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## ***Arkansas Democrat Project***

Interview with

Bob Lancaster  
Sheridan, Arkansas  
6 June 2005

Interviewer: Mara Leveritt

Mara Leveritt: This is Side A of the tape with Bob Lancaster on June 6, 2005.  
  
[This is an interview for the Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History's project on the *Arkansas Democrat* and the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*.] It is being conducted in Bob's home in Sheridan, Arkansas.

[Tape Stopped]

ML: Bob, just before I turned on the tape, you were talking about Ernie Deane.

Bob Lancaster: Ernie was a representative of a different generation of newspaper people, and [he] was one that was just going out of existence when you and I first came to the *Arkansas Democrat*. I came in 1969—early in 1969.

ML: To the *Democrat*?

BL: Yes. I think you were already there then, weren't you?

ML: No.

BL: But, you know, that was when Gene Foreman and Bob McCord and them were bringing in a whole new crew. It was a very different bunch of people from the people who had been there.

ML: What was the difference?

BL: Well, it was utterly different. It was totally different. Those people had a method of publishing newspapers that was just different from what we did.

ML: Those people, being . . . ?

BL: Those people who were there at that time who were still at the *Democrat* . . .

ML: Such as . . . ?

BL: . . .but very old. They were getting old and they were retiring. Gene Foreman, who had been brought in to be to be the managing editor while we were getting a whole new generation of journalists to work to an entirely different standard.

ML: So the old generation—who made up that group?

BL: Well, there were a number of people there when I got there. There were people like George Douthit and Bobbie Forster, who were the main reporters. They were two older people who were sort of fixtures around there, and had been for many years.

ML: Yes.

BL: There were people like Inez McDuff, who was the old business editor, and people like Lelia Maude Funston, who was the Sunday school editor. I don't know if you remember her or not. There are some great stories about her. I'll tell you in a minute. On the copy desk there were a number of old hands who had gotten old.

And some of them had gotten embittered—some of them had, but some of them had just turned into drunks or crazy people or really eccentric people—people who talked to themselves [laughs]. But some of them had just marvelous talent that you hardly ever saw.

ML: Well, name names here. Who are you talking about on the copy desk?

BL: My favorite person on the copy desk was an old guy named Leon Hatch. He was a bald guy, and he was very old. I found out things about him after he was gone and after I had known him. He'd sit around the copy desk with two big wads of cotton in his ears just to keep out a hateful world, I guess. [Laughter]

ML: You don't think it was just all that racket from the . . . ?

BL: Well, I don't know what it was, really. But he did that. He was great on grammar and usage. He really was. There were some good stories that are not repeatable about his ability to correct copy and edit copy. Later on I found out [that] in his youth, he'd been a champion marathon dancer in Little Rock.

ML: [Laughs]

BL: He was sort of a parochial man. He was a big, well-known ladies' man. All these old . . .

ML: How old was he at that time?

BL: At that time, I would guess he was probably seventy, maybe. And a lot of these people I've mentioned were around that same age. There was another old copy editor who really *was* embittered. His name was Si Dunn.

ML: I remember Si.

BL: I always remembered—Bill Terry once referred to him, and he spelled his name

S-I-G-H. [Laughs] Do you remember that?

ML: Yes. [Laughter]

BL: It was just the perfect thing to do, somehow. Bill Terry was there, too. I mean, he was . . .

ML: He was never at the *Democrat* when I was.

BL: Well . . .

ML: There was no overlap there at all.

BL: Well, he was still in some capacity with the *Democrat* when I got there. I don't know exactly what capacity, but he still wrote those short stories for the Sunday magazine. [Laughs] He could turn out a full-blown short story [in] a week, you know? And he did that every week for years and years. I never understood people who could write that way. Paul Greenberg writes that way, too.

ML: Who were the main people in charge when you first got there? Who was the hierarchy?

BL: The paper had for many years been owned and edited by an old man named K. August Engel. He was a contemporary of J. N. Heiskell [owner of the *Arkansas Gazette*]. They were both centenarians. He at the *Democrat*, and Mr. Heiskell at the *Gazette*. Both were over 100 years old, and he continued to work, as Mr. Heiskell did, at the paper even after he turned 100. [Editor's note: K. August Engel died in January of 1968 at the age of 78, and J. N. Heiskell died December 28, 1972 at the age of 100.]

ML: So you met Mr. Engel?

BL: Yes. When I first went there, he still paid us—all the employees were still paid in

cash. Every week he would have an armored car bring cash over from the First National Bank to the *Democrat*. He would sit in his office with an elderly woman who was the secretary, I guess, and they would count out your money. They would actually give it to you—they didn't have withholding, for some reason.

ML: [Laughs]

BL: But they would count it out in *new bills*. You'd have to go in there with your hat in your hands sort of thing [laughs], and he would parcel . . .

ML: Do you remember how much you got paid?

BL: I didn't get paid very much. I still have my first paycheck stub from the time I left the *Pine Bluff Commercial* in here somewhere. And I know how much it was for. I worked an eighty-hour week and I got \$59.

ML: And that was in what year?

BL: That was in 1963. I went to work the week after [President] John [F.] Kennedy was killed. That's over forty years.

[Tape Stopped]

ML: I wasn't even in Arkansas yet, actually, in 1969, when you started at the *Democrat*.

BL: Well, I came back later.

ML: So you were born in what year?

BL: 1943.

ML: And attended school right around here—right in Grant County?

BL: Yes, right down the street.

ML: Attended Sheridan schools?

BL: All the way through.

ML: And went to college in Magnolia?

BL: That's right. I went there briefly. I went to UALR [University of Arkansas, Little Rock] briefly, when it was LRU [Little Rock University]. And that was it. I went to work. When I was nineteen, I went to the *Pine Bluff Commercial*.

ML: You never graduated from college?

BL: No.

ML: But you worked at the *Commercial*.

BL: Yes. That's a [funny story?]. I was interested in that, but I was nineteen years old, and I had been in college for a year—half a year at Magnolia and half a year at UALR. I knew I had to get a summer job, and Martha and I wanted to get married. We were just kids. So I went to Pine Bluff because I heard that the gas company down there had some kind of opening for a meter reader. I went down there, and I walked into the gas company office and decided I just didn't want to be a meter reader. [Laughter] I just didn't think I could do it. My sister, Anita, was the Sheridan correspondent for the *Pine Bluff Commercial*, and through her I knew the regional editor and the farm editor over there. He was an old man named Clarence Taylor. So I said, "Well, I'll just go over and see Mr. Taylor and see what he can tell me." I walked in there, and he was out of the office at the moment. I sat down in his little cubicle—this was when the paper was over on Main Street, many years ago. I sat down there, and a little while later the sports editor wandered through there and asked me what I was doing. I said, "Well, I was waiting to see Mr. Taylor." He said, "You've never written any sports, have

you?” I said, “No, but I could probably give it a try.” He said, “Well, football season is coming up here in less than a month, and I’ve got to have a sports reporter. I’ve got to have somebody at these games.” [Laughter] His name was Bobby Jones. He later went on to the Jonesboro paper. He said, “Well, let me introduce you here to our new managing editor and we’ll see—if he says it’s okay, we’ll give you a shot.” That was Gene Foreman, who was later at the *Democrat* and later at the *Philadelphia Enquirer* when I went there. And Gene said, “Well, okay.” He was sympathetic because he knew there had to be a warm body in there to do the sports. That’s how I got into newspapering, and I just never left after that.

ML: I was reading the interview you did for the *Gazette*’s history, and it said you had also worked on the paper, though, when you were in school at Magnolia.

BL: Yes, I did.

ML: What did you do there?

BL: I was the editor of the student paper. I got fired.

ML: From the paper?

BL: Yes.

ML: What was the name of the paper?

BL: It was the *Bray*.

ML: B-R-A-Y?

BL: Right. And it still is.

ML: Why did you get fired?

BL: Well, I had taken a job there—sort of like I did the one in Pine Bluff later—

because no one else wanted to do it. And they paid me a little bit of money, which I needed because I didn't have any money. My family were poor people. So I got in there, and I was all hot to change everything, and I started writing editorials about a terrible character—this governor we had named Orval Faubus. And, you know, he was at the height of his power then, and you just didn't do that. So the president of the college called me in soon after and said they didn't think they were needing me to do that anymore. That's why I transferred in the middle of the year to UALR, because it was a private college, and they gave me a little bit of money to be the editor of the paper there.

ML: Was that the *Trojan*, then?

BL: Yes, it was.

ML: Okay.

BL: I got in trouble there, too.

ML: For what?

BL: I don't know. Something stupid. It was just for saying something unflattering about the Greek organizations on campus or something. I don't know. But I just couldn't leave well enough alone. I was an obnoxious kid from the country who just didn't have any respect for anything. [Laughter]

ML: Did you form any opinions about the newspaper business from either of those experiences?

BL: I didn't, really. I sort of liked the way a newspaper—it gave me a new kind of way of self-expression. I never was able to talk. I didn't talk at all until I was four or five years old.



ML: Literally?

BL: Yes. And I never did learn to talk well. It was sort of a great thing to be able to express myself as well as anybody else, which I found out I could do writing. As the years passed, I worked at that, whereas I didn't work at oral expression at all. And I learned to write a little bit after a while. It took a long time. [Laughs]

ML: Do you have any idea why you didn't talk for such a long time and why it had been so difficult for you?

BL: Yes, I do have an idea about it. I was intimidated by the world—by my inability to make a place for myself in the world. I shied away from that, and I still do, pretty much. That's why I never was a reporter. I mean, I never was a *good* reporter. I did some reporting. But I just couldn't leap into something. My impulse was to shy back from people—not to ask them questions that would cause any kind of discomfort or embarrassment. I just couldn't do that. I never *was* able to do that. It was just sort of luck that I had blundered into it; therefore, I didn't have to do it.

ML: In school, did you have a love for writing, or did you feel an affinity for books in high school—college? Were you attracted to the written word?

BL: I never did read any books when I was a child. I might have read two or three sports books or something, but I never read anything.

ML: Until when?

BL: Well, when I did get to college, I started reading a few things. There were several people at Magnolia who had a real influence on me. One was a teacher [who taught] an English course that I just signed up for, again, as a fluke. This young

guy was teaching a course on Joseph Conrad's story, *Heart of Darkness*. He was really patient with us all. He got us to read it and then over the course of the semester, he taught us to understand just how marvelous a thing it was that somebody could produce a work of art like this. I was so impressed with that that I never really got over it. I sort of learned that story by heart, almost. And I'm still as impressed with it as I ever was. I get it out every once in a while. It's just unbelievable that somebody could do this. So it was a good thing to have that as a kind of goal to shoot for, too, because I knew I never could do that, but I knew that I was going to *try* to do it [laughs] as long as I was able to.

ML: So you began doing sports for the *Pine Bluff Commercial*. That was somewhere in the background there, I guess?

BL: Yes. That's what it was. In fact, all the journalism I ever did—maybe in the first ten years of it, or maybe the first twenty years of it—I don't know—a lot of it was just learning how to do it—for me, it was. I never really was interested in what the stories eventually said, and any kind of impact they might have had on society or on politics or on anything else. What I was interested in was the composition and trying to fit that into a way that would make me feel good about having done it, instead of just trying to get the story out, which is what *good* reporters do.

ML: So each piece was sort of unto itself? You weren't concerned about—you weren't going for impact? Or were you?

BL: Well, I don't know what I was doing, really. I was just doing the best I could. I remember a few different things. I remember a lead that I wrote once about some old guy—an old grocer up in Redfield. His grocery store was right close to the

highway, and somehow it was in a turn where people kept driving their cars right through his grocery store. I wrote a lead about that. I always thought that was the greatest thing, that I was able to get that lead just exactly right. It had thirty or forty words to it, but it told that whole story, and it was funny, and it just had the right atmosphere about it. Accomplishments like that [laughs] were what meant something to me. It wasn't the story. I did a story one time about the Arkansas Industrial Development Commission. I was at the *Commercial* then. It was about how in their yearly reports of new and expanded industry in Arkansas--so that they had just made up stuff for years. I called all these companies and said, "You know, this report has you listed as having sixty-four new employees this year and having done \$100,000 in expansions. Can you tell me about that?" And they'd say, "I don't know what they're *talking* about!" And there were hundreds of those things. What had happened was that agency had just been used as a political—I mean, it was just a political tool.

ML: Right.

BL: I did that story, but it meant absolutely nothing to me because I didn't know how to write it. I didn't write it well, and Gene Foreman took it and redid it, and redid it just *exactly* right, and made it a powerful, wonderful story. To me, it always represented a big failure on my part because I wasn't able to do it. I mean, I got the story. I got all the stuff, and all he did was just redo it. And he probably did it in an hour. But, to me, I had tried to write something, and I had failed to do it. I just sort of wrote that off.

[Tape Stopped]

ML: How long did you do the sports at the *Commercial*?

BL: Not very long—through that football season.

ML: And you and Martha got married?

BL: Oh, yes.

ML: Based on that salary. [Laughs]

BL: Oh, yes. We sure did. We lived in a little efficiency apartment. It was very small. It wasn't very long until our first child was born and then it wasn't very long until our second child was born. And we were still there and still struggling mightily. But I didn't do that very long. They made me a reporter after that first football season, that following winter. Not very much time passed until the great political [Arkansas gubernatorial] race between Orval Faubus and Winthrop Rockefeller occurred. That was in 1964. It was sort of the ethical and political race, and it still is. It's still—I think it was the most important and most interesting political race I've ever seen.

ML: And you covered it for the *Commercial*?

BL: Yes, I did. They had a political reporter whose name was Harry Pearson.

ML: I've heard of him.

BL: He was a young guy that they'd brought in from the *Nashville Tennessean*. He was so full of himself. Man, he was the cockiest, most confident person I've ever known. He decided he needed someone to help him cover [the race]. He would do one candidate, and I would do the other one. So he did Faubus just because he thought Faubus would be a more interesting character, and he was. So I covered Rockefeller, and I thought he was very—I sort of identified with him, I guess, be-

cause he had trouble expressing himself, too. He was a very inarticulate man, but he was a very good man. He had the kind of confidence that you rarely see in politicians, and that is to get people smarter than he was to run his campaigns and his administration. I always liked him. I always got along with him. I'm sure my coverage of him wasn't very good, because it wasn't very objective, I don't guess.

ML: Did you labor hard over each article? These would have been deadline stories, and yet you were going for a stylistic or a particular writing craft there that is sort of not too comfortable with the pace of deadline.

BL: I did work awful[ly] hard at it. [Laughs] I remember one story one night—it was the night my son was born—our second child. This was after Rockefeller had been elected—no, he hadn't been—he had been defeated by Faubus. He came back the next time and ran against Jim Johnson and won. I went to Booneville one night to cover a Lincoln Day Rally that Winthrop Rockefeller was speaking at. I had to go from Pine Bluff to Little Rock, and he had a press plane—Winthrop did. It was supposed to take us to Booneville, and we wound up getting diverted because of bad weather. I got in a pocket of a storm, and it dropped the plane [in altitude], and it just crushed my eardrums. I was deaf for about two weeks. I mean, just about totally deaf. I got back in the middle of the night and had to write that story for the next day's paper.

ML: Did your eardrums bleed from the concussion?

BL: Yes. Oh, man, it was terrible.

ML: Did you get a headache?

BL: I was in agony from that pressure, which never did equalize. And for two weeks I

was just about totally deaf. Anyway, when I got home, I had to write that story. [Laughs] I remember doing that story. I had taken Martha over to her mother and dad's house. They lived here in Sheridan. They kept trying to call me that night. I got home around 3:00 [a.m.], having written the story. I couldn't hear the phone ringing because I was deaf. And they kept trying to call me. Finally, our neighbor there in Pine Bluff—they called him, and he broke into the house [laughs] and got me up to send me over to here to take Martha to the hospital. And our son was born, then, at around 6:00 in the morning at St. Vincent's [Hospital] in Little Rock. Before that day was out, I had to write a follow-up story about [laughs]—but I found out I could do that kind of stuff easier than I could do something that I had to work on, because I would go ahead and do it. When I had the time and the opportunity, I would stew over stuff too long and make a mess of it. The best example of that was one of the first anti-evolution trials in Little Rock [that] was back around that time. I called the story in on the phone because we were an afternoon paper.

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

ML: Okay.

BL: Well, anyway, I had to phone in a story as it was happening on that trial. And I had to go back to Pine Bluff that afternoon and write one for the following day. And the one I called in was a lot better. It was a whole lot better. It was fresh, and the other one was just one of those stories when you work on them too long.

[Laughs]

ML: Yes. I'm reminded of—I've heard that comedian Jonathan Winters had such a hard time that [he was in and out of a mental hospital] and so forth and an art therapist helped him by giving him very small canvases to work on. And he would do art. He would make very complex, little paintings that could only be this big [laughter] and it freed him, he said—the constraints of such a very defined and limited amount of space to work in.

BL: Yes.

ML: It gave him the go-ahead to do what he needed to do without just going wild.

BL: He became a really good painter, too. I've seen his work.

ML: How long were you at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*?

BL: I was there for nearly six years.

ML: Who were you working with there?

BL: I worked with Gene Foreman, mainly. He was my supervisor in a lot of ways. There was another editor there who was the editorial page editor who influenced me a lot. I eventually wound up doing a lot of work under him, too.

ML: Who was that?

BL: His name was Patrick J. Owens. Good guy. One way he influenced [me] was he was a Nieman Fellow [had a Nieman Fellowship from Harvard University], and later on, when I went to the *Democrat*, I had applied to do that—and I actually won that fellowship.

ML: Were you doing editorials at the *Commercial*? Did you actually begin doing columns or editorials there?

BL: I did. It's an interesting thing—eventually—when I first went there, Pat Owens

was there, and he brought in an assistant from Hunter College in New York who wanted to get back to the South. That was Paul Greenberg. Paul started as an editorial writer there, and eventually Patrick Owens left. He went to the *Gazette* and on to *Newsday*. He was Bill Moyers's right-hand man up there for years. But Paul took over the editorial page, and in 1968 Paul left the *Commercial* to go to the *Chicago Daily News*. I became the editorial page editor. I was maybe twenty-two or twenty-three years old, and I didn't know how to do it, but, again, I just learned by doing it. Paul was up there for a year, and he called me one night, and he said he wanted to come back. He just couldn't stand it up there. And I said, "Well, yes, come back." So he did. He came back. Pretty soon after he got back, he won the Pulitzer Prize. [Laughs] I worked with him there on that page for about a year after he got back and then went on. Gene Foreman, in the meantime, had gone to the *Democrat*, which was doing this major makeover. He's the one who got me to come up there to write a column. I had done some columns at the *Commercial*, too. He wanted somebody to do a front-page column with a new look—*Arkansas Democrat*. So I did that.

ML: What was your understanding of what the *Democrat's* new look—its new take on journalism—was going to be all about when you moved up there?

BL: Well, I think the world of Gene Foreman. I think he proved to be one of the best editors in the United States. There were two guys who had taken over the *Democrat*. Their names were Marcus George and Stanley Berry. Stanley just died not long ago. They had bought the paper, and they were going to redo it. [Editor's note: Stanley Berry and Marcus George inherited the paper from their uncle, K.



August Engel.] They were going to remake it into something that was good and new and that didn't have that old, dull Gothic look about it that the *Democrat* had . . .

ML: You mean typographically?

BL: Well, I mean typographically and institutionally.

ML: Editorially?

BL: Editorially. And the place itself—I mean, just the physical plant was like something out of an old horror movie. [Laughs]

ML: I never thought of that.

BL: Anyway, they were going to redo it. And the person they got as their editor was Bob McCord. McCord was the one who got Gene Foreman up there. They quickly started getting a bunch of really good people. Young people. I mean, they were all young. For a time, it was sort of two newspapers. There were a lot of old people who resented all this new bunch of interlopers coming in and changing everything they'd ever done—changing the standards and the values and the look of the place and the look of the paper. You had all these young people who were really interested in putting out a good paper. And the paper was—even though at that time it didn't succeed in establishing itself financially, it didn't win over a lot of subscribers from the *Gazette*, partly because it was still trying to be an afternoon paper for most of that time.

ML: Do you remember what its circulation was?

BL: No, I don't. Anyway, they put out a good paper. It started becoming a really good paper, and it stayed that way until Walter Hussman [Jr.] took it over and

wanted to make some money out of it and decided to take on the *Gazette* head-on. And he got McCord to bring in Bob Starr [John Robert Starr].

ML: Okay. Backing up, when you were in Pine Bluff looking at—reading the *Gazette* and the *Democrat*—how would you have described the *Democrat* in the era before you went to it? As a newspaper reader, what was your—how would you describe it?

BL: It was very old-fashioned. It was like a paper out of the twenties [1920s]. Many of the people came to their maturity in the twenties. It was very old-fashioned.

ML: In what way, for example?

BL: It was still—well, they still had a front-page feature that was called “Hambone Says,” and it was a caricature of a black person talking in dialect and saying these little catchy sayings in dialect. It was, you know, about the *Democrat* during the civil rights crisis. It was very anti-everything.

ML: Say a little bit more about that, in terms of watching that play out from outside Little Rock. What was your impression? What was your own opinion of the role that the *Democrat* was playing?

BL: To tell you the truth, it came a little late for me. I was too young to know what happened in 1957 [reference to the 1957 Little Rock Central High School integration crisis]. All the happenings around the late-1950s were something that I found out about later because I was just not old enough.

ML: By the sixties [1960s], was it still kind of limping along on that same . . . ?

BL: Yes, it was.

ML: Those same rickety legs? [Laughs]

BL: Yes, it was. Its coverage of the crisis was largely George Douthit's work.

George—I don't know if you remember George or not. He was Ed Bethune's father-in-law, which is a strange fact.

ML: Yes.

BL: Anyway, he did a lot of that coverage. And their editorial coverage was one of saying, "We don't need meddlers coming in here and telling us how to run our institution." Its coverage was just—it just pretty much didn't exist. It was a kind of parroting of whatever Faubus and Faubus's people wanted it to be. And it just wasn't very good. The *Gazette*, in the meantime, had carried on the tradition that Harry Ashmore started there in the fifties [1950s], and it was just much superior. It was just a much—I think that had to do with this generational thing, too, because it was the younger people at the *Gazette* who had done the important work in the fifties [1950s]. It was those same older people at the *Democrat* who stayed on through the fifties [1950s], and it was in the late sixties [1960s] when they started to move out. That's when I got there, and a lot of other young people did, too. I don't think I had much to do with it, but . . .

ML: So you came on to write a column?

BL: Yes.

ML: It was going to be a front-page column?

BL: Yes.

ML: What was it called? Did it have a name?

BL: I'm not sure. [Laughs] I don't remember. I think it might have had some really clunky-sounding name, like—I believe it was "Lancaster's Arkansas." I can't

think of a more horrible name for a column than that. [Laughter] But it was sort of Gene's idea—his and McCord's together. They wanted something to liven up the front page because it was so “old standard” looking. This was a paper that yellowed-out even before it got out of the rack, you know? So they redesigned the front page and went from the old eight-column format to six columns. Then they widened it out and brightened it up, and it looked pretty good.

ML: By that time, had you found that was your preference—column writing?

BL: Well, I had sort of done it at the *Commercial* because when Paul came back from Chicago, it sort of left me for the time being without anything to do. So just mainly to amuse myself, I started writing these little pieces that—again, it was just an adventure in learning how to write, and it was—I just did them to have something to do, mainly. And Gene, when he left, he remembered that. He thought about it, and when he got up there and wanted somebody to do something for his front page, well, he called me. So I didn't have anything tying me to Pine Bluff.

ML: How many did you do a week?

BL: Five.

ML: Every weekday?

BL: I did four weekday columns. I don't know which one I skipped. Monday, probably, and Sunday.

ML: How long did you do that?

BL: I did it for about two and a half years. I did a lot of columns, and they weren't very good. For a long time they were really just—news reporting. They were just

terrible because I couldn't get a sense of what I wanted to do. Then I started getting better—maybe in early 1971—and just in time for me to submit a few of them to this Nieman committee. [Laughs]

ML: When you didn't have a sense of what you wanted to do, what *did* you think you were trying to do?

BL: Well, I didn't know. At that time, the columnist situation was a lot different from what it is now, both nationally and in Little Rock. This kind of personal commentary, edgy-kind of thing didn't exist. I was more out of a featurey-kind of tradition.

ML: Meaning what?

BL: I didn't write hard politics. I didn't write the breaking news stuff. I didn't write anything that, as I told you a while ago, required me to get too deep into it. I just tried to write the observer kind of things from a distance. And a little bit tied to the news, but not necessarily so.

ML: Did you go out and talk to people for your fodder?

BL: Yes, I did a lot of that, in fact. Later, when I worked at the *Gazette* as “The Arkansas Traveler”—I'll tell you how that came about in a minute—that was what I did almost exclusively. I liked to go out and write about things that were unusual out in the state. I did a lot of that. I enjoyed that a whole lot.

ML: What sorts of things attracted you? What was the best kind of opportunity you could find?

BL: I wrote a piece about an old guy in Banks, Arkansas. He was an old black guy—uneducated. He had built him a library out in the middle of—behind his house. I

just went down and talked to him about his books, and that turned out to be a really successful thing. In fact, I've got a letter in there on the wall that [television travel and news correspondent] Charles Kuralt wrote. He had seen it [the article] somewhere, and he came all the way here from New York, or wherever, just to talk to the guy. Another one I liked was [when] I went up to northeast Arkansas, somewhere out in the middle of nowhere beyond Jonesboro . . .

ML: [Laughs]

BL: . . . and talked to one of my childhood heroes. His name was Lash LaRue. He was a cowboy with a whip. He was an old drunk who was trying to get his life together again as a minister in all these little country churches. It was so—I mean, it meant a lot to me to write that column. I sort of continued to do that when I went on to Philadelphia. A lot of people I wrote about were people who had been prominent at one time and who had lost it all. I don't know. That sort of became a theme I did.

ML: By the time you said you had enough of them together to submit to the Nieman folks, what had you found out about doing columns that [made] you [feel] you were on the right track?

BL: Well, I never really had a sense of what I could do and what I couldn't do, and whether I was doing it well or not. I never was able to do that. I still *can't* do it. But some people were telling me things. They were telling me it's working sometimes. And every once in a while I'd do something—Ernie Dumas used to tell me stuff, you know? I just think the world of him, anyway. He would tell me stuff, even though he worked at the other paper [the *Gazette*]. He would tell me what I

was doing right and what I was doing wrong. Trimble helped me some, too.

ML: That would be Mike Trimble?

BL: Yes.

ML: And he was at the *Democrat*?

BL: He was at the *Gazette*, too.

ML: He was at the *Gazette*.

BL: At one point there, I was at the *Democrat*, and Dumas and Trimble were at the *Gazette*. We were all trying to cover the [Arkansas] Legislature at the same time. The *Gazette* had a bunch of [crazy?], kind of prudish rules about usage in their newspaper. As a result, there were stories that neither Mike nor Ernie could get in the paper, so they'd tell them to me, and I'd get them in the *Democrat*, you know? Then the people at the *Gazette* said, "Why can't we do stuff like this?" And they'd tell them, "Well, you know, we tried to do it, and you wouldn't let us."

ML: Do you remember—for example?

BL: I don't remember examples. I remember some of them had to do with certain words—language—and certain pieces of legislation and all. There was a deal about showing dirty movies at the drive-in movie houses, and it had a lot of language in it that they couldn't get into the *Gazette*. By that time, I was able to get it into the *Democrat*, and I just had a lot of fun with it. I did a lot of that at the legislature where I just gave up trying to be a real reporter and just went out there and wrote about whatever I wanted to and sort of tried to have a good time with it. And what I've done in all the different jobs I've had is that I never was able to do it the way anybody else did it, so I just did the best I could and did something dif-

ferent. For some reason, I've always had people who would pay me money to do that. [Laughs] I was really lucky.

ML: And having a good time at it—was that personally important to you? If you were having a good time, would it just make it tolerable, or did you have it as part of the personal ethos, practically?

BL: It's funny. I never liked writing. The process itself—I never have liked it. It's always been hard work for me, so I don't think I ever had a really good time writing anything. But sometimes, you know, it would be all right when it came out and I could look back at it later and think, "Well, that worked." Bill Terry wrote me something—wrote me a letter not long ago. He's got a new novel. It's pretty good, by the way.

ML: Really? Where is he living?

BL: He's in Golden, Missouri. But he wrote me. He wants to get together. He's got a publishing situation where he's publishing stuff himself. He wanted me to give him some stuff, and he wanted to include it in something. I finally had to tell him, "You know, I just don't want to do anything. I don't want to have to do it anymore," because it's just too hard for me. And it's always been *really* hard. I told Max Brantley not long ago, "You know, you'd think after forty years of doing it that it would get a little bit easier, but it *never does*. Every week it's the same thing, only harder. And it never gets any easier, and I don't understand that."

ML: Where does the good time that you mentioned come in? You mentioned that the legislature kind of . . .

BL: It was just fun being around those people. Pat Owens told me something one



time. I asked him, “Who is it that we’re writing this stuff for? Are we writing it for the readers, or are we writing it for ourselves?” Because I didn’t know. And he said, “We write for each other.” And I always thought that was one of the wisest things I’ve ever heard, because that’s the *truth*. That’s who we write it for. We don’t write it for ourselves. We don’t write it for readers. I think we’re trying to win the respect and the admiration of our colleagues. I know that I am. I think I always do have certain people in mind when I’m writing anything. I have sort of a distant image of those people looking at this and in their appraising, they’re saying, “You know, he missed the [boat?] just a . . .” [Laughs]

ML: Alive or dead—who would you most like to impress?

BL: Well, I’ll tell you what I do sometimes. One of my dearest friends is Edmund Freeman, who was the editor of the Pine Bluff paper. He lives in Little Rock.

ML: I just saw him the other day.

BL: When he was running the paper down there, he read every editorial that ever went into it, and he did work on every one that ever went in there. He had some of the most wonderful suggestions that you can imagine. He was not the kind of editor who changed stuff or who wanted you to do something different. He’d just suggest stuff that had to do with making you think about it, and not letting you get away with any kind of either sloppy construction or sloppy thinking. I’ve always got him a little bit in mind when I’m working on something because I know if I don’t do something—I know if I do something that’s not as good as I can do it, that he’s going to *know* it if he sees it. You remember people like that. They’re scattered far and wide, and some of them are alive and some of them are not.

ML: All writers?

BL: No. No. At Harvard there was a professor named Donald [Fleeman?] who was teaching the course that Arthur Schlesinger had taught: American intellectual history. And he got to be a good friend of mine, and Martha's, too. He was an old guy when we knew him. I was twenty-five when I went up there on that fellowship, and Martha would have been twenty-three, I guess. He just flipped for Martha. He just thought she was the greatest thing that he had ever seen. And we got to know him pretty well, and I always think of him, too. He was one of the great minds I've ever known. But there are a lot of people like that.

ML: What year did you go off to Harvard?

BL: That was 1971. You know, that fellowship meant something to the paper, too, besides me, personally.

ML: Yes.

BL: It was the first—in this changeover, it wouldn't have happened now. This was the first kind of award they had won, and it was sort of the first validation of what they were trying to do up there. It meant something to a lot of people.

ML: Yes.

BL: It turned out to mean a lot to me, too. While I was up there, one of the requirements was that you had to go to the paper that sent you when you came back.

ML: Did it stipulate how long you had to . . . ?

BL: No, they didn't. And while I was up there, Bob Douglas became the managing editor of the *Gazette*. He wrote me—one of the first things he did—he said, "I know you've got to come back to the *Democrat*, but come back and stay as long

as you have to, and if you'll come over here and work for us, I'll revive the 'Arkansas Traveler' column," which had not been in existence ever since Ernie Deane had retired. It had been ten or fifteen years. He said, "We'll revive that up if you'll come over here." So I came back.

[End of Tape 1, Side 2]

[Beginning of Tape 2, Side 1]

BL: I did go over to the *Gazette*. I stayed there for a little over a year and then went on to Philadelphia.

ML: Were there hard feelings when you left the *Democrat* after a few months?

BL: No. No. There weren't. I worked with McCord, and by that time, Gene Foreman had gone, and Jerry McConnell was back at the *Democrat*. He may have been there when you came.

ML: He hired me.

BL: Yes. And Jerry—I mean, I just loved him, too. In fact, he told me, you know, "That's what you ought to do," because he knew it was probably a better situation for me, anyway, over at the *Gazette*. Anyway, he was just great. That period in there when Gene Foreman and Jerry McConnell were running the paper—I just think it was a great newspaper, and they were great people. I'm just sorry it didn't prosper any better than it did.

ML: So your stint at the *Democrat* was—am I right—from about 1969 to 1972, with one year at Harvard?

BL: Yes.

ML: So not long. You were not really—you didn't work there for more than maybe a

total of . . .

BL: Two and a half years. But I came back later, you know.

ML: Okay. Then you came back and went to the *Gazette*.

BL: That was in 1973. I stayed there for a year and went to Philadelphia to the *Enquirer* for three years.

ML: And that was when you wanted to come back, just to be back in Arkansas?

BL: I don't know why I came back. I got to the point where I was writing columns, and I finally learned how to do it up there, I think.

ML: Now, what did you learn there?

BL: I learned how to just do commentary. I mean, I learned how to do a column which would take on a topic and just try to turn it every which way but loose. [Laughs] That's what I did. I'd do politics. I'd do local government stuff. I'd do art stuff. I'd do sports stuff. I'd do whatever. And nobody gave me any guidelines or tried to put any limits on what I was doing. I learned eventually to be able to do that with the sort of consistent voice to it, so that you might look here and see what this character had to say about what was going on today. I hadn't done that kind of column before.

ML: Was what you were trying to do to make your own presence in the column more consistent?

BL: Yes.

ML: Was it to develop your own sensibility as a . . .?

BL: Yes, unless—you know, it's hard for me to trust myself to do that. It required inventing a different person from the actual me to be the author of this column. I

mean, my name was on it and my picture was on it. And I used the "I" word, but, still, it was a different person from me, really, who was doing the column, and it was the development of that character that the column was really all about.

ML: Before then, you had not had a particular columnist persona that you could call up?

BL: That's right.

ML: [ ] Each column was a different saying, maybe.

BL: Yes.

ML: And now this consistent voice that you found at Philadelphia—or developed in Philadelphia.

BL: Yes. It took a while there, too.

ML: We sort of skipped over your fellowship. What did that do for you as a writer?

BL: They say that Nieman people—that nobody has ever come back from Nieman Fellowship and [done anything?] [laughs] because it spoils you.

ML: Because it what?

BL: It *spoils* you.

ML: Oh.

BL: I mean, it's just such a marvelous thing. They take you up there, and they give you a bunch of money to live on—however much you're making wherever you are—plus, they don't want anybody to be any better off than anybody else in the program, so whoever's making the most money—that would be *The New York Times* person at that time—they gave everybody that amount of money to live on. So your income is the thing that's—at that time, it was John Kifner from *The New*

*York Times*. Everybody got that amount of money to live on, and they gave you a place to live, which was on campus. And they make you an officer of the university. They open up the whole curriculum to you so you can take any course in any of the schools—the school of government, the law school, or any of them. You can do anything you want to—go to any of them you want to. And even do them for credit if you want to. But you don't *have* to do anything. They give you your own carrel in the library with 350-year-old books surrounding you. [Laughs] And there's no obligation on your part to do any of it. Every couple of days, they'd bring in a famous person in some aspect of public life to talk just to your group in the faculty club for as long as you feel like talking to that person, over lunch.

ML: How many of those fellows were with you?

BL: There were twelve and still are. There were twelve people from the United States, and now there are twelve from the rest of the world, too. There weren't that many foreign fellows at that time. It's a really small group. It's just the greatest thing you can imagine, especially in that kind of environment. I had never been out of the South, and it was a revelation to me to live in a place where there was no kind of psychological pressure on you to conform to *anything*. [Laughs] I mean, it was just like being let out of prison, almost. I had never experienced anything like that at all. It was my first encounter with the liberal environment. I'll always remember it fondly because of that.

ML: Did it change you?

BL: I think it probably did a little bit. It probably smoothed down a little bit of the

redneck in me, maybe. I *did* learn a lot of stuff, but there was such a lack of discipline. I mean, they don't try to make you do *anything*. They let you do anything you want to, but it's up to you if you won't do it. Because of that, I missed out on a lot of things that I shouldn't have. But, you know, we got to do things like—oh, they gave us series season tickets to the Boston Symphony and to the Boston Red Sox. [Laughs] I mean, you know, just *anything*. It was just a wonderful thing. It's bound to have changed us all, I guess.

ML: What about the association with the other journalists who were participating?

BL: That was nice, too. My best friend up there was from the Tulsa newspaper, and he was such a good guy.

ML: Who was this?

BL: His name was Mike Flannigan. He later killed himself. Nobody knows why. He went to the *Sacramento Bee*, and he was working out there. He was just the greatest guy in the world. And, all of a sudden, he just killed himself. This was only a few years ago. That was a *shock*. It's *still* a shock.

ML: You were non-conforming even when you were writing editorials with the college paper about Faubus and not fitting too well into the psychological pressure that dominated this state at that time. You seem to be able to resist it pretty well.

BL: Well, that was all just sophomoric stuff. I really didn't know what academic or mental freedom really was. I didn't know. I mean, here, you live in this sea of other people's expectations. And up there nobody expected *anything* from you. I mean, nobody *cared*. They don't care what you believe. They don't care what you think. They don't care what you think of them. They just don't *care*. What-

ever you do is all right with them. That's just utterly different from how it is here.

ML: Was there any difficulty coming back to this environment after having experienced that?

BL: Well, I can see how there would have been, but, really, I think it made this situation even better because it strengthens you to know that you can function at Harvard.

ML: [Laughs]

BL: The faculty there really liked me—the fellows—because they're older people, and they can relate to them a little better than they can all these kids with IQs [intelligence quotients] of a thousand who don't *know* anything. So I got to know any number of people up there—faculty people. I found out, you know, being in a place where everybody I knew was smarter than I was something that—I had never been in that situation, either. [Laughs] And to find out that I could do okay and I could function all right in that situation—I think that had a really strong effect on me, and it helped me out in the long term psychologically.

ML: Okay. When you came back from Philadelphia . . .

BL: That was in the bicentennial year.

ML: 1976.

BL: Yes.

ML: How did you decide where you were going?

BL: At Philadelphia I had to make a decision. A couple of my friends there went on to *The New York Times*. One of them went to the *Boston Globe*. One of them went to *The Washington Post*. I had the situation where I could go to *The New York*



*Times*, and probably eventually be doing what I was doing there in Philadelphia, which was column-writing. That's sort of what my ambition had been for a while: to pursue that kind of work as far as I could with it, career-wise. I got to that point where I could—if that's what I really wanted to do, then I could do it. Well, I sort of hesitated when I got to that point, and I guess he who hesitates really is *lost*, because I finally decided that that was not what I wanted to do. And I didn't know what it was that I wanted to do. It had only been ten or twelve years since I had walked into that gas company in Pine Bluff. So I said, "Well, I'll just go back to Arkansas and see what comes next." So we came back down here without any prospect of knowing what we were doing, and McCord found out I was here and . . .

ML: Let me—was this a deliberate rejection of the New York course and a choice for Arkansas?

BL: No.

ML: It was what?

BL: It was a career decision. I decided that that was not what I wanted to do with my life. I think I really had in mind that I would like to write some books. I knew I couldn't do it if I took that particular career path. I didn't think I could. So I said, "Well, I'll just stop here and reassess and see what happens." And that was easier to do here than it would have been up there. So we came back here. We were here a few months, and Bob McCord at the *Democrat* found out I was here. He wanted me to—he called and asked me if I'd go out to the legislature and just write some columns. They were about to have a session. I sort of did it on an in-

formal basis for a while and then wound up working for the *Democrat* again, but not for long because it was not too long after that that John [Robert] Starr came in, and I just couldn't see working with him.

ML: Why not?

BL: I knew some things about Starr that I didn't like [from when I'd known him before?].

ML: Where did you run into him before?

BL: When he was the bureau chief for the AP [Associated Press]. Man, he—I didn't like him and I didn't trust him, and I didn't think he told the truth. When he came back to the *Democrat*, I thought his purpose in doing so was just to satisfy some old grudges he had against the *Gazette* and people at the *Gazette*, and he was going to use the newspaper and his staff to satisfy those things. I didn't think that was right. So that's one—and Ralph Patrick was city editor, and he thought the same thing. He had been contemplating establishing his own magazine for a while, so he did that. He established the *Arkansan* magazine, and I went over and helped him work on it. That would've been in 1978 or 1979. Poor Ralph got caught in that [President] Jimmy Carter twenty percent interest crunch, and it killed him.

ML: How long did it last?

BL: The magazine lasted about a year and a half or so.

ML: So the difference between the *Arkansas Democrat* that you went to for Foreman and then came back to in your second stint—was there much difference, considering that you left when Starr began?

BL: Well, see, McConnell was there when I came back in 1976. It was a while before Starr came on. I don't remember exactly when. But it was still a tremendous place when McConnell was here. He was just a prince. I just really admired him. He had brought in a lot of good people, and most of the old hands by then were gone. It was just a totally different environment, and he was mostly responsible for it.

ML: How would you describe the relationship between the *Democrat* and the *Gazette*, at that point?

BL: It was amiable. McConnell had spent *years* at the *Gazette* working in the sports department. I don't think there was any real great hostility then, even though Walter [Hussman, Jr.] had taken over the paper in the meantime. I don't know if it was his idea to destroy the *Gazette*, or if it was part of that, but they made a pact there that that's what they were going to do.

ML: Did you ever have any encounters—any discussions or any conversations—with Walter Hussman about . . . ?

BL: I never had a conversation with him about *anything*. I never did have a conversation with him. I think you were at the—there was a meeting they had when Marcus George and Stanley Berry were going to sell the paper to Walter. Do you remember that meeting when Marcus George sort of defined himself with that awful joke that he told?

ML: No, I wasn't there then.

BL: Do you know what I'm talking about?

ML: No, I don't.

BL: Well, there was some kind of big staff meeting—Marcus was a pretty bright fellow, but he was a really awkward guy. He just had a terrible time relating to people. And he tried to—this was a really stormy meeting, and he tried to calm everybody and get on their good side by telling this joke when he first got up. The joke was, "Do you know how to make a dead baby float?" And the answer was, "You take two scoops of ice cream and a dead baby." And, I mean, there were people who just walked out of the *room*! It was one of those most horrible situations I have ever *seen*! [Laughs] And I think the *Democrat*, from that moment on, was never any place that I wanted to have much to do with.

ML: Why was the meeting stormy in the first place?

BL: I don't know. There was something going on about the sale of the paper that everybody was angry about—if he was going to cut wages, or whatever. There were some big staff issues involved in the thing, and he was trying to diffuse the situation and inject a little humor into it. [Laughs]

ML: I'm surprised somebody so socially inept would even get into such a position.

BL: Well, Stanley—he was the publisher of the paper. They were editor and publisher, but co-owners of it. I think they were nephews of Mr. Engel, and that's how they had come into possession of the paper. But Stanley, who died just recently, was supposed to be one of the dumbest people who ever lived. I remember Tucker Steinmetz told me a story one time that the *Democrat* got sued for \$6 million, and they went in to tell Stanley Berry about it. Stanley thought about it for a minute and said, "Now, that's six and how many zeros?" [Laughter] Anyway, the transfer of the ownership of the paper was—there was friction in it from the start,

and people leaving, and it never got much better. And McCord accepts all the blame for having brought Starr in, but he didn't really have much choice about it. What he had to do was that—I think his mandate was to go hire somebody who was ready to take on the *Gazette* and ready to do whatever it took to kill it off.

ML: I'm reminded of the cover of the *Arkansas Times* [with Starr?] standing on the toilet seat . . .

BL: With a knife in his teeth?

ML: Wasn't he squatting on it?

BL: No, on a newspaper box.

ML: Oh, on a *newspaper* box with the knife in his teeth. That's right. I'm mixing it up with the toilet seat because I saw it in a *Democrat* employee's home framed with a toilet seat and hanging on the wall. [Laughter] A commentary there, I think.

BL: Alan is the one who did the toilet seat.

ML: [Laughter] Yes, that would be Alan Leveritt.

BL: Correct.

ML: Okay, so, Bob, we know you eventually—after the *Arkansan*, you carried on and went to the *Arkansas Times* and ended up writing columns there to this day.

BL: Yes. I was there for seven years, and I was away for a short time.

ML: When you were editor there.

BL: Yes.

ML: Did you like being editor?

BL: No. I was a terrible editor. You'll remember that because that's not my thing. I didn't like being responsible for getting other people to do things. You know, for

some people it was just about impossible, like Mike.

ML: Mike [Trimble?].

BL: I remember times when—and maybe you went with me, I don't know—but I'd have to go over to his apartment and sit there and tell him I was not going to leave until he gave me a piece of paper. I had to do that twice.

ML: [Laughs]

BL: He just—otherwise he wouldn't do it. I'm just not a very good manager, and that's what you have to be.

[End of Tape 2, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 2, Side 2]

BL: And I never could deal with Alan Leveritt as a publisher because he wanted to sell his editorial product. He wanted to sell advertising on the basis of what was going to be in the paper, and we never could get the thing well enough established. We never could get far ahead enough so that I could tell him what was going to *be* in the paper, even in the next issue. And we never did work any of that out. I just really wasn't suited to be an editor; it's just not my thing.

ML: So you didn't—what do you consider yourself suited for? [Laughter]

BL: I don't know.

ML: In terms of writing, have you had the career that you—are you glad for the career you've had?

BL: Lately, just in the last two or three years, my weekly goal is to push the envelope to the very edge every time.

ML: Every column.

BL: Every one of them is going a little bit farther . . .

ML: Where?

BL: . . . afield than the last one.

ML: [Laughs]

BL: And to go into places where it's dangerous and it's silly to be there, and there's nothing good to come from [it], and there's no good way out of it. But that's where I like to be. That's the place I like to be.

ML: What do you mean, dangerous?

BL: Well, you never know what's going to work and what's not. When you're doing something that there's not much precedence for—either personally or nobody else is doing it, either—you just never know if you're going to be able to go in there and come back out with your head, you know? You might come out just looking like an idiot. And sometimes I *do* feel like that. But I enjoy doing that. I enjoy trying new things, trying new approaches, and trying to be . . .

ML: And how do you get yourself back? How do you manage that trick?

BL: Well, it's just by experience. I tell you the thing that keeps going through my head in this—in Mozart's twentieth piano concerto, there's this beautiful theme that plays along. This is the first part of it—no, it's the second movement. It's a beautiful little theme that's going along so nicely and then all of a sudden he stops, and he just starts going *crazy*. He just goes everywhere. He wanders all over the place, and he's loud and he's soft and he's wild and he's crazy. And you wonder, "What does this have to do with anything?" And you just never know up until the last little measure, which drops back down into the same pace, and the

last four notes of it are the same four notes that were in that thing when he started it. And it's just the most *amazing* thing. It's just the most remarkable thing, that somebody could do that. And that's what I'm always thinking: "Just go out here into the wilds of stuff and see if you can bring it back to that thing like he did."

That's a really eccentric kind of goal, but that's sort of what I do. [Laughs]

ML: Well, a lot of us are grateful.

BL: Well . . .

ML: I had intended to wind up with a question about Elvis Presley, but I think it's better to end on Mozart. [Laughter] This has been far-ranging, and I'm sure [there are] lots [of topics] that we could have talked about, [but] we haven't. Is there anything that we should have?

BL: I thought we should—when we started out, we were going to talk about some of those characters, and I think about those characters often. There were people like Karr Shannon. He was one of those old columnists, too. He was there from the thirties [1930s] up until the mid-sixties [1960s]. I got to know him when I first got there. He was very old. He got to be a real fan of mine, and I sort of was his, too. I found out he had done things like—he carried on a correspondence over *decades* with [journalist and social critic] H. L. [Henry Louis] Mencken. This was Karr Shannon of the *Arkansas Democrat*. He told me himself that he used to steal Mencken's columns—Mencken wrote for the *Baltimore Sun*—and he'd run them in the *Democrat* as his *own column*!

ML: [Laughs]

BL: And I said, "Well, you can't do that, Karr!" He said, "Well, I never could write it



that *good!*" So he'd just do it. And his thought wasn't [that he was] plagiarizing or anything, it was just that this guy had said it good, so why not just *repeat* it? So he would do that. And, apparently, Mencken didn't take offense, either, because they had just the pleasantest correspondence. Mencken was that way. He never failed to respond to any letter he ever got.

ML: Did you write to him?

BL: No. He died before—he died in 1955, I believe. [Editor's note: Henry Louis Mencken died on January 29, 1956.] But I probably would have if I had been around.

ML: Do you get much mail?

BL: I don't get much mail. I remember Charles Allbright's great line, where he said, "A letter poured in." [Laughter] But I don't get a whole lot of mail. No. I do hear from some really strange, interesting people, though. [Laughs]

ML: By e-mail, as a result of your columns—in reaction to your columns?

BL: Yes. And, I don't know, different people—the people that I've really come to admire have written me over time, and I've gotten to know a lot of people that way. There are some really great people here in Arkansas that you never hear about. One of the best friends I ever had was Gene Newsom, the pollster who lived up at Bigelow. He was one of the most sophisticated, accomplished people I've ever known. I got to know him that way. I got to know Dee Brown. He was another one who was just—I just can't imagine anybody who's a better, more accomplished person than him—just the finest kind of man.

ML: That reminds me of the relationship between newspapers, journalism and history.

Do you have any thoughts . . . ?

[Tape Stopped]

BL: Well, I don't know. I've tried to do some history myself. I think newspapers *are* history. I don't think they *do* history; I think they *are* history. We make it every day as we go along. I'm sort of worried about what it's going to be—what's going to take our place because I don't think there are going to be many newspapers here in just a few years. I think it's going to be all television and [Internet] blogs and electronic stuff—that it's going to disappear. And I don't know what will replace it then. Anyway, I'm sorry we didn't talk about some of those characters any more than we did.

ML: Well, we have a little tape left.

BL: What I was going to tell you about Lelia Maude Funston, the Sunday school editor—she was an old spinster. There were a whole lot of them at the *Democrat* at that particular time. And they were still referred to by that term, and they even referred to *themselves* by that term a lot. Lelia Maude used to—she was . . .

ML: What's her name?

BL: L-E-L-I-A. Lelia Maude. M-A-U-D-E. Funston.

ML: F-U-N-S-T-O-N.

BL: Yes, that's right. She was the Sunday school editor, which—later, they made [that position] the religion editor. She did a weekly column of—it would be the Sunday school lesson for all the readers. She was in the new regime, too. She was another one of those who didn't like it. She got into a memo-writing contest with Tucker and Ralph Patrick on the city desk. She'd write them memos criticizing

something they'd done to her copy, and it would have a little Bible verse attached to it. So Tucker started looking up Bible verses to fit on his replies to her. They had quite a little duel going on there. I took that and put it in the novel that I wrote, where it became a kind of shorthand where these two people were arguing, and they just threw chapter and verse at one another without even saying what the passage said. I mean, everybody would just say, "21:3." [Laughs]

ML: Tucker, of course, left newspapering entirely.

BL: Yes.

ML: A lot of people did. A lot of people kind of passed through it and went on to ad agencies or corporate America in some form or other.

BL: Yes. A lot of the *Gazette* people did that because they didn't have anywhere to go. That was a pretty big organization at the time it folded.

ML: And a lot of them went to other newspapers—a lot of them scattered—a lot of people passed through the *Democrat*, in particular, I think. I don't know about . . .

BL: Yes, they did. They sure did.

ML: . . . if it was that the *Gazette* folded so much, but it seemed to drop a lot of people in who stayed maybe a year—didn't stay long—or went on to other good things—in newspapers.

BL: Yes. I remember—another thing about Foreman coming in and trying to help these older people any way he could to make this hard transition [easier] for them. He figured out a way that Miss Funston and Miss [Inez] McDuff could retire and actually make more money than they were making at the *Democrat*. So he took this proposal in to Marcus George—another example of Marcus's inability to deal

with *anything*—he took this proposal in to Marcus and said, "I've figured out a way we can retire these ladies, and it will even benefit them in the long run."

Marcus listened and thought about it a minute, and he said, "Okay, we'll do it when it *snows*." And Gene said, "What do you mean, when it *snows*?" And Marcus said, "Well, I just couldn't let them go myself, but I can tell somebody when it comes a real snowstorm, and they have to fight their way to get down here, I can tell them, 'Boy, it sure would be *nice* if you could stay home on a day like this. In fact, we've got a way you can *do* that!'" [Laughter] For all I know, they were around until the first day that it snowed. That's the kind of thing that Gene had to deal with, but he was the kind of person who could edit and be an editor and could handle just about anything. He was a great editor.

ML: If you've got some other folks—I know that the purpose of this is to pin down not only your own memories of your career, but the atmosphere—the work of the paper—the other personalities who made it. So if you have other folks you want to talk about, please do.

BL: Well, I don't, really. I just hate to see the generation that was at the paper when I first went there—which was about to pass on—I just hate to see it not remembered *at all*, because there's not going to be much history about those people. You know, they were a different kind of people with a different—they put out a different newspaper. They lived in a different world. And there were things about a lot of them that these later people did not understand and did not like. I was always fascinated by them, and I was interested in them, and I just hate to see them not remembered somehow. I don't think there's anybody much left to re-

member them, you know?

ML: But their papers exist—all the newspapers they put out are there.

BL: Yes, but, you know, I think those people were better than the sum of their newspapers, somehow. [Laughter] Karr Shannon's columns, for instance, are just, by and large, pretty bad. The news stories that Bobbie Forster did just weren't very good. But those were real people who did interesting things and had interesting lives, and their world was—in a lot of ways, it was a better world than ours. And their journalism, while it's a lot different from ours, had things about it that were great, too, and we shouldn't let those things . . .

ML: I'd like to have you comment on both of those things. What do you mean, "their world in a lot of ways was better," and "their journalism in a lot of ways was better?"

BL: The world in the thirties [1930s] and forties [1940s] was—well, you know how different it was from the world today. It was much more insular, but the newspapers had come out of the nineteenth century and had, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, turned into much broader-minded, one-world kind of institutions. They had shrunk the world down so that even in Arkansas people could be as cosmopolitan in their interests, in their ideas, in their standards, in their culture, as people *anywhere*. And the newspapers had a lot to do with that. These people came out of that world—the world when, suddenly, it *was* one world—you could get news instantly, and breaking news *mattered*. And opinions—there was a small enough number of people expressing literate political opinions so that it *mattered*. It *mattered* what the individual people said. We got in right at the end

of that period. The world became something else, maybe, right when I got into newspapering, which was when Kennedy was killed. It became something *else*. It became something else really quick, and it has since become something else *again*. It's pretty easy to think back to those old days and to think that those people were sort of quaint and that their journalism was naïve and unsophisticated and [that] those people didn't know the stuff that we know today, but that's just not the *truth*. They did their thing, and, in a lot of ways, they did it better than we can do it.

ML: Thank you, Bob.

[End of Interview]

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