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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with

Mel White
Little Rock, Arkansas
12 July 2007

Interviewer: Brenda Tirey

Brenda Tirey: This is Brenda Tirey. It's July 12, 2007. I'm in my house at Little Rock, Arkansas, with Mel White, preparing to do an interview for the [David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville] about the *Arkansas Democrat*, where Mel used to work. And now you've signed the release for the use of this tape by the Special Collections [Department] at the University. Correct?

Mel White: Yes, I understand what this is for, and I agree.

BT: Well, tell me first just a little about yourself, about your background, and where you were born and grew up.

MW: Okay. I was born in Conway, Arkansas. My father's name was Melvin Virgil White, just like mine, and he was from Kansas. He was orphaned as a young boy and moved to Conway to live with relatives. My mother's name was Virgie Harrison. She was born in rural White County, and her family moved to Conway

when she was also young.

[Small portion of recording is muffled because it sounds like someone is handling recording device while recording is taking place]

MW: I think they met in high school in Conway. I was born in 1950 in a hospital that no longer exists in Conway. I have one sister who was born four years later. She still lives in Conway. I lived in Conway for the first twenty-three or -four years of my life. I went all through school there. I went to Hendrix College, where I got a degree in humanities, which was a combination of philosophy and English, I think. I doubt they even offer it anymore. It was kind of useless.

BT: Did you live at Hendrix when you were there?

MW: No, I did not live on campus. I lived part of the time at my parents' house and I lived part of the time with some other guys in a house we rented.

BT: When you were growing up, what did you think you would be when you became an adult?

MW: I was interested in writing. Well, I wanted to be the first baseman for the New York Yankees [Major League Baseball team]. That was the number one goal in my life.

BT: Was there a particular first baseman that you admired, or did you play that position in Little League?

MW: I did play that position. I was a pitcher and I played first base. I think the [Yankees'] first baseman's name when I was a kid was [Bill] "Moose" Skowron; and it wasn't so much that he was my hero. Mickey Mantle was my hero, and that's why I liked the Yankees, which was a very non-traditional thing to be into

at that age in Conway, Arkansas.

BT: Because everybody liked the St. Louis [Missouri] Cardinals [Major League Baseball team].

MW: Everybody liked the Cardinals because the Cardinals were the team you could hear on the radio every single night. And I *did* like the Cardinals, and we went to some Cardinals games when I was a kid. I had liked Stan Musial, too. But Mickey Mantle was my real hero. However, I was writing silly little parodies and satires and things even in junior high school. I used to write little silly parodies of TV shows or commercials or movies. I had the inkling that it was fun to do that. It was fun to write things that made people laugh, even at that age. I actually wrote two stupid—really stupid—little parody plays that were put on in high school.

[Muffled recording]

BT: Who were you writing these for, your own amusement, or did they get published in school newspapers or in papers that you and your friends put out?

MW: The plays were just written as silly little satires that were put on to raise money for the Spanish Club—or maybe it was the Latin Club. We'd practice them and charge people, like, a quarter to come in at lunch hour or something. That was all it was. The first thing I ever had published [was when] I was eight or nine years old, and I wrote a poem about Thanksgiving. My mother thought it was so charming, as mothers are so wont to do of their children—whether it's poems or little pictures they put on the refrigerator. She sent it to Charles Portis at the *Arkansas Gazette*. He was doing the "Our Town" column, which was a really

popular little sort of gossipy, human-interest column. And Charles Portis published—printed my little poem in the “Our Town” column—this would’ve been, like, 1957, 1958, 1959—with my name and everything. So that was my first appearance in print.

BT: Do you remember the poem?

MW: I can remember one line, which was, “Even though the turkeys don’t like this time of year.” Now, I don’t even want to imagine what came before or after that. But Portis printed it. [Laughter] And Charles Portis—for those who unfortunately may not know—is this hilarious writer who has written a bunch of comic novels. He’s a semi-undiscovered genius. Some people have discovered him, but not enough. If there was any justice in the world, Charles Portis would be much more famous than people like [syndicated humor columnist] Lewis Grizzard and he would be at least as famous as Roy Blount, Jr., because he’s a *lot* funnier. [Editor’s note: Portis is most famous for writing the 1968 novel, *True Grit*, made into the 1969 movie starring John Wayne] So my earliest, and possibly greatest claim to fame of my entire life, was that Charles Portis printed my poem.

[Laughs]

BT: Your poem was worthy of the *Arkansas Gazette*.

MW: Either that or it was a real slow day. [Laughter] He needed to fill up about four inches of space in his column. [Laughs]

BT: Well, how did you get into journalism as a paid journalist?

MW: I played in a rock-and-roll band all through college, and that’s one reason I hardly met anybody at Hendrix because when other people were having parties and stuff,

I was out *playing* for parties almost every weekend of my college career. I continued playing in the band for a year or more after college, and then I got a job at the Pulaski County Library on the bookmobile. And then I had a blowup with the woman who was the head librarian, and I was unemployed. Believe me, this *does* lead to journalism eventually.

BT: So right out of college you were in the band for a while and then got a job that had a regular salary?

MW: Right. I was on the bookmobile, and then I was unemployed. I didn't at that moment need money, and I didn't want to go get a regular job. I actually went to work for the [J.] William Fulbright campaign. This would've been 1974, when Fulbright was running for re-election as United States senator against [Arkansas Governor] Dale Bumpers [in the Democratic primary]. If I had known then what I know now, I would've worked for Bumpers, *but* [then] I was distressed that this young whippersnapper was running against Fulbright, who had stood up against the Vietnam War all those years. I felt like Fulbright deserved better. I . . .

BT: What did you do for the Fulbright campaign?

MW: I just showed up as a volunteer, and I put bumper stickers in envelopes and I just did whatever they needed done. Eventually, they started actually paying me because I was around there so much. They said, "Well, you know, we think you deserve something." So they started giving me \$100 a week or something. Anyway, one time they called me and said, "There's this photographer from *The New York Times* who's coming down to cover the big chicken festival at Nashville, Arkansas." It was a big political thing, and this was one of the events

in Arkansas that all the politicians went to. And *The New York Times* was interested in this campaign—Bumpers versus Fulbright—because Fulbright was a very, very famous man in those days.

BT: Yes, he was the chairman of the [Senate] Foreign Relations Committee and was very influential as a senator from a state that was not very populous or always well thought of.

MW: Yes, yes. [Fulbright [had always been a very patrician sort of a guy, but his heart was in the right place. He was one of the leading opponents of the Vietnam War. And who was it who used to call him “Half-Bright?” Was it Joe McCarthy?

BT: I believe that’s right. Yes it was Joseph McCarthy. [Editor’s Note: McCarthy was a Republican senator from Wisconsin who gained fame and notoriety in the 1950s for his efforts to identify Communists in the United States]

MW: Probably many people called him [Fulbright] that because he made a lot of right-wingers and hawks mad with his opposition to the war. Anyway, [the campaign staff] said, “Would you be interested in driving this [*New York Times*] guy from the Little Rock [National] Airport [Adams Field] down to Nashville, Arkansas, and back. Just being his handler. He was a little, short Italian guy named Santi Visalli. I picked him up and drove him down to Nashville, Arkansas, and I kind of helped him a little bit. I would carry his extra camera or carry his film. And he took zillions of pictures of this political rally. I was dating a woman named Dorothy Palmer, and Dorothy was a reporter for the *Arkansas Democrat*. The campaign was over. In those days, whoever won the Democratic primary was essentially the winner of the election. And the primary was in May. Fulbright

lost and I'm glad, actually, because Dale Bumpers is the greatest politician ever to come out of Arkansas, in *my* memory. Anyway, Dorothy Palmer got me an interview with Jerry McConnell, who was the managing editor of the [*Democrat*]. There were no openings as a reporter, which was what I really wanted to be. I wanted to be a writer. This was when journalism was suddenly [laughs] this hot profession because of Watergate, and [*The Washington Post* reporters Bob] Woodward and [Carl] Bernstein, and investigative journalism. Suddenly reporters were like stars. And so with me always having been interested in writing, this was a way to get into the field. Of course, I shouldn't have been one [a reporter then], anyway because I had *no* experience. But Jerry McConnell talked to me. I *think* the only thing I had to show him was a paper I wrote in college about *Moby Dick*. But, like happened to so many other people, Jerry believed in me or decided to give me a chance. He hired me to be a copy editor. Now, I was disappointed in this because I thought copy editing was really boring. You just sat there and changed commas to periods or something. But it was really one of the best things to ever happen to me—maybe *the* best, as far as writing, because it taught me to think about things like style. And by style, I mean what the newspapers call style, which is: What do you capitalize? What do you not capitalize? How do you use dashes? What's the difference between that and which? What's the difference between uninterested and disinterested? What are the facts? How do you spell people's names? Is it Broadway Street or Broadway Avenue or just Broadway? Things like that that you have to get right if you're going to be a writer, no matter what you're doing. I read books about it and I

tried pretty hard.

BT: Did you read books about copy-editing?

MW: Yes. People gave me some books and the AP [Associated Press] style book and things like that. I just started to think, “Wait a minute. Have I ever stopped to think about the difference between that and which? Have I ever thought about the difference between nauseated and nauseous?” So, I got a job there. The copy-editor people were the ones who took reporters’ stories or what they call wire copy, such as Associated Press or Reuters stories, and edited them a little bit, wrote a headline, and maybe cut them to a certain length, and then they were sent off to be printed after they had been approved by what was called the slot man. I guess I could give a quick little description of the copy desk. In those days at the *Democrat*—the first floor was business offices. The second floor was what they call the editorial offices. That’s where all the reporters and writers and the sports department and the editorial department and managing editor—and the copy desk—were. And then the third floor was where the printers were. I was there at the transition time between the old-fashioned typesetting where somebody sat and typed in these stories [on a Linotype machine that] caused them to come out in lead type and computer-set type, where stories came out on film as already set type, and there was no lead involved. I was also at the transition between the time when reporters wrote their stories on typewriters and the time that people started using computers. I was there during that exact transition.

BT: How did you edit copy?

MW: It depends. When first got there I would be handed either the reporter’s story on

typewriter paper or a long single length of paper that had come out of a [news wire service] machine.

BT: Teletype machine?

MW: Yes, that [paper] was anywhere from six inches to four feet long and about six inches wide. Later on, those stories that came in from Associated Press or Reuters were already in the computer, and so we didn't really have a chance to edit them very much. They had already been through this whole process. They were really pretty good. Unless there was some egregious mistake, mostly what we did with them was cut and make them fit in a certain space, and write a headline for them. Now, with the reporters' stories, we could change things around a little bit. Of course, I didn't change hardly anything when I first got there because I didn't know what I was doing.

BT: But you used pencils?

MW: Yes. Sometimes we used red pencils, but generally they were these big, black grease pencils. We each had an old-fashioned manual typewriter at our spot on the desk, which I will describe, and we would type the headlines. The headlines could be anything from eighteen-point type, one column wide, which is a little, tiny story that was maybe three inches long, to a great big headline that was on the front page that would be, oh, forty-eight-point type or sixty-point type. You used to have to count [the letters for] heads. You knew that a capital W was two, and a capital O was one and a half, and a capital T was one and a half, and a capital I was one, I think, and a lowercase M was one, I think, and a lowercase I was a half or something. So you knew what the head count was for a particular

thing, say, two columns wide by twenty-four-point type. You knew that you had forty spaces.

BT: You had a count of twenty-four or forty or something for a line?

MW: Right. And so you would write these headlines. And it was sometimes a challenge to write a headline there that fit and would obey the rules of headline writing, of which I was totally ignorant until I started doing this. It was to get the story across and not be what they called a label head, which was just a statement with some nouns and no verb. The slot man in those days was a guy named Mike Kirkendall. Most of the time he was the guy that I worked with, and he was a very, very nice guy, and very patient with me. He never yelled at me. If I did something wrong, he would explain to me what I did wrong and that I needed to do it over again. Now, the reason he was called slot man was that the copy desk was shaped like a big U—like a big horseshoe. The copy editors—anywhere from two to three to four to five at any one time—sat around the outside of this horseshoe, and the *person* who was in charge of the copy desk sat in the middle. Traditionally, the person was called the slot man, although sometimes it was a woman. I'm sure later they started calling it something *else*, because sometimes the slot person was Patsy.

BT: McKown.

MW: McKown. I think I was even the slot later on a few times when things were really desperate. But generally it was Mike Kirkendall. Sometimes it was Carol Gordon. They sat in the middle of this U-shaped thing—in the slot.

BT: Do you remember what month you began work?

MW: It probably was in the late summer of 1974. We had an interesting copy desk. With me on the copy desk were Carol Gordon, who I already mentioned, who went on to the *Chicago Tribune* and to the *L. A. Times*, and became some sort of managing editor, and Sheila Daniel, who went on to also the *Chicago Tribune* and the *L.A. Times* and became a reporter and a freelance writer who did stories in Southeast Asia for quite some time. She was a stringer in Vietnam and Bangkok [Thailand] and Indonesia. Collins Hemingway was a copy editor who at some point moved to the [Pacific] Northwest and got a job with this brand-new company called Microsoft that nobody had ever heard of, and he eventually retired at the age of [laughter] fifty or something with a lot of money.

[Tape Stopped]

BT: Yes, he became one of the top assistants to [co-founder of Microsoft] Bill Gates.

MW: Yes, yes. And they were all nice to me. Collins said the meanest thing anybody said, and this was not very mean. I couldn't even type, and so I actually went to the library and bought a book, *How to Type—Teach Yourself to Type*. And I sat there at home practicing.

BT: Did you have to buy a typewriter?

MW: I had a typewriter at home, but I was a really bad [typist].

BT: You were a hunt-and-peck typist?

MW: A one-finger-type typist. So one day I brought the book to work to take it back to the library to turn it in, and Collins saw it and said to me, 'You mean you can't type, either?'" That was the meanest thing anybody said to me when I was there. But it was very valuable experience. I'm really glad that I spent what seemed like

a long time at the time, but was less than a year, on the copy desk. I kept asking if I could be a reporter—if I could be a writer. I was there when the *Democrat* started buying computers.

BT: They had scanners at one point. Were you there then?

MW: That's right. It's not like one day we walked in and all the reporters had computers. And this was really the early days of computers, okay? They were gigantic. They were the size of Volkswagens.

BT: [Laughs]

MW: All the reporters got IBM Selectric typewriters because they had a certain kind of a type font. When they wrote their stories, they would hand them in to the city editor and he or she would mark them up. They would run them through this [scanner] machine that would use lasers or something to read the type on the typewriter paper and put it in the computer so we could look at it on the big computer over by the copy desk. Now, quite often there were mistakes because the scanner was imperfect. We'd have to go back and fix words that didn't come out right. Then we could write our headlines on the computer and we could actually visually see if they would work [fit in the allowed spaces]. We could also cheat. If we wrote a perfect headline that was a teeny bit too long, we could tell the machine to squeeze it to 96 percent or something and make it fit. But if we did it too much, the slot person would say, "This looks like you squeezed it. Do it over again."

BT: Before that you used to get them tossed back to you by the printing shop when they didn't fit.

MW: Yes. The printers were hard-bitten men. I don't think there were any women up there. They thought of themselves as the real workers and the rest of us on the second floor as pansies who just sat around and didn't do actual work and did things to make their lives difficult and screw up and give them trouble. None of us liked to go up to the third floor because if we did we were treated like yard dogs. We were not very well tolerated on the third floor.

BT: Yes, that's right.

MW: [City Editor] Ralph Patrick would go up and he could go toe-to-toe with them, I think. In those days [laughs], before the computers, there was an actual conveyor belt-type mechanism from the copy desk, and the slot person, after you had turned in [a story] and the headline had been approved, et cetera, would take the copy and roll it into a tube and stick it between these two leather belts which would carry it to the third floor. If we messed up and the printers didn't like something or it was wrong, they would send it back down to us, and it would flop down with some kind of mark, like, "head too long" or something like that.

BT: With a big mark where it hanged over the end of the column allowed for the headline.

MW: Yes, yes, probably so. I was there when the Walter Hussman, Jr., and WEHCO Media bought this newspaper from the family that had owned it for decades.

[Editor's Note: The Palmer Group, headed by Walter Hussman, Sr., and his son, Hussman, Jr., purchased the *Democrat* from Marcus George and Stanley Berry for \$3.7 million in March 1974] It was an afternoon paper when I was there. It was the end of the time when it was an afternoon newspaper. At the [Arkansas]

Gazette, a morning paper, the copy editors worked from something like 3:00 [p.m.] to 11:00 [p.m.] or 4:00 to midnight or something. We worked from 6:30 in the morning until 2:30 in the afternoon, more or less, depending on what shift you got. Sometimes you got 5:30 to 1:30. Sometimes you got 7:30 to 3:30.

BT: How many deadlines did you have to meet?

MW: There were at least two and maybe three deadlines.

BT: You had the state edition.

MW: Yes. The state edition went to press at something like 10:00 in the morning.

Then maybe the city edition went to press at 12:00 or 12:30. And then I think there was one last, final edition that you could squeeze in a few new stories if something earthshaking happened. And at one point it was printed on green paper, I think. Do you recall that at all?

BT: Yes, the green sheet.

MW: So people would [see the green paper] on the newsstand, would know it was the latest news. Jerry McConnell was the managing editor. Ralph Patrick, who went on to *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, was the city editor. His assistant editor was Larry Gordon, who was married to Carol Gordon, who was on the copy desk. Larry—in a spirit of history—and trying to tell the truth—had a problem with drinking. He was the most nervous-seeming guy I ever knew in my life. He was *always* drinking coffee and smoking. His hands shook all the time. Years later, I was looking at the newspaper, and a teeny, teeny little story at the bottom of page 4B or something said that someone named Larry Gordon had died, and that he was working as the night manager at a Roadrunner convenience store. I made

some calls, and sure enough, it was *that* Larry Gordon. Apparently his alcoholism had led him to that point in life, and he apparently drank himself to death.

BT: And at that point, he was not married to Carol.

MW: Yes.

MW: Carol went off to the *Chicago Tribune*. So did Mike Kirkendall and so did Sheila Daniel. They all went off to Chicago. One of them may have worked for the [*Chicago*] *Sun-Times* instead of the *Tribune*.

BT: When did you get to be a reporter and *how* did you get to be a reporter?

MW: Well, of course, reporters did not have to go to work at 5:30 or 6:30 in the morning, and reporters got their bylines in the paper, and it seemed more glamorous. Even though being a copy editor was really valuable and I'm glad I did it, it's not something I wanted to do forever. Now, I'm not putting down copy-editing. On really big newspapers—*The New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*—a really good copy-editor is at least as valuable as a reporter, if not more so. It's not glamorous. You're stuck in a little cubbyhole all day, but it's really a valuable thing to do. I just didn't see myself doing it forever or even a long time. And I wanted to be a writer, because I still wrote things in those days.

[Tape Stopped]

BT: What kinds of things were you writing?

MW: Well, I'll explain—I'll get to those things in just a second. I'm trying to think if there's anything more we could talk about about the copy desk.

BT: What did the *Democrat* look like? Did it look like your idea of a movie set newsroom?

MW: In some ways it did. It was very noisy. I think it was probably fairly smoky in those days. Everybody had desks scattered around the room. The cooking [food and women's section] people were over on one side of the building. I had no contact with them whatsoever. The sports department was over on the other side in a corner. I had no contact with them because they had their own copy-editors and their own everything. The people who wrote the editorials had their own little offices, and I had *very* little contact with them. It was linoleum floors, high ceilings, noisy, not so much dirty as just cluttered—wadded-up pieces of paper all over the floor. I guess I'd been there less than a year, so we're talking 1975. I kept bugging Jerry McConnell, and he finally allowed me to become a general assignment reporter, so I did not have what they call a beat. I was not the police reporter. I was not the county government reporter or something like that. Every day they would give me something to do. It could be a feature-y type thing. It could be some kind of a meeting. I can't really remember the kind of things I used to do it those days.

BT: What kind of hours did you work then?

MW: Like 9:00 [a.m.] to 5:00 [p.m.], I think, or 8:30 to 4:30—something like that. I literally started writing obits, little obituaries the funeral homes would send on a little sheet with [the deceased] person's vital statistics on it, and I would turn it into a little newspaper story.

BT: But you had a very specific style and format for that, or did you write feature obituaries?

MW: These were little ones at first. I actually don't remember if I might have written

larger ones because I didn't do it very long. Pretty soon, they were giving me just these odd things. The *Democrat* in those days had a little thing called "Where are they now?" or "Looking back," something along those lines. And one of the first things I did was call a man [Ved Mehta]. He was from India, and he was a staff writer for *The New Yorker*.

BT: He had been at the [Arkansas] School for the Blind.

MW: That's right. He had been blind since he was four years old, and his parents sent him to Little Rock, Arkansas. Because we had a blind school here that I imagine was affordable or maybe they gave him a scholarship. I have no idea. He was obviously a very smart man and became a writer, and he ended up as a staff writer for *The New Yorker*. He wrote several books, including a memoir of being a blind Indian boy in Little Rock, Arkansas, in the 1950s. Larry Gordon or Ralph or somebody told me to call this guy and ask him what he's doing these days and how does he remember Little Rock. And I was so apprehensive about calling a writer for *The New Yorker*, because in those days I absolutely worshipped—I still do, actually—*The New Yorker*. I learned to write by reading *The New Yorker*, which is why I write in the old-fashioned, sort of *New Yorker* way to this day. And I just couldn't imagine that I would actually get to speak to someone who worked for *The New Yorker*—me, on the telephone. But, sure enough, I did. He was borderline polite—not super friendly or forthcoming—just sort of, like, "Okay, I'll do this, but let's don't spend too much time." I remember him saying he did not have fond memories of Little Rock and the blind school. He felt like it did not challenge him. It did not provide him with an adequate preparation for the

rest of his life. He did not remember his experience in Little Rock fondly.

BT: Did he say if he experienced any kind of racial prejudice?

MW: He didn't mention that. I don't think I read his book, but I read excerpts in *The New Yorker* about his experience. As you can imagine, [he] was a fish out of water in a completely different culture. He learned to catch the bus to various places around town. He wasn't really negative about Little Rock or the blind school, but he thought that he had wasted a lot of time there. And I'm sure for someone as smart as him that's probably true. For other people, maybe that wasn't true. I'll tell you a story about my first byline.

BT: Did you get a byline on *that*?

MW: No. This was a formatted thing. My first byline may have been before or after that. This was before the 1976 elections, and Nelson Rockefeller was the vice president. After Nixon resigned—forced out of office by the Watergate scandal—[Vice President] Gerald Ford became president. And Ford appointed Nelson Rockefeller to be vice president.

BT: He had been the governor of New York and was liberal.

MW: Right. Anyway, many of the Republicans wanted the party to go in a conservative direction and did not like Nelson Rockefeller. They did not want him as the vice presidential candidate when Ford ran as the Republican presidential nominee in 1976. I was told to call Lynn Lowe from Texarkana, who was the chairman of the Arkansas Republican Party, and ask him what the feeling was among Arkansas Republicans about Nelson Rockefeller. So I called Lynn Lowe and did a phone interview: “What do Arkansas Republicans think about

Nelson Rockefeller?” And he told me, “Oh, he’s a fine man, and he’s doing great.” Some kind of put-me-off thing. So my first byline appeared in the paper with a headline said something like “Dislike of Rocky overstated, state GOP head says.” My mother bought forty-two copies of the newspaper, cut [my story] out and sent them to all her friends. She cut one out and wrote, “Your first byline,” or something on it, and what do you call it when you put it between pieces of plastic?

BT: Laminated.

MW: She laminated it and sent it to me. Well, it had hardly gotten in my little hands before the conservative Republicans got together and forced Nelson Rockefeller [laughter] not to keep his position. So my first story was actually pretty inaccurate.

BT: But Lynn Lowe was the one who was inaccurate. [Laughter]

MW: But it was sort of a good lesson in being a reporter. All you can pass on is what you get. Eventually I did other stuff. In those days the *Democrat* had a thing called the school page. One day every week, I forget what day of the week it was, they did a whole page devoted to a school in Pulaski County or central Arkansas. Me, and a young photographer who was assigned to it just like I was, would go to a school somewhere in Pulaski County and we would interview a student and a teacher whom the school had picked out. It was a real fluffy, feel-good—you know, “Missy Jones is a cheerleader and she wants to be Miss Arkansas,” and “Pat Smith has been a teacher for twenty-three years and feels she has influenced . . .” That kind of stuff. It was *really* boring most of the time, but it

got us out of the office for an entire day. We'd leave in the morning, drive to Oak Grove or somewhere, spend the day there—maybe even eat lunch in the student cafeteria and come back. Later on, I was made the federal court reporter. David Terrell, who had been at the *Democrat* a long time, covered the federal courts down on Capitol Avenue, a few blocks west of the *Democrat* building. David quit, and they made me the federal court reporter. I was *so* ignorant. I did not even at that point understand the difference between, say, the state and county courts, the circuit courts, and this whole separate deal called the federal courts. I swear, I did not even understand that difference. David took me over to the federal court building and introduced me to people, like some of the clerks for the judges and maybe even a couple of judges. I met Leslie Mitchell, who was the *Gazette's* federal court reporter, who knew 100 times more than I did and had been there quite some time. Then David hit the road, and I was stuck there, absolutely having *no idea* what I was doing. I covered a bunch of trials. I stopped in different offices every day and looked in their press baskets to see if there was anything going on. I didn't know enough to know what was news, what *wasn't* news. I felt like a fish out of water. I was still doing the school page at that time, which meant that one day a week I was not even in the federal court building. I was out somewhere interviewing kids. I also was occasionally having to do the police beat on Friday or Saturday night when [police beat reporter] Bob Sallee got a night off.

BT: Yes.

MW: So I was missing one and sometimes one and a half or two days a week in the

federal courts, when I should've been over there learning and keeping up with stuff that was going on. I knew that I was not doing a good job. I felt depressed all the time because I did not like going to that building and trying to deal with these people. If you've ever tried to get anything out of the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation], you know what I'm talking about. They treat you like you are a potential bomb carrier if you walk into their building. These people have the hammer. You're in there begging for crumbs of information. They give you what they want. A good reporter, of course, can dig around and find stuff. I was twenty-five years old, maybe even twenty-four, and I really felt bad about it. Leslie Mitchell was friendly enough as a rival and competitor. She helped me out a little bit. She had a morning paper and I had an afternoon paper, so sometimes we weren't really *in* competition. But it was interesting. I learned a lot. I covered the trial of this guy named Porter Rogers Sr., from Searcy, Arkansas, who was a physician. He had been accused, I think, of murdering his wife, but he was in federal court on charges of defrauding the government on Medicare or something like that. And Jack Lessenberry, a local lawyer, came in as a temporary judge for some reason. Maybe the [other] judges knew this guy or something. He ran the trial and it was very interesting to see that happen. And Porter Rogers was convicted and sent to the [federal prison] hospital in Springfield, Missouri, where they sent the non-dangerous-type criminals. Later I saw Jack Lessenberry at the post office, and I said, "You don't know me, but I was covering that trial, and I thought you did a really good job as the judge there." And he said, "Well, thank you. I really appreciate that." I guess judges don't get

complimented very often. [Laughs] But I had seen some really bad judges. Terry Shell, who was a Republican appointee from Jonesboro, was not a competent judge. I will hold it at that. He was *not* a good judge. And Judge G. Thomas Eisele was very good. The most interesting case I covered was about Frederick Smith, the founder of Federal Express. The federal prosecutor in that time was W. H. “Sonny” Dillahunty, a political appointee, who was verging on the edge of competence but was a mean-spirited, humorless man. He did not give the impression of being smart or a learned attorney, just a political appointee. Fred Smith had some connection with Little Rock, Arkansas. His family was from here originally or something, but he’s famous for having gone to business school and turning in a report about a company that would take packages and put them to a central location, then deliver them around the country overnight. I think he got, like, a C+ on the report or something. Well, that, of course, was [what he did with] Federal Express, FedEx, now one of the world’s largest companies. At one point he actually talked about putting FedEx in Little Rock, but the airport wasn’t big enough, and he ended up putting it in Memphis [Tennessee]. Anyway, Fred Smith’s family had some connection with Little Rock. And Fred Smith did not do this from poverty. Fred Smith’s father had something to do with Toddle House or Greyhound buses, or something, and was a millionaire. So Fred Smith was not some poor kid. He had money to begin with. [Editor’s Note: Smith grew up in Memphis. His father, who died when Smith was four, founded Dixie Greyhound Bus Lines and Toddle House Restaurants. In 1969, Smith moved to Little Rock, where he founded Federal Express in 1971. He moved the company

to Memphis in 1973] But he—at one point in the early days of FedEx—he needed money really bad. He was about to go out of business. So he went to the family’s trust fund and took out what seemed a large amount of money and used it to get his company out of bankruptcy or stave off bankruptcy. He paid the money back with interest, and went on. And FedEx, of course, became this gigantic, huge success. Well, Fred Smith had some kind of big falling-out with his sisters or sister, and the sister got really mad at him for taking this money without authorization. So somehow he ended up in federal court. And Sonny Dillahunty saw this as a big chance, maybe he wanted to be governor or something, to get his name in the paper and show that this big-time, rich businessman can’t flout the laws of this country. That was a really interesting trial. Fred Smith hired this lawyer from Memphis named Lucius Burch, who was this man with white hair, kind of balding, and a white beard. He wore kind of light-colored suits. He wore Hush Puppies [shoes]. He talked in this real genteel Southern accent. Dillahunty came off as just this mean, vindictive jerk. And Lucius Burch was so nice and so calm and soft-spoken. It was like watching Tiger Woods play golf with me or something.

BT: [Laughs]

MW: I mean, Lucius Burch was ten times as smart as Sonny Dillahunty and a hundred times better lawyer. Fred Smith was completely guilty. And the jury found him innocent. Why? Because Lucius Burch was such a great lawyer. Lucius Burch got him [Smith] to talk about being in Vietnam and being in the Marines and his life, and “now, no harm came of this, really.” That kind of thing, even though he

was guilty. And that's when I started telling all my friends, "You know, if you're ever accused of a crime, whether you're guilty or not—whether it's jaywalking or murder—do anything you can to get the best lawyer you can get." In an ideal world it would not make a difference. We would all be treated fairly in court. In the real world that's not what happens.

BT: Right.

MW: Real good lawyers make a lot of difference. [Laughs] So that was the most interesting thing that happened to me as a federal court reporter. I did that for a while, and then I got a call from this guy that I had known since grade school and I had been in a rock-and-roll band with in college. I used to do the arrangements for the band. I took a lot of music courses in college. I could write music. I could arrange music. I could do the charts. I really enjoyed doing that kind of thing. He said that he had acquired the assets of a bankrupt recording studio and he wanted us to get together and write and produce jingles. Little thirty- or sixty-second commercial songs that businesses use to advertise themselves. They don't use them that much anymore nowadays, but in those days everybody had a little jingle.

BT: And it was on radio that they were used.

MW: That's right. Even on TV, you know, "Doublemint, Doublemint, Doublemint gum," or "Winston tastes good like a cigarette [should]."

MW: That's right. [Laughs] And I was very unhappy at my job. Jerry McConnell was a really nice guy and they treated me pretty nice. But at that point they were pressuring me to start writing a weekly column, like, "Inside the Federal Court."

I kept putting it off and they kept after me. And I did not want to do it. So when this guy said, “Come in with us and let’s do this recording studio,” I quit the *Democrat*.

BT: Didn’t you tell me once that Sonny Dillahunty gave you a scoop? Even though he wasn’t your favorite person at the courthouse.

MW: That’s right. Sonny Dillahunty really hated Leslie Mitchell, the *Gazette* reporter, because she saw through him and was always trying to dig up stuff about him and writing negative stories about things, which is what a reporter should do, right?

BT: Yes.

MW: So he would barely talk to Leslie Mitchell. Maybe he wouldn’t even talk to her. Maybe she had to talk to his assistants or something. So he saw this as one time to get back at Leslie Mitchell. He was going to give me this exclusive story. It involved filing charges against dairies for fixing the price of milk for school lunches.

BT: Yes, that was an antitrust issue.

MW: He called me up one day and said, “When is your deadline?” And I said—whatever it was—noon or 11:00 [a.m.] And he said, “Well, okay. I want you to come in here at 10:15 or so to my office.” “Oh, gosh!” So I go in and he tells me all this stuff about these charges they’re going to file. He’s doing it then so that the *Democrat* will have it before the *Gazette* will have it. He wanted me to get this big scoop. And he thought this was this huge deal, this big prosecution. It was going to get his name in the paper. Obviously I was too stupid to know what was going on. I just wrote down what he told me. I called Ralph or Larry or

whoever and, sure enough, they put it on the front page. Right at the top right-hand corner of the front page, “U. S. attorney files charges against local dairies.” And I’m sure the story was totally superficial. It was, like, eight inches long. It didn’t even jump [continue to another page]. When the *Gazette* came out the next morning they put it on, like, page 5A or something—a little bitty one-column thing. To them it just was like no big deal. I should talk about what the *Democrat* was like to me in those days.

BT: When you were a beat reporter did you have to call in your stories or did you go to the Democrat office to type them out on the computer or on the typewriter?

MW: It depends. If it was something that was not time-sensitive I would just go back to the building and type it out. If it happened in the morning and could make the state edition or the city edition, I would call it in. I didn’t have the judgment and experience to know what was a big story and what wasn’t. I would ask Leslie Mitchell or I would just call it in and let them decide what to do with it, which is really what their job is anyway. But if I could back up a little bit here, let’s talk about the *Gazette* and the *Democrat* because I think that’s what is more important than my anecdotes and experiences. When I was a kid I was a voracious reader. I used to just read anything. And that’s why I am who I am today. I read any book around the house. I’d pick a volume of encyclopedias and just read it. I went to the library all the time. I checked out as many books as I could from the time I could pedal my bike to the library or my mother would take me. And we took the *Arkansas Gazette* in my house in Conway, Arkansas, and I grew up reading the *Gazette*, and these really excellent reporters and writers they had in those days.

BT: Was your mother working?

MW: My father did not go to college. My father started working at the Western Auto store, which was a sort of auto parts, appliances, general merchandise-type store, in Conway, after high school. And my mother started working at the J. C. Penney [department] store. These were both in downtown Conway, Arkansas. I don't know how they met. I never really learned that story or anything, but, like I said, I think they went to high school together. My parents put off getting married until my father went off to World War II and came back. So my parents didn't get married until 1947, which was fairly late in their lives compared to some of my friends' parents. Most of my friends' parents were younger than my parents. My father started working at Western Auto right after high school. My mother started working at J. C. Penney. By the time I was old enough to know anything, my mother was no longer working anywhere. She was a stay-at-home mom. My father had become manager at Western Auto. When I was about nine or ten years old the owner of Western Auto died. His widow wanted my father to buy the store, and my father bought the store. So from then on my father owned the Western Auto store in Conway. At some point my mother started working down there all the time, too. When I was a kid my father worked six days a week, Monday through Saturday, except in those days the Conway merchants had a tradition where all the downtown stores closed on Thursday afternoon. It was just this agreement so that people could go home and spend time with their families. It was one of those old-fashioned small-town things. Thursday afternoon was when my father would come home and mow the lawn or play baseball with me or

go fishing or something like that.

BT: You said there weren't a lot of books in your house.

MW: There were not that many books. My mother did read a fair amount. But mostly my books came from the school library, the church library, believe it or not, or the Faulkner County/Van Buren County Library, which was downtown on the courthouse lawn.

BT: Your church had a library?

MW: It just had a room.

BT: What type of church?

MW: It was the First Baptist Church. It had a little library with Hardy Boys mysteries, children's books and all kinds of books. When I was seven, eight, nine, ten—I used to check books out of that library, especially the Hardy Boys. I think I read all the Hardy Boys books. And I grew up reading the *Gazette*, just as when I was in my twenties, I devoured *The New Yorker*. I'm sure that reading the *Gazette* as a child influenced me, because it was very well written, very well copy-edited, and I was very naïve about many things. I had this *Leave It to Beaver*-type childhood. No problems. Two parents who loved me, a baby sister, no traumas. It wasn't until I started traveling after college that I started reading other newspapers around the country and realized how good the *Gazette* was. I saw the Dallas [Texas] paper. I remember one time when I was about twenty-two I went to Phoenix and read the two big Arizona papers—*The Arizona Republic* and whatever the other one was. I couldn't believe it. They were so much worse than the *Gazette*. There were some good papers, but many big cities had really bad

newspapers. By this fluke of circumstances, the *Arkansas Gazette* was a really, really good newspaper. It was not, maybe, the journal of heaven that people nostalgic about the *Gazette* remember it as being. It wasn't that fabulous. And it had some issues with sexism and it certainly didn't hire any black people for a long time.

[Telephone Rings]

[Tape Stopped]

MW: We got interrupted there by my cell phone ringing. Anyway, it wasn't perfect but it was really good. It was just this strange circumstance of local people wanting to stay in Arkansas or hiring the right out-of-town people. I don't know. But it was really good.

BT: Were you aware of the *Arkansas Democrat* at that time?

MW: Yes, yes. My grandparents, my mother's parents, took the *Democrat*. My father was orphaned, so I never knew his parents. In my mind, the *Democrat* was associated with my grandparents and their house and was that kind of fashioned. Their living room was full of what we'd call antiques, but it was their furniture. They had a wind-up record player. The *Democrat* was like that. The typeface was old-fashioned. The layout was old-fashioned. It used to run this ad called, "Why do the heathen rage?" It was this sort of crazy end-of-the-world Christianity ad that would run every week or day. They had this columnist called Karr Shannon, who was just overtly racist and right-wing. They were just like the poor relation of the *Gazette*. It came in the afternoon. That's not to say that there were never any good people at the *Democrat* or that the *Democrat* didn't do some

good things. I think in the minds of most Arkansas people, and in my mind certainly, it did not come up to the level of the *Gazette*. Most of us who thought about working for a newspaper always talked about working for the *Gazette*, because that was the pinnacle in those days. And it was symbolic to me that my grandparents took the *Democrat*. They were very old-fashioned. They were not very enlightened about a lot of social issues. [Laughs] One of the reasons a lot of people took the *Democrat* was because of the 1957 [Little Rock] Central High [School] racial crisis, which I won't go into because everybody knows about that. The *Democrat*, of course, took the segregationists' side and the *Gazette* took the more moderate side. And many older people and people who did not approve of integration more or less boycotted the *Gazette* after that and supported the *Democrat*. And that may have been one reason my grandparents took the *Democrat*.

BT: Did you ever apply to work at the *Gazette*?

MW: No, I never did.

BT: Did you ever think of it?

MW: No, I didn't. I was very happy to have a chance to work at the *Democrat*. The *Gazette* would not have given me an opportunity with my lack of experience and total ignorance of the way newspapers worked. The fact that Jerry McConnell gave me a chance to work there changed my life. It was one of the top three things to ever happen to me as far as influencing my life, and I'm very grateful. But there was always this feeling in those days among many of us, probably not everybody, that we were working for the runner-up in the two-horse newspaper

race.

BT: I think news sources often wanted to give things to the *Gazette* just because of its larger circulation.

MW: Yes. Well, you would know because you worked at the *Gazette*.

BT: No, I mean when I worked at the *Democrat* often that was the case.

MW: Yes.

BT: But not always.

MW: Back to my own personal experience. The fact was that they were pressuring me to write this column about the Federal courts, which I felt incompetent to do and did not want to do, and I went in and said, "Look, I'm leaving." And they didn't want me to leave. I don't know whether they thought I was good or just didn't want to break in somebody new or what. I said, "I don't want to write this column, and I'm trying to keep up with the *Gazette* here and I don't know what I'm doing, and I'm still having to do the school page." And I was having to work Friday and Saturday nights on the police beat, and because of that I had to take a day off during the week. They were, "Okay, well, you don't have to do the school page. We'll get somebody else. And you don't have to do the police beat anymore." I'd made up my mind and I quit. Looking back, I was probably a copy editor for only six or nine months and I was probably a reporter for about nine months or maybe a year.

BT: Well, 1975 was when Hussman bought the paper. Was it 1975 when you left, or 1976?

MW: It was 1975, I believe. It could've been early 1976. But Hussman had bought the

paper by that time because I remember a meeting where we all were called together and Hussman introduced himself. I think he was only two or three years older than I was, [laughs] and he was not an impressive-looking guy to be running the paper from pure physical appearance. But he had a lot of money, and everybody knows what he did after that. So anyway, I went to work for this recording studio for a while. I just was an employee for these guys who had bought this equipment and had set up this company. It turned out that we didn't have enough business to really get going. So I was, again, sort of unemployed. And somehow word got back to the *Democrat* that I was not working, and somebody called me up and offered me a job again. I don't know whether it was Ralph or Jerry or Larry Gordon, but somebody said, "Would you like to be the 'entertainment editor'?" Well, I needed a job, and this was not a beat. This was not going out and trying to interview people, because I'm not really good at that. Never have been, still am not. This was sitting at a desk and just putting together the TV page every day, plus I think four pages of entertainment news and feature stories for the Sunday paper, and putting together the little comic book-sized TV guide that was in the paper every Sunday, which was just filling in the marks on this grid of what TV shows were going to be on.

BT: By then was totally computerized.

MW: Not totally. I think I was still typing things onto a Selectric and scanning. Each reporter did not have his or her own terminal in those days.

BT: Do you remember when that was?

MW: Yes, it would've been around August or September of 1976, because my

girlfriend at the time was Julie Baldrige, who was also working at the *Democrat* as the “Answer, Please” [column] lady. We had planned a three-week vacation out west to Colorado, Idaho, Arizona. We’d already booked it and made plans and we were going to have this long driving trip. I said, “I’ll do it, but I’ve immediately got to have three weeks off. I’ll work for one month, take three weeks off, and then I’ll come back to work.” And they let me do that. [Laughs] So I went to work, learned a little bit of the ropes, went on this vacation, and came back, and I was the “entertainment editor.” And nobody watched over me. As long as I got my work done by Friday afternoon, nobody cared how I did it, or when I did it. I had a certain amount of space to fill with stories and my own little TV column, and it was very nice. I lived just off Kavanaugh [Boulevard] in Little Rock in those days, and I even took the bus to work. It was so nice because I didn’t have to be there [at a set time]. I didn’t need my car during the day. I would take the bus to work and the bus back home and eat lunch at my desk. And this is the way I prefer to work. I like to work with human beings contacting me as little as possible because I’m not a real people person. So this was great. I had an assistant who was really uncommunicative and not very smart or very helpful and was lazy. I learned one time when she was sick for an entire week, and I had to do her work and my work both. I actually finished a lot faster than I did when she was there, because I worked faster than she did and I didn’t have to go back and redo everything she did because I did it right the first time. I mean, I’m not bragging on myself, but she just was not very competent. I actually think I went to Jerry or Ralph and said, “As far as I’m concerned, you can fire this person and

give me the money.” But they didn’t do it. This job was really another extremely valuable experience—not because I was writing anything really good, but because every day, Monday through Saturday, for five or six days a week, I had to write a column. It was basically just what’s going to be on TV that night—what the best bets were. In those days there were only four channels.

BT: The local channels.

MW: The local NBC [National Broadcasting Company], ABC [American Broadcasting Company], CBS [Columbia Broadcasting Service], and the local PBS [Public Broadcasting Service] educational TV thing.

BT: You didn’t do any outside reporting.

MW: Not really. In those days they did not send you to these press junkets. Nowadays if you’re the TV reporter, they send you to Hollywood [California] once a year to see the previews of the new shows and you get to go to New York occasionally to talk to some movie person or something. But in those days I just sat there and opened the mail from the local channels and wrote about what was going to be on TV. I would get press releases from the national networks, too, and pictures.

BT: Did you feel like you had to watch TV to keep up with all you had to write about?

MW: I did watch some TV. I was not a big TV fan, and I thought most of what was on TV was junk. Most of what I recommended was on Channel 2, a PBS affiliate. One time on Christmas Eve I wrote a column that said, “Here’s what to do. Go to your TV. Walk around to the back. See that black cord? See where it goes into the wall? Pull it out. What are you doing watching TV on Christmas Eve?”

Another time I wrote a column that got the attention of the editorial staff. The

editorial page editor was Robert McCord, who's a very nice man. He's a conservative in many ways, but not one of these neo-conservative, Nazi right-wing crazy people like are out there now that . . .

BT: Yes, a very decent, kind man.

MW: A very decent man, a very thoughtful man, a great newspaperman, a smart man—you know, a good guy. But Hussman hired this guy named David Hawkins who was a babbling right-wing lunatic professionally. If you talked to him in the hall he was a nice enough guy, but his editorials were not. A couple things happened because of that. One time I wrote a preview of some made-for-TV movie about Jesus, and I referred to Jesus as “Jesus, the noted religious leader,” or something like that. A few days later Hawkins comes over to me just cackling with joy, and says, “Look at this. This is great. Look at this!” And he shows me a proof of the “Letters [to the Editor]” page [laughter], and somebody had written a letter that said, “I see where your TV writer, Mel White, referred to Jesus as a ‘noted religious leader.’ I hope that someday he has the privilege of knowing the place we call ‘Hell, a noted hot spot.’” [Laughter] Hawkins just was having so much fun with it. And it was funny. And he was a funny guy. I think he's passed on to the great Fourth Reich in the sky. Another time Hawkins wrote this editorial after a big flood in Little Rock. It rained, like, twelve inches in twenty-four hours, and there was a big flood.

BT: Some people were killed.

MW: Yes, three or four people were killed. Somebody was washed off a bridge in their car when their car got stuck. And some little kids playing by the creek fell in and

drowned or something. It was bad. People died, and the area south of University Avenue was flooded. Fourche Creek flooded. There had been this movement to channel some of these creeks that run through some of our city parks, like Boyle Park, into concrete ditches. Many of us, including me, had fought against this pretty hard. The [U. S. Army] Corps of Engineers and the city wanted to just turn these [creeks] into big concrete ditches. So we had this flood and people died. Hawkins wrote this editorial where he actually called environmentalists murderers because we had opposed programs that [he said] would've lessened flooding in Little Rock. He said the blood of these [dead people] was on our hands. Well, I wrote a letter to the editor myself. It was one of those things that you should stop and count to ten, but no.

BT: [Laughs]

MW: I wrote, "This is insane," and I talked a little bit about the background about this situation and then I said, "But this is typical of the *Democrat*, which is nothing but the boot-licking lackey of big business."

BT: [Laughs]

MW: A few days later Mr. McCord—who I still cannot bring myself to call Bob after all these years—comes out very quietly and says, "I'd like to talk to you." Ooh, darn! [Laughter] Well, he shows me [my letter].

BT: Had David Hawkins seen it?

MW: I *don't know*. I don't know. But he [Mr. McCord] says, "If you really believe this, you need to leave the paper. If you believe this is what the *Democrat* is, you don't need to be working here." Well, of course, I back-shuffled. We talked and

he made it easier for me to back-pedal a little bit, because he sort of apologized for this editorial. He was out of town when Hawkins wrote this, because all Hawkins's stuff had to go through McCord. He said to me, "If I had been here this would not have run in the form that it ran in." It seemed he was giving me an opportunity to say "I'm sorry" if he would say he was sorry. So I said I was sorry, and I was not fired.

BT: And the letter did not run.

MW: I'm sure it didn't. What I was coming to earlier was that I had to write this column every single day. Up to that point I had this feeling that you had to have some kind of inspiration to write. But I had to write these ten, twelve, twenty paragraphs every single day, no excuses, and turn it in. That really helped me get over the idea that you had to be in a certain mood to write. It got me to thinking of writing as a job, which it is in large part. I don't care whether you're a novelist or writing obits [obituaries] for a little paper, there's certain tools you use, there's certain techniques, there's certain skills. And if you look at it as if it were a job, like carpentry, you're much better off. I'm not saying that inspiration doesn't play a part or that there's not genius involved sometimes besides pure workman-like skills. But workperson-like skill is a big part of it. And I'm glad that I wrote that column for those months there.

BT: It's a discipline that was imposed on you, but that you could apply to your life thereafter.

MW: That's right. It's a discipline. That's a good word. I've told this story many times to classes I've talked to. Pauline Kael used to write for *The New Yorker*.

She was the movie critic but she was really great, a funny writer, very acerbic and the queen of the one-liners, in her own way. She one time reviewed an old 1940s movie about a songwriting team. It was the kind of movie where a husband and wife team would be sitting around eating breakfast or something, and someone would say a phrase. The other one would say, “That makes me think of a song,” and they’d run over to the piano and write the song in three minutes, right? Just a perfectly composed song. And she [Pauline Kael] was making fun of this, and she said, “Song writing is not like that. Song writing is hard work, like plumbing.” I’ve used that line many times when I’ve talked to journalism classes because it helps if you think of writing as “hard work, like plumbing.” There are these tools you learn. You don’t just start doing it. You wouldn’t hire a plumber who’d never plumbed before. You wouldn’t hire an electrician who didn’t know how to use a volt meter. And in writing—especially being a reporter more than a fiction writer—there are tools and discipline that you’ve got to have. My time at the *Democrat* taught me about that in several ways. One, being on the copy desk and learning that certain words are better than other words and more correct than other words. And just learning to have to write a column every single day whether I felt like it or not helped me try to be a writer and do a better job being a writer.

BT: Is there any story that you wrote that you like best or that was the most fun?

MW: The one that was the most fun thing to do was when I let myself go a little bit, and I realized that if you just let yourself go and have fun, nine times out of ten it’s the right thing to do. There was a guy, I think he died fairly recently, whose name

was Russ Meyer. He was a Hollywood director and producer, and he did what they called “nudie movies” in those days. They were movies that featured women with very large breasts, and that was pretty much all there was to them. Back in the days when pornography was not so pervasive in our lives, he managed to make these movies and get them shown. They never showed in Arkansas, I’m sure, but in big cities, you could go to these sleazy theaters in the bad part of town and see these movies. Over time he got to be slightly more respectable and started making some movies that got reviews. He got to be semirespected. His movies still basically showed naked women. He actually came to Little Rock [laughs] one time with this woman, Raven De La Croix, who was the star of his new movie. They invited people, including me, to come to this party-slash-press conference where he was publicizing this new movie.

BT: You were entertainment editor at the time.

MW: I was the entertainment editor. I was writing not just the TV column, but I was writing about the movies and editing the pages about movies, too. So I go over to Larry Gordon or Ralph, and they’re, like, “Well, heck, yeah, go! Hey, go see what it’s all about.” So I go and there’s the woman who’s the star of the show and she’s wearing the dress that’s the size of a black napkin. And her breasts are the size of large cantaloupes—not just cantaloupes.

BT: [Laughs]

MW: And they’re 99 percent uncovered. So I hang around just long enough to get a little of the atmosphere, and I go back and I wrote a story. Oh, let me back up. I had previously written a sort of angry column because the local PBS channel had

showed a program in which James Whitmore portrayed [President] Harry Truman. It was a very well reviewed and very popular stage show that they had filmed and put on TV. Harry Truman used curse words pretty often, apparently. Channel 2 went through and bleeped out all the curse words. Some public television stations around the country did that, others did not. It wasn't the morality of the thing so much, as that it made the thing unpleasant to watch. And they were treating us like children. People in San Francisco [California] or Portland [Oregon] or wherever got to see it and we did not. And this was not a decision I made for myself. It was a decision that was made for me by these people at Channel 2. I wrote this nasty little column about this fact and I protested it. Shortly after that I go to this party for this sort of X-rated movie, and I kind of made fun of myself. I said, "Here I am in a difficult situation. I've just criticized Channel 2 for bleeping all the swear words out of this Harry Truman show," and—which was called *Give 'em Hell, Harry!* now that I think about it. They may have called it, *Give 'em [bleep], Harry!*

BT: [Laughs]

MW: Anyway, here I am, not able to describe what I did and what I saw because I cannot use those words in a family newspaper. I probably could've used the word "breast," but to make my point, I wrote this entire story and bleeped out a whole bunch of words. I would say, "I met Miss Raven [De La Croix] and her dress was cut between her [bleep] and her [bleep]." And the last line was "I haven't seen this movie, but I'm willing to bet it's a piece of [bleep]." People thought it was funny and it ran in the paper. It was one of the last things to run in the paper

before I quit as entertainment editor and my career at the *Democrat* ended the second time and final time. Maybe if I had gotten to write more stuff like that, just go out, do feature-y stuff, have fun, be funny, be goofy—who knows? I might've stayed. But the people who had done the recording studio stuff a year and a half earlier called me back and said, “Oh, guess what? We've got some new investors, some new partners. We've got a whole bunch of money. It's really going to happen this time. We really want you to come work for us.” And they offered me quite a bit more money than the *Democrat* was paying, which I believe in those days was \$149.50 a week, up \$24.50 from my salary previously. So they offered me more money and an easier, more fun job, and I left the *Democrat* in 1977. So I was copy editor for less than a year. I was a reporter for maybe a year. And I was the entertainment editor for maybe a year. You know, when you're twenty-something a year seems like a really long time.

BT: Yes.

MW: But looking back, I was not there very long at all.

BT: What was the company that you went to work for?

MW: It was originally called On-Air Productions, and we had our studio at the corner of Markham [Street] and Rodney Parham [Road], and we did lots of jingles. I worked for them for six years, and we did jingles for almost every bank in the state of Arkansas, [and] car dealers. The things that I wrote and played on were on TV and radio all the time. They were silly little jingles, but I got to work with some people from the [Arkansas] Symphony [Orchestra]. I got to work with some of the best musicians in town, really good singers. We had fun in our

sessions.

BT: You actually directed what you wrote.

MW: I wrote it [the words]. I wrote out the music. I produced it. I hired the people. I ran the sessions. I recorded it. I mixed it. I played quite a bit on some things. I played trumpet or guitar or keyboard.

BT: How did you learn to play all those instruments? Did you take lessons?

MW: Yes. I played trumpet all through my grade school and college days. I just picked up the keyboard and I took some lessons off and on. And I picked up the guitar. Anybody can play guitar. The thing about working in a recording studio is all you have to do is play for sixty seconds and if you mess up you just hit the red button and do it again. It doesn't matter whether you do it the first time or the tenth time as long as you finally do it right. You don't have to be that good.

BT: And you worked there six years?

MW: I worked there six years.

BT: You also have gotten quite a reputation as a birder and someone who knows a lot about nature and ecology. That was going on all the time you were at the *Democrat* and afterward. How did that come about?

MW: Well, Mother was a backyard-type bird-watcher. And for some reason when I was five, six years old I got totally hooked on birds. I was also a big baseball fan, but to me birds were what baseball was to some kids. It was an obsession when I was between the ages of six and ten or eleven. I'd read lots of bird books. I had lots of bird books. I looked at birds in the backyard all the time. We used to go for bird-watching trips on Sunday afternoons around central Arkansas.

BT: As part of an organized group or just family?

MW: Just my mother and me, and sometimes a few of my mother's friends. At one point I got to meet Ruth Thomas when I was kid. For many, many years she wrote a column in the *Arkansas Gazette* called "The Country Diarist," which ran maybe in the 1950s and 1960s and maybe into the 1970s. [Editor's Note: Thomas' column began in 1933 and ran until the early 1970s.] It was about nature, but mostly about birds. She was very influential. A lot of people loved Ruth Thomas and became bird-watchers [because of her]. For all I know, my mother became a bird-watcher because of Ruth Thomas. But my mother knew somebody who knew Ruth Thomas, and once I got to go up to Morrilton to her house and meet her. Another funny little anecdote, Ruth Thomas passed away [in 1973]. Bill Lewis [a reporter] at the *Arkansas Gazette* called me up when I was working at the recording studio, so it would've been between 1976 and 1982, and said, "I understand that you know about birds, and we're kicking around the idea of continuing a column about birds because it was so popular. And, could you write something about birds just as a little trial?" I wrote some column and never heard another word, so I failed my tryout as the new "Country Diarist" back when I was twenty-seven or whatever.

BT: Well, you have written a birding book since, though.

MW: Well, yes. I totally paid no attention to birds between the ages of ten and twenty—literally ten and twenty. I think because I got interested in girls. Then when I was in college I got hooked on birds again and I have been ever since, not the last five or six years as much as I was back in my twenties. In my twenties

and thirties and forties I traveled all over the world looking for birds and looking at birds all over the United States—not as an ornithologist or biologist, but just as a bird-watcher. Because of that I picked up a lot of information about natural history, and I have since written quite a bit about birds. I wrote a book called *A Birder's Guide to Arkansas*, which tells people where to go see birds in Arkansas. I've written a column for the *Living Bird* magazine for about twelve years now. That's the magazine of the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology. I've written many stories for other magazines about birds. I've written lots of books that are nature-oriented guidebooks to parks and refuges and things like that.

BT: How do you get into that? Did people approach you or did you approach publishers and publications?

MW: Let me back up to that time when I was twenty-three years old and I took Santi Visalli from *New York Times* to Nashville, Arkansas. After I'd left at the *Democrat* and I was working at the recording studio, I really, really liked Hunter S. Thompson, who died a couple years ago. He was this crazy guy who wrote about politics, drugs, and that was pretty much it.

BT: As seen through his eyes.

MW: As seen through his psychedelized eyes. He also wrote about the Hell's Angels [motorcycle club] and about shark hunting and about the Kentucky Derby, and he started off as sort of a general magazine writer, then started writing about politics a lot. And he wrote a book called *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, which was about the 1972 [presidential] election. He wrote a book called *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, which is about being crazy, basically, and drugs.

And I really liked him a lot. So I wrote this piece in the style of Hunter S. Thompson that had a few chuckles in it. It was about my night taking Santi Visalli to the Nashville Chicken Festival—this manic little Italian guy from New York City to rural Arkansas and watching him work, and also my observations about that night. [Then-Arkansas Supreme Court Justice] Jim Johnson, Bumpers, Fulbright—other politicians that were there. I wrote it just for fun. I showed it to Margaret Arnold, who I'd worked with at the *Democrat*. She was then living with or married to Alan Leveritt, the publisher of the *Arkansas Times*, which in those days was a monthly general-interest magazine. Margaret Arnold, who has since changed her name to Mara Leveritt, showed it to Alan, and Alan thought it was great. He showed it to Bill Terry, who was the editor of the *Arkansas Times*. They both thought it was really great and they printed it in the *Arkansas Times*, this fake, third-grade level Hunter S. Thompson wannabe story.

BT: You were still also working at the recording studio.

MW: I was still at the recording studio. They started bugging me to come work for the *Arkansas Times*. That was in 1981. I turned them down. Then in 1982 the recording studio work had really, really slowed down. I was still getting paid, but I felt guilty because we just didn't have that much work to do. So I did quit the recording studio and went to work for the *Arkansas Times*. I still worked at the recording studio at nights and weekends sometimes for quite some time, writing and helping them out down there. But I went to work full-time for the *Arkansas Times* from 1982 to 1990. First I was a magazine writer doing sort of general stories, some politics, some features, some profiles of people—just whatever.

BT: And what was the *Times* like then?

MW: When I first joined, it had just become what they call “all slick.” For a long time the cover was a slick, heavy color paper, but the inside of it was pulp paper like a comic book. When I joined, it had just recently switched to having all the pages on glossy, heavy, nice paper.

BT: Like a magazine.

MW: Like a regular magazine people think of. Before it'd been like a comic book with a [laughs] magazine cover. Alan Leveritt was the publisher. Alan is a very influential guy in the history of Arkansas journalism. He's kept [*the Arkansas Times*] going for thirty-something years now. A lot of good stories have run there. For the last ten years or something—I don't know—the *Arkansas Times* has been a weekly tabloid newspaper that focuses on politics, the arts, culture, feature-y stuff.

BT: And entertainment.

MW: Entertainment and also a lot of politics. Some people who've worked at the *Gazette* and also *Democrat* are employed there—really good writers and journalists—old-time journalists from Arkansas and young people who are just coming up, too. But in those days it was a monthly slick magazine—general-interest magazine like *Texas Monthly* or like the *Washingtonian* or . . .

BT: Or *New York*?

MW: . . . like *New York* or *The New Yorker*, except that those are weeklies, but it was a monthly. And I wrote a lot of stories on all kinds of things. When I first went there Bill Terry was the editor. Bob Lancaster, who now writes a column for *the*

Arkansas Times, later was the editor. After a few years it became obvious that Bob was wasting his time doing the managerial-type junk and he was not writing as much as he should, so we flip-flopped. I became the editor running the quotidian details and Bob got to devote his time to writing. In 1990, I was going to be forty years old, and I was tired of many aspects of the magazine at that point. I was tired of the dining guides. I was tired of the special home decor issue and a special issue fashion issue and a special whatever issue.

BT: That ad revenue.

MW: They were advertiser-driven, not editorial staff-driven. And I thought to myself, “If you’re ever going to do something different, what are you waiting for?” I had some money in the bank. I wasn’t going to starve. And I quit and thought I’d become a free-lance writer. For about six months, I didn’t make even a little money. I sent some clips and some sample things I’d written and some proposals to *National Geographic Traveler* because it was my favorite travel magazine of the ones that were out there. I hit them, by pure luck, at a time when they were looking for new writers. One of the references I gave, unbeknownst to me, had formerly worked for the *National Geographic*.

BT: Who was that?

MW: Her name was Mary Luders. I had done a free-lance project for her for Smithsonian Books when she was the editor and I used her as a reference. It turned out that she had used to work at *National Geographic*. I didn’t know that. So she gave me a really glowing review. They hired me to write a small feature story for *Traveler* in the fall of 1990.

BT: What was it about?

MW: It was on the hill country of Texas, west of Austin. I turned that in in late 1990. They liked it. They gave me two more feature stories to do in early 1991. That was the beginning of my relationship with National Geographic Society. I have written many, many, many stories for *National Geographic Traveler* over the years. Through them I got hooked up with National Geographic Book Division. I did many, many book assignments for them over the past fifteen years. Through those two I got hooked up with *National Geographic*—the yellow magazine—I've had two stories in there. I'm working on two or three others at the moment.

BT: You've traveled over the world for these?

MW: Yes, for these different assignments for National Geographic I have been to Australia twice, New Zealand, Chile, Belize, the Amazon River, Alaska, British Columbia, Ireland, Italy. I climbed Mount Kilimanjaro [Tanzania], Madagascar, Switzerland—all places that I would never probably have gone except for work.

BT: Are most of the pieces you wrote oriented toward the natural side of these places or do you also get to go to the nightlife and experience other aspects of the country?

MW: All of the above. I got a reputation as a natural history writer, so I did a story on the Amazon River, which was very nature-oriented; Belize, which was very nature-oriented. I did a story on the national parks of New Zealand. I spent three weeks going to seven different national parks in New Zealand. I did a story on the Great Barrier Reef [Australia]. But I've also done some stories that had nothing to do with nature. I did a story on the wine country of south Australia. I

did a story on the Italian lake country. I did a story on County Mayo in Ireland. I did a city story on Charleston, South Carolina. None of these had anything to do with nature.

BT: Are these all assigned by the staff or do you generate the ideas?

MW: I talked them into doing the story on Belize. I talked them into doing the story on the environmental crisis in Madagascar.

BT: Yes.

MW: That's quickly what I've been doing since the *Democrat*. Considering I left the *Democrat* thirty years ago [laughter], and my time at the *Democrat* was limited, it was really, really formative in what I have done since.

BT: Thank you, Mel. Is there anything else you'd like to say about the *Democrat* or your experience?

MW: I appreciate your taking the time to do this. I know I've babbled on, but . . .

BT: It's been fascinating.

MW: The *Democrat*—part of this was about the *Democrat* and part of this was about the influence the *Democrat* had on me. So thank you, Brenda.

BT: Thank you very much.

[End of Interview]

[Transcribed by Cheri Pearce Riggs]

[Edited by Chris Branam]