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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with:
Rusty Starr
Telephone Interview
7 January 2009

Interviewer: Jerry McConnell

Jerry McConnell: [This is] Jerry McConnell, and I'm here in Greenwood, Arkansas, preparing to do a telephone interview with you. And you are in your office in—in Palatka, Florida. Is that correct?

Rusty Starr: That's correct.

JM: And the *Palatka Daily News*. Is that correct?

RS: That's correct.

JM: P-A-L-A-T-K-A. Is that right?

RS: Yeah.

JM: All right. Okay, the first thing I need to do is ask you if I have your permission to record this interview for The [David and Barbara] Pryor Center for [Arkansas] Oral and Visual History [at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville] on the *Arkansas Democrat* and [Arkansas] *Democrat-Gazette*.

RS: Yes, you do.

JM: Okay. Very good. So let's just start—well, we know—we know one thing to

begin with. [Laughs] You—you are the son of John R. [Starr] or John Robert Starr and Norma Starr, correct?

RS: That is correct.

JM: And you are in the newspaper business yourself and have been for some time.

RS: Absolutely—been—been in the business—I—I joke that I was born into it.

JM: Yeah, okay. [Laughs] So you—your—your real name is, as I understand it—well, just go ahead and tell me your real name.

RS: Real name is Robert Russell Starr, and Russell is spelled R-U-S-S-E-L-L. It's a family name.

JM: R-U-S-S-E-L-L?

RS: Right.

JM: Yeah, okay. Where were you born?

RS: Memphis, Tennessee.

JM: Memphis, Tennessee.

RS: Yeah.

JM: Was that while your dad was going to school over there?

RS: Correct. As I say, to refugee parents from Arkansas.

JM: Yeah, okay. He was—was that when he was going to Rhodes [College]?

RS: Well, it was Southwestern at Memphis. And even after they changed the name to Rhodes, he always called it “Southwestern at Memphis, currently called Rhodes.”

JM: Yeah, okay. [Laughs] Well, I'll—I'm—I'm more familiar with it by the name of Rhodes myself. I knew several—several pretty bright people from around Little Rock who went to school when it was Southwestern, but . . .

RS: I tell ya, everybody I've ever run into that—that graduated from it when it was Southwestern were some of the sharpest people I ever met.

JM: Yeah, they were some—they were some very smart people there. Now, course, you know, that—that your dad was—he did a lot of things, but he was famous and infamous, I'd say, at some—with some quarters for his stint as the editor—managing editor of the *Arkansas Democrat*, and then for a while, the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, in the war with the *Arkansas Gazette*—correct?

RS: That's correct, and—and to him it was always important that the title was managing editor, not executive editor or something like that. He always thought the managing editor title was the appropriate one.

JM: Okay. And I think that since your father is deceased, I think perhaps that you maybe can give us some insight into what kind of person he was and what you know about his stint at the—*Democrat*—*Democrat-Gazette*, and at the Associated Press before that. One of the things that we discussed the other day is that he obviously, you know, was very competitive towards the *Gazette*, and some people thought that he hated the *Gazette*. What was your view on that?

RS: Well, I think that not only did my dad, but I think also Walter Hussman, [Jr.], from everything I understood—both of them actually loved the *Arkansas Gazette*. I recall going back to Little Rock after the war was basically over, and, you know, looking at the kitchen table that all my life had always been covered in newsprint. And with only one newspaper in town, the table was no longer covered.

JM: Yeah.

RS: And I had a conversation with Dad about that, and that's kinda when he, you

know, kinda shared with me that there was a real love for the *Arkansas Gazette*. There was a real sadness when the war ended, that the community was not going to have two newspapers any longer. I mean, I think there was a real love for the *Gazette* that did not deter either of those two men, I think, from putting on their most competitive suit, so to speak, and really fighting that war in ways that nobody really imagined. And there were certainly great editorial decisions made during that time, but there were some great business decisions made. I got the chance about 1996 to go to a real fancy management and marketing seminar up in Boston [Massachusetts], and one of the key case studies was about the business decisions that were made during the war . . .

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: . . . and how they were [made]. But, now, there's a—there is a funny story, as I was told it, on how Hussman was able to convince my dad to come back to Little Rock. My dad had left the AP [Associated Press]—been teaching college at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock for at least two years, maybe three.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: Getting an annual contract every year—wanted a longer-term contract, and they wouldn't give him one. And he kept fighting for it and eventually they said, "You know, this—if one of the muckity-mucks at the University of Arkansas System ever asks why we have a guy with a BA [bachelor of arts] in French teaching journalism you may not get a contract at all."

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: So my dad had left Little Rock—had gone to Knoxville and was at the University

of Tennessee pursuing his master's degree when Hussman supposedly, as I was told the story, went and asked for the joint operating agreement with the Pattersons at the *Gazette* and was basically laughed at, was the way I was told the story. And decided, you know, it was time to fight. And supposedly the call from Hussman to my dad went something like this: "Hey, John Robert," you know, "[I] know that for years you had to kiss the rear end of the *Arkansas Gazette* because they were your biggest customer when you were the bureau chief of the Associated Press, so you gotta treat your biggest customer nice." He said, "Well, instead of kissing it, how would you like to kick it?" And I think the way I was told the story, that was pretty much a done deal.

JM: [Laughs]

RS: All they had to do was work out the details, which included Hussman, I believe, paying for my dad's airline flights from Little Rock to Knoxville to continue classroom work or whatever he had left to do on his master's degree.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: Which, ironically, he never got, because he never did whatever thesis or whatever—you know, probably the easiest part for a man who wrote a column seven days a week . . .

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: . . . to have done—he didn't ever do. Once he got engaged in—full-fledged in—in the newspaper war, the thoughts of—I think, of going back to teach college kinda faded away. I think he was having too much fun.

JM: It sounds like it. Do you recall him ever saying, though—him ever saying

anything about his relationships to the *Gazette* when he was the bureau chief there, if they were giving him any static?

RS: No, I—I don't know that they gave him a whole lotta static. I do believe from what he told me, that when they picked up the phone and called the bureau chief of the Associated Press in Little Rock, they expected the bureau chief in Little Rock to drop everything else and attend to their needs.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: Now, you know, I—I've been in the newspaper business all my life and, you know, there's not much of—and although I am now on the business side as a publisher—I cut my teeth in the newsrooms.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: And—and there's not an over-abiding love of people who cut their teeth in the newsroom of kowtowing to anybody. Well, let me tell ya, I grew up in a family where we were not taught to kowtow.

JM: [Laughs]

RS: And I don't think my dad did much kowtowing to anyone.

JM: Yeah.

RS: I think Hussman—when he was a young kid and took control of the *Democrat*, I think a lotta people underestimated him. But whoever he sought advice from, for what to say to my dad to get my dad to come there . . .

JM: [Laughs]

RS: . . . or whether he did that through his own research or knowledge or whatever, he said the right things. He said to a man who did not like to kowtow, "How would

you like not to kowtow to anybody? We're going to do what we're going to do."

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: And, course, I—you know, I've—I've seen the recounts of the story where Hussman almost fired him over sitting over—on the newspaper box with his Bowie knife in his teeth and those kind of things, and, you know, Hussman probably did wonder exactly what he'd gotten himself into. [Editor's Note: The *Arkansas Times* published a picture on its cover in May 1979 of Starr crouching on a *Gazette* newspaper box with a knife in his mouth and declaring war]

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: And—and, course, in my opinion you can take all those business decisions, and some of them were truly grand and great business decisions. If you didn't have the hard-news war going on . . .

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: . . . the *Democrat* doesn't win. The business decisions were great. Maybe they did. Maybe they would've worked. But the combination was what was the one-two punch [in the end?].

JM: Uh-huh. Did—did you ever hear him say that? I—I think you—you're saying that you think that he admired the *Gazette* for, you know, at times, or maybe most of the time and everything, but was there anybody in particular at the *Gazette* that he had problems with? Do you have any . . . ?

RS: I really do not have any personal knowledge of that. I know that there were a lot of people over there that he had great admiration for.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: I think [longtime *Arkansas Gazette* sports editor] Orville Henry probably was one of the people that he had great admiration for, and—and if you follow—I mean, I—and we know that as a part of talking about this, most of my learning is distance learning . . .

JM: Yeah.

RS: . . . okay? Well, sometimes you—you know, you get told stuff when you're not gonna be in the market to repeat it that maybe other people don't get told.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: But the—the other thing I recall is toward the end, after the war was over, the old sportswriter in my dad kinda came out. And he did a lot of columns and such and—and directed a lot of [*Democrat Sports Editor*] Wally Hall, and by that time Orville was working for him.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: A lot of attention—a lot of his personal attention went to the quality of what was going on with the [University of Arkansas] Razorbacks [athletic] programs and what needed to be done with 'em, and he put a lotta heat on Razorback people or within the Razorback portion of the University of Arkansas. He put a lotta pressure on those folks that he had reserved in the past for people like Bill Clinton.

JM: Yes. I think that he—I think that he had decided at one point in time, if I remember, seeing some of his columns, but then I didn't see a lot of 'em, 'cause I was in Oklahoma at the time—but that he thought it was time for [then-UA men's basketball head coach] Nolan Richardson to go.

RS: I believe he got on Nolan pretty hard.

JM: Yeah, yeah, and maybe Broyles—maybe [then-UA athletic director] Frank Broyles for a while. I don't know, but . . .

RS: Yeah, and I don't know enough about any kind of personal relationship over the years. I mean, you know, you—in my opinion, when you talk about Frank Broyles and John Robert Starr, you're talking about two of Arkansas's icons.

JM: You know—you know, he said, though—he said a lot of derogatory things about Orville for a while when the war was going on—that he was just a homer for the university, and so, you know, there were some questions asked about that when Orville changed [laughs] papers and came over to the *Democrat*. Did you ever hear him say anything about any of that?

RS: No, not really. I—like I said, I recall—the comments to me about Orville—you know, a lot of it being about what Orville did when he was a young man and ramping up the efforts that he did that probably saved the *Arkansas Gazette*.

JM: Uh-huh. Yes, there's—there's some . . .

RS: There's a lot of tall tales that are told about that.

JM: Yeah.

RS: I don't think there—I don't think there's much doubt that Orville is largely responsible for the *Gazette* being around and being strong at the time that the war happened.

JM: Yeah. No, there were a lot of people there, I think, that felt that the—Orville in the sports department, that people's—they were mad as heck at the rest of the paper, and particularly editorials, but they still wanted to read [laughs] Orville

Henry in the *Gazette* sports [section].

RS: Well, and to see Orville—I mean, the respect had to go both ways when Orville actually did the desertion and went to the *Democrat*. There had to be some underlying respect there.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: And I—I know from my personal experience, I lost a longtime friend back in the days when I worked for *The New York Times* Company and all of the regional newspapers together talking about better ways to cover sports and sharing of resources and stuff like that. And the guy who was kinda the sports editor who was in charge of that effort, I'd had dinner with the night before and said something to him then the next day at the meeting when it was being discussed, he said, "Well, Rusty has something to say on this topic." And I looked at him, like, "You really don't want me to say this here." And I said, "I can't use the copy about the University of Alabama from this newspaper or the copy about the University of Florida from this newspaper because they are homers. And my newspaper in Gadsden, Alabama, doesn't want to read about those two schools from the homer viewpoint."

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: Well, one of the editors of the paper nodded his head in agreement. The other editor, who had been a longtime friend, basically never spoke to me again.

JM: Hmm. Hmm.

RS: But, let me tell ya, he was a homer. And Orville Henry probably saved the *Gazette* by being a homer. So, you know . . .

JM: Yeah.

RS: Hey, it's sports. No harm, no foul.

JM: Yeah. Okay. [Laughs]

RS: I mean, you know, the sports—some people take that sports stuff real seriously, like the guys at Westside High School outside of Jonesboro, who were carrying me out of the gym one night 'cause they didn't like what I wrote about their basketball team, but . . .

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: . . . an assistant principal saved me and life went on.

JM: [Laughs] What were they gonna do, beat ya up?

RS: Oh, yeah. They were carrying me out.

JM: Huh.

RS: [Laughs]

JM: You left Arkansas about the time that your dad took the job at the *Democrat*, did you not?

RS: Yeah, in fact, I stopped by Knoxville on my way from Jonesboro. I was headed to Wilmington, North Carolina, to start work with *The New York Times* regional newspaper group, and stopped by the apartment complex that my mom and dad were living in there in Knoxville and said hi to 'em on the way, and it wasn't long after that that I got a call from my dad telling me he was going back to Little Rock.

JM: Hmm. Yeah, I know that—what's the name of the paper at Wilmington?

RS: The *Wilmington Morning Star* was the—the six-day [publication] and then on

Sunday they called it the *Star-News*. They used to think I owned [it] when I'd answer the phone.

JM: Is it still the *Morning Star*?

RS: Yeah, it's—I think that they kinda have gone—over the years they now just pretty much go by *Star-News*. They're still owned by *The New York Times*, though.

JM: Did you ever hear your dad say anything in particular about [*Gazette* Publisher] Hugh Patterson—his relationship with Hugh Patterson?

RS: No, not—not really, just—you know, I had the—I always had the feeling that Hugh was the guy who called when the *Gazette* wanted something. I think that was the feeling that I had. But no, I don't recall any in-depth conversations about Hugh.

JM: Yeah. Did you ever hear him say anything about he—him getting irritated about the way the *Gazette* handled his byline when he was working for the AP?

RS: I do not. I do remember that—really, about the—the only thing I remember on that was a short conversation and some disgust, you know, about the fact—you know, that it was done kinda backhandedly.

JM: Yeah.

RS: 'Cause I worked up at the *Jonesboro Sun* for several years and he would say something to the effect of, “You know, the *Jonesboro Sun* is the best newspaper in Arkansas for me to be able to check the real quality of work of my staff at the [AP] bureau . . .”

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: “. . . because the *Jonesboro Sun* runs the stories pretty much as they—as we send

'em and they run 'em with the bylines on 'em unlike [laughs] some other people . . .”

JM: Unlike . . .

RS: “. . . [] some of my biggest customers.”

JM: Unlike the *Gazette*. Yeah. [Laughs]

RS: That's about the extent of it.

JM: Yeah, like I—I think I had heard that way back there, that he was sort of irritated about that. And one place I saw—did see a comment for him—said, “Well—” said, “They—they'll always run the AP bylines on the story if they think the story might blow up on 'em.” [Laughter]

RS: Correct. Right. That's like John Troutt, who used to own the *Jonesboro Sun*, said [spoken with a gravelly-sounding voice,] “There are some times, son, when ya want the AP to break the local story for ya.”

JM: Yeah. [Laughter]

RS: Oh, but yeah, it was an interesting situation as far as the bylines were concerned. But that's about all I ever heard.

JM: How long were you at the *Sun*?

RS: Oh, I guess I was there from—I started there in about 1974 and left in 1978. And a couple of those years were—I still call 'em part-time, even though John Troutt told me the last day that I was there—he said, “Don't ever put on a resume that you—when you were in college you worked part-time for me, 'cause you worked full-time.”

JM: Yeah.

RS: [Laughs]

JM: Huh. Yeah.

RS: But I did some sports stuff with 'em while I was in school and then was fortunate enough to be their reporter/photo chief for a couple a years after that.

JM: Yeah, okay. So what was your last position there?

RS: It was the reporter/photo chief.

JM: Oh, okay. I . . .

RS: Which meant that you had to train the other reporters how to shoot a picture.

JM: Yeah, I understand. [Laughter]

RS: Everybody shot at the *Jonesboro Sun*.

JM: I suffered through that. I suffered through being taught about how to shoot a picture with the [Graflex] Speed Graphic [camera]. But [laughs] . . .

RS: We—we had—we were quite fancy. We had the—I always called 'em "Nick-er-mats" " But we had the little junior Nikons. And that—those huge singer flash heads that the sync cords never worked on.

JM: I went to college with John Troutt. [Laughs]

RS: Oh, okay. Okay.

JM: So—so . . .

RS: I have a tremendous amount of respect for that man. He stood behind his people. He is really a quiet man in many ways, but I remember one time that somebody came in to take issue with a story that I had written, and the whole building went silent as John told the guy in very high tones how much faith he had in me and the quality of my reporting.

JM: Hmm. Okay.

RS: And John didn't know whether I was right or wrong at the time. It turned out I was right, thank goodness. But the people who worked there never saw John's wrath. He would defend ya to the end, but you would see a little bit of his wrath if you ever admitted that you didn't read the entire paper today.

JM: Yeah. Hmm. Okay.

RS: [Laughs] We learned to keep our mouth shut if we had not read the entire paper that day.

JM: You went to Arkansas State [University, Jonesboro]?

RS: Yes, indeed.

JM: Yeah. And all four years?

RS: Well, I was fortunate enough, the—I conned my way into a job as a yearbook and newspaper photographer. My freshman year I went up and did a summer term and took the photography class so I would actually be able to do the job.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: And after that I did a couple of summer terms and managed to get it—get through in three years. But I—that—yeah, I was there the whole time, and the last two working at the *Sun* . . .

JM: Yeah.

RS: . . . which was great. I learned more working at the *Sun*. I loved the people at Arkansas State, but I learned more working at the *Sun* than I did in the classroom.

JM: Who was—? Was Joel Gambill head of . . . ?

RS: Joel Gambill was there.

JM: Yeah, was . . . ?

RS: Giving me a hard way to go about turning in dirty copy.

JM: Was he the head of the journalism department?

RS: I believe, by the time I left, he had been—he had been the head. There was a fellow there, Roy Ockert . . .

JM: Yeah, I know Roy.

RS: . . . who was the—I think Roy ended up leaving because he refused to get a master's degree and, my goodness, he didn't need one to be able to do the job he was doing at Arkansas State, but . . .

JM: Yeah.

RS: . . . let me tell ya, a lotta little newspapers, including now the *Jonesboro Sun* in Arkansas, have been the beneficiary of Roy Ockert leaving Arkansas State.

JM: Yeah, well, he went to . . .

RS: He went back into the—went back into real newspaper work.

JM: Yeah, I remember he went to Batesville for a while, I think, and Russellville maybe, and . . .

RS: Yep.

JM: . . . maybe some other places. But . . .

RS: And then back to—he may have been someplace else, but I know he did a good job in Batesville and Russellville and then back to Jonesboro.

JM: Yeah. Let's see, now, what's he doing now? Do you know?

RS: He's the editor of the *Jonesboro Sun*.

JM: Oh, is he really? Okay, good.

RS: Yeah.

JM: Very good. Yeah, he's a good hand.

RS: Now owned by Paxton Media [Group LLC].

JM: Yeah. [Laughs] But John Troutt didn't come out too bad when he sold that thing.
[Laughs]

RS: I bet not.

JM: [Laughs]

RS: The—and it's a shame that that's not a Troutt family paper.

JM: Yeah, yeah, yeah, it is, because . . .

RS: I tell ya . . .

JM: . . . it's been that way for a long time, but . . .

RS: You couldn't have—you couldn't have asked for better people to get your journalism career started with.

JM: Uh-huh. Where'd you go to high school?

RS: I went to Wilbur D. Mills [in Little Rock].

JM: Wilbur D. Mills High School. Okay.

RS: Yeah, we used to joke, right down the street from “Fanne Fox Junior High.”
[Editor's Note: Mills, the longtime Arkansas congressman and chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, cavorted in public with a stripper named Fanne Fox in 1974. He decided not to seek reelection in 1976]

JM: Yeah, okay. [Laughs]

RS: Which it wasn't, but that was the joke.

JM: Yeah, I understand.

RS: All that happened while—all that stuff was going on while I was in school.

JM: Yeah, yeah, and it all happened while I was [laughs] working for the *Democrat*, too, so . . .

RS: [Laughs] Yeah, exciting times.

JM: I—yeah, I remember that little side story that ol’ Fanne jumped into the pool [Tidal Basin] at the capitol [Washington, D.C.] and—whatever they call that pool . . .

RS: []. Yeah.

JM: . . . on a Friday night, you know. Well, on Saturday, then, we had a very limited staff at the *Democrat*, and I wondering, “Damn, how are we gonna get a follow-up on that?” Well, of course, we’re taking the [*Los Angeles Times*]/[*Washington Post* News Service, so I called the *Washington Post*. I said, “Are you gonna have a follow-up on Wilbur Mills for Sunday?” And they said, “God, I hope so. We got six reporters working on it.” [Laughter] And I thought, “Man, what a luxury it would be [laughs] to have six reporters you could throw in on one story.” But . . .

RS: Okay, your days at the *Democrat* and my days as the editor are very much alike.

JM: Yeah.

RS: How do you—how do you stretch your resources and do a quality job?

JM: Yeah.

RS: Because most of the papers I’ve worked at have been in the smaller variety.

JM: There is, you know, a lot of tales—both sides—about the pressure that your dad put on the reporters at the *Democrat*, you know, to compete, and “you gotta have

this story,” and, you know, and critique them. Some cases they said he even wrote about them in his column.

RS: Right.

JM: But you—[can] you offer me any insight on how [laughs] he was to deal with in a situation like that?

RS: Well, and—I really have heard very little of that part. I did find it interesting that during the height of the newspaper war and, you know, no—both newspapers are probably losing money.

JM: Yeah. Uh-huh.

RS: But during that time, I was a news editor for the *Wilmington Morning Star*. So, I mean, I ran the copy desk. And I remember my dad asking me to come over and spend a couple of nights working with his copy desk, because he just didn’t feel like they were performing to the level that they should perform, given the resources that they were given.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: And I remember going up there and spending a couple of nights and my dad saying, “Okay, you know—what do you think? What do we need to do,” you know, and that kind of thing. I said, “You’ve got really good people.” I said, “But I’m not gonna tell ya about the rest of it. I’m gonna put it on paper.”

[Laughs]

JM: Yeah.

RS: He said, “Well, why are you gonna put it on paper?” I said, “Ya need to hand it to Hussman.” And he said, “Well, just tell me. Just tell me.” I said, “No, I just

need to put it on paper.” They had computers that the copy editors were trying to copy-edit with that you couldn’t see the letters.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: I mean, how in the world are you gonna get words spelled correctly in the paper if the copy editor can’t see the type on the computer screen?

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: And then they had a couple of really embarrassing things. How do you win a newspaper war when there are a couple of days that you don’t even print a new paper?

JM: That you don’t even what?

RS: Where they had computer systems crashing, and they didn’t even print a new paper. They etched on the new dateline or something on the front page.

JM: Yeah, ran the . . .

RS: And ran it again.

JM: . . . previous day’s—yeah, I remember. I remember hearing about that.

RS: How in the world do you win? I mean, the . . .

JM: Yeah.

RS: . . . other guy’s part—I mean, and—and the other guy’s—the guys you’re fighting against—how did they lose?

JM: Yeah.

RS: [Laughs]

JM: Yeah, that’s a good question. That’s—see, that’s one of the things that wore me out, was that we started out with one big computer—main computer mainframe,

and four terminals, and the whole paper was supposed to be put out on those four terminals, you know, and, man, it was slow to begin with and the computer—big computer was crashing, and I was always said that before I left and went to Oklahoma City, I thought, “One of these days that thing is gonna crash and they’re not gonna be able to get it up right away, and they may have trouble getting their paper out.” Well, [laughs] I heard they . . .

RS: Yeah, and I think it happened to ’em at least twice.

JM: Yeah, so—I heard that it did happen. But it was a struggle and everything, but Walter . . .

RS: Well, and some of the stuff that I’ve read about different things and—and I hope will—I don’t want to get too far ahead in certain things, but I think probably the readers of the *Arkansas Democrat*—the true loyalists—and when you look at what Hussman has told over the years about the readership studies and the research that they did . . .

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: . . . and the loyalty of *Gazette* readers and the loyalty of *Democrat* readers—I think that they survived those kind of things because you did have a real loyalty during those days.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: And if you were a *Democrat* reader, you were a different kind of Arkansan. You were—and in all honesty, you were the kind of Arkansan that I think my father brought me up to be.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: Which was, you know, somebody who would listen to what the other guys had to say and weigh it in to determine independently what you were gonna do. And I think the *Democrat* view—readers viewed themselves that way, and I think, on the other hand, the *Gazette* readers were people who were looking to be led.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: And when the—the *Gazette* started going away from some of its traditions and honoring that need of their readers, I think that's part of where they lost it.

JM: You mean, in particular, talking after Gannett came in.

RS: Absolutely.

JM: Yeah. Hmm.

RS: I mean, and—and let me tell ya, Gannett probably has great, you know, specialty and knowledge in making papers look nice. And making 'em soft and fuzzy and you wanna cuddle up to 'em.

JM: Yeah. [Laughs]

RS: The people in Arkansas did not want to cuddle up. They either wanted to read a newspaper and feel a little bit of the Arkansas rebellious spirit or they wanted to be led.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: And they were getting that out of those two newspapers—one or the other, whatever they wanted they were getting until Gannett came in there.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: And my dad told me—one of the great stories of how he knew the war was over—when he knew it was over. And he's sitting in his office and they hand

him the readership study and this is the way my dad told it to me. “I looked at the readership study. The people of Arkansas at that point think that the *Gazette* is only better than the *Democrat* in terms of comics and coupons.”

JM: Hmm.

RS: Now, my dad interrupted the story to say, “You know it’s not true. I mean, the *Gazette* was still better than us in a lot of ways.”

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: And he said, “But the people thought this.” And he said, “I rocked back in my chair and said, ‘You know, the boys over [at] Gannett, both here and at corporate headquarters, are reading this same result. No matter who did the poll they’re reading the same result and calculating the millions of dollars that it will cost them to change that mindset among the people in Arkansas.’”

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: And he said, “I thought about it for a few seconds and said, ‘They won’t be willing to spend the money.’” And, sure enough, it was only just a matter of months, weeks, whatever, that all of the calls started happening—and it—the process really began of the *Gazette* to sell the assets to Hussman. And the great business decision that my dad always had admiration for and appreciation for, and I wish I knew the name of the guy so I could, you know, bring his name in this thing, but I don’t, and—I believe that Hussman has told the story, too, of they’re sitting around when Gannett decides to lower their subscription price again and—and they discuss, you know, “Are we gonna lose the X-millions of dollars to lower our price to match theirs?” And somebody—I guess Hussman turned to the

circulation director and said, “Would you rather have X-amount of money to promote the paper at the current price?” And the guy said, “I’ll take the money . . .”

JM: Hmm. Yeah.

RS: “. . . to promote the paper.” Well, guess what? That’s what led to the readership study that said the *Democrat* is better than the *Gazette* except for comics and coupons.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

RS: So, I mean, that’s—that was a critical point and my dad, you know, really always had a lot of admiration in the way he told that story.

JM: I think that was a—the deciding point. I think that they had—they concluded—the *Democrat* concluded that they could not match the Gannett rates for circulation, ’cause it was gonna cost ’em more money than they had. So Walter offered him another alternative, which was to, you know, start pushing—selling more papers that—and . . .

RS: And this gets—I mean, this jumps to a topic that’s true today, okay? We’ve always underpriced for our circulation, okay? But—and Walter continues to be one of the loudest voices of reason in the newspaper business. Now, I sit here at a little newspaper with 11,000 circulation five days a week and, you know—in my last circulation audit I had an increase in circulation, we could use our fingers and toes and count the papers that have had increases in circulation in recent circulation audits.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: All right. But that went back to the issue, and if I move from the news side to the business side, you know, news guy—you'd like send out your newspaper to everybody in town.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: Okay. You'd like everybody to get the news. The correlation when you're looking, and—and I find that the stories that were told about the *Democrat* situation, as you were referring to, very interesting, 'cause that's what I find in the business analysis. The circulation money is not that great a portion of the business.

JM: It's the advertising. [Laughs]

RS: It's the advertising.

JM: Yeah.

RS: But if you eliminate that circulation revenue—the relationship even with a small paper like mine between the circulation revenue and the actual profit of the company that keeps ya going, okay—that relationship is very close and very important.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: I mean, I remember a time one time when a bunch of auto dealers at a newspaper wanted to pitch a fit and talked about wanting to pull their advertising, and I looked at 'em and said, "Look, you're only 8 percent of my business. Goodbye!" And they all backed off and didn't quit advertising. Now, what I didn't say is, "You know, 8 percent of my revenue is really important to my profitability."

[Laughter]

JM: Yeah, you bet.

RS: So it was—I mean, it—it was a bluff, but it—it—it still—if I'd have lost that 8 percent, I—we—might've lost the whole franchise.

JM: Yeah, you had [] anyway. Hold on just a second. Let me double-check and make sure I'm capturing everything.

[Tape Stopped]

JM: . . . start up again. Did your dad ever say anything to you or did you ever hear him when he said something to your mother about wearing out during all that period in time? Did he get really tired doing all the work that he was doing?

RS: Well, I think he got—there were times when he got so focused on it, and certainly he was a person with a tremendous ability to focus on a task and . . .

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: . . . I think there were times that he got so focused on it that he wasn't paying attention to his own personal health. I mean, there's a—anybody who believes in astrology or whatever will find it very interesting that my dad had a heart attack in Colorado on April the first . . .

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: . . . 1981.

JM: Oh, did he. Okay.

RS: And a full lunar cycle later—nineteen years on April 1, 2000, he had a heart attack in Colorado and died, okay?

JM: Uh-huh. You said that was on April first, 1981, out in Colorado?

RS: Yeah, the same time that [President Ronald] Reagan got shot.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: I happened to be on that trip in 1981 with him.

JM: You did?

RS: When he went skiing and then came back in and basically, you know, spent a couple of days talking about how bad his indigestion was . . .

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: And then we got on a plane and flew back to Arkansas. And he went to get some kind of award that someone was giving him. I forget exactly what it was. And he went to pick up that award, which, you know, you—those kind of things never seemed very important to him, but that one was for some reason.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: And he picked up that award, and as soon as he got through accepting the award or whatever, he went to somebody and said, “Take me to the hospital.” So he suffered—you know, basically suffered through a heart attack to go [laughs] get that award.

JM: Yeah.

RS: And—but that was the kind of determination of the man, so I think that if he ever really got tired he wasn’t gonna show it. And so I think the biggest issue was just not paying attention to his health.

JM: Well, what did—how did they take care of his heart attack that time? Did they have to do bypass surgery or anything?

RS: The first one they—he went to a doctor who told him he needed to have bypass surgery.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: Okay. And he then went and found another doctor who would treat it with medication. And so they treated it with medication and patched him up and kept him going for a while. Unfortunately, I cannot remember the year when he had the first bypass surgery. Well, I can, too.

JM: Okay.

RS: Let me think about this for a minute. First bypass surgery was in 1983. Because I was—I had moved to Florence, Alabama, at that time, and I know that I got through working on a shift on the copy desk and—and I took—had one of the ladies I worked with take me over to the hospital, and I always said—you know, they did all this—the tests and everything else. And I said, “Well, must’ve just been sympathy pains for my dad.” [Laughs]

JM: Uh-huh. Did—how many bypasses did—? I mean, how—was it double, triple, quadruple or . . . ?

RS: He did some—I think the first time he did a quadruple and then he had to have another one—another set of bypasses done twelve years later, so that—whatever—that would’ve been . . .

JM: That’d been 1995 or something like that.

RS: . . . 1995. And, you know, there were a lot of people that were just convinced that, you know, until he actually had to have heart surgery that he didn’t have one for ’em to work on.

JM: [Laughs]

RS: And it was kinda interesting that the doctor said he was one of the people who

basically had a heart that bypassed itself that formed capillaries and stuff around the blockages, which apparently is not unheard of, but not that common, either, which really made things complicated for him after he had the second surgery. They basically told him that they could never do it again.

JM: Did you ever notice—after either one of those bypass surgeries, did his temperament change any? I've heard some people say, you know, that they—they were successful and—but your temperament changes with all that—that they have an effect on you. Did you ever notice any of that with him?

RS: How would anybody have been able to tell?

JM: [Laughs] Yeah, good question. [Laughter]

RS: And the interesting thing—I mean, I—I really did—I left home in 1973. Okay. And really never went back.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: Now, after my dad did retire, which I really didn't think he'd do, he actually—he and my mom actually moved to Palatka and got a small house here and spent a lotta time here.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: And so it was the first time that I had to really spend extensive amounts of time around my dad, you know, since I left home in 1973. And the funny thing is people say that our mannerisms, our hand gestures, everything else, are almost identical despite that fact.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: But the—so, I mean—I did not notice any changes on that. Now, I will say that

after the second one, when they told him they could never [do] it again—he did have kind of a countdown clock that hovered around over his head.

JM: Yeah.

RS: Because the first surgery had lasted twelve years, and he figured at best he had twelve years left.

JM: Yeah.

RS: So—and as far as personality change—I mean—and I only somewhat jokingly say you could see the clock. But you could see it in him and the way he talked to ya about things and—and, you know, there was a—there was a desire at that time—and I . . .

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: And I say that—you know, I really thought that my dad would probably slump over one day over the desk in the messy office in the corner of the *Arkansas Democrat*, ya know?

JM: Yeah.

RS: So I was really happy when he actually did retire.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: One of my personal frustrations was that he died too soon after he had completed the transition from hectic newspaper editor, okay, to doting grandfather.

JM: Yeah. Hmm.

RS: And let me tell ya, the—when he made that transition, the things that he was doing for my kids—taking my oldest son, who has Down Syndrome, out to dinner with his girlfriend and sitting in the car while they ate so that they could have a

real date, you know?

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: Taking my youngest son out when he was no bigger than a matchstick and driving around a golf course 'cause the kid liked to play golf. And my dad would just drive him around out there and let him play and he—you know, they spent basically a summer, you know, with my dad driving him around playing golf.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: And when he first started doing that kinda thing he wasn't terribly comfortable with it. But in the last year or so he did get very comfortable with it, and not only that, was just enjoying it immensely. And I—that's one of my few regrets, is that he didn't have a little more time to enjoy that part, 'cause he sure did enjoy all the hectic, crazy stuff.

JM: Yeah. You'd told me something before about how he wound up writing seven columns a week. [Laughs] How did that come about?

RS: Well—and the reason he told me this story, because he—back in those days, as I've told ya, I was a copy editor. And so he'd love—he loved telling me how he could blame, you know, this on a copy editor.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: But apparently at that time his column may have been running six days a week, or whatever, and did not run on Saturday. There was some kind of special Voices page that ran on Saturday that . . .

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: And some copy editor put his Sunday column or whatever column he grabbed

into the Saturday paper by mistake. My dad claims that he got so many calls the next Monday from readers happy to see his column in Saturday's paper that he could just never go back.

JM: Hmm, he just decided that he could write one every day, huh? [Laughs]

RS: Right.

JM: Yeah. [Laughs]

RS: And he actually said the process of writing a column every day was much, much easier than the assignment given to a guy who had to write a column three days a week or one day a week. I mean, if you're only writing three days a week or one day a week it better be good.

JM: Yeah. Right.

RS: If you're writing seven days nobody really expects you to have anything that's just a truly extraordinary piece of writing. Now, my dad had a gift that he could write—and I've heard some of the stories that are told about this, and I think they're absolutely accurate—he had an ability to write in a very simple fashion and to just crank it out.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: Because when he wrote his column, and I have to be honest and say, you know, I never read my dad's political reporting. I probably should have. I did read his book, *Yellow Dogs and Democrats*. [Editor's note: The book's title is *Yellow Dogs and Dark Horses: Thirty Years on the Campaign Beat with John Robert Starr*]

JM: Yeah, I did, too.

RS: And it was a very easy read.

[Tape Stopped]

JM: Now this is side two: Jerry McConnell here with Rusty Starr. Rusty, you were saying that you'd never read any of his political reporting when he was with the AP—I guess you were saying.

RS: Right. Now, I read a lot of his columns.

JM: Yeah.

RS: And what he was able to do is those columns told it to you like he would tell it to his sister.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: And as copy editor, one time I had a great piece of advice from a guy who said, "Write your headlines like you were talking to your sister and you'll write better headlines." Well, that's the way Dad wrote his columns. And, therefore, he developed a family of readers, and—and with those readership studies that we were talking about—I mean, you know, you talk about something that used to just infuriate him, I think, is that Wally Hall's sports columns—and I didn't read as much of Wally's stuff, but Wally also had that ability.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: Wally's sports columns and Dad's columns were obviously ringing true with the people who read the *Arkansas Democrat*. I tell a funny story on Hillary Clinton and, gosh, you're gonna have to help me here . . .

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: . . . 'cause the name has slipped my mind—Carville.

JM: James Carville.

RS: James Carville.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: Now, my mother served on committees and stuff with Hillary Clinton and always had a tremendous amount of respect for her.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: You know, and the point I was gonna make is whether the people loved him or hated him or loved his column or hated him, there were certain groups of people who had to pick it up every day.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: Okay. And many years later, I'm in—or I guess it was during a [presidential] campaign—one of [Bill] Clinton's campaigns—it may have been the first one. But I'm in [Montgomery]—I'm working in north Alabama. I go to south Alabama to Montgomery for a meeting. Hillary's there and having a public reception. I said, "You know, never met Hillary. I'm gonna go stand in the line."

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: I went and actually stood in line. I walked up to Hillary and stuck out my hand and said, "Greetings from the kinder, gentler branch of the Starr family." And I guess they were running against "kinder, gentler" [President George Herbert Walker] Bush back in those days.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: And Hillary said, "Well, hello." She paused just slightly. "You're Rusty, but you're not from this part of Alabama. What are you doing in Montgomery?"

JM: Hmm.

RS: Okay.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: So here was a lady who was so sharp as to, you know, not only know her friends but know the family of—at that point my dad had to be—had to be classified as an enemy because he at that point had gone after Clinton with all four feet.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: Because once Clinton reneged on the pledge that he had made to my dad in his last run for governor . . .

JM: Not to run for president?

RS: . . . not to run for president, it was over between those two guys.

JM: Yeah.

RS: Okay. There was a love/hate relationship there, but that was the end of it.

JM: But he did admire Clinton for a while, didn't he?

RS: Oh, absolutely. But there was—I don't think there was another kind word written about Clinton in the column after he reneged on that promise. Now, years later, after I moved down here to Florida, they had a little thing here that they call the Putnam Society, and this is Putnam County . . .

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: . . . and—and—and so—so people with a little bit of money in Putnam County pooled it together to occasionally get somebody that they thought was a national-level speaker to come to town. And James Carville [laughs] was the one that they invited right after I first moved down here.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: I stuck my hand out to James Carville and said, “Greetings from the kinder, gentler branch of the Starr family,” and—and you could tell by the look in his eyes, there was nothing there. And I thought, “This guy probably—”cause they based that campaign out of Little Rock.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: “This guy probably either got up every morning and read my dad’s column himself or was briefed on what my dad’s column said as one of the first things he did for the day.” And some guy in some strange place mentions the Starr family and he doesn’t even respond with, “You talking Ken or John Robert?”

JM: [Laughs] Yeah.

RS: But at that point that was when it confirmed to me that, “You know, my mom was right about Hillary Clinton. She’s a very smart lady.”

JM: Yeah. How did your dad feel about Hillary?

RS: I think my dad had a lot more [laughs] respect for Hillary than he did for Bill.

JM: Yeah.

RS: I think. But there were times when he had great respect for Bill. But like I said, I think my dad had more respect for Hillary.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: You know, I’m not really sure, but he didn’t very—he did not say very many unkind things about Hillary. He was known to say a lot of unkind things about Mr. Clinton.

JM: Yeah. Did he ever feel like his—he was in competition with Wally as far as

which one was the most read?

RS: Oh, absolutely. I mean, we—we go back to the column seven days a week.

JM: Yeah.

RS: That's an ego. That seven-day-a-week column by the mistake of a copy editor . . .

JM: Yeah.

RS: The only reason you go to seven is his ego.

JM: Yeah, yeah. [Laughs]

RS: And let me tell ya, I don't think my dad understood how Wally was competing against him, but I think I know. I think it was because they both wrote like they were writing to their sister and when you read their stuff you felt like you were a member of their family.

JM: Yeah.

RS: And when they sent Wally off to run the bulls [in Pamplona, Spain] and do some of those crazy things that they sent him off to do . . .

JM: Yeah. [Laughs]

RS: I mean, the people of Arkansas loved that. This is stuff the people of Arkansas—the—the ones who are real *Democrat* readers, the ones that I talk about that have that rebellious spirit.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: This is stuff that these people would have done themselves [but they were?] glad Wally's doing it for 'em.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

RS: [Laughs]

JM: Yeah. [Laughs] Do you have any insight on how your dad, though, put pressure on people to perform at top level?

RS: I really don't. There is a story that was told to me that was not told to me by my dad because I was talking to somebody and said, "I don't understand my father's loyalty to this person." And I want to be careful in telling the story because I don't really think it's appropriate to name the person. But I'll throw it out there that the person was a man. And I said, "I don't understand my father's loyalty to this person."

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: "You know, he could find better people to do that job in my opinion." And somebody said, "Well, you have to understand that there came a point," and I wish I knew the timing. But there came a point where there was going to be a revolt, okay, over whatever pressure my dad was putting on the staff to do whatever. But there was gonna be a revolt. This person that my dad—I didn't understand the loyalty to was the person who left the revolt meeting, got in his car, drove to my dad's little two-bedroom house on the south side of Little Rock . . .

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: . . . you know, part of the reason he wanted to be the managing editor and not the executive editor—I mean, you know, pomp and circumstance is just not that important to my dad.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: But this is the guy who drove out and said, you know, face to face, "Here's what's

going on and you need to get in your car and go back down there.” And my dad was able to go back down there and—and—and quell whatever the revolt du jour was.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: And, therefore, my dad then had loyalty to this person, despite the fact that at times I thought the person was some—sometimes even an embarrassment to the *Democrat*.

JM: Well, I’d love to know who it is, but I’m [laughs] not gonna press you to know . . .

RS: [Laughs]

JM: . . . ’Cause it’s probably somebody that I know. [Laughs]

RS: Well, and I’d be glad to tell you sometime, but not for the oral history.

JM: Not for publication. Yeah. Okay. [Laughter] All right. But, yeah, so he was able to quell the revolt, though?

RS: Oh, absolutely. And, you know, it—I think one of the key ways he did it was—and they used to joke when I worked at the *Jonesboro Sun*, and they were all great people up there and easy to get along with and everything else, but a guy named Mike Overall or Larry Fugate—and I’m not sure where Larry is these days, but a hell of a newspaperman.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: And I can’t remember whether it was Mike or Larry, but they were running the newsroom when I was there, and they used to just pretty commonly say that, you know, what we had in Jonesboro was management by embarrassment. If they

were up in the front of the room editing your story and you misspelled a word, you know, they were gonna say out—you know, out for everybody to hear, “Starr, when are yagonna learn how to spell such-and-such? You misspell that every time you send it over here to me.” Well, guess what?

JM: Hmm.

RS: I didn’t misspell it again after they—you know, management by embarrassment—management by embarrassment. But I think that the [Democrat] memos that were done during the height of the competition where the quality of the work was critiqued in a highly, highly public way. There’s not a management training school that I have ever been to in my life that would tell ya to do it that way.

JM: Yeah.

RS: And, you know, gosh, I worked for *The New York Times* Company and, man, did they send you to all the management schools. But you know what? It’s a tremendously effective way, even though we—some people leave. Some people can’t take that kind of critique and embarrassment on a daily basis.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: And it was brutal, from what I understand.

JM: Yeah.

RS: There was no holds barred. If . . .

JM: I’ve heard that, too.

RS: . . . John Robert thought you made a mistake, you—you were in the critique, and you were persona non grata until you did something good.

JM: Yeah. [Laughter] Okay. Well, how was he as a father, growing up? How did

[laughs] he treat you?

RS: I think the main thing—I mean, you know, I can recall stories where we—you know, all of the kids wanted to go to the state fair and, you know, he would tell us to go write an essay that included at least five good reasons why we should go to the state fair.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: And we all did that, and he didn't let us go because none of us put in there that going to the state fair would be educational. He said, "How could you leave that out?" He was the kind of guy that in a tense moment would hand you a matchstick and say, "Now, talk for ten minutes about that matchstick," to divert whatever the—to get you diverted from whatever you were on.

JM: Yeah.

RS: I mean, it was—and my brother—you know, I sometimes forget that my brother is the smart one in the bunch.

JM: Let's see, what's his name?

RS: John Phillip.

JM: John Phillip. Right.

RS: But I realized it again at the memorial service for my dad. And I wish I could sit here and recall for you the things he said about my father's expectations of excellence. My brother was excellent. The truth was my dad put a lot more pressure on my brother to be excellent than he did on me.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: I remember when I was editor of the student newspaper and, you know, I put out

my student newspaper. I was real proud of it and he—and my dad, you know, like, “You know, yeah, the paper’s pretty good this time, you know,” and not saying a whole lot. And I’d say—I said, “You know, I think it’s the best one we ever put out.” “Well, it’s—maybe a few too many mistakes.” “Well, maybe—I don’t think so.” He said, “Okay, you want me to mark it up?” I said, “Yeah!” Oh, man, he made the thing bleed.

JM: [Laughs]

RS: But he—for me, and I’m the baby of the family. You know, the old joke—the—the pacifier drops on first child and they wash it off and clean it up and sterilize it, and the second child they at least wash it off. Third child, they just hand it back to ya.

JM: Yeah. [Laughs]

RS: So I’ve got—I had it a little bit easier and, you know, I don’t think that that was because I had shown some interest in the newspaper business. My plan was not to go into the newspaper business. And, really, that happened when I sat down with the dean of the college where I thought I was gonna study when I went to Arkansas State, and figured out that those degrees didn’t really assure you of a job.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: And, you know, I guess my dad had—well, it was my mom that probably taught me to be more practical than that. And I walked out of that building and my head down, and I when I lifted my head up the journalism building was right across the street.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: And I remember saying, “I know what those people do with their degrees.” And I went over and signed up. So I don’t think I got off the hook because it looked like I might be a newspaper guy you know? I think I got off the hook because I wasn’t as smart as my brother . . .

JM: Yeah. [Laughs]

RS: . . . and I don’t think his [expectations]—you know, he—he had high expectations for me, but they weren’t as high as my brother had to deal with.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: And at the memorial service my brother made the—just a wonderful talk, because the room was full of people who my dad’s push for excellence . . .

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: . . . I mean, we’re talking—there were people who got up there to speak who played on his baseball team, who stood up and talked about how miserable my dad made their life as a baseball player. And how because he made their life miserable as a baseball player, they were better people.

JM: Yeah. Hmm.

RS: And my brother, you know, talked about that. And my brother talked—and, like I said, I got off the hook. []. And part of it is because I—you know, sometime in high school, when they had grounded me for the millionth time and I made a decision that I was not gonna ask to be ungrounded and I made my dad give up and actually come to me and say, “I can’t stand you being around the house anymore.”

JM: Yeah. [Laughs]

RS: “And you’re ungrounded.”

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: “Why would you never ask to be ungrounded?” And I just smiled because, you know, I said to myself, “Eventually you’d give up.” But for the most part, I got off the hook. I mean . . .

JM: Yeah. Your . . .

RS: . . . I think there’s the old story that, you know, all the psychologists tell that you’re greatly influenced by the way you were raised. I think that’s probably true of me. But it didn’t bother me. [Laughs] Other people get bothered by it.

JM: Your brother was—is—an engineer, is that correct?

RS: Yeah, he owns a chemical company out in Delta, Colorado, that makes an oil-free food-release agent for the cooking industry that—it’s a company that he bought after he’d worked for Alcoa Aluminum for many, many years in their chemical filtration division and retired from them at age forty-two—started a bed-and-breakfast [inn] and managed to sell it for a million dollars more than he had in it and bought a chemical company.

JM: Where was the bed-and-breakfast?

RS: Colorado Springs. Right outside of Colorado Springs. But we’re talking about a guy here who has an intelligence level that—that most of us can’t even fathom. And just tremendous intellect and a respectable ability to use it. [Laughs]

[01:04:20.27] JM: Yeah, yeah. Hmm. And you—then you have a sister, right?

RS: I have a sister, Linda, who is a jailer for the Boulder County [Colorado] Sheriff’s

Department.

JM: Hmm. Okay.

RS: And I joke that—she was four years older than I was, and I joke she could kick me—whip me anytime she wanted to and that she’s a jailer just in case there’s an opportunity for one of those inmates to get outta line.

JM: Yeah. [Laughs]

RS: She’s a tough lady and actually went through academy at—I think she was fifty-six and graduated from the police academy to qualify to be a street deputy. And most people can’t get through those programs like that when they’re in their twenties.

JM: Yeah.

RS: [Laughs]

JM: Your—how much time—do you recall your mother ever saying, “Oh, you’re hearing . . .” How much time did he spend at the office when he was right in the middle of the [newspaper] war? Do you know?

RS: Oh, I think that—I joked earlier when we talked that I was born into the newspaper business.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: Let me tell ya, he just lived and breathed it. It started with that kitchen table being full of newspapers in the morning. And not that that was that much different from the whole time I was growing up when he was working for AP.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: But, I mean, the news business was what he did. And, you know, one thing that I

don't really know for sure. I know he remained active as an officer, but during the days at AP he was involved in a community baseball association that built one of the finest rec[reational] fields and rec programs that expanded out to cover baseball and basketball.

JM: That was at Geyer Springs?

RS: Every—yeah. And I don't know if it ever got into football or not, but, I mean, they had a—you know, back in those days they had a \$100,000 gymnasium for basketball programs . . .

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: . . . and stuff, and I know that he remained active as an officer in that. I don't know how much coaching he was still doing. But I think that he did find some time. Now, of course, what my mom did was—during some of that time—and I guess—no, that predates that. Well, when I left for college—my mom and I graduated from college on the same day.

JM: Did you really?

RS: Yeah. She graduated from UALR [University of Arkansas at Little Rock] and at Arkansas State you did not have to walk in the graduation. It wasn't a requirement. But the only way I got out of it is because my mom wasn't gonna be there. She was walking in her graduation the same night at UALR.

JM: Hmm.

RS: But my mom was able to—she got her degree, and by the time the war was going on, she was teaching school.

JM: Oh, was she? What kind of degree was—? Yeah.

RS: And teaching kindergarten.

JM: Yeah, okay.

RS: And so she wasn't sitting there . . .

JM: Twiddling her thumbs.

RS: . . . waiting around. I think my dad didn't like that very much in all honesty, but . . .

JM: Yeah. [Laughs]

RS: . . . see, he didn't like her being that independent, but she certainly was.

JM: Yeah. Okay. Well, that's probably good to keep her—keep occupied and have something to do rather than just sit there and wait.

RS: But I don't recall—in the days when I was growing up, I don't recall a great ability other than around the supper table and around the baseball fields to get to spend a lotta time with Dad. I mean, he worked. And AP—there were times when he worked nights. So that—I joked to my wife when she first acted like she—this was back when she was just my girlfriend. I joked to my wife—well, not really joked—I warned my wife when she first started giving me an indication that she thought I was worthy of—that I might be marrying material.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: I said, “You know, you need to understand. If you marry me, I'm going to take you away from your home and you are going to be very frustrated numerous times when you don't understand why in the world I would put the job above everything else. But, hey, that was the way I was raised.” And I warned her, and, sure enough, I took her away from home, and one day when I was an editor I walked

in the house and she said, “Have you ever calculated how much you make per hour?” And I said, “No, it would be too depressing.”

JM: Uh-huh. [Laughter] Yeah. Where was she from?

RS: She’s from Florence, Alabama.

JM: Oh, she is? Florence, Alabama. Up in northeast Alabama. Northwest Alabama.

RS: Yeah. She was literally the first eligible woman that I met when I moved to Florence, Alabama, in 1983 and, man, I tell ya, those Alabama girls—it’s hard to get away from ’em.

JM: Yeah. Yeah.

RS: But I met her in January of 1983, and we got married in October of 1984.

JM: Yeah. Okay. All right. All right. Well, Rusty, anything else you can think of that you might—that might shed the light on your dad’s career, and particularly at the *Democrat* and winning the war?

RS: I would just say that the—to kinda repeat, that I think it was the one-two punch. I’m telling ya, when you study and read the business decisions that Walter Hussman and his team . . .

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: . . . and I believe that Walter was smart enough to let my dad be a part of the business team, too—at least to be there and weigh in is—but the one-two punch is what did it.

JM: Yeah.

RS: I [don’t?] think you can do it without the hard news, but I don’t think you do it without the business sense, either.

JM: Yeah. Yeah.

RS: And I'll tell one quick story and that is when it came clear that Orville would be willing to desert [the *Gazette*], my dad told me that he went to Hussman while they were in the process of making the decisions [and] said "We can't do this." And Hussman said, "Why not?" "Well, if he comes in, he's gonna be under Wally, okay? And that puts him on the pay scale under this person, this person, this person, this person, this person, this person, this person's boss." I always joke that I do editor math, so I'm pretty sure my dad does editor math, too.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: "Editor math says that costs this much money. You—we can't do it." The way my dad told the story is Hussman didn't say, "Well, let me get back to ya."

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: Without batting an eye, Hussman said, "It costs me X-amount of money every month to fight this war. If the war ends one month early it will cover those costs. If because of this decision—" And I'm not sure that you could go back and say the war ended one month early because Orville Henry was a *Democrat* instead of a *Gazetteian*.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: But you know what? I bet it was at least a month.

JM: Yeah. Well, it sure ruined the morale over at the *Gazette*. [Laughs]

RS: Absolutely. And I—the joke that I always said, "Well, ya know, you can shave off a whole portion of my potential journalism career, 'cause I doubt I'll ever go to work for a Gannett property. I'm sure the Starr name is pretty much persona

non grata.”

JM: Yeah. [Laughs] I wouldn't be surprised. Yep.

RS: But that, I think, is the story of the war. You had the very intelligent guys who came together with a determination and—and you just—I wish I knew Walter Hussman better but it's the determination.

JM: Yeah, that's the thing that's . . .

RS: . . . you couldn't put an editor who was more determined.

JM: . . . yeah, that's the thing that surprised a lot of people, how much determination that Walter had and how he hung in there, you know, and . . .

RS: Well, like I said—and I've heard Walter's recaps and things, and he doesn't emphasize that the Pattersons laughed at him, the way I was told the story.

JM: Yeah.

RS: But the way I was told the story, they laughed at him about a joint operating [agreement].

JM: Yeah, they just flat said no.

RS: And whether they laughed at him or they just told him no, they insulted the man and he was not going . . .

JM: To give up.

RS: []

JM: Yeah, I can tell ya a couple other incidents. One of them, the *Democrat*—the *Democrat* pressmen went on a strike and they were walking the picket line outside the *Democrat*. But one of the other guys working—one of Walter's top aides said—told me that—that most of the press—well, most of the people on the

strike line were *Gazette* pressmen and that Hugh Patterson came in over there every day to encourage them.

RS: [Laughs] And this was while the war was going on?

JM: Yeah. You think that didn't—no, this was even before the war. This was before the war. This was about 1975 or 1976. You think—you think that didn't chap Walter? [Laughs]

RS: Well, like I said, what—I don't think that I ever met a Patterson other than maybe to say hello or whatever. But, again, you—I am greatly concerned about—the reason why I wanted to do this with you Jerry, is because I'm greatly concerned about the lessons [that] are there in that Little Rock battle that—that go to today.

JM: Yeah.

RS: When I read [Arthur] “Pinch” Sulzberger [Jr., publisher of *The New York Times*] saying that, “We're *The New York Times*. We think it's all gonna work out.” I see a vision, even though I never met 'em of the Pattersons laughing at Hussman.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: I think we have to be more humble in this mission that we do for people with the reminder that there's a mission that we want to do or we wouldn't be here []. But there is a business side of this that involves money, that if you don't have the money you don't get to do the mission.

JM: Yeah. Yeah.

RS: So why did I say, “Okay, I'm willing to leave a newsroom and go be a publisher”? Because I didn't see enough editors getting promoted to publishers. I didn't see enough people with that fire in their belly to do the mission, who were

willing to take responsibility for the money.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: And we've got to figure out what it takes to survive. And you know what? Hey, *The New York Times* may be one of the few that survive, and they may survive because of their arrogance, and I'm an idiot.

JM: [Laughs] Well, I—they do tend to be a little arrogant at times. And you know what really—what's really frosting people on now are the people in Boston [Massachusetts], that somebody in New York City has got control over what's gonna happen to their newspaper. [Laughter]

RS: Oh, yeah. They—I was still working for *The New York Times* in 1995 when they bought *The Boston Globe*. And later on at that fancy marketing seminar I learned about some small newspapers had kinda stolen a big portion of the market from the family that owned *The Boston Globe* right before *The New York Times* bought it.

JM: Uh-huh.

[01:17:18.03] RS: I didn't learn that till later. But my initial reaction to the purchase was, "Gosh, this is a great career opportunity for me, a young editor in Gadsden, Alabama. Surely I'm gonna be named the third deputy managing editor in charge of clean restrooms."

JM: [Laughs]

RS: Because that was my vision of what places like *The New York Times* and *The Boston Globe* were.

JM: Yeah.

RS: That they—there were other things going on there than—and there was great journalism going on there. But it was basically—let’s be honest, it was foreign to a country boy from Arkansas.

JM: Yeah, I understand. Uh-huh.

RS: And I grew up in Little Rock, but I can call myself a country boy from Arkansas.

JM: Yeah, okay. Well, Rusty, I appreciate it, and . . .

RS: Jerry, I enjoyed it immensely and . . .

JM: . . . I did, too. So—and they will . . .

RS: I have had an opportunity to go back and look at some of the other ones. Probably gonna spend a little more time.

JM: Yeah, do.

RS: I think there—I think there are some folks that will really enjoy getting an opportunity to see a little—a little anecdotal added to the history, ’cause it is a grand history. I don’t think there’s ever been a newspaper war fought quite that way.

JM: No, I don’t think so either. That was a heck of a war. I used to say, “Well, it’s about like the Conway Wampus Cats beating the Green Bay Packers, but [laughter] that’s how big an upset it was.

RS: Absolutely.

JM: Yeah.

RS: And, like I said, and I remember one that—when the *Gazette* came back to fight free classifieds with a little ol’ lady or somebody advertising that you could get three lines for three days for \$3. And it took the *Democrat* less than twenty-four

hours to have a television commercial on the air that said, “Why would you pay three, three, three when you can get it free, free, free?”

JM: [Laughs] I think that was a Paul Smith [slogan] . . .

RS: Wow, I’m tellin’ ya! I don’t know who was responsible for that. I never heard the detail of it. I think I was actually in Little Rock, for some reason, when the little ol’ lady came out there and said that, and I just about died. I thought, “Golly!”

JM: Well, that—I’m pretty sure . . .

RS: I’ve always been fascinated by the business side of . . .

JM: I think that was Paul Smith. He was—came in as the business manager and advertising director, then business manager and moved right on up. Now he’s the president of the *Democrat-Gazette*, but he was—a lot of people say—say he’s brilliant.

RS: It’s not hard for me to believe that my dad retired and is deceased—that I can put in perspective. But when you look at Hussman and Paul Smith and those people that are getting up there to the point where they’re close to retirement age. That one doesn’t register with me.

JM: I understand.

RS: Those were the guys who were driving the business part of it.

JM: Yeah, they were. Rusty, thanks a lot. I appreciate it. They will type up a transcript of this and mail it to me. I’ll go over it and send it back. Then they will send you a copy and you can edit however you see fit.

RS: Thank you so much, Jerry. I appreciated it and enjoyed.

JM: Okay, me too and thanks a lot Rusty. Bye.

RS: Bye.

[End of Interview]

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