believe, October of 1986.

JD: Yes.

JB: And when they came down and with their "deep pockets" pronouncements, you say that kind of gave the *Democrat* employees pause for a short time, huh?

JD: It did, and we just really didn't know what to expect. I mean, we really didn't know what to expect. I guess it's probably overstating the case to say that it's like being in a coastal town and you're waiting for a tropical storm to come ashore. You know, you don't know whether it's going to land or not. But we began to get a feel for the way it was going to go several months in, though. You know, like we were saying previously, when Gannett came in they began to make the type of blunders that businesses or organizations do when they really don't know anything about a people or a culture, and they were unaware totally of how important the outdoors are to a lot of Arkansans. The fishing tables—you know, one of the editors who came in wanted to take out the fishing tables. The fishermen, you know, rely on those, but when you have, you know, someone who is an editor or page designer from Ames, Iowa, and you ask him to come down to Little Rock, Arkansas, and gear the publication there toward what you think is new and bright and innovative, you're going to wind up with something that the local readership really doesn't like or find very useful. And so that's what happened, and I think that they just basically began to alienate their readers. And,

worse than that, they sort of fell down on their responsibility as a local publication. Because with the heritage and the history that the *Gazette* had, it became something that longtime *Gazette* readers just really didn't recognize that much.

JB: Well, Bob Douglas, who had been at one point the managing editor of the *Gazette* before he went to Fayetteville and taught journalism [at the University of Arkansas]—he was at Fayetteville already teaching up there long before the war started heating up. And at some point while it was going on, he said, “You know, Walter Hussman understands what the *Arkansas Gazette* was much better than the Gannett people.” [Laughter]

JD: Well, and that's got to be very true because Walter was, you know, from Camden, Arkansas.

JB: He grew up reading the *Gazette*.

JD: And, you know, the publisher of *USA Today*, the head of Gannett [Al Neuharth], came to—kind of grudgingly—well, not even grudgingly—he came to admire Walter Hussman and, you know, printed some op-ed pieces in *USA Today* about what he was doing in Little Rock was very smart. And I think some of that may be been like a backhand at some of his staff or former staff that manned the *Gazette*.

JB: Well, it seemed like every replacement they made—publisher, editors, managing editors, sports editors—the newest one was always worse than the previous.

JD: Yes. And, you know, Starr really liked to bait all the succession of editors that came in, and when a new one came to town, Starr would pick up on whatever

foibles this guy might have, and he'd start writing about it. A couple of them tried to match Starr and go very public. And it just usually didn't pan out because they—again, I think these individuals—they weren't willing to invest the time or the energy that kind of thing takes.

JB: Well, one day—I believe it was a Sunday, probably about six months before the *Gazette* closed—somewhere in that period of time, there was a furious exchange—this was before e-mail [electronic mail]—there was furious exchange of faxes [facsimile transmissions] that day . . .

JD: [Laughs]

JB: . . . between Starr at the *Democrat* and Keith Moyer, who, at that time was the editor—his equivalent at the . . .

JD: The managing editor, yes.

JB: Yes, his equivalent. And these faxes were posted on the bulletin board of the *Gazette*, and each of them [laughs] was a little bit more childish than the last.

JD: [Laughs]

JB: They pretty much ended up saying, “Your father’s an old goat,” or some—something like that. [Laughter]

JD: Yes, and the thing is, you know, Starr probably just enjoyed that immensely.

JB: Oh, I’m sure he did.

JD: And I’m sure Moyer . . .

JB: He loved tumultuous stuff.

JD: Yes. I had a few conversations with Keith Moyer, and I’ve probably told you this story a couple of times, but in 1990, I get a call one afternoon and it’s Keith

Moyer, and he wanted me to come to work at the *Gazette*. And so I said, “Well, you know, I feel like the *Democrat* is going to win the newspaper war and I’ve been with the *Democrat* now for—” I guess by that time it would’ve been . . .

JB: Close to ten years.

JD: . . . close to ten, eleven years. And he asked me to name a figure, and I named a figure just to see what he would say. And without stuttering or anything over the phone, he said, “Well, that sounds good to me.” He said, “Let me go back and talk to some people.” And in the meantime, I mentioned this to Michael Storey in the graphics department. Michael and I had our desks still in close proximity, and I leaned over and said, “Hey, Michael, listen to this. Keith Moyer called me.”

Michael is the—the writer who [is] behind “Otus the [Head] Cat.” [Editor’s Note: Storey writes a column of “humorous fabrication” in the voice of his pet cat Otus, who died in 1992]

JB: “Otus the Head Cat.”

JD: Yes. So he sort of has a penchant for the absurd, and so he made this—he got a *World Book* encyclopedia out and found a little painting of Adam and Eve being cast out of the Garden of Eden, and he must’ve spent about a half-hour at the Xerox [photocopying] machine blowing this thing up about fifty times. And he finally blew it up poster size, and he set some type on the computer stuck under it, and it said, “Pray for John Deering in this, his hour of temptation.”

JB: [Laughs]

JD: And so—of course, somebody in the newsroom called Keith Moyer because we had moles [informants] over here telling people over there what was going on.



And so Keith called me. He called me back. He had asked me to go to lunch with him, and I told him that I would. I think we were going to meet at the Blue Plate Special [restaurant], and he was going to lay out his plan and everything. So he called me back and he said, “John—” he said, “lunch is off.” He had gotten wind of this poster that had been stuck up and he was not amused. He said, “Lunch is off.” But he said, “When you—if you want to come to work over here, we’ll put you to work.” And I said, “Well, I feel like that the *Democrat* is going to win the newspaper war.” And so he kind of laughed on the phone, and he said, “John, when the newspaper war is over, you come over here and we’ll find a job for you.”

JB: [Laughs] That was nice.

JD: Yes, it was very generous of him. And so anyway, I mentioned all that to my wife. And she sort of—she told me that—I think at the time that all this was going on, she had just seen [the motion picture] *It’s a Wonderful Life* on television, and it reminded her of the scene where Jimmy Stewart is asked to come over and go to work for, you know, the old man in the wheelchair.

JB: The old banker.

JD: Yes, the old banker. And that—you know, he’s offered all this money. And they made me a very generous offer, but I think in the long run I did the smart thing because if I hadn’t, I probably would’ve wound up in Butte, Montana, or somewhere.

JB: Yes, you would’ve landed on your feet somewhere, but you might’ve had to leave Little Rock.

JD: Yes.

JB: [Laughs] Well, John, I appreciate your time and your thoughts and your cooperation and . . .

JD: Thanks. It's been fun.

JB: Great talking with you, as usual.

JD: All right.

[End of Interview]

[Transcribed by Cheri Pearce Riggs]

[Edited by Chris Branam]

[Reviewed by Susan Kendrick-Perry]