

Gazette Project

Interview with

Richard Allin,
Little Rock, AR,
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Interviewer: Jerol Garrison

Jerol Garrison: Richard, the aim of these interviews is to shed light on what kind of newspaper the *Gazette* was. We want to talk about the quality of the paper, the people who produced it, and your part in the *Arkansas Gazette*. Please describe for me when you worked for the *Gazette*, and was that time entirely spent on the “Our Town” Column?

Richard Allin: I started with the *Gazette* in December of 1963. Until that time I had worked and lived for three years in Little Rock, working for the *Commercial Appeal*, covering the Arkansas General Assembly. Before that I worked an additional three or four years for the *Commercial Appeal* in Memphis, as a roving reporter in Tennessee and Arkansas and Mississippi, a job which I liked very much. The *Commercial Appeal* wanted me to come back to Memphis. I considered it for half a day. Then I remembered all the friends that I had in Little Rock, including many at the *Gazette*, with A. R. Nelson, then managing editor, being one of them. I drank beer with A. R. Nelson while working for the *Commercial Appeal*, and

I took many a meal with him at Breier's. He had asked me, while I was a member, if I wouldn't come to the *Gazette*. And I had declined. I make changes very slowly. But the opportunity came in December, when the *Commercial Appeal* said, "Okay, you're coming back over here." And I declined to do it. I resigned from the *Commercial Appeal* and I called up Nelson. He said, "Yes. Come on." And he said I'd have to take a slight pay cut. But I was willing to do that. It was slight. I came and continued to cover the legislature, under the leadership of Bill Shelton. And Shelton is perhaps the world's greatest city editor. But I did not like working under Shelton, because, until that time, I had never really had a boss. All the work at the *Commercial Appeal* had been done without immediate leadership. Shelton wanted you to do right, and he made you do right. And I chafed under that discipline for about two years.

JG: Did you cover the Capitol?

RA: I covered the Capitol. Well, I covered the legislature and the Capitol, and I did general assignments as well. I wasn't very happy as a reporter in those days, although I loved being associated with the *Gazette*. On September 8, 1965, I wrote my first "Our Town" column. And Nelson, a few weeks before that, sitting at the bar at the old Officers' Club in Little Rock, turned to me and said, "Do you want to write the 'Our Town' column?" And it was like a delivery from heaven.

I said, “Oh, please.” When I got that job, I was assured of a happy life. It was like being able to retire, because, from then on, I was my own boss again.

JG: You had only written one. Nelson saw that, and he wanted to know if you would do that?

RA: Yes, I believe I did. They had a number of people write columns, several people who were interested in the job. And I wrote one. Some time after that, as I remember, Nelson asked me if I would do it. And I did. It made all the difference in the world. As you know, the “Our Town” columnist did not have to follow any particular office hours. I did, out of routine, at first, and then I found out that no one cared whether I came in or not. But I always enjoyed the milieu of the *Gazette*, I always enjoyed associating with the people. If you needed an answer, there were two people you would ask at the *Gazette*. One was Leland DuVall, who always knew the answer. The other was Romeo Gatewood, who was the building superintendent. I never got a bad answer out of either one of them.

JG: How did you come up with your subjects for the “Our Town” column? How did you figure out what to write about? At that time, was the column running every day, or how many days a week did it run?

RA: It started, when Carroll McGaughey wrote it — he was the first one — it was seven days a week. By the time I got it, it was five days a week. And it appeared on the left hand column of the high page.

JG: The high page is the front page of the second section?

RA: Right. I never worried about subjects. I sort of had the feeling when I was writing the column that I was writing it like writing a letter to some friend that I knew. I wrote it as simply as possible, and I liked to try to achieve a light touch. I didn't always do that, but I tried to achieve a light touch. I realized early in the column production that you don't have to write about earth-moving subjects every day. You can write about things that are common to everybody. Most of the columns in my life, I've never known what the subject is going to be until I've sat down for them. And then I just sat, and thought, and a subject would come to mind that I could pursue. It could be anything. I mean, I wrote a lot about parking meters. When I was in the symphony, I wrote about the symphony. I wrote about the meter maids. I wrote about food. All these things affected people.

JG: Traffic lights?

RA: Traffic lights.

JG: Wad and Gudge Creek?

RA: Wad and Gudge Creek. And the legislature and how the legislature spoke. Two dictionaries came out of that, the *Southern Legislative Dictionary*, and the *Second Southern Legislative Dictionary*. And they were very popular. The first was banned by the Secretary of State, Paul Riviere, from the gift shop in the Capitol. But the legislators got hold of it and they started laughing at it and enjoying it. So Paul Riviere let it back in. I got on to collecting the pronunciations of the legislators by hearing them myself, and then people would call in with expressions, or with what the legislators had to say. The first word I collected

was the word “statistics.” But not a single member of the Arkansas General Assembly could pronounce that. It invariably came out as “statistic.” So I wrote about that in the column one time, and then people started contributing words like “incarcinate,” which means put in jail. “Federal Coat House.” “Hail no.” I collected about five hundred words. Rose Publishing Company printed the two books. George Fisher designed the books and also drew illustrations for them. They sold very nicely, I mean, not enough to get rich, but they sold very nicely. People bought them. *Time* magazine did a piece on the first one. Edwin Newman wrote a piece on it, did a radio thing. ABC News did a piece on it, ABC World News with Peter Jennings. Hughes Rudd came down and interviewed me and made a film of it, and here I was on ABC.

JG: Hughes Rudd came down from ABC World News?

RA: Yes. He came down from ABC World News. He brought a crew, and there was a camera crew, and there was a director, and I felt like such a big shot. Yet, I had no idea, because the first book was very small. It was droll, but I can’t imagine why I got all the publicity out of it.

JG: It was new and different, for one thing.

RA: It was new and different. And I guess people, you know, northerners, always seem to be interested in what southerners are saying and how they say it. So that happened.

JG: The second one was more of the same?

RA: More of the same thing, words that I had collected, and it was just like the first

one.

JG: Did Paul Riviere try to ban that one, too?

RA: No, he did not. I'm not even sure if he was . . .

JG: He was probably gone by then.

RA: Yes. I'm not even sure if he was Secretary of State. But, no, he did not. And it sold all right. I don't think it sold as well as the first, but people were interested in it.

JG: There was also a book, wasn't there? Didn't the *Gazette* have a book that had works of four people in it, and weren't you one of those four?

RA: No, I was not. Those were the guys who wrote the *Arkansas Traveler*. But the University of Arkansas Press took the columns I wrote on the towns of Wad and Gudge Creek, and they made a book called *The Wad and Gudge Creek Chronicles*. When they put them in the book, they sort of suggested a sequence, a small plot in the thing. People were very polite, and they bought the book, a little bit. I didn't make any money on it, nor did the university, but it was a pleasant little book.

JG: What was the name of that book?

RA: It was called *The Wad and Gudge Creek Chronicles*.

JG: Oh, okay. It was a compilation of those columns.

RA: Yes. It's no longer in print, but that's all right, because we had the fun of doing it.

JG: It was sort of like Arkansas' answer to Lake Wobegon.

RA: Well, yes, it was sort of like that. I think every newspaper columnist — if somebody doesn't print some of his columns, he'll get them together and have them Xeroxed and then put out his own book. Columnists always like to have something to show around.

JG: Richard, I wonder if you would tell us a little about where you came from, where your family came from, what your family did?

RA: For reasons that I do not know, the first Allin, Uncle Joe, who was born in Holsworthy, Devonshire, about 1834, moved to Canada. And for some reason, after living in Canada for a while, he moved — and I would say that this was in the 1850s — he moved to Marvell, Arkansas. He moved out of cool Ontario to the mosquito-laden land of Marvell, Arkansas. No one ever knew why. But in 1880, my grandfather, who had been born in Ontario in 1859 . . .

JG: What was his name?

RA: His name was Richard Allin, as was my father's. And he came down and went to work for the Arkansas Midland Railroad, which ran between Helena and Clarendon. It eventually became part of the Missouri Pacific. In 1882, he went back to Ontario and brought my grandmother, May Churchill Allin, to Helena, where they both lived. My father was born in 1892 in Helena. My mother was born in Grenada County, Mississippi. Her grandfather had fought in the Civil War. In the early 1900s she and her family — when she was a girl, a teen-aged girl, they moved to Helena. And my father, who had been born in Helena, met her. Then he went off to the First World War, and when he came back, they

married. He worked as a bookkeeper. My brother was born on April 22, 1922. He was a good guy, a serious fellow with a wonderful sense of humor. After graduation, he went to Sewanee and graduated from college, and then entered the Episcopal seminary, Saint Luke's Seminary. And his first church was in Conway, Saint Peter's church in Conway. Then he went to New Orleans, where he was curate at Saint Andrew's church, as well as chaplain at city prisons and institutions, and Episcopal chaplain at Tulane. Then he went to Grace Church in Monroe, Louisiana, as rector. Then he went to All Saints College in Vicksburg, as president and rector. And in 1961 he was elected bishop co-adjutor of the diocese of Mississippi. A co-adjutor bishop is one who serves under a bishop who holds office, but he has the right of succession when the main bishop dies. And he became bishop of Mississippi, a post he held for ten or twelve years. In 1974 he was elected presiding bishop of the Episcopal church in the United States, and that's the head bishop. It's not like being Pope, but it's the head bishop.

I was born October 6, 1930. I was kind of a kid with no particular talents. I couldn't do anything. I never could make the knife stand up in mumblety-peg. I would always drop the softball. I couldn't catch a football very well. This sort of went on, and in high school, I went out for band. I'd loved all of my teachers. All of them were just wonderful. How dedicated and well educated the teachers were in those days, the 'thirties and 'forties. They were just superb. I played the tuba, called the sousaphone, in the band, which led to eventual fun, later on, when

I was in Little Rock. After graduation I went to Sewanee — University of the South — and I majored in English Literature. I minored in French and History. I took four years of French, and I discovered that I could speak French fluently to another college student, but I could not make myself understood in France. Nor could I understand the French that the French spoke. But it was a language that helped me. I had taken Latin in high school, which, by the way, I think ought to be required by law. For anybody going to college, I think Latin is the most useful subject — aside from learning your own language — Latin is the most useful subject you can take.

I graduated from Sewanee, and I went into the Navy. I went to Officers Candidate School in Newport, Rhode Island. And I succeeded. I became a “hundred-and-twenty-day wonder,” or whatever it is, and I was commissioned as an ensign. They assigned me, after I graduated from OCS, to the Pentagon building, where I was a pencil pusher in the Office of Naval Intelligence. Now, believe me, the Office of Naval Intelligence has some bureaucratic, do-nothing offices, and I was in one of those. I had nothing to do with the cloak and dagger stuff, and I never knew any of the real inside of ONI. At the end of it, after I’d been in Washington for twenty-three months — if you can imagine, it was a great city for a twenty-four-year-old, just a wonderful place to live in — I had never been to sea and I had seen very few naval vessels. So I went to my office commander, and I said, “I want to go to sea.” And he said, “No, I don’t have a replacement for you.” He was a full commander, a naval commander. I went

back to my desk. I had a second-class yeoman working for me as a secretary. And he was an old timer. He'd been in the Navy for years and years. I said to him, "Go out and find a way for me to go to sea." He left the office, and he went and talked to a chief petty officer in the Pentagon Navy mail room — old chief so-and-so. Well, this guy in the mail room knew a chief in the Bureau of Naval Personnel. So the yeoman got a call one day, and he put his hand over the phone and said, "What kind of ship do you want to be on?" I said, "I don't care, a destroyer." He said, "You're too old to be on a destroyer now. I mean, you're too high in rank." I was a Lieutenant JG by then. I said, "Cruiser." Well, ten days later I had orders to the *USS Des Moines*, a heavy cruiser. I went to Norfolk, and we sailed the day after I got to Norfolk for the Mediterranean, where I spent a year. And I'll tell you what, the way the Navy was organized then — we were the flagship, we carried the Admiral of the Sixth Fleet — I was assigned to the communications department, which meant that I had no boss there, either, and no office hours, other than watch assignments. So that was just lovely. We stayed in the Mediterranean, and we made several crossings to Germany, and to Sweden — it was just glorious. Then somebody said, "Why don't you stay in the Navy?" Well, I'm not of a military disposition. And I would never have risen above Lieutenant JG, I don't think, so I got out. I took the train back home from Norfolk. I wondered on the way — I thought, you know, "You got to have a job." So when I got back to Helena, my parents were worried, too, about me, and my brother was worried about me. The only person who was not worried about me

was me. I never really worried very much. So when I got back to Helena, my father said, "What do you want to do?" And I said, "Well, I'd kind of like to go into the newspaper business." I really didn't know why, except that I'd been interested in newspapers. So the day after I got back, I guess, I wrote a letter to the *Commercial Appeal*, and I wrote a letter to the *Arkansas Gazette*. And I mailed them both at the same time. And I got a call, I guess two days later, from both papers. One was Gene Rutland, I believe, at the *Commercial Appeal*. He was the state editor, or the tri-state editor, as they called it. The other was from A. R. Nelson. But since the *Commercial Appeal* had called first — and it was closer to Helena — I decided to go to the *Commercial Appeal*. I went up there, and they gave me a little writing test, some short little feature thing, and I wrote it, and by God, it came out in the paper the next day. Well, you know what that will do to you, to see yourself printed the first time, in a newspaper. And they assigned me to Blytheville, Arkansas, to be a bureau correspondent for northeast Arkansas and to break into the business, you know. Other than that piece, I'd never written anything for newspapers. I remember trying to write a piece for the sixth grade newspaper, and they rejected it. So I didn't know how I was going to do.

JG: Other than that sixth grade piece, had you ever written anything for a newspaper?

RA: I never had. I honestly cannot think of anything that I had ever written for a newspaper. Maybe I did, but I can't remember what it was.

JG: So you just wrote a letter to Gene Rutland and to A. R. Nelson. No phone call,

just a letter?

RA: I just wrote the letter to them. I didn't know anybody.

JG: What year would that have been?

RA: 1957 . . . maybe '56, but I believe '57.

JG: So you were a reporter for the *Commercial Appeal* for three years?

RA: Well, I stayed in Blytheville for nine months. Then they had an opening in the slot of roving reporter. And the roving reporter was a sort of general purpose feature writer, and general assignment, except not in Memphis. They said, "Do you want to do that? Do you want to try it? We'll put you on probation and see if you can do it." I did and loved it. I would spend two days a week working on the desk in Memphis, just sort of routine editing, and the other days I would travel. I would travel the lengths of Tennessee, Mississippi, and Arkansas, because the *Commercial Appeal* had big circulation in all of those places. I had a good time doing that. I was free, and I was out. I could write pretty much what I wanted to. I was obligated to write a weekly feature for every Monday called "Our Home Town." And it was just a sort of fluff thing to keep the little towns happy, little towns where there was circulation. Then I would cover news as necessary: train wrecks, murders, trials, political news, I mean, during a governor's election, or something like that. Then I would join up with the political writers and cover one of them. And that was fun for a while. When you're young, even covering political candidates is fun. I'd hate to do it now. I covered Buford Ellington in Tennessee, and Frank Clement, and, over here, Bruce Bennett. You really can see

the characters. Orval Faubus. Being around Faubus really was to like him.

Politically, I never voted for Faubus. I could see what he was doing to the state.

But to be on a one-to-one, or a conversational, basis, he was a very engaging man, as you know.

JG: I spent a little time with him.

RA: So, that's what I did. Then, in 1960, they assigned me to the Little Rock bureau to cover the legislature and to cover the State House. And I did that, and it was fun. I met all the old guys: Ernest Valachovic, George Douthit, R. B. Mayfield, who actually worked for the *Democrat* — he killed himself. Bobby Forster, John Robert Starr. Valachovic and I were sort of merciless with John Robert Starr, and it may have affected his later life. We would play jokes on him. Whenever Valachovic and I would be in the pressroom at the Capitol and John Robert Starr would come in, Valachovic and I would jump up and run out, as if something was breaking. Of course, nothing was. And Starr never caught on to it. Oh, we didn't do it too much, but we did it some. Finally — well, I say he never caught on to it, but finally we basically told him about it.

JG: Of course, he was Capitol correspondent for the Associated Press at that time.

RA: Yes, he was. He was. And then that ended, and the *Commercial Appeal* wanted me to come back. We've been through the thing about joining the *Gazette* and writing the "Our Town" column, which, in effect, I felt like I retired, and I've been in a state of retirement for thirty-five, or however many years

JG: Thirty-five years this year (2000). Do you sit down to write your columns, or do

you write standing up? I guess you sit down. You say that when you sit down, you don't know what you're going to write about.

RA: That's almost always the case.

JG: How long does it take you to write a column? You used to sit at a typewriter. Now you sit at a computer. How long, on average, does it take? Is it a two-hour thing or a three-hour thing?

RA: Well, you know, sometimes they write themselves. I mean, sometimes you don't have to labor over getting one idea, and then another idea, and then finding something to say. Sometimes they just write themselves. Sometimes that might take twenty minutes. And sometimes you get up and leave, and get up and leave, and that might take two hours. But spending more than two hours is just very rare.

JG: Do you transmit the columns to the *Democrat-Gazette*, or do you deliver the disk, or what?

RA: Yes, I transmit over the computer. I have a computer that has the software in it that will contact the main computer at the *Democrat-Gazette*. It's just like writing down there. So when I get through, I do two or three things and it's there.

JG: You were at the *Gazette* writing "Our Town" from 1965 on. What changes did you notice at the *Gazette* while you were doing the column, and how did they affect you?

RA: The *Gazette*, I think, was still an old-time, handmade newspaper when I started. There were no computerized systems there. It was all lead. It was all Linotype.

It was turning in hard copy on copy paper, all marked up, with lines through things, and you tried to edit your stuff with those marks that I now have forgotten. The computer came along and revolutionized the *Gazette* and all newspapers. Also, people drank during the day at the old *Gazette*. The one exception — well, there may have been more than one exception — J. N. Heiskell did not drink on the job, but many, many others did. One or two editorial writers would come in and do their work before noon, because after noon they would be past goin'. I can remember the Sunday editor, Charlie Davis, a guy that I liked very much. Charlie was drinking all the time. I never knew how he put out a Sunday section that looked as well as it did. Then that changed. I mean, now, no one, *no one* takes a drink in the newspaper business. Or it's very rare. Now, with computers, you turn in totally clean copy, with no misspellings. Or if you do get misspellings, you had to go to a lot of trouble to make the misspellings. It's quicker. It's cleaner. We miss the old characters in the back shop, and there were many, but they're gone now. Computer people have taken their places. There are no deaf mutes any more that work for the paper.

JG: There used to be several of those men back in the composing room.

RA: Yes.

JG: How about the management of the *Gazette*? Were there any changes in the management, and did any of those affect you?

RA: I guess they affected me in some ways. When I went there, J. N. Heiskell was still living. Hugh Patterson was the publisher, and he had influence in varying

degrees. Mr. Heiskell was, ultimately, the final word. A. R. Nelson was the one that I reported to, and he had a very light management touch. You had to make a bad mistake before you got a frown from A. R. Nelson. So that's one thing that made it easy. Nelson was retired, and I was very sorry to hear that. Then Bob Douglas came, and Bob was a guy that everybody liked. Bob never bothered me. If I can remember any critical remarks — well, I'm sure he made some, but I can't remember. The biggest change came when Bob was retired and Carrick Patterson came. I had very high hopes for Carrick because he's a very talented individual in so many ways. But his management style, and his father's management style, to my opinion, did not create a very good atmosphere at the *Gazette*. And for the first time in my career as a columnist, Carrick came to me and said don't write about a certain thing. That thing was to not write about "Wad and Gudge Creek" any more. Well, that was my favorite subject. So I spent two years in limbo, not knowing what to do, for the first time having a slight feeling of anxiety when I came to work, which I had *never* had before because writing was easy for me. I mean, subjects came easy. They were self-assigned, or the articles were made up. I considered that to be meddling on Carrick's part, and if he reads this, or hears it sometime in the future, I almost think that he would consider it meddling, too.

JG: Was there any subject that they *wanted* you to write about?

RA: Oh, very rarely. Oddly enough, Mr. Heiskell made a couple of suggestions to me one time. But they were "tee-tee" subjects, which can be so cute, but it's a

subject that I have always avoided. I don't like those little, personal things. I don't write sexual columns, or things with sexual innuendo, unless they are just absolutely hilarious.

JG: What is "tee-tee"? What does that refer to?

RA: Well, little people going to the bathroom. Wee-wee. But he had a couple and I never used them. And I got the message that Mr. Heiskell said that "Mr. Allin is very independent." Margaret Ross read the paper to J. N. Heiskell every morning. One day Margaret came in and said to me, "Congratulations." I said, "For what?" And she said, "Mr. Heiskell let me read your whole column to him this morning." [Laughs] I just think of all the times that he would wave her off and say, "Go to some other subject." Jack Meriwether came to be general manager of the *Gazette*. Jack had been Little Rock city manager for several years and had been a banker in Paragould. He moved back to Little Rock to take this job as general manager of the *Gazette*. One of the things he did was to persuade Hugh Patterson that he was drinking too much and that he needed to sober up. As far as I was concerned, that was fine. I had always liked Hugh Patterson. I still like him. He's an inspiration to us for having enjoyed himself all his life and for having lived as long as he has lived. But I thought at that time — and I've discussed this with Meriwether before — I said the only problem was, when he was totally not drinking, he took more interest in the paper. He moved us around, moved us to different rooms, and made on-the-spot decisions that were really uncomfortable and disastrous many times. He made the sports department and

the features department switch places one time. We stayed that way for three or four months. It became unbearable. Then he ordered that we switch back.

JG: That was Hugh Patterson who did that?

RA: Right. Those were uncomfortable times, when Carrick was there.

JG: The Wad and Gudge Creek — was that the only time that the management told you not to write about something?

RA: Yes.

JG: You later went back to writing about Wad and Gudge Creek.

RA: I did. I did. Carrick left.

JG: That was after Carrick left?

RA: I'm not saying I didn't write one or two pieces in the meantime. He thought that maybe that I was using it too much. Well, people liked it. The readers liked it. Both towns were convenient for making comparisons between Little Rock and North Little Rock and for dealing with the subjects that would come up in both towns. This was a little column about them — fictitious towns. One of the problems with writing about fictitious towns, Wad and Gudge Creek, was that many, many people thought that they existed. They thought that they were real. They would call up and ask how to get there. And the AARP called up one time and said that they were going to take a bus tour of western Arkansas and they would like to go to Wad and Gudge Creek. I had no idea how they knew it was in western Arkansas since the two towns didn't exist.

JG: How was it when the *Gazette* was sold to the Gannett Corporation? What

changes took place? Did anything affect you?

RA: Yes. In some ways it affected me very, very much. We were used to home ownership of the *Gazette*. I guess Hugh Patterson made the decision on totally economic reasons, and he sold it to the Gannett Corporation. To my mind the Gannett people were a ruthless bunch. They hired people who knew nothing about Arkansas. None of their top officers had the slightest idea of Arkansas history. And Arkansas does have a considerable history. They knew nothing about that. Gannett cheapened our paper. We were a gray good newspaper, as you well know, because you were an important part of it. And we reported facts. You could depend upon what the *Gazette* said, and you could read all the news in it. It was the newspaper of record. Gannett came in, and we learned that Walker Lundy was going to be our editor. He had been fired from the *Fort Worth Star Telegram* for some reason or other. Bill Malone was to be our publisher. Well, he was from Marked Tree or Trumann or somewhere, and he did know Arkansas, but the only thing he knew about newspapers was from when he had been — before he went to Gannett — a circulation man in north Mississippi for the *Commercial Appeal*. Then we started getting a lot of young, new faces. We could tell, as soon as Walker Lundy got in there, our hard news suddenly began dissolving. The news that was supposed to appeal to people 18 to 34 started getting preference in the paper. We did Spandex on the asses of cheerleaders at UALR. In the first staff meeting that we had with Lundy in the features department, he described to us one of the best features that he liked so much. In

another newspaper a fellow had taught a cat how to shit in the commode indoors.

“What you do,” Lundy said, “is you put Saran Wrap over the toilet and put some of the cat’s kitty litter in there, and then you do this, and then you do that.”

That’s what he considered to be a wonderful feature for a newspaper. All of us declined to write that. But that was the inspiration that he left us with. I will say that he didn’t like my column very much, and he didn’t like me very much. And I didn’t like him. I remember one time, and this was not a particularly nice thing to do, I went back and resurrected a column and printed it verbatim, which was a stupid thing to do. You could go back in the computer — the computer was advanced enough by then — and print a few words and it would show you the column they came from. We had some people, the editors of the features section, who did not come to me and say, “What the hell are you doing?” They thrashed over to Walker Lundy and told on me. So Lundy called me in and he said, “You know, you can get fired for this. Why did you do it?” I couldn’t tell him why I did it. I really sort of did it out of contempt for the new management of the newspaper. But that passed because I had readership. So nothing ever happened. But it went downhill from there. We did things — “we” being the staff, the editors — to lose our biggest advertiser, Dillard’s. We lost the Dillard’s advertising. That was a time when we were in growing competition with the *Arkansas Democrat*, which did not lose the Dillard’s advertising. Contempt grew for the paper. Every time I’d see somebody, they’d say, “What has happened to the newspaper under Gannett?” I’d say, “Just read it and see. Meet the people.”

Right before the *Gazette* was sold to Gannett, I got a confidential inquiry from Walter Hussman asking me if I would like to come work for the *Arkansas Democrat*. I gave it thought. He promised a very substantial raise and very good terms. And I was tempted, not only because the man he sent to be his contact with me was a guy that I liked very much — still do like him — but I declined. I told Carrick about it one time. He was surprised. And I will say that although I didn't particularly like the way Carrick was acting as executive editor of the newspaper, he gave me a raise. And then Gannett came. Again the guy: would I be interested and would Charlie Allbright be interested in going?

JG: Walter Hussman?

RA: Yes. And we talked to him again. Neither Charlie nor I liked to make changes very much. We had people still working on the *Gazette* that we liked and admired. So we declined again. Well, it got out that Walter had made contact with us. Something got out, and I don't know how it got out. But some weeks later, a rumor got out in the newsroom that Charlie and I had accepted. The rumor got out. I learned this after the fact. It was such a flaming rumor that one day an emergency meeting was called of the upper staff of the *Gazette*. I mean, it became crucial. They wanted to keep us. They couldn't let us go. They decided it would be wrong for the *Gazette* to let us go. Everybody was panicked except Charlie and me, and we didn't know anything about it. We had no idea until Mr. Moon came into our office and said, "I want to talk to you guys." He was the new publisher. He took over after Bill Malone had been retired. He said, "We

really want to keep you.” He offered us the most outrageous raise in salary, free parking, plus a \$10,000-a-year bonus for staying with the *Gazette*. Charlie and I just sat there open-mouthed, shaking our heads. Everybody else knew we were gone, and Charlie and I didn’t know anything about it. We hadn’t discussed it. We had both made our decision to stay at the *Gazette*, and that was it. We were not going to the *Democrat*. And here he came in and dumped this bunch of money in front of us. He gave us a contract. So we were rolling in dough. We made more money than anybody. I mean, I don’t know about Walker Lundy. Well, we enjoyed more money than, of course, we were worth. Then, when the *Gazette* was sold to the *Democrat*, that day when the last — well, we didn’t get to print an edition saying we were going out of business the night before. I got word from Walter Hussman that he wanted Charlie and me to come to the *Democrat*. Well, I saw nothing wrong with it. It wasn’t a break in favor with anybody at the *Gazette*, because the *Gazette* was closed and Gannett had ruined it. It wasn’t these people. So we went. And Walter honored our contracts until they ran out. Then, inconveniently, but sensibly, he lowered our salaries back to something more reasonable. He was still generous. As I suspected, it almost tore up Charlie Allbright. But Charlie always took my advice about things — I don’t know why — and I said, “Look, this is the best we’re going to get. He has a right do this. We don’t have a contract anymore.” So he finally came around. But that was the story. We made much money and never knew why.

JG: How long was your contract?

RA: It was three years.

JG: You obviously meant a lot to Gannett that they wanted to hang on to you in this crucial newspaper war.

RA: Well, yes, they wanted, you know — whoever writes a column has readers. Bad that they may be, they still have readers and still have a following.

JG: You and Charlie had always been good friends, hadn't you, while writing your columns?

RA: Always. Always.

JG: Did you socialize, or was this just kind of a friendly relationship?

RA: We never socialized. Charlie doesn't socialize very much. I mean, you know, he's not reclusive, but he doesn't get out and socialize. Hell, I don't socialize all that much. A few friends would come over, or I'd go over to their house for a drink or dinner sometimes, but that's about all. When you're advancing in age, it's hard to get a dance anymore, as they say. Charlie and I have always sat by each other, or been in close proximity to each other, or we have shared an office with each other. And sharing an office, which we started to do in the old *Gazette*, was so much fun because we could banter back and forth. And he's very good at that. We had a lot of people that we knew coming in who were always welcome. All the old people were always welcome, and there was always a bunch in the office. We just had a wonderful time. Charlie and I have always been on great footing with each other. When Walter Hussman spoke to me about coming over there, I said, "Will you include Charlie, too?" So after that we just sort of became

a unit. I mean, people thought of us as being together. There's not anybody that I really didn't like at the *Gazette*. And I have said that I'd have preferred not to work directly under Shelton.

JG: You're talking about the *Gazette* before it was sold to Gannett?

RA: At any time.

JG: At any time?

RA: At any time. Well, that's right, before it was sold to Gannett, then there were two or three people I didn't like.

JG: When did you start writing your column at home? How did that work?

RA: I started writing at home when I went to the *Democrat*, as it became the *Democrat-Gazette*. Charlie and I had shared an office up until that time. So we always wrote on the computers at the *Gazette*. When we went to the *Democrat-Gazette*, they didn't have space for us at the time. They were in a period of refurbishing their offices. They were moving their offices on the second floor. The offices on the second floor were a rat's nest. They gradually made these modern offices on the third floor at the *Democrat-Gazette*, but initially they didn't have room for us. They didn't have an office for us, and they had agreed to give us an office. So they said, "Well, you can write on your computers at home, and then you can send it in by modem." Well, Charlie didn't have a computer, and Charlie could barely turn on the computer that he had at the paper. So for the first several months, Charlie would write his columns at home, but he'd come over to my house and use my computer to send his columns. From that point on, we were

writing at home, essentially. They gave us an office at the *Democrat-Gazette*, and we still have a private office, but we use it about one hour a week. He does all his stuff at home and I do all mine at home.

JG: Does he have his own modem now?

RA: Yes. He sends by modem, and I send by modem, too, but I have one that's hooked up directly to the mainframe down there. His has to go through some special process to get to them.

JG: But he is able to handle it?

RA: He's able to handle it, right.

JG" Tell me about the tuba you played for the Arkansas Symphony. I remember your playing for the symphony — the symphony got started around 1964, didn't it ?

RA: It had a rebirth then. There had always been something called the Arkansas Symphony. Sometimes it was just on paper. Somebody had started an orchestra around 1923. You know, they just got together and played. But it had its rebirth in 1960-something. B. Lecil Gibson would get musicians together. He was the choir director at Second Presbyterian Church. And he would put on church programs that required musicians. There was a small pool of musicians around Little Rock, and it sort of grew out of that. Competent players got together, somehow. B. D. Ford finally — B. D. Ford was the owner of Bean Music Company — he finally got an organization going to promote the symphony. It built, little by little, and he led it some. We got a big enough pool of musicians, and he got Francis McBeth, a professor of music at Ouachita Baptist University, a

wonderful guy, and McBeth came up and rehearsed the orchestra and made it into a going, viable organization. It was good. The musicians were paid, but not much, just a few dollars a concert.

JG: Did you get started under McBeth?

RA: I got started under Lecil Gibson, in the percussion section. I'd play things like the bass drum, the triangle, cymbals, things like that. But McBeth let me play tuba. I had been playing tuba in summer bands. I borrowed one from Bean Music Company, and I played it in summer bands. I got some of my chops back, and I got some of my ability back. And then I practiced, and I played, and McBeth said, "Okay, you're the tuba player for the Arkansas Symphony." He had never heard me before. And I went, and I had practiced enough so that I could sort of cut the mustard. There are some symphonic parts with easy tuba parts in them. We would play music that was suitable for us at that time. I played the tuba, and I got better and better on it. But I was still an amateur player. I had never had any lessons from anybody. I mean, everything I'd done I'd learned by myself, besides the initial high school band. And when you do that, you develop bad habits that stay with you forever. Today, all but a few players have gone to the conservatory or music school, and they have the best pedagogues. So they play well. I played okay, but I didn't play well. But I lasted ten years. Then Kurt Klipstatter came after McBeth retired. — I must say "the late" Kurt Klipstatter. He died. — But he came, and he stayed for seven or eight years. He was an Austrian conductor, and we played beautiful music under Klipstatter. I enjoyed every moment of it. He

resigned to go somewhere else, and we went a year without a conductor. And then Robert Henderson came. He had been with the Los Angeles Philharmonic. I despised him and so did most everybody else in the orchestra. He was used to professional musicians. Amateurs get to a point where they just can't do any better. There were several of us in the orchestra like that. He wanted something better. So one day he called me in and fired me. And he fired Jett Ricks, who had been a clarinet player since the thirties. And he fired Bonnie Sallings, from McCrory, who drove eighty-two miles each way for every rehearsal. She had been the early high school mentor of Tom Stacy, who is now the English horn player for the New York Philharmonic. He fired several others. And I'm not holding that against him, because he wanted better musicians. But I do hold it against the orchestra board, because the amateurs that he fired were the amateurs who had held the orchestra together and who were responsible for its maintaining itself as an orchestra. Not one of those people ever got a mention, ever got a "thank you," ever got anything from the board. So that's what I think about the board at that time. They've changed.

JG: You played a tuba called "Elizabeth," as I recall. What was the background of that?

RA: I was a friend of Elizabeth Young, Mrs. Gordon E. Young, wife of a federal judge, who died — the federal judge died. She was a very, very generous person. And she would do things for the orchestra. She gave parties for the orchestra. She gave fund-raisers. She would travel to every concert with the orchestra when

we went out of town. She was at every concert. And I had written about playing the tuba in my column because I wanted to give the orchestra some publicity.

And one day she said, “How much does a tuba cost?” I said, “Oh, I don’t know, a thousand, two thousand dollars.” She said, “Well, look into buying a prime tuba.”

So I sought advice from people, including McBeth, including B. D. Ford, and we found that a German tuba called a Mirafone was a fine, fine symphony tuba. And she said, “Well, order it.”

JG: So you ordered the tuba?

RA: I did, yes. Bean Music brought it in, but it had been damaged in shipping. The bell was bent. But I never saw that. B. D. Ford had an instrument back shop at Bean Music Company that was equal to anything in the United States. They took the tuba apart, took the bell, straightened it out, and you couldn’t *see* a wrinkle in it. And they re-lacquered it. It was better when he finished with it than it had been when it was shipped from the Mirafone factory. So we took it to a concert one time and I got up at that concert and introduced it to the audience. Elizabeth Young had bought it, and I said, “Ladies and gentlemen, this is Elizabeth,” and so it became known that the tuba had a name, Elizabeth.

JG: Is it still being used with the symphony?

RA: No. No, it is not.

JG: It’s been retired?

RA: As a matter of fact, after several years, we retired it. I had borrowed a tuba, just to play in one concert, just to see what it was like. I had borrowed a Conn piston

valve tuba. Klipstatter heard that and he said, "I like the sound of that tuba better than I like the Mirafone. The Mirafone was big, I mean, it had a great big sound. This one had a little more compact sound. So we made a deal. We traded the Mirafone in for the Conn. And I played it for the rest of the time. I was kind of sorry I had turned the Mirafone in. I had some little problems with it, and the Conn was lighter. But, we did it, and I just named the other one Elizabeth II.

JG: Elizabeth II.

RA: Yes.

JG: So the name continues.

RA: The name continues.

JG: So is that Conn tuba still in use by the symphony?

RA: I believe that Conn tuba is at Hendrix College. Elizabeth Young was a very faithful alumni of Hendrix. After I left, well, I don't know what the process was that led up to that. I had nothing to do with it.

JG: Do you still play the tuba?

RA: I never have played since, the reason being, I'm advancing in age, and the tuba, with case, was forty pounds to carry around and I'm just tired of that. I told Carol that if I had everything to do again, I'd take up the oboe instead of the tuba. You can carry an oboe with two fingers.

JG: You mention Carol, that's your wife?

RA: Carol, Carol Cole, of Paragould, Arkansas. We were married in 1966, after an extended courtship. I've lived happily ever after.

JG: She is in the travel business?

RA: Actually, she's getting out of the travel business because she's had a mastectomy. But when I met her, she worked as educational director at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral. And then she founded a bookstore, called Capitol Book Store. It was extremely popular, and it lasted for ten or twelve years, in four locations. The third location was in the Main Street Mall, which collapsed, and her store collapsed with it. — or, at least she moved her store into a place — but it was passé because the Main Street Mall was just the kiss of death for everybody. Several businesses failed as a result of getting tied up with that bunch. After her store closed, she went to work in the travel business. She's been a super travel agent for more than a decade. [Carol Allin became manager of the Cathedral School in Little Rock in autumn of 2000.]

JG: So now you have traveled with her on a number of trips, and you have written about some of these trips in your column, and a lot of people know Carol as TC.

RA: TC.

JG: Which stands for . . .

RA: Traveling companion. In the first I never made reference to TC as being a woman until one day somebody questioned, "Is TC a man? Is he traveling with a man?" And I thought, "Well, I better get that straightened out." So I started calling *her* TC, that's most definitely a woman. And we traveled thousands of miles in every possible way.

JG: You still do, don't you?

RA: Well, we can. Of course, we're a little bit restricted right now. Both of us — since airlines treat you with such contempt and you have to ride under such uncomfortable conditions, we've started driving in the United States.

JG: You also ride the train a lot.

RA: Right, we do ride the train.

JG: You made a trip to Austin a while back and saw an opera performance down there.

RA: Surely did.

JG: Did you visit Mrs. Johnson's flower ranch, too?

RA: Well, Carol contributes to that, but we didn't go there. We did go see Lyndon's library. We would like to have done that, but we didn't get a chance to do it. But Carol contributes to that and to other natural beauty organizations. Carol and I have ridden the train a lot. Her most famous trip was a trip across Canada, on the Canadian train, called "The Canadian." We went from Toronto to Vancouver. We did that seven times, I believe. But I had already — I've made the trip about fourteen times, on other occasions.

JG: You mean fourteen plus seven?

RA: I guess about fifteen times, including seven. One of those that I did by myself was from Halifax to Vancouver, which was fun. And I once did a circular trip around the United States, into Canada, and up to Churchill, Manitoba. I did more than 11,000 miles in thirteen days on the train. And that was fun. I've done a lot of other trips. A lot of people wouldn't tolerate that, but I just like trains. I've

ridden them many times.

JG: You also like to use the term “libation.” How did that get started? Was that just a term you starting using or was there any background to that?

RA: Oh, you know, I would put hints in my columns that would indicate maybe that I liked to have a cocktail every now and then. So I’d use “libation” in that sense. And I would rename gin, or the martini, as “olive bullion.” And people started taking that up. They would kid me about that.

JG: So we don’t see the term “martini” in your column. It’s “olive bullion.”

RA: Well, in the old days it was, but nowadays I’m trying to use it a little bit more. So I use it alternately. I do use “martini” every now and then, because there’s a new generation of readers out there.

JG: Looking back over your columns, is there one column that stands out as your best column, or two or three that stand out in your own mind? Would you care to comment on what maybe were some of the top-notch columns that you wrote, or the ones that created the most attention from the public?

RA: Jerol, that’s hard to say. There have been so many of them in the last thirty-five years that I, well, I went on a crusade one time to plant trees in downtown Little Rock. And I like to take credit that some of the trees that are now in downtown Little Rock are there because of the columns that I wrote about it. I hope so. Until I started kidding City Hall, it was against the law to have trees in sidewalks because they felt a limb might fall on somebody. Or a bird might get to somebody. Or that fire equipment couldn’t get by the trees. So I started making

fun of that, and they changed the law, they changed the ordinance at City Hall. Little by little, they started planting trees. And now if you look at downtown Little Rock, it's quite a beautiful thing. I may be wrong in my own assessment of the columns, but I think they had something to do with encouraging the growth of those trees. Now we're trying to get trees planted from the Capitol all the way down Capitol Avenue to the interstate freeway, so we can have a boulevard of trees, a formal boulevard for Little Rock.

JG: Running all the way from the Capitol Building over to Interstate 30, is that the idea?

RA: Yes. If you'll drive that length now, you'll see that many, many trees have already been planted along there.

JG: Any other subject that created a lot of public attention?

RA: Some of the projects were small, like being able to serve wine at the symphony. I did that. The traffic light system — mercifully, they didn't synchronize them, which gave me a subject to write about for a long time. Little crusades like that.

JG: And what was the name of the lady over at City Hall who was in charge of . . .

RA: Radiance Wuppertal was in charge of traffic signal timing, oiling, and lens acquisition. I'm trying to think of some monumental creation of good that I inspired, but nothing comes to mind right now, you know [laughs].

JG: Well the synchronizing of the traffic lights was certainly a major improvement.

RA: Yes, that was fun. It was fun doing that. It was fun promoting the symphony. It was fun promoting Amtrak. I was Amtrak's loudest promoter here in Arkansas

for a long time.

JG: Now it's about to go daily, I believe.

RA: Yes, it is, this month.

JG: It was four days a week, but you wrote in your column that it's going to be daily.

RA: It is. But the existing Amtrak is the last of the old type system. There's going to be a new rail system in the United States, and it's going to be high speed, and the trains are going to go 200 miles an hour, and they're going to be on tracks separate from existing freight tracks. That's the way it is in Europe now. And even we, a country of very bad mass transit policy, will one day have that. It may be fifty, or seventy-five years from now, but we will be able to get on a train in the *middle* of New York City, and be deposited in the *middle* of Chicago in a very short length of time. The train will travel 200 miles an hour. You know, when you lap up that much land, you can cover a lot of distance. Then Chicago to St. Louis, maybe through Little Rock, to Dallas. Los Angeles to San Diego is already high speed rail. New York to Boston has high speed rail, getting even higher speed. That'll be the way. The old ways of 60 miles an hour and sleeping cars — that will one day pass.

JG: Is there anything else that you would like to mention before we close the interview?

RA: In my thoughts I love thinking about the people that you and I used to work with at the *Arkansas Gazette*. The column I wrote when Gannett took over, I wrote a column saying that I was encouraged and I thought that the ghost of J. N. Heiskell

would continue to haunt and inspire the halls of the *Arkansas Gazette*. That's not the way it was. It was a beautiful column, I will say. But it was wishful thinking, because Gannett took this paper and destroyed it. They destroyed it, and they started the first day destroying it. They made it a cheap rag, where it had been, I mean, where a fact was a fact. You alone were the most careful writer that the paper ever had. So I remember you. I remember Bill Lewis. I've often said that if I were going to start a newspaper and I could choose one man to write it, I would choose Bill Lewis, because he can write so much in an interesting fashion, on any subject. He could fill more space quicker than anyone. Nelson was my mentor, and I love that guy because he gave me this job. And Bob Douglas helped to make it a good newspaper, helped to make it a great newspaper when he was there. Leroy Donald was in and out of trouble all the time, but he was a character and gave the paper its own sort of flavor. And Jerry Neil, an editorial writer, a very literate man — strong drinker, drank a fifth of gin every day for twenty-five years. I wish they were all here, and I wish we were all working for the same newspaper, under ideal conditions, with ideal pay, which we really didn't have at the *Gazette*. The *Gazette* got a lot out of us, and without paying us very much. Then Gannett came along and made a mistake and overpaid Charlie and me [laughs]. That was a great time. And Orville Henry. Look, it gave me more than I gave it. I enjoyed every moment. There was not a column that I did not enjoy writing. I never, ever went to work without a certain uplift in my heart. It was fun. It was fun doing what I did, because I didn't have any real bosses. I

could do what I wanted to. I could come and go as I pleased, without reporting to anybody. That's what made it so much fun.

JG: Thank you very much.

[End of Interview]