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Arkansas Democrat Memories

By Jerry McConnell
Greenwood, Arkansas
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Working for the *Arkansas Democrat* in the middle of the twentieth century was a test of anyone's dedication to journalism. Poor wages, six-day weeks, lack of fringe benefits, lack of air conditioning and other amenities made it eventually a frustrating experience. I wouldn't have missed it for anything. It was a good place to learn, there were some great people with whom to share your suffering, and we had some fun. We sometimes did a good job of reporting the news, some of which might not have been reported without us.

I went to work for the *Arkansas Democrat* in June 1951, two days after graduating from the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville with a Bachelor of Science degree in journalism. My starting salary was \$45.12 a week for a six-day week. I did not figure out until years later that I was making less than a dollar an hour and was probably making just a few cents an hour over the federal minimum wage of 75 cents an hour.

I took the job because I thought it would be good for my career to start work at a major metropolitan daily, even if it was not the biggest paper in town, and Little Rock was not the biggest metropolitan area (and I still think I was right), and because my

girlfriend Jo Davis (now my wife) lived in Little Rock.

For its size, Little Rock was one of the best newspaper towns in America. It still had two locally owned, family owned newspapers that competed diligently against each other for the news, even though one, the *Arkansas Gazette*, did have the edge. Thus there was a strong interest in local affairs and local news by the ownerships of both papers. There was also a strong newspaper tradition in Little Rock. The *Gazette* was considered the oldest, continuously publishing daily newspaper west of the Mississippi River and the *Democrat* had been publishing since the 1870s. Some newspaper historians think that the *Democrat* was even the better, more progressive newspaper in the late years of the nineteenth century.

The *Democrat* building then was where it is now, on the southwest corner of Fifth (or Capitol) and Scott Streets. The newsroom was on the second floor and it looked as though it hadn't changed in decades although it had only been in that location, in an old YMCA building, since 1930. The floor was well-worn hardwood that was oiled to keep down the dust. To clean it, the janitors sprinkled sawdust on it to absorb the other dust and then swept it with big push brooms. In the hot weather, they kept the windows open and had big fans sitting around the room, which stirred up a breeze and everything else. Before noon, you could run your hand across your forehead and wipe off the grime. Some people said the fans edited more copy than the editors.

After a few weeks of training on the city desk, and helping out in the sports department, my first assignment was to cover the Little Rock police and fire department beats. I had never even been in a police station before, so you could say that I started at the bottom of the learning curve: particularly so because the guy who was supposed to

teach me the beat had never learned it himself.

During my first weeks at the *Democrat*, I mainly sat at the city desk and helped edit other reporters' copy. I do recall two specific reporting assignments during that period. Once I was told to go down to the Hotel Marion (which used to be where the Peabody is now) and cover a noon luncheon speech to some civic club by Gov Sid McMath and to make the earliest edition possible. I think the *Democrat* had about six or seven different editions each day then. The one advantage an afternoon paper had over a morning paper (some people thought) was that the stories people read when the paper was delivered in the afternoon were about events that happened that day, whereas the morning paper was reporting events a day old. Therefore the editors wanted to cram as many new stories as possible in each edition. I was told that I would have to make a 12:30 p.m. deadline. I pointed out that by the time they ate lunch and the governor had made his speech, it would be after 12:30.

"Here's how you work it," said one of the editors, perhaps the city editor Alan Tilden, whom I liked and respected. "Politicians always carry extra copies of their speeches, so just ask the governor for a copy and go down to the phone in the lobby and dictate a story."

So I hustled on down to the Marion, and when Governor McMath arrived, I approached him with some trepidation (I had never met him before) and asked him for a copy of his speech. He said he had only one. I explained what I wanted to do.

"Here, I'll loan you this one, as long as you get back up here as soon as possible," he said.

I rushed down to the lobby, located a phone and began to look over the speech.

There wasn't time to go back to the office, or even to type out a draft. Some newspapers at that time had rewrite people, who took notes from the reporter in the field, and then wrote the story. The *Democrat* had no rewrite people, and there really wasn't time anyway. What you have to do in those cases is to just dictate a story, composing it in your head as you go along. I had never done that before and I suspect I may have been a little slow at it.

When I raced back upstairs I found that all the club members and the governor were sitting there, waiting for me. They had finished lunch, and it was time for the governor to talk and I had his speech. I apologized and, as I recall, the governor was very gracious about it.

The other story I remember happened late one afternoon, shortly before the final edition. We'd learned somehow that a young man from Little Rock had been killed in a car wreck near Pine Bluff. An editor told me to call his home and see if I could find out any information about him.

In those days the police did not notify the next of kin before they released victims' names. I called his home, and his mother answered. I asked her if she knew so-and-so. I heard her gasp, and say yes, and ask if there was anything wrong. "Oh hell," I thought, "she doesn't know." There was no way to back out then and I had the unpleasant task of telling her over the phone that her son had been killed. As I remember, I think I did get some information out of her about her son.

I was sent to the police beat to replace John Scudder, who had at one time been an excellent reporter and writer who had worked his way up to covering the state Capitol and writing a column about politics. Scudder, however, had become an alcoholic and

management's strange decision was to remove him from the capitol beat and assign him to the police beat.

John was a hell of a nice guy, and he never became belligerent when he was drunk, which was most of the time. His typical breakfast, other reporters told me, was a glass of milk and two bottles of beer. John was a veteran of World War II, the South Pacific campaign I think, and I suspect that may have had something to do with his problems. Even the police liked him, although he sometimes embarrassed them. He lived in the Hotel Grady Manning at this time, and sometimes the police would discover him stumbling around the streets at night, and they would pick him up and take him back to the hotel, although they were arresting other people in similar condition for public drunkenness.

At that time, much unlike the present day, newspaper people were given free reign in the police department offices. We could wander behind the desk where police booked people for various crimes. The wooden desk was a high one, perhaps so the drunks being booked could lean on it with their elbows. At any rate, the chair the desk sergeant used was also a high one, somewhat like a bar stool without arms. Once Scudder was sitting in the chair, he urinated on it and himself. That may have been the time that Abner Hay, the jailer, told him, "John you know you're kind of an embarrassment to us. You're standing behind the desk here with us, and you're drunker than people we are throwing in jail for being drunk."

I suppose the editors must have decided that it was a mistake to put John on the police beat, and that was why I was assigned to replace him, or maybe it was because they often started rookies on the police beat. They brought Scudder back to the office to

work as a general assignment reporter, where he also was assigned to do rewrites of stories that had appeared in the *Arkansas Gazette* that morning. John kept that job until one day he made fourteen mistakes in a three-paragraph rewrite, and he was finally fired.

John was not the first drunk to work the police beat for the *Democrat*, nor at a lot of other papers, I suspect. The veterans on the staff, as well as the police and firemen, used to regale me with stories about Bill Rose, who had been a police reporter at the *Democrat* for several years and a really good one, they said. Bill, they said, became such an alcoholic that he would sometimes use all of his pay to buy liquor. At such times he would be unable to pay for the room or apartment he rented and would be evicted. On some of those occasions, he would live in the Central Fire Station, next door to city hall, which housed the police department. He would sleep on the stacks of coiled hose, firemen told me. At least it was handy when there was a fire. Sometimes when there was a fire alarm Bill would get up and jump on the fire truck and ride it to the fire. That went on until one day he jumped on to the side of the big ladder truck. When the truck made a turn from Markham onto Broadway, Bill lost his grip and went rolling down the street. He apparently wasn't seriously hurt, but the city still issued an edict that reporters could not ride on fire trucks any more. I always regretted that, because there were several times when I was in the station when the alarm went off, and I would have loved to hook a ride on the fire truck.

At that time the *Democrat* was an afternoon paper six days a week, but published a Sunday morning edition. The typical schedule called for most reporters to report at 7:30 a.m. and do rewrites. The editors came in earlier and clipped stories out of the *Arkansas Gazette*, the morning paper, which had a larger staff. They were given to the

reporters in whose purview they fell, and the reporters simply rewrote them unless they felt the stories needed further checking, which was seldom. These were usually minor stories. A major one would be passed to the reporter with instructions to follow up on it. After finishing the rewrites, many of the reporters trooped out for breakfast or coffee before moving on to our regular duties.

The regular breakfast place for our group was Lane Drug Store, on the northeast corner of Fifth and Main, just a block away. A few, notably the state Capitol reporters, may have gone to Walgreens, just across the street. We would sit together and talk and drink coffee, and a few would have breakfast. One time we decided that we were bored going to the same place every morning, and we decided to shift to Franke's, an excellent cafeteria, which was then located in the next block on the west side of Main. The only problem with that choice, it turned out, was that the *Democrat's* owner, K. August Engel, had breakfast there every morning with his friends, who apparently started asking him how his staff ever got any work done. Engel then issued an edict that we could not have breakfast at Franke's anymore, although we could have it anywhere else. We went back to Lane's. The morning breakfast or coffee was not as irresponsible as it may sound. We usually arrived there by 8 a.m. or a few minutes before, and since most offices did not open until 8 a.m., we knew it would be awhile before there was any new news. We were a close group. There were always a lot of young, unmarried reporters on the *Democrat* staff because once they started getting some experience and honing their skills and making contacts, they moved on to better paying jobs, either to other newspapers or in related professions such as public relations and advertising.

The *Democrat* at that time did not have a sick leave policy. Well, they had one, in

a way. There wasn't any sick leave. I learned that the hard way. After a couple of years on the job, my wife and I moved into a duplex on Pearl Street near Stifft Station [residential area]. Once, after dark, I was taking out the trash. There was a two-car garage, with no doors, behind our duplex and the garbage can was just to the far side of it. There was an alley beyond that and across the alley there was a driveway on a medium incline up to a carport. Just as I dumped the trash, I noticed that the car in the carport was rolling backwards, without any lights on. I thought someone was driving and planned to back into the alley, so I stepped back just behind a pickup truck. The car kept coming, and by the time I realized it was driverless, it was too late. I moved back against the bumper of the pickup and turned sideways. The car hit something and veered backwards toward me, and my legs were caught between the two bumpers. The car bounced away, and I fell to the ground. My legs were numb, but I did not feel as though anything was broken. For awhile, I couldn't stand up. Moments later my wife Jo came outside, calling my name. I answered and told her I had been hit and couldn't walk. She helped me into the house, by which time I could hobble along a little.

I still didn't feel as though any bones were broken (they weren't), and I planned to go to work the next morning, but when I stood up out of bed in the morning, my legs collapsed and I fell to the floor. The muscles were so traumatized they wouldn't support me. Jo called the office and told them what happened and told them I would not be to work that day. Later in the day the assistant city editor (I think it was Gene Herrington) called and said I needed to come to work the next day. I said I didn't think I could walk. He said he understood, but if I did not come in they couldn't pay me.

“If you can just get down here, you can just sit at your desk all day and just do

rewrites,” he said.

So Jo went out and got me a set of crutches, and helped me into the car and helped me up to the office at the *Democrat*. And I sat there all day and maybe did two rewrites, and I got paid. Since I had foolishly talked Jo into quitting her job when we were married, we needed the money.

When I started at the *Democrat* the company paid us every Friday, in cash. I guess the company felt they saved money by not writing checks. Usually, the whole reportorial crew would descend on the paper about lunchtime, collect our wages and head for the bank. The banks might have been closed if we had waited until after work. I guess we didn't want to carry all that big money around all weekend. I always thought that was very unusual, but I learned later that the *Gazette* had done it the same way for years, but had quit by this time.

In college, I had actually intended to become a sports writer. During my senior year I was co-sports editor of the school paper, the *Arkansas Traveler*, and I was the Razorbacks correspondent for Orville Henry, the sports editor of the *Gazette*. Orville asked me to check with him when I graduated, and I did, but at that time he didn't have an opening, so I wrote a letter of application to the *Democrat*. I never even interviewed for the job.

The *Democrat* didn't have an opening in sports, either, but told me they had an opening on the news side, and I could have it if I wanted it. I did. It was sort of happenstance that I went into journalism anyway. I had been better at math than at language in high school, but I couldn't think of a way to make money in math. The only teacher who really tried to guide me toward a profession was my English teacher, and she

kept telling me that I should be a writer. I had always been a reader, so I guess that had some appeal.

I was born in a farmhouse in the Oak Grove area, which was part of a community called Cornish, which was located in the area in Sebastian County that now comprises Fort Chaffee. This was 14 years before there was an army camp there. My father Ellis M. (Bun) McConnell was a farmer when I was born in 1927, but he took over the general store at Cornish in December 1929, two months after the big stock market crash, and nursed it all the way through the [Great] Depression. My mother was Thelma Davis, who had graduated from high school at Greenwood, had attended college briefly, and had taught school for a few years before she married my dad. Both came from large families that had settled in the area and stayed, until the government ran them out to build an army camp in 1941.

My father's family had settled there first. There were thirteen children in that family, eleven of whom lived well into adulthood, and ten of those eleven were boys. All ten boys were sports fans and several of them were good athletes and used to play with me often when I was a kid. There were eleven children in my mother's family, and they all survived into adulthood. I attended school for my first six years in the Cornish school, which had two rooms, with three grades and one teacher in each room. Cornish was part of the Greenwood school system, so I attended the last six grades in Greenwood, where I graduated in 1945. I was awarded a full football scholarship to the University of Arkansas, but unfortunately football and other sports and games of chance were about the only things I was interested in, and I was put on academic probation at the end of my freshman year and lost my scholarship. I then enlisted in the Army, so I could receive the

GI Bill, and was assigned to the Army of Occupation in Berlin, Germany, in 1947, at about the time the Cold War was beginning to heat up, especially in Berlin. I was assigned to the 16th Constabulary Squadron (Separate), which was designed to police the peace in Germany. My contribution was to play baseball and football for a service team in Berlin. I got out of the Army in January 1948, and returned to school in Fayetteville, where they told me I had to pick a major. There were a lot of things that interested me, from science to history to sports, but sportswriting sounded like the most fun, and so I chose journalism.

In truth, I did not think either of our journalism professors were great teachers. My friends and I really liked Joe Thalheimer, but he was a little dry. I thought W.J. Lemke, the head of the department, was talented but was just coasting, and he seemed far more interested in his old students than his new ones. I also thought he had lost his zeal for the newspaper profession.

In my junior year I started to work for the *Arkansas Traveler*, and fortunately there were several students on the *Traveler* staff who had a background on real newspapers, and I guess they indoctrinated me with their zeal for newspaper work. These included Bob McCord, who had worked at the *Arkansas Democrat* since the ninth grade; John Troutt, whose family owned the *Jonesboro Sun*; Jimmy Jones, whose family owned the *Batesville Guard*; Charlie Allbright, who had also worked at the *Democrat*, and my roommate, Charlie Rixse, who was as keen on the profession as any of them. For some reason, there was a period there of about four years after World War II when the UA journalism department was loaded with students who would go on to make their marks in journalism, as well as other professions. In addition to the ones I mentioned, there was

Mort Stern, who went to work for the *Arkansas Gazette* and became editor of the *Denver Post*; Bob Douglas, who became managing editor of the *Gazette* and then head of the UA journalism school; and Bill Shelton, the legendary city editor at the *Gazette*.

So when I graduated, and couldn't find a sports job, I was eager to try "real" news.

Being assigned to the police beat at the *Democrat* was one of the best things that every happened to me. I learned to be thorough, industrious and accurate. One reason I learned that was because my competition was Joe Wirges of the *Gazette*. Joe was a legend, deservedly. He had covered the police beat for the *Gazette* for more than thirty years, he knew the police and they knew him, and trusted him. They would tell him things they might not tell another reporter. Joe covered every execution that was carried out in Arkansas while he was working for the *Gazette*, and he became close friends with Lee Henslee, the prison warden. At first Joe occasionally came up with a story that I had missed. Once, the office took me to task for not coming up with a story on a fatal accident handled by the state police. I told them I didn't know I was supposed to check the state police. No one ever told me.

So I learned to start checking every possible avenue for information. I called the state police periodically, I called the ambulance companies, I called the emergency rooms in all the hospitals, I checked the police radio logs (they would let you do that then, not now), I checked the police blotter where reports were filed, and I checked the books where people were charged and booked into jail. I also tried to establish a rapport with all the policemen.

Another reason I learned to be careful was that the U.S. Supreme Court had not

yet ruled, as it did later in *Times v. Sullivan*, that you could not libel a public figure unless it could be proven you printed erroneous information and did so willfully and maliciously. Just being wrong was not enough. But it was enough back then, if the information was damaging to a reputation. On the police beat, you were always covering stories that were damaging to someone's reputation. So I made it a habit of checking my facts at least three times.

One other thing I learned on the police beat was how to concentrate. The city hall provided a pressroom for us on the second floor. Inside we had a couple of desks and typewriters and a Teletype machine similar to those used by Western Union. It had a keyboard, and you could type your story on it and it would print out back in the office. There were three of us who used it: myself, the city hall reporter, and the reporter covering the county courthouse, which was only a block away. So you weren't supposed to take up much time on it, and some reporters typed out their copy on a typewriter and then copied it on the teletype. Because I couldn't touch type (and still can't), I hated to do it twice, so I learned to organize the story in my mind and just type it out once on the Teletype.

Just behind the pressroom was a large paved parking lot. Workers spent much of one summer breaking up the concrete with jackhammers. Since the pressroom was not air conditioned, you couldn't keep the windows closed in really hot weather, and sometimes it sounded as though the jackhammers were in the room with us. I had to learn to shut out the noise and concentrate on what I was trying to write. I learned to tune out almost all noise. Years later reporters would laugh at me about my concentration. I would be working on a story, and someone would ask me a question. They said I might

go on typing for maybe five minutes, as though I had never heard them, and then look up and answer the question.

I worked days Monday through Friday, but on Saturday, I worked the night shift, from about 4:30 to 1:30 a.m. or so. Someone else covered the day shift on Saturday. Whoever had been covering the Saturday day shift resigned, and for a few months I covered all seven shifts, starting about 7:30 a.m. Saturday, taking an hour or so off for dinner in the afternoon and then working until 1:30 a.m. Truthfully, I can't remember if they paid me overtime for the extra shift, but I doubt it.

Joe Wirges and I, of course, went head-to-head on Saturday nights. After awhile, we became friends. Once we were sitting in the radio room, and the radio operator had a call to a shooting ten or eleven blocks out on West Capitol, not too far away.

“Let's go,” said Joe, and we ran out and jumped in his pickup.

We beat the police and the ambulance to the scene, and when we arrived we could see the victim, a fairly young white man, sitting in a chair on the front porch of a big, old two-story frame house that was now a rooming house. He was wearing a white shirt, and his head was slumped forward and he wasn't moving. There was a small circle of blood, about the size of a bullet, on his shirt, about where I thought his heart would be. It turned out the bullet went just under his heart. A pistol laid on the floor near the chair, at a spot where he likely would have dropped it. Joe and I went on inside and started talking to people in the house. They told us the man had been depressed and apparently shot himself. We went back outside and could see the man was still breathing, but apparently still unconscious. About that time the ambulance crew arrived and one of the attendants touched the man's arm and said, “Can you walk, Buddy?”

Two detectives arrived about that time and asked Joe and me what had happened. We explained that it seemed like a pretty clear case of attempted suicide.

“Hell, since you all already have all the information, why don’t you just write up the report for us,” said one of the detectives.

So when we returned to the police station, Joe and I collaborated on writing the police report and then placed it on the blotter. As I said, times were different then.

Another time, sometime after midnight, a call came in that there was a big fire about Seventh or Eighth and Louisiana [streets]. Joe and I raced up there again. We discovered that there had been a fire in a rooming house and that some of the people had been trapped for a few minutes. One woman in a room on the second floor had taken a bureau drawer, put a pillow in it, put her baby on top of the pillow, and dropped it out the window to a man standing below and he caught it. The woman was later able to escape. The man’s name was George Fisher, and he was working at the time for Southwestern Bell Telephone, which was nearby. I interviewed him, and that was the first time I met the man who later became the *Gazette*’s, and the state’s, best editorial cartoonist.

Wirges was able to give me some insight into how the *Gazette* worked, compared to the *Democrat*, and the *Democrat* did not always fare well in such comparisons. Both papers ran lists of all the marriage licenses issued and divorces granted in Pulaski County, as well as those arrested for driving under the influence of liquor. Not often, but occasionally, a name on the list of divorces or arrests would fail to make it into the *Democrat*, which meant that some editor had removed it. I bitched about this one time to Joe and asked him if that ever happened at the *Gazette*. He said, “No, the *Gazette* had a policy that if you ran one name, you ran them all.”

There was one occasion, though, where both papers failed a test of editorial correctness. When Winthrop Rockefeller first moved to Arkansas in 1953, I began hearing whispers around the police station about his liquor supply. Eventually I was able to piece out the details that among the items being moved were three truckloads of alcohol. State revenue agents had confiscated the trucks because Rockefeller had not paid Arkansas taxes on the alcohol. Eventually, I talked to the state agents, and they told me that, as you might expect, the load contained some very expensive liquor, even some indicating that it came from the stock of John D. Rockefeller, Winthrop's grandfather. I also discovered that Joe Wirges had been onto the story, but I knew it hadn't run in the *Gazette*. I asked Joe about it, and he said the *Gazette* had decided not to run the story because some of Winthrop's friends had prevailed on the *Gazette* not to publish it. Even though I was pretty sure that Rockefeller had not paid the taxes because he was unable to do so and that it was probably an oversight, I still thought it was a story.

So I rushed up to the *Democrat* with the information and discovered that some of Rockefeller's Arkansas friends were meeting with the *Democrat* officials at that very moment. When they finished the meeting, the editors told me that the *Democrat* would not run the story, either. Rockefeller's friends had made the case that Rockefeller might back out of his plans to move to Arkansas if he ran into such negative publicity. I didn't agree with the decision, but I understood their point. I think the editors really felt that Rockefeller's move might benefit the entire state, and it did.

To be fair to the *Democrat*, I must say that they gave me a \$5 a week raise every six months for the four-plus years I worked there on that tour of duty, and they once gave me a \$5 bonus raise, which people told me was just about unheard of. That came about

because of my work on a story of a terrible house fire. I came in early one cold winter morning and was told there had been a fatal house fire out on Crystal Hill Road, which was then well out in the country. They said that the fire had apparently killed several people. They had at first assigned the story to Leo Martin, the county courthouse reporter, but he told them he didn't want to do it. So they asked me, or told me, and I said, "Yes." They told me to try to get photos of the victims if I could.

Ferd Kaufman, a real gung-ho photographer (as well as a gung-ho driver), and I drove out to the scene. By that time the house had burned to the ground and the only people around were firemen and sheriff's deputies. They said that there had been ten members of the family and that at least six of them were dead, and the rest had been taken to Baptist Hospital. They said that the father apparently tried to start a fire in a wood-burning stove, and had by mistake thrown gasoline on it, and it exploded. I asked if they knew where other members of the family were. They told us. It wasn't far away.

When we arrived and knocked on the door of the small wooden home and were admitted, there must have been twenty people in the living room, crying and consoling each other, and it was immensely hot in the room. I felt a little embarrassed and timid about intruding on all that grief, but I did. I introduced myself and asked them to name the members of the family, and then I asked if they had any photos. The family seemed happy to comply and eventually came up with photos of all ten. That was when I learned the lesson that many other reporters have learned: that people are pleased that you care enough about their departed relatives, and they are really usually willing to talk about them.

Fred and I rushed back to the paper; I turned in the photos and wrote the story. I

then went to the police station and called the hospital and asked how the four survivors were doing. They said three of them were in critical condition but one, a young girl, wasn't hurt as badly. I called the hospital before each edition deadline, and on three such occasions found that another victim had died. So I rewrote the lead to the story three times. I asked how the other survivor was doing, and they said she was doing well. I asked if we could interview her to find out what happened. The doctor said he thought we should wait awhile. Finally, I talked to the doctor about 3:30 p.m. He said that he now thought it was okay for us to talk to her. It was past our final deadline, and so the *Gazette* would get the story first if we did the interview then.

“Well,” I said, “I know she has had a tough day, so why don't we just wait until tomorrow morning to talk to her?” The doctor said that would probably be for the best, so the next morning the *Democrat* sent out Charles Allbright to do the interview. That's the same Charles Allbright who later wrote a very popular column for the *Gazette* and then the *Democrat-Gazette*. Charlie always had a marvelous touch on feature stories, and he did a great one. After that, the *Democrat* decided we should establish and promote a fund for the girl, and we eventually raised more than \$12,000.

At any rate, the *Democrat* had called me into the office the previous afternoon and told me they were giving me a \$5 raise on the spot.

One of the real characters on the staff then was C. C. Allard, who was editor of the Sunday magazine. One day we were standing side-by-side in the restroom using one of the old-fashioned urinals. Apropos of nothing, he said, “Do you know the biggest mistake I ever made? Margaret Mitchell sent me her first draft of *Gone with the Wind*, and I sent it back to her and told her I didn't think it would sell.” I never knew if there

was any truth to that story.

Allard later was deposed as the editor of the Sunday magazine because the editors suspected he was trading mention in the magazine for small gifts and was replaced by McCord. So did the editors fire him? No, they first put him on other reporting assignments, but I think they did eventually let him go or he left on his own volition.

As I said, I still think working the police beat was good experience. It did produce some great human-interest stories. It just didn't produce them very often. After a year or two on the beat, I caught myself thinking that I wished something really dramatic would happen, like a juicy murder or a big fire. I also started feeling a little cynical about human nature. After all, about all the people I dealt with, besides policemen, were drunks, prostitutes or common criminals. It began to wear on me, and maybe even depress me a little, so I asked to be taken off the beat.

The editors complied and moved me back to the office to work on what was called general assignment, covering stories that did not fall on a regular beat, or events that occurred unexpectedly.

One of my assignments demonstrated, for me, another problem brought on by low pay; the paper's inability to hire specialists for dealing with complex or difficult stories. I was sent to cover a speech by Raymond Moley, who at that time was a columnist for *Newsweek* magazine, but at one time filled a key role for Franklin D. Roosevelt. Moley, a professor at Columbia University, had been chosen by Roosevelt to help pick people who would hopefully help guide the country out of the Great Depression. Moley picked and became a member of what became known as Roosevelt's "brain trust." His speech covered a lot of what to me were abstruse or arcane economic issues. I had no idea what

he was talking about. Fortunately, the speech had occurred in the afternoon, and I didn't have to produce a story until the next day. I later called Moley at his hotel, asked him to explain what he had been saying. After I wrote the story, I violated one of the cardinal precepts of newspapers: don't let any subject read your story ahead of time. I called Moley again and read what I had written, to make sure that I had it correctly. I thought getting it right was more important than that old newspaper rule.

It occurs to me now that what was going on at the *Democrat* then may have been somewhat symptomatic of what was right and what was wrong with journalism at that point in time. The pay was so lousy that it was often impossible to keep good, talented people. Thus the editors often tolerated hard drinkers, as long as they were competent and could function when they were at work, and if they came to work on a fairly regular basis. For that matter, some editors were known to take a nip on the job. What they would not tolerate was dishonesty in reporting, and they were not fond of mistakes of any sort, and for the most part they really cared about their profession. You really had to care about your work and about the profession to tolerate the working conditions. And there were a lot of people who did care about their profession, even if some of them became disenchanted after awhile.

I suspect that the poor salaries were the reason a lot of newspaper people drank in those days, but not the only reason. Newspaper reporters and editors work under a lot of tension. They faced deadlines every day in which they had to produce a major story or put out a newspaper in a matter of minutes. I can remember receiving a copy of Orval Faubus's first inaugural address about fifteen minutes before deadline, and I was expected to produce something in those fifteen minutes.

The poor salaries did have one benefit for those of us who were newcomers to the staff. Because people kept quitting to take better-paying jobs, the rate of turnover was pretty high, which provided the opportunity for rapid advancement.

When I went to work for the *Democrat*, the two reporters assigned to cover state government, generally regarded as the best “beat” on the paper, were Ken Francis and Marcus George. In early 1954, Francis quit to take a job with Arkansas Louisiana Gas Company. R. B. Mayfield, who had been covering Little Rock city hall, replaced Francis. I was sent to city hall to replace Mayfield.

This happened during the reign of Pratt Rummel, the first Republican to be elected mayor of Little Rock since the Reconstruction period following the Civil War. I was later told that Rummel was a manic-depressive, but in truth he was a pretty good mayor. He was relatively handsome, well-dressed, friendly and personable, and he was honest. Once, when I was working the police beat, some young, well-dressed man was hauled in for being drunk, and he was obviously drunk. He kept insisting that he be allowed to call Pratt Rummel. He said he knew the mayor, and the mayor would get him off. He was allowed to make the call (he was too drunk to dial it himself), he made his plea, and then turned the phone over to the police. Rummel told them to throw the man in jail.

In 1954, Rummel decided he would run for governor as a Republican. His Democratic opponent was Orval Faubus, who had upset the one-term incumbent, Francis Cherry. I was assigned to cover Rummel’s campaign, following him around the state on some of his campaign trips. At one point, I was covering Rummel for the *Democrat*, and Sam Harris was covering him for the *Gazette*.

Harris was a state Capitol reporter at that time, but had once been the city editor of the *Gazette*. We were the only two reporters on the trip. At one stop, Rimmel was told that Faubus had attacked him on some point. Rimmel asked Sam and me how he should respond. I told him I didn't think that was my function. To my surprise, Sam agreed to help, and I think he composed a statement for Rimmel. Of course, everyone knew Rimmel didn't really have a chance of beating Faubus anyway.

After the election which Faubus won, of course, I was transferred to the Capitol to replace Marcus George, the nephew of Mr. Engel, who became the assistant city editor when the former assistant, Gene Herrington, replaced Tilden.

Every newspaper is replete with tales of classic boo-boos; either an unfortunate typographical error, or a real lapse in judgment. One of my favorites about the *Democrat* (or any other paper) involved Herrington, the assistant city editor. One of the downtown department stores had just installed an electric stairway, perhaps the first in Little Rock. A story in the *Democrat* called it an Escalator. Someone from the stairway company called and complained, saying that the stairway was not an Escalator; that Escalator was a brand name, and this particular stairway was some brand other than Escalator. Someone in the *Democrat* hierarchy then issued an edict that in the future, unless we were absolutely positive, the word Escalator should be changed to electric stairway.

Herrington, I was told, one day handled a story about letting a contract for a new Veterans' Administration hospital in Little Rock. The story said the contract included an escalator clause. Herrington allegedly changed it to say that the contract included an electric stairway clause. When I interviewed him for the *Democrat* oral history project in 2005, Gene said he could not recall that story. "It sounded to him," he said, "like

something that George Douthit might have started.”

My first real scoops on the police beat occurred in February of 1952. I had become fairly friendly with a bail bondsman (he was a cut above most of the other bondsmen), and he told me that a notorious convict, who had killed a sheriff, had been released from prison by Governor McMath by executive clemency. It was typical in those days for the state to announce the name of prisoners who received parole, but it did not announce the name of those who received executive clemency. Four days later, due to the same source, I was able to report that another convict, who had killed a state hospital guard with a gun smuggled to him by his brother, had been released on furlough. About two weeks later the state parole board voted to announce the names of convicts released through executive clemency.

Perhaps the biggest story I had been involved in, and one of the biggest ever, happened on March 21, 1952. I was working at the police station, and just before I was supposed to get off work, I called state police headquarters to make a final check for the day. The radio operator told me that there had been a tornado at Dierks in southwest Arkansas and that at least two people had been killed. I called the office and notified the editors. Then I went on up to the office just to see what was happening. The office had already dispatched Roy Bosson and Bill Secrest, two of our best reporters, to Dierks. I checked the state police again, and they said they had heard that perhaps several more people had been killed. The editors then decided to send me and Douthit, one of the real veterans on the staff, to Dierks, telling us to look for information for follow-up stories the next day. Douthit was noted for his speed in producing a story, although I didn't think he was always thorough, and he was a pretty good photographer. We drove to Dierks and

began gathering information until it was dark, and then Douthit decided we should stay in a hotel or rooming house in nearby Nashville. By that time we had been hearing on the radio that even more deadly tornadoes had struck other parts of Arkansas, and it seemed, as we listened, they kept adding new cities to the list. I told George that we should call the office and let the editors know where we were staying, or perhaps should head on back. He refused to do either one, and since I was many years his junior and was riding in his car, I couldn't do anything about it. I never did forgive him for that, I guess partly because I hated to miss a really big story and partly because I thought they might really need us, since we did have a somewhat limited staff. At least we could have called and given them the option. By coincidence, they were having a staff picnic that night at Boyle Park, and nearly all of the reporters were there. Later staff members regaled me with stories about how Deane Allen—a short, stocky, chunky state editor—played the all-knowing editor to the hilt by ordering different reporters and photographers to each site as the news came over the radio. It did turn out to be a hell of a story, the most people killed by tornados in one day in Arkansas history. I came up with a decent story from Dierks, where seven people were killed, but I knew it paled into insignificance compared to the 105 who were killed in other parts of the state.

After I was transferred to the state Capitol beat, I learned about hard-ball politics. The *Democrat* had incurred the enmity of Faubus and some of his crowd because it had reported heavily about problems within the state highway program. Faubus had been appointed to the state highway commission by McMath. Several state departments typically issued reports on various activities in their purview and some of those were newsworthy. Typically, I was told, the department would release the report one month in

the morning and the next month in the afternoon, giving the *Democrat* the break one month and the *Gazette* the next. Suddenly Mayfield and I discovered that these departments directly controlled by Faubus were holding all their reports until late afternoon, too late for the *Democrat*. In the ten months I covered the beat, this did not change. However, Faubus did not directly control some departments, and I worked hard to get an edge there.

This happened with the state highway department, which for years had been sort of the kicking boy of politicians. However, the people of Arkansas had just approved the Mack-Blackwell Amendment, which theoretically created an independent highway commission. People had been complaining that the administration was too involved in highway politics, so McMath himself proposed the amendment in an effort to take the governor out of highway politics. The amendment, which was approved in 1952, provided for five highway commissioners who would serve staggered ten-year terms. This, theoretically, would keep any governor from ever appointing a majority of the highway commissioners. No one expected that, right off the bat, Faubus would serve twelve years as governor, which would give him a chance to appoint a majority. The new commission brought in Herbert Eldridge from Texas as the new highway director, and he was indeed independent. One day I was sitting in his outer office and heard him tell his secretary he was going to take a nap. In a few minutes a state senator came by and wanted to see Eldridge. "He's going to be tied up the rest of the afternoon," his secretary said. The senator went away. I did develop some rapport with Eldridge, and he gave me the breaks on most of the big stories coming out of the highway department.

There may have been more than one reason why the Faubus folks had it in for the

Democrat, but I was pretty sure about one. In 1951, Roy Bosson had reported in the *Democrat* that the state highway department was planning to build a road in Madison County at a cost to the state of nearly \$500,000 and that if the state had chosen an alternate route, it would only have cost it about \$65,000. Bosson said the highway commission had sought financial help from the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads, which could have paid for fifty per cent of the project. The bureau turned the state down, but said it would provide help for a shorter and less expensive route that would have cost about \$130,000, half of which would be paid by the feds.

Bosson reported that the state had decided to go ahead with the more expensive route, which just happened to pass the farm of A. C. Mowery Jr., a member of the state highway commission. Mowery had been named to the commission by McMath to replace Faubus, who had resigned to become secretary to McMath.

In his original story, Bosson reported that highway commissioners are required by law to take an oath that they will not have any interest directly or indirectly in the location of a state highway and that a violation of that oath would be a felony.

That section had at first been in the third paragraph of Bosson's story. In one of those great journalistic imponderables, the editors apparently became worried about it being potentially libelous, and so removed it from the third paragraph and placed it at the bottom of the story. The location of that material did not make any difference when Mowery later sued the *Democrat* for libel. Ordinarily as the plaintiff Mowery would have been required to prove that the *Democrat* had in fact libeled him. Instead the trial judge ruled that by including that paragraph the *Democrat* had implied that Mowery committed a felony, which was libel per se, and therefore the *Democrat* would be

required to prove that Mowery had committed a felony. As I recall at the end of the trial, it took the jury thirteen minutes to rule in the *Democrat's* favor.

In early 1955, when the legislature went into session, Mayfield covered one house and Douthit covered the other. Thus it fell my lot to cover the governor's office, and Faubus was making a lot of news at that time. Periodically he would call a news conference in his office, and we soon learned it was very difficult, maybe impossible, to pin him down on any issue that was somewhat controversial. I remember once I kept asking him questions about some issue and became convinced that I had finally pinned him down. I rushed down to the newsroom to write my story, but when I started reading over my notes, I discovered that he had once again left himself an out. I rushed back to the governor's office and told his aides that I needed to speak to the governor for just a minute. There were times when they would have turned me down, but this time he met me in the hall. I told him that I thought he had been unclear about one matter, and asked him a question that would clear it up.

"I'll stick to the statement I made, Jerry," he said.

Actually, Faubus handled himself pretty adroitly in news conferences. At some point, some newsman pointed out that it was very difficult sometimes to pin him down, and Faubus replied, "I always leave a rabbit hole to duck into."

This was about the time that such news conferences changed forever, and not for the better, according to my way of thinking. Early on the governor might call a news conference and there would be three or four or five newspaper reporters there and possibly one radio reporter. We would all sit around and ask questions rather casually, and the governor would answer the same way. If the governor misspoke, he knew he

could correct himself and sometimes give us a fuller explanation. When television cameras started covering the press conferences the governor, or whomever, soon learned that TV was generally looking just for a sound bite, a short statement that they could put on the air in its entirety. At that time, newsmakers such as the governor became more careful about how they looked and more precise, even careful, in their reply, because they knew there might not be a chance to rephrase the statement. They put on their coat, tightened their tie and took their foot off the desk. The news conferences became more stilted, and I thought, even less informative than they had been in the past.

This was in 1955, and on May 31 the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its follow-up ruling to *Brown vs. Board of Education*, specifying that public schools should be desegregated with “all deliberate speed.” I thought this was a huge story, and I was eager to cover it. In fact, I had been covering it in the weeks leading up to the Supreme Court decision.

As part of my assignment at the Capitol, I had been covering the state Department of Education and had developed some rapport with Dr. Ed McCuistion, who had worked with the Negro schools for most of the twenty-four years since he had joined the department and had served as the director of the division of Negro education. McCuistion consulted frequently with black and white educators, and because I was interested and asked, he kept me informed about his and their thinking.

There was considerable speculation about which course the Court would choose to implement its ruling that segregated schools were unconstitutional. The Court had been presented with three different arguments. Black leaders had called for a fixed date, either September of 1955 or September of 1956 at the latest. Several Southern states had

argued against a fixed date and asked that district courts be given broad discretionary powers about when integration should be effected, figuring some district courts might not ever get around to it. The Eisenhower administration also argued against a fixed date, but said court decrees should insure that there would be bona fide progress towards integration.

The Court seemed to come down on the side of the Eisenhower administration when it ruled that schools should be desegregated with “all deliberate speed.”

There was some uncertainty at the start about what the Supreme Court meant by “all deliberate speed,” but not a lot of uncertainty among those who had been paying attention about the objective or to whom it applied, even though the bigots and demagogues tried to muddy the situation.

On June 1, I had the lead story in the *Democrat* after interviewing school superintendents from all over Arkansas. Most of them said they foresaw no major trouble arising from the Supreme Court decision. They thought integration would be accomplished fairly rapidly in districts with small black populations, but might be drawn out over a long period in districts with a heavy black population. Some hoped that in districts where there were a lot of blacks that the blacks could be persuaded to attend their own schools as long as they were equal.

A move in this direction was already underway in Arkansas, for whatever reason. Voters in the Helena district had approved a three-mill tax for a bond issue to build a modern Negro high school. However, it soon became clear that blacks now were not going to settle for equal facilities. Ozell Sutton, a reporter for the *Democrat*, reported that the Arkansas Teachers Association, an organization of black teachers, voted to

abandon its previous goal of separate but equal facilities and had decided to push for integrated schools.

Sutton, the first African American reporter hired by the *Democrat* or *Gazette* and still the only one at that time, had been with the *Democrat* since 1950, and had ably covered the news of blacks in Little Rock and across the state.

I reported that Virgil Blossom, the superintendent in Little Rock, said he was working on a plan for integration, but was not yet ready to spell out the details of the plan. McCuistion told me at some point that black leaders in some areas of the South thought that Little Rock should be the first major Southern city to be integrated because Little Rock had better race relations than most other Southern cities.

A few days later I interviewed all of the presidents of all of the state-supported colleges in Arkansas about whether the court ruling applied to the colleges as well as the secondary schools. The prevailing opinion was that it applied to all public education, but the opinion was not unanimous. Several of the presidents said they did not believe integration would be much of a problem at their institutions, but also indicated they weren't anxious to "pioneer" in the matter.

On June 5 I wrote a column that led the *Democrat* editorial section and spelled out what seemed to be the consensus among Arkansas's leading legal and school leaders. Here's how I summed it up:

"Integration is coming in all public schools, sooner or later,
as sure as death and taxes.

"Such integration may take several years in some areas, but
there is doubt that it can be dragged out indefinitely.

“District judges will give local school districts ample time to work out their problems, but the districts must show they are sincerely trying to integrate.

“Attorney General Tom Gentry is of the opinion, however, that the court did not have in mind allowing extra time for the adjustment of the thinking of the citizens.”

I should note that Ken Kaufman preceded me on the education department beat and he had also covered the proposed desegregation rather thoroughly. In fact, my hazy recollection is that the two of us covered the story in more detail than had the *Gazette* during that particular period. Ken, an excellent reporter and friend had decided that he wanted to get married, and he didn't think he could afford to get married on the *Democrat* salary. So he went to work for Southwestern Bell Telephone and eventually became the top public relations person for all of Southwestern Bell.

Not long after this I forfeited my chances at continuing to cover the story, but I doubt that I thought that the governor's office was going to become the hot spot in the integration battle. Faubus had been a somewhat liberal and progressive governor, and I saw no signs that he was a racist. I was surprised, like a lot of other people, when he called out the National Guard to block integration at Little Rock Central High School.

At about this time several *Democrat* reporters had started going to the Lafayette Hotel for lunch every Friday after we picked up our pay at the *Democrat* office. Those luncheons quickly turned into griping sessions, with everyone complaining about the terrible pay and working conditions at the *Democrat*. Finally, one day, in exasperation, I suggested that we quit complaining about the conditions and try to do something about

them. Someone asked me what I had in mind. I said that perhaps we might take a list of our grievances to Mr. Engel, or else try to form a union. Everyone seemed certain that neither approach would work, especially a union, and told tales about how Engel had headed off a union in the past. So I soon started looking for another job.

During my vacation in July, Jo and I drove to Texas, and I applied at the *Fort Worth Star Telegram* and the *Dallas Times Herald*, and I also approached United Press International. About a week after I returned, the *Times Herald* called and offered me a job, for \$5 more a week, but no moving expenses. I told them I couldn't afford to make the change. UPI also offered me a job, but at a minimum salary. UPI had a union, and their salaries were based on experience. They wanted to start me at one year's experience. I told them I had four year's experience, and I didn't think that was fair and turned them down.

At this time Sam Harris and Matilda Touhey were covering the Capitol for the *Gazette* and one day in the pressroom, one of them told me they heard I was looking for a job. I confirmed it and Sam asked me if I would like for him to set up an interview with A. R. Nelson, the *Gazette's* managing editor. I said, "Yes."

Nelson interviewed me and offered me a job on the spot, but he said he did not have an opening on the news side. He said he did have one in sports, and if I would take that, I could then have the first job that opened up in news. He offered me \$10 more a week for one day's less work than I was making covering the state Capitol for the *Democrat*. I took it. Later that same day UPI called me from Kansas City and said they had come up with an opening for a sports writer in the Kansas City bureau and offered me the job, and offered to start me at the four-year salary level, a fair amount more than

the *Gazette* offered. I told them I had just accepted a job at the *Gazette* and wouldn't feel right going back and turning them down.

I intended to go back into news after a reasonable period of time, but Orville Henry put me in charge of the high school beat, then the number two beat in sports (behind the Razorbacks, of course) and I started enjoying it. I suspect I may have enjoyed reporting positive news, rather than so much negative news, but in truth there were a lot of high school coaches who were fun to be around, and I liked watching young high school players develop and perform at a high level.

I stayed at the *Gazette* for sixteen years, but after about twelve years on the high school beat, Orville told me he was taking me off that and moving me into the office, where I would take over his duties of making out work schedules and assignments. I never knew anyone who worked any harder or longer than Orville, but he had had some health problems, and I suppose he decided he needed to slow down a little. I was, I guess, the assistant sports editor, but he never gave me that title. I didn't enjoy that work as much as I enjoyed covering games and events and dealing with sports issues, so after awhile I began to get restless.

At about this time, in 1971, officials at the *Democrat* asked me to come over and talk to them. This was three years after Engel had died, and I think I talked to Marcus George, the editor, and Stanley Berry, the publisher, with whom I had worked in my first stint at the *Democrat*. They offered me the job of managing editor, and I took it. I was hired to replace Gene Foreman, a great newspaperman and an old friend, who left to take a job at *Newsday* in New York. I suspect that I was not the first person who had been offered that job. Perhaps the others had thought to check the financial situation at the

paper before turning down the job. I don't think I even asked. I was ready for a new challenge, and I was ready to get back into "real" news. I probably was aware that the paper had been losing circulation, but I don't think I knew that it apparently was already losing money. I don't think anyone volunteered that information either.

I told Orville that I was going to take a job as the managing editor of the *Democrat*, and I told him I would give the paper three week's notice. Orville said that I was bound to be thinking about my new job, so I should make the move immediately. In other words, that was my last day at the *Gazette*. I have since been told that was a fairly common practice among the two papers, but I was a little upset by the abruptness of it. I thought the implication was that I couldn't continue to do my job at my previous level, and I didn't think that was true.

I held the managing editor's job for seven years, until August 1978, and those seven years constituted a period of mammoth changes in the newspaper industry, as well as at the *Democrat*. During that time the paper converted from hot type to cold type, became one of the early users of computers in preparing, editing and processing copy, underwent a change in ownership, underwent a union election in the newsroom and underwent a strike by the pressmen, and that's just for starters.

I was in the middle of most of those changes, except the strike, and I'm a little surprised now that I lasted as long as I did. Not only were we going through some of the biggest technological changes in the history of the newspaper business, but we were trying to do it on a shoestring because we were losing money throughout that period. Not only did the lack of money make the technological changes more difficult for everybody, those difficulties and low salaries meant that there was a steady flow of reporters and

editors leaving for other jobs, and hiring replacements was part of my job, too. It was also my job to go off to school and learn about computers and then to teach everyone in the newsroom how to use the computer terminals. And for awhile it was my job to bring the main computer back to life if it crashed when none of the technicians were around. At the same time, we were trying to make changes in the paper to make it more appealing to potential readers. It was also my job, not by my own choice, to represent management in the run-up to the union election.

This was also a period in which afternoon newspapers across the country were dying, and in retrospect the *Democrat* was dying, too. I knew it was struggling, but I'm not sure I ever knew it was dying. I must confess that I was one of those journalists, and there were a lot of them, who were only interested in finding the news and getting it printed. I never had any desire to own my own newspaper, and I never paid much attention to newspaper finances. I was, I guess, in one sense, a purist.

The *Democrat*, I suspect, was already dying when the old owner, K. August Engel, died in 1968, but I don't think his successors had given up. Marcus George and Stanley Berry, particularly George, wanted to try to revitalize the paper, so they hired Robert McCord away from the *North Little Rock Times*, which he owned, made him a part owner and installed him as associate editor and editor of the editorial page. Throughout much of Engel's tenure, the editorial page had been pretty bland and pretty cautious. My own view was that a typical editorial would try to analyze some problem and then would conclude, "Somebody ought to do something about this."

McCord was brought in to breathe life and character into the editorial page. To revamp the news sections, they brought in Foreman, the former *Arkansas Gazette* and

New York Times staffer, from Pine Bluff. He made a lot of significant changes, revamped the looks of the paper, made it more readable, improved the editing, hired a lot of bright young journalists and stepped on a few toes in the process. After three years, the *Democrat* was still losing circulation, and Foreman was about worn out, so when he was offered a job as executive news editor of *Newsday*, a major New York City newspaper on Long Island, he took it.

Not long before Foreman left, many members became unhappy with the pay and lack of fringe benefits and perhaps other issues, and began to discuss what to do about it. According to some of them, they talked about trying to form a union, but dropped that idea and decided to approach the owners with demands, or requests, for improvements. At that point Marcus called what became a somewhat famous meeting with the staff at the Lafayette Hotel. It became famous because of a “joke” Marcus told to start the meeting. According to several participants, he said, “Do you know how to make a dead baby float? Well, first you take two scoops of ice cream....” Some of the participants thought he said that, as a joke, in an effort to relieve the tension. Several of them also said they were appalled by his statement. In retrospect, I’m not sure he didn’t have a little deeper meaning; that trying to resurrect the *Democrat* was like trying to resurrect a dead baby. At any rate, the results of the meeting were apparently not altogether positive. One participant says George said the paper was going to have to retrench; others said he said he would try to make things better, but made no promises.

So Foreman left and I came on board on August 1, 1971. I should point out that McCord and I had been friends since our college days, when we were both journalism majors at the University of Arkansas. In our senior year, he was editor of the student

newspaper, the *Arkansas Traveler*, and I was co-sports editor with Charles Rixse, a job to which I was named by McCord.

I have since heard in recent years that some members of the staff were a little nonplussed that the *Democrat* hired someone from sports to replace Foreman, although no one ever said anything to me about it. I also heard that James Scudder, an excellent writer and editor, urged them to give me a chance.

Be that as it may, I was soon in the middle of running all phases of a news department, and that included copy editors, reporters, photographers, the sports department, the women's department, business writers and the Sunday magazine.

One of my first tasks, and it was a preview of what was to come, was to start replacing departing staffers. As I remember a few people soon left to follow Foreman to *Newsday*, and I think these included copy editors Dick Allen, Mary Lowe Kennedy and Bill Eddins, all good ones. Diane Gage left to go to the *Gazette* and it wasn't long before Bob Lancaster, a brilliant wordsmith, left to go to Harvard University for a year on a Nieman Fellowship, perhaps the most prestigious scholarship in journalism. Then Martin Kirby, who was a really good reporter and a bit of a prima donna, left to start his own alternative paper. At some point, Bill Terry, the wire editor, lost his temper and picked up his old Underwood typewriter and slammed it into the trash can. We had a shouting match and Terry soon left; he says I fired him.

I always felt you couldn't have a good newspaper without good people. And hiring good people really took time when you couldn't offer good salaries. I spent a lot of time going through resumes when I received applications, and I spent a lot of time looking for prospects when I didn't. I also spent a lot of time checking out references and

also in interviewing the prospects. I also sought input and advice from the various department heads, such as the city editor, the sports editor and the women's editor. It seems to me now that we may have been a little more competitive in salaries at the start of my tenure, and were able to hire some people with experience, which is always preferable because they have a track record you can check, and you ideally don't have to spend so much time training them. Of course, we couldn't hire people with a lot of experience and good credentials, because they could go to bigger papers for better salaries. So what we were is what the *Democrat* had nearly always been, an entry level paper where people came to get experience so they could go on to better jobs. So what I tried to do was find people with brains and language skills and the potential to advance, as well as the potential to do a good job rather quickly. What we hoped to do, perhaps unreasonably, was to put out a newspaper that was good enough to attract more readers and more advertisers, and thus earn more money, which could be plowed back into salaries and benefits, and thus be able to retain some of our best staff members.

McCord was a newspaperman at heart and he spent a lot of time studying other newspapers and going to meetings where they discussed recent innovations in newspapers. He stayed so involved that he eventually became national president of Sigma Delta Chi, the newspaper fraternity. What we tried to do was package the news better, so the reader knew where to find news that interested them, and to provide the reader with some of the news they wanted. At some point in the next year or so we started a TV magazine. Now almost every paper has one, but at that point the *Gazette* did not have one. And we switched our Saturday afternoon paper from afternoon to morning. Until then we had published six afternoon papers a week and Sunday morning paper.

In those days we were so short-handed that I had to work on Saturday morning and put out the afternoon edition myself; that is, I functioned as the news editor and picked the top stories and laid out the paper and supervised the copy editors. I quickly learned that we had trouble getting out the Saturday afternoon paper on time. The *Democrat* had a policy, which probably stemmed from Engel but had been carried on by George and Berry, that the deadline for accepting classified ads for the Saturday paper was 9 a.m. on Saturday. We were supposed to turn the last page at about 11:15 a.m., and that invariably was the last classified page, because we had to wait for those classifieds to be set into type and then placed on the page, and we didn't know how much room would be left on the page, so we had to have a bunch of stories with varying sized headlines to fill the hole. This made no sense to me because I could tell we didn't have very much classified from Saturday morning. I started complaining about it, but no one wanted to make a change. So I asked the composing room to start making proofs of all the classifieds that were sold on Saturday morning. It turned out to average about nine inches of type, not enough to pay one paltry salary, and we then got that policy changed and moved the deadline back to Friday evening.

At some point, either in late 1973 or early 1974, the editorial employees decided to seek a union at the *Democrat*, declaring they wanted to affiliate with the International Typographical Union (ITU). At about the same time, *Arkansas Gazette* employees decided to try to form a union affiliated with the Newspaper Guild. George and Berry were still in charge of the *Democrat* at that time and they soon approached me and told me they wanted me to be in charge of management's response against a union.

I was not overjoyed by that decision, partly because I feared the union attempt

might produce some tense times between employees and management, and I was in charge of managing all editorial employees, and partly because I had some sympathy with the employee effort to better their situation. After all, I had briefly considered a union myself when I was a struggling reporter. However, I did not think I had a lot of choice. After all, I was a part of management. The only way I could have avoided the job was to resign and seek a job in some other city, because the *Gazette* would not have been likely to hire someone who was obviously pro-union. I also thought it was a major mistake to try to affiliate with the ITU and I also feared a successful organizing attempt at that stage might put the *Democrat* out of business. So I decided to take on the job.

I thought it was a mistake to join the ITU because I did not think reporters and editors had a lot in common with the typesetters and compositors. I thought members of the ITU pursued a trade and we pursued a profession. It was their job to put the stories on the page in time to meet the deadline. It was our job to produce the stories and to try to get as much late news in the paper as possible. I didn't think they always showed much sympathy for that effort. I'm sure they didn't think we always showed a lot of sympathy for their efforts to meet the deadline. The ITU nationwide was also beginning to lose membership, which put more pressure on current members to pay enough dues to provide strike benefits and retirement funds. This was a time when newspapers were just beginning to switch over to computerized typesetting, which would soon make linotypes and other typesetting processes obsolete. I think the ITU could see this coming, and so it decided to try to seek members from other parts of the newspaper, and it had already launched efforts to organize the newsrooms at other newspapers.

I soon learned more about labor law than I ever wanted to know. George and

Berry hired veteran labor lawyer Gaines Houston as their attorney, as did the *Gazette*. He informed me that we could not promise anyone anything that even sounded like an inducement to keep them from joining the union, we could not threaten them with any action if they did vote for the union and we could not even ask them how they felt about the union. I really didn't want to know. By this time I had hired, or approved hiring, many of the members of our staff, and after this was over, I wanted to keep them, and I didn't want them suspecting that I might punish them for their stand. I had promised them at the start that I wanted to be fair and honest with them. I talked to all of our other editors and supervisors about what they could and could not say and urged them to be careful.

In trying to devise an argument against the union, I decided to learn all I could about how the ITU operated and how its organizing efforts elsewhere were going. By that time, the ITU had been behind organizing attempts at six other newspapers in the United States. I called all six newspapers (four voted for a union) and talked to the editors at length about how their elections had gone and what arguments they had used against the union.

While I was busy trying to decide my approach, George and Berry sold the newspaper to the Hussmans, who owned the old Clyde Palmer chain in south Arkansas, and Walter Hussman Jr. was put in charge of the *Democrat*. Walter retained me as the managing editor and told he wanted me to remain in charge of the management position in fighting the union.

By this time I had become concerned with Gaines Houston as our lead attorney. I feared that he would devote more time to the *Gazette* case because the *Gazette* was a lot

bigger paper with more employees and more prestige. I had also become concerned with his approach. He had been pushing me to take a tack that did not exactly violate the labor laws, but which I thought was pretty threatening and which I took as an effort to intimidate our employees. I wasn't sure that he understood that reporters and editors were a different breed from the type of people he had been used to dealing with, were generally well-educated, well-read, and taught to be skeptical about what they were told. I was pretty sure they would see through some of those arguments and react strongly against them.

After a lot of thought, and with some trepidation because I knew the Hussmans were philosophically opposed to unions, I went to Walter and told him I wanted to change lawyers. He asked me why, I told him, and he said okay. I have always admired Walter for making that decision, because I suppose it was somewhat of a gamble. It sure felt that way to me.

Our new attorney, Bill Toney was from a Tulsa firm that had experience in dealing with newspapers and had been used by the Hussman family in the past. I was much more pleased with his approach, which was not so confrontational and allowed me, I thought, to live up to my promise. He, Walter, and I began to develop our arguments against the union. By this time, Walter had made some positive changes at the *Democrat*: putting in a profit-sharing plan, and expanding space and salaries at least slightly. Our argument was basically based on the premise that affiliation with the ITU would be a bad one, and that the new owners had made some improvements and at least deserved a chance to show what else they would do for the paper.

As I recall, I had told our other supervisors that they could (maybe even

encouraged them to) talk to their employees about the union, but could not ask them how they felt. In case they responded anyway, we wanted to know so we could have some idea of how things were going. Just a day or two before the scheduled election, I made a speech to all of the employees. It was a rather long one (about ten pages, double-spaced, and I still have it.).

I have seldom felt such pressure as I felt the day of the election, because I had gambled on changing attorneys and had devised much of our strategy. I sat there in my office, alone, and I could see the employees trooping into our library to vote. I think I felt that the company had a chance to win the election, but you are never sure. More than half of our employees had signed the union card seeking an election and all it took was a majority to get a union. The National Labor Relations Board supervised the vote and the counting of the ballots. It seemed like an eternity before someone emerged and told us that the company had won the vote 31-15.

I felt greatly relieved and some satisfaction (I must confess) when I found out that the *Gazette* election had been held the same day and that the final vote there was 50-50; the *Gazette* prevailing because a majority was necessary for the union to win. In my view, the *Gazette* had most of the advantages. It was a bigger, more prestigious, more successful paper with better salaries, working conditions and fringe benefits. The only thing it didn't have was the ITU to run against. I've always wondered if Gaines Houston's hard-nosed tactics hadn't backfired. During the run-up to the elections, I had hired two excellent people from the *Gazette* (that didn't happen often) and they told me they were unhappy with how the *Gazette* was handling the union effort.

In the newspaper business, there is no time to rest, and it wasn't long before I was

told that Hussman was buying a computer, planned to start processing news stories on the computer, and wanted me to go to school to learn how to operate the computer terminals, on which the editing and writing would be done. Then I was supposed to come back to the paper and teach all the reporters and editors how to use the terminals. They sent me to the American Newspaper Publisher Association's Research Institute, then at Easton, Pennsylvania. For five days, nine newsmen from both the U.S. and Canada were trained how to use the terminals and we even produced our own newspaper (we produced a four-page spoof of ourselves and the whole operation). One problem, for me, was that all of the computer terminals used different commands for different functions. We had four different models at the school, but not one like the one we had bought, which was produced by DEC (Digital Equipment Company). So when I came back to the *Democrat*, I didn't know how to operate the DEC terminal. We had at least two of them set up in the basement, so for another week I worked on one of them (helped by Geoff George, a computer specialist) until I learned how they operated. One problem was that when computer manufacturers started planning to make word-processing machines for newspapers and magazines, they went to the people in the back shop for advice. That is they went to the mechanical people, who operated Linotypes and similar machines. But they were not the ones who were going to be operating the terminals at most newspapers; that was going to be the reporters and editors. So at the start, we wound up trying to operate machines with commands we didn't understand. I remember once, some production man explained something to me by using the terms "upper rail and lower rail."

"What is that?" I asked.

He looked at me with surprise and said, “They are the two rails (or bars) on the Linotype machine that carry different kinds of type.”

Well, I didn’t know that and neither did a lot of other reporters and editors.

Computers and computerized typesetting were huge advances for newspapers, helping cut costs and giving editors and reporters direct control of what went into the paper. However, it was not an easy switch at the *Democrat*. Hussman brought only one mainframe computer to the *Democrat*, which meant we didn’t have a backup, which meant that when the main computer went down (as they always do), we had a problem. He also bought only four terminals, on which we were supposed to make the final edit of stories, affix the headline and then send the story to the typesetting machine. Of course, the stories could also be written on the terminals (as they were later on) if there were enough terminals for everyone to use. But the *Democrat* was short on money, and we had to do it the hard way. (Hussman has since told me that he actually bought two mainframe computers and eight terminals, but could not get both of the computers in the same room at the *Democrat*, so sent one computer and four terminals to one of their other newspapers.)

That was a problem because the main news department, which was always handling breaking (new) news, needed the terminals at the final minutes before deadlines to get new stories into the paper. That meant the other departments, whose stories were usually less timely (such as women, business and sports) had to wait until the news department was finished with the computers before processing their own copy. Of course, four terminals weren’t even enough for the news department.

At one time, and not long before this era, all stories were written on paper, and

were edited with pencils, and if something had to be inserted, the editor could just tear the paper apart, put a new paragraph in and then glue the paper back together. Once you'd finished editing with pencil, and typing a headline, they were then sent to the composing room to be set into type on Linotype machines, which used hot lead to form the type. That was the way it had been done for decades. National and international stories came in on Teletype machines, which printed them out on paper and made a clickety-clacking sound that old newspaper people still remember fondly. Local stories were written on old-timey upright typewriters, usually Underwoods.

Now the national and international stories were punched out on perforated tapes, which could be fed into the computer. Local stories were written on IBM Selectric typewriters and the pages were then fed into a machine known as a Scanner, which "read" the stories and punched them out on tape. The Scanner was one of the most horrendous inventions ever fostered on newspapers. They were slow and tricky.

So we soon arrived at the point where all the stories were fed into the computer, and the editors had to call them up on the terminals and edit them and then affix a headline and then send it to the typesetter. There is no point in my going into all the details, but we had problems, in droves. I've never seen a computer or a computer program that didn't have a lot of bugs in it at the start, and we were at the start. We kept crashing the system, usually just before deadline, which is the worst possible time to do it. Basically the problem was this: The editors had to specify the type of headline with a command such as *k72*, which mean a seventy-two-point sized head, which is one inch tall. Then they were supposed to give it a command to stop doing that, say *tag* and then give it a command to do something else, like *k10*, which meant ten-point, regular

type. We eventually discovered that in the rush at deadline the copy editors were sometimes leaving off the *tag* and just telling the machine what to do. That was crashing our system. The computer people said tell your copy editors never to leave off the *tag*. I said, "Bullshit. Some of these are new copy editors who have never seen a computer before and they are going to make mistakes. Why don't you write a program with a default in it or take out the requirement for a cease and desist." That's what they eventually did.

That wasn't the end of our problems. Sometimes the main computer crashed, and nothing happened then until it was brought back to life. Usually there was a computer technician on duty to bring it back to life, but not always. So I had to learn how to resurrect it and had to take a beeper with me so that if it crashed and no technician was available, I could be summoned back to the office. That duty later fell to other editors. There were other problems, on which I will not dwell.

I was always fearful that the computer might crash some morning and we wouldn't be able to get it running again right away, and that we couldn't get out the paper. After I left to go to Oklahoma City the computer did crash one day and they had to publish one day with mostly day-old news. I left in 1978, and when I started this oral history, I asked some of the veterans if they ever solved all those computer problems. Yes, they said, after Walter bought the *Gazette's* assets in 1991, and they inherited the *Gazette's* computer system.

All during the time we were holding a union election and introducing computers we were also still trying to improve the paper and be competitive with the *Gazette* at some level. Staff turnover was still a problem. We were still somewhat a revolving door.

I can't remember if it increased because of the results of the election or the introduction of computers, but I'm sure some people left for those reasons. Some of our copy editors later told me it became a lot less fun to edit the paper after we got computers. Before, all they had to worry about was editing the stories for grammar and writing a good headline on them. The introduction of computers also made them the production department. They were also, in effect, setting the copy into type. And with limited computer capability, it was often a frustrating job. The upshot was that it now took more copy editors than ever before to put out the paper. It would have been easier if we had had better equipment, but we didn't.

So we slowly began to increase the number of copy editors and reduce the number of reporters, which made it more difficult for us to compete with the *Gazette* in the breadth of coverage, and the *Gazette* already had an edge there anyway. A lot more journalists want to be reporters than want to be copy editors. As a reporter they get to go out and cover interesting events, and they get to write the stories, and they get their bylines on some of their stories, and some of them get to be well-known. Copy editors sit in the office all day, editing stories on events they never see, and never getting their name on anything. They are anonymous to the public at large.

Hiring new people was a problem for me (and the paper) because as time went on we seemed even more constricted in our salaries. I was never told precisely what our financial condition was (other than it was tight) and I never had the freedom to offer any salary that I might want to offer. And as time went on I began to hire more and more women. I know there were various theories at the time why I hired so many women, but here is what I remember. If I was allowed to offer a certain salary, I thought the women I

could hire for that salary were often better than the men I could hire. I had always questioned the idea that women weren't as good as men. After all, when I was in school most of the top students were women, especially in language-related areas, and I didn't think they all of a sudden got dumber when they graduated. Nor did I hold to the old idea that women weren't tough enough to be good journalists. Maybe there was some thought at one time that women should not be exposed to the coarseness reporters sometimes see when they are covering a news story, or sitting around a male-dominated newsroom, for that matter.

Whatever the reason, there weren't many women in daily journalism for a long time. When I first went to the *Gazette* in 1955, there was only one woman, Matilda Touhey, in the newsroom. That doesn't include special areas like women's news, or food columnists. When I replaced Foreman at the *Democrat*, I think there already were four or five women in the newsroom. As time went on, I hired even more. At one time I counted and found that women comprised at least 48 percent of our editorial staff. I should also say that these weren't just warm bodies. For the most part, they were excellent journalists.

These included Carol Stogsdill, who went on to the *Rocky Mountain News*, the *Chicago Tribune* and then became senior editor at the *Los Angeles Times*, perhaps the highest position ever held by a woman in American journalism (other than inherited ownership) up to that time. These also included Teri Thompson (hired by Fred Morrow as a sports writer), who is now the Sunday sports editor at the *New York Daily News*; Amanda Singleton Allen, now travel editor of the *Atlanta Journal & Constitution*; the late Nancy Miller, who was the lifestyle editor at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*; the late

Connie Hoxie, who obtained a doctorate in journalism and taught at Wisconsin and Penn State; Sheila Daniel, who later worked at the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Los Angeles Times*; Patti Cox, who later worked for the Fort Smith paper for several years, became a member of the State Board of Higher Education and now works for the University of Arkansas, and Mara Leveritt, now an esteemed freelance journalist in Little Rock and a best-selling author. This also included Deborah Mathis, whom we hired fresh out of high school as a clerk, but was so bright she was soon promoted to reporter. I think she was the first African-American woman hired by either the *Democrat* or *Gazette* and she went on to a distinguished career as a television journalist and later a nationally syndicated columnist.

In fact, salaries eventually became so tight that I couldn't hire experienced people for the copy desk, which most journalists shunned anyway. It also reached the point where the woman in charge of the copy desk, a great, tough editor, named Patsy McKown, said she was too busy trying to get out the paper to seek and interview applicants and asked me to do it. I spent a lot of time on that. If they had no journalism background, I asked them about their reading habits, what and how much they read, their background in language, their knowledge of daily events, if they read philosophy, and so on. One of my hires said she still remembers that we talked for an hour about Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky.

I thought this would have been a good time to challenge the *Gazette*, if we had had more resources. I sensed that the *Gazette* was coasting a little, and I don't think I was the only one who thought so. I think Foreman had felt the same way. The *Gazette* still had some excellent editors and reporters, but some of them had become a little

complacent. At one time the *Gazette* had consistently attracted some excellent new talent, but it may have become a victim of its own success. Because people were proud to work there, and because their benefits were fairly good, it reached a point where the paper did not have much turnover, and thus did not have the opportunity to hire new talent.

I also thought at times some of the *Gazette* people were a little arrogant, and tended to look down their noses at the *Democrat*. I suppose I exhibited some of those symptoms when I worked at the *Gazette*, but I did think the people at the *Gazette* failed to give the *Democrat* credit for some of the good work it did. The typical attitude was to ignore the *Democrat*, and that proved almost fatal later on when the *Democrat* did begin to provide the resources to challenge the *Gazette*.

The *Gazette* was always proud of the people it hired who went on to great things elsewhere, and they did have a lot of them, but the *Democrat* hired a lot of people who distinguished themselves after they left the paper, and they also did some distinguished work while they were at the paper.

We hired some exceptional male journalists as well as female. Foreman, of course, hired some great people, many of whom are mentioned in his interview for this oral history project. I'd like to mention a few more hired during my time, and this is not meant to be inclusive. We hired David Terrell, Mark Oswald, Garry Hoffmann, Steele Hayes and John Brummett, who all wound up at the *Gazette* for awhile. Then there was Mike Kirkendall, who went on to the *Chicago Sun-Times*, where they soon made him editor of their Sunday magazine and ended up at the *Los Angeles Times*; Al May, who became a top political reporter for the Atlanta papers and then head of the journalism

department at George Mason University; Collins Hemingway, who became a top aide to Bill Gates and ghost-wrote one of his best-selling books; Gary Rice, a great investigative reporter, who now has a doctorate and is head of the journalism department at California State University, Fresno; Dan Farley, now head of the Arkansas School Boards Association; Mel White, now an excellent freelance journalist in Little Rock who sometimes does articles for *National Geographic*; Jim Allen, who went on to the Associated Press and then became high up in a major trucking firm.

We kept trying to improve the paper, but that was hard to do when we started cutting back on reporters. McCord kept coming up with innovative ways to try to compensate. It was his idea, I think, to hire a full-time person to handle the Answer-Please column, which tried to respond to readers' problems and questions in any area, and I eventually hired Julie Baldrige away from the *Gazette* to do it, and she did a great job with it. Bob and I usually agreed on the things we were trying to do, but not always. I could never convince him that we needed to increase our emphasis on sports coverage, although many papers were beginning to greatly increase their sports news. Through much of this time we only had three pages of sports news and there were often some ads on all three pages. On January 2, 1974, we had only about two and a half pages of sports, and this was the day after all the major bowl games had been played on January 1. Bob admits now that he was mistaken.

Although we kept making changes, I had reached the point where I didn't think there was any way we could compete with the *Gazette* unless we offered our readers just as much as they did. That would take more reporters, more editors, more good columnists, more space and more advertising. We might make it look a little prettier, and

we might sometimes (and did) beat the *Gazette*, but that didn't compensate for the fact that the *Gazette* carried more news and features than we did, and it was sometimes better written and was more thorough. This was partly because they had more experienced reporters than we did, because they paid them enough money to keep them after they learned what they were doing. We hired people who had, I thought, the ability to become as good as their *Gazette* counterparts, but we couldn't keep them.

I always got along well with Walter, except on politics. After he took over the paper, I was invited to attend the editorial conferences. One day he asked us if we really thought Richard Nixon was guilty. This was probably around mid-spring of 1974, well into the Watergate affair. There were probably about five of us in there and, knowing that Walter was pretty staunchly Republican, we all looked around at each other and no one said anything. Then I asked him if he wanted an honest answer. When he said, "Yes," I replied, "I've always thought the SOB was guilty." I was never invited back to another editorial conference, which is just as well. The owners get to decide their paper's political positions, and I didn't have time to be worrying about that anyway. Walter says he doesn't remember this. In truth, it may not have been his decision to not invite me back for another editorial board meeting. McCord might have decided there was no point in me and Walter arguing politics at every meeting.

I thought Walter was smart and dedicated to trying to make a go of the *Democrat*. He kept trying new approaches, and not all of them worked, but he learned from his mistakes and he was willing to listen. He thought it was important that his people know as much as possible, and he kept sending people off to seminars, even with a tight budget. He was keen on new technology and he would take four or five of us to the yearly exhibit

of new newspaper technology, which was usually held at places like Las Vegas or Anaheim. He also sent me to the yearly Associated Press Managing Editors' convention, which were usually in interesting sites, including Orlando, Florida, where I heard in person Richard Nixon say, "I am not a crook." I thought, "Sure."

Even though he kept giving me some difficult assignments, I always tried to do them, and I really got irritated with him only twice. Once was when he decided to start delivering the *Democrat* to the homes of all the people that did not take it, in certain sections of Little Rock and North Little Rock, as I remember. He decreed that all the department heads, including the editors, would have to help deliver it and that included himself. I already thought I was doing so much other stuff, like trying to hire people, supervise them, and make sure the technology was working that I didn't have time to devote to printing the news, and I really begrudged having to go out and deliver the paper one afternoon a week. The other time was when he asked which newspaper in the United States published the biggest Sunday sports section. I told him I didn't know, but I would try to find out.

After checking as many papers as I could find, I told him that I didn't look at them all, but of the ones I had seen, the *Baton Rouge Morning-Advocate* and the *Boston Globe* produced the biggest Sunday sections, probably the *Globe*. He asked me how many pages it had. I said about twenty-four. Then he said he wanted to produce the biggest sports section in the United States. I told him I had checked to see how many columns of type there were in those big sections and gave him some figure. He said, "No." He wanted to publish the biggest one in the number of pages. He envisioned that we could fill it up with copy from our various wire services. I asked him how many more

sports copy editors I could hire to do it. “None,” he said.

“Walter,” I said, “I have never before told you that we couldn’t do something, but we can’t do that.”

I tried to explain to him that there was a lot of difference between trying to fill a section that might have lots of advertising, say perhaps the equivalent of twelve pages of advertising, and one that had virtually none.

The *Globe*, I pointed out, would only have to fill the equivalent of twelve pages, and would be doing it with a far larger staff, and we would be trying to fill twenty-four empty pages with a limited number of terminals and a limited staff.

Walter never did try it while I was with the paper, but after I left, and he decided to challenge the *Gazette* head on, he did try it, but he also hired a lot more staffers.

I wasn’t aware that during 1977 and 1978, the financial situation at the *Democrat* became much more perilous and that Walter decided, by his own admission, that he might have to close the *Democrat* or work out a joint operating agreement with the *Gazette*. I was aware that I was restricted in the number of people we could hire and how much we could pay.

At some point in 1978, McCord told me that he had the feeling that Walter might want to try someone else as managing editor at the *Democrat*. Walter never told me that himself, nor did McCord ever say that Walter told him that specifically, but I considered the information good enough that I started looking around for another job.

That presented a dilemma, because I didn’t want to leave Little Rock. My wife was a Little Rock native, and we both loved Little Rock. I couldn’t conceive of any job that the *Gazette* could offer me that I might want. So I toyed with the idea of applying

for a job with one of the big advertising agencies in Little Rock, where I knew a lot of people. Somehow I just couldn't quite bring myself to do it. I had spent too many years trying to sift truth from hype, and I didn't want to wind up trying to promote something in which I might not wholeheartedly believe.

At about this time I received word that Walter Hussman Sr. wanted to talk to me about a job at his flagship paper at Texarkana. I was not real excited about this, because I had heard unflattering things about the way the other Hussman newspapers operated and because I wasn't too enamored of Texarkana, because it was a smaller city and because it was too far south to suit me. But it was another newspaper job, and I liked Walter Sr. We had been together on trips to newspaper exhibits and expositions. I thought he was a distinguished-looking man with a lot of poise and class, and I found him very personable, so I agreed to go to Texarkana to talk to him. As I recall, the job was to replace his editor, Harry Wood, who may have taken a job somewhere else. The Texarkana editor may have also had some authority over the other papers, but I don't remember for sure. Of course, Walter Jr. had to know about this and may have even passed on the tip, but we never discussed it.

To be honest, I remembered hearing news people at the *Gazette* run down the Palmer and then the Hussman chain. Hussman Sr. was Clyde Palmer's son-in-law and when Palmer died in 1957, Hussman took over the papers. The criticism was, as I remember, that the chain was virulently anti-union and that it cut costs to the detriment of good journalism. Palmer had pioneered the system of having one paper capture all the wire news and then ship it to the other papers. By this time this was being done in Texarkana, and as I remember the *Texarkana Gazette* was the only paper in the chain that

subscribed to various wire services. The Texarkana staff then picked and edited and wrote headlines on select wire stories, set them into type, and the stories were then microwaved to the other papers. I thought this didn't give the other papers much autonomy.

As we began to discuss the job, I asked Mr. Hussman to describe how they operated, and I eventually raised some objections about the microwave service and perhaps some other practices. At any rate, he eventually said he would change them the way I wanted and offered me the job. I told him I would have to talk to my wife about it.

The next day I received a call from Gene Fields, who was the general manager of the paper. He said he needed to meet with me urgently and suggested that we meet in Malvern and I agreed.

Fields said he had heard what Hussman promised me and was astounded. He said he told him, "Mr. Hussman, you know you won't follow through on that. It will cost you a lot of money."

He said Hussman reluctantly agreed and said that perhaps Fields had better talk to me about it.

"The problem is, Jerry," Fields said, "Mr. Hussman likes you so much he was willing to promise you almost anything to get you to take the job. But I know he couldn't do this."

I thanked Fields and told him that under those circumstances I could not take the job. In retrospect, I think I may have been a little condescending about small-town newspaper practices. I had only worked on metropolitan dailies and perhaps had developed some purist expectations that might not be possible everywhere. I also didn't

know much about newspapers finances and their profit margins. For all I know, those savings may have kept the other Hussman papers afloat. They were all located in south Arkansas, where the partial demise of the oil industry had left many areas facing tough times.

So I continued on at the *Democrat* until one day Jim Standard called me, seeking advice on a new executive sports editor for the two jointly owned dailies in Oklahoma City, the *Daily and Sunday Oklahoman* and the *Oklahoma City Times*, of which he was the head editor. As a senior at Little Rock Central, Standard had worked for us in the *Gazette* sports department and later was our correspondent from Fayetteville. So I flew over to talk to him and was hired.

I left the paper in August of 1978, and before the year was out Walter had hired John Robert Starr to replace me, had started free classified advertising and soon began to shift the afternoon *Democrat* to morning and add a lot of space. The rest is history, much of which is a subject of this oral history project.

[Edited by Pryor Center staff]