

Gazette Project

Interview with

Ronald Farrar,
Columbia, South Carolina,
29 September 2000

Interviewer: Dawn Hinshaw

Ronald Farrar: I hadn't thought about these folks in so long. It was amazing I was able to reconstruct almost the whole damn staff.

Dawn Hinshaw: Wonderful.

RF: That's not the whole bunch, but that's most of them.

DH: George Stroud. Is that Scott Stroud's old man?

RF: Yes. Well, no. That's his uncle.

DH: His uncle. Oh.

RF: His dad worked there, too, later.

DH: You've got Frank. You've even got last names on everybody but old Frank and Carolyn.

RF: I thought of that. It's Moorman. M-O-O-R-M-A-N.

DH: Well, write her on there. She deserves a last name.

RF: Well, she does.

DH: This is great. I know that will be helpful, and are you pretty confident of the spelling? I'm guessing not.

RF: Yes. Yes. Yes.

DH: Okay.

RF: There were copy editors I couldn't remember, and there were some sports guys I couldn't remember.

DH: Okay.

RF: And it seemed like a total of fifteen names that I remember in the newsroom, but I'm not sure there were more than about twelve on a regular basis.

DH: Before we get too deep into that, let me get some basic information that I need real quick. I need your date of birth, and I'd like to move through kind of quickly your early life, where you grew up and went to school, your folks, and that kind of thing. Just to get that on the record.

RF: Okay. My name is Ronald Farrar. I was born in Fordyce, Arkansas, July 3, 1935. Raised in Fordyce. Went to the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville. Got my degree in business in 1957. Went into the army as a second lieutenant in the Adjutant General's Corps on active duty. Got out in 1958. Went to work for the *Paragould Daily Press*.

DH: I did, too. I worked there also after college.

RF: Wally White was the owner. This is before your time – Good man.

DH: 1958?

RF: Yes.

DH: Because Roy Reed told me he thought you worked over at Marked Tree, which is also in that neck of the woods, but he was wrong about that?

RF: No. I went to – After six months at Paragould, I went to the *Gazette*. I stayed at the *Gazette* for the better part of two years. And then went to the *Trumann*

Democrat to be editor/general manager of a weekly. At that time, I thought I wanted to be a newspaper publisher, and some friends of mine owned three papers: Marked Tree, Lepanto, and Trumann, and they needed somebody to run their Trumann paper. So I left the *Gazette* and went to Trumann. Stayed there for a little over a year and then, at that point, got married. My wife and I began graduate school at the University of Iowa. Got a master's degree there. Then decided at that point to enter the teaching field, so I looked around for a Ph.D. program. Missouri had a good one and offered me an assistantship, so I went to the University of Missouri 1962 to 1964, and I've been teaching ever since in some capacity. I started at Indiana University in the fall of 1964. 1970, I left to become chairman of the little journalism department at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. Then after three years, I went to the University of Mississippi, Ole Miss, as chairman. Stayed there for four years and then went to the University of Kentucky as director of the journalism school. Stayed there eleven years, although only four years as director of the journalism school, and then came to the University of South Carolina in 1986. I came as something called a Reynolds Faunt Memorial Professor, which is more title than the job might indicate and essentially ran the graduate program and then served as associate dean. And then last October, when our current dean went on leave of absence, I was asked by the president and provost to serve as interim dean, and that's what I've been doing since last October.

DH: October of

RF: October of 1999.

DH: Well, you've had a very distinguished career.

RF: It's a long career. My sixty-fifth birthday was in July, and I agreed to serve until a new dean is in place, and that could be as early as this coming January, January 2001, or it could be longer than that, at which point I plan to retire.

DH: Is that so? Well, good, I'm glad to have all of that. Born and grew up in Fordyce. And I, of course, want to home in on those two years at the *Gazette*. What years were those?

RF: 1958 to 1960. It wasn't quite two years.

DH: 1958 to 1960. And how did you get the job? You were at Paragould.

RF: Right. And Bob McCord, Robert McCord, whom I had known for many years – In fact, he had gotten me a summer job with the *Arkansas Democrat* at one point. He was a very, very good friend, and even though he had no connection with the *Gazette* at that time, he was very good friends with A.R. Nelson, the managing editor. And so, he called him, and Mr. Nelson had an opening. And so, through Bob McCord's good auspices, I got a job on the *Gazette*. I was there at a very good time, some awfully talented people. They had already won the Pulitzers by then – one for Harry Ashmore's editorials, the other for news coverage – but there was still a lot of bad feeling towards the *Gazette* at that time. It was perceived as advocating integration. It was very difficult even to rent an apartment in Little Rock if you were identified as a *Gazette* reporter. At least it was difficult for me.

DH: So this bad feeling towards the newspaper was from, I'm assuming, state

leadership, but also just common folks.

RF: The state leadership was fairly sophisticated about things like this. It was the people who felt most threatened by integration of the schools.

DH: I'd be curious if you had any examples, like the apartment thing, where people were hostile towards you as someone affiliated with the *Gazette*.

RF: Well, we would get – when you showed up with a photographer on a story, you were apt to get snide remarks or catcalls or something to that effect. I never felt personally threatened by it. Little Rock, despite whatever image people might have of it, Little Rock was a very civil place. It's just not the kind of place where people are really mean. They may not like you, and they may say things, but, generally, you know, I was Arkansas, they were Arkansas, it was

DH: You were one of them.

RF: Yes. Yes. Yes. Maybe a so-and-so, but I was one of their so-and-so's.

DH: [Laughs] So I asked you how you got the job, and you mentioned Bob McCord. And do you recall how much you were paid, for example?

RF: Yes. Seventy-five dollars a week.

DH: Is that so?

RF: I got some raises while I was there, but that was what I made.

DH: And what was your beat?

RF: I was general assignment initially.

DH: I'm sure everybody was when they first came on.

RF: Right. And then some of the stars began to leave. Ray Moseley, who was

number one reporter, I suppose, by any standard in terms of politics, got a job in New York, so that started kind of a musical chairs. Roy Reed, who was covering North Little Rock, moved to take over Ray's job.

DH: Covering politics?

RF: Right. Politics and some at the capital. And then I was moved to North Little Rock, and I spent a good bit of time there. North Little Rock bureau did have a secretary. It was the city across the river, 50,000 or so people, very separate city government.

DH: Kind of a suburban feel to it?

RF: Yes, it was. It was not a particularly desirable beat.

DH: I was thinking that, but I didn't know if I should say it.

RF: In fact, they referred to it as "Dog Town." And one of my predecessors in that beat had contracted impetigo in the police station just by putting his arm down on the desk one day. People across the river looked upon you as some sort of pariah, but it was a wonderful beat because you had everything. You had city government, and they had a very colorful city hall at that time. The mayor was a guy named Casey Laman, who was quite a colorful politician, probably cut a lot of corners along the way, but we loved him, loved the guy. I could tell you some stories about him, but I covered city government, the police, the schools.

DH: One man show?

RF: Yes. Well, and wrote a Sunday column.

DH: An opinion piece? Or . . .

RF: No. It was mostly pictures, sort of off-beat stuff that you ran across there in the course of a week.

DH: Sounds great. Dog Town, huh?

RF: Yes. It was. You didn't have a bunch of guidance. I mean, you were on your own, and North Little Rock had its segregationist element, a very strong segregationist element. Little Rock was a two-newspaper town at that time with very competitive newspapers, and the *Democrat* man in North Little Rock was L.D. Kerr. He and I were very good friends, but he was also quite an effective reporter. He had been there some time, and he had better contacts than I did. But I quickly came to realize how good a reporter Roy Reed was because I – this is the secretary. God, I can't remember her name.

DH: I'm guessing an older woman?

RF: Yes. She kept a scrapbook, and I would leaf through that and cover city council meeting and compare my story with what Roy had done previously. Let me tell you, it was a maturing experience. He was just a very gifted reporter, and he had identified with that city totally. He just did a magnificent job.

DH: You said something there that interested me. Your morgue was essentially a scrapbook?

RF: Yes.

DH: This woman kept a scrapbook on her desk?

RF: Right. What I would do is go to work, usually around 8 a.m., and then I would call into the office around 4 p.m., in time for their news meeting. Then, around

4:30 or so, I'd go back across the river and stay in the city room and actually write my copy. And I'd stay in the city room until, you know, sometimes 8 or 9 p.m. at night. I was not as fast as some, and there was no immediate pressure. First edition didn't carry North Little Rock stuff much anyway, so I had plenty of time, and I took it. I worked a lot longer hours than I needed to.

DH: Yes. What hours did you say again?

RF: I'd get on the beat around 8 a.m., and I would still be there around 8 or 9 p.m.

DH: And I apologize if you said this and it went over my head – there was not an office in North Little Rock? There was?

RF: Yes. It was in city hall.

DH: Okay, so you had your own office there, but did you work downtown primarily or did you work out of that office?

RF: I worked out of that office, and the police station was in the same building. And the school office was not far away. I had a parking space. I also had a camera. I mean, this is the kind of thing where you – I could get a photographer if I needed to, but what I would do is just shoot the pictures myself. I didn't process them, I'd just drop the rolls off when I went into the main office at the end of the day, and the photographers would process them, quite often with a few instructive comments afterwards. [Laughs]

DH: Photographers, do any of them stick out?

RF: Yes. They had a couple that I remember. Larry Obsitnik was, I guess, the number-one guy and a very colorful and delightful fellow to work with. He was

gruff at first, and he referred to me, several times as “One of those God-damned college boys.”

DH: Well, apparently, he was right about that, wasn't he?

RF: Yes. And then another one was Gene somebody or other, and he was hilarious. And we would do imitations of him because he couldn't say “film.” It was always F-I-M, in a distinctive way. One time I really had it, but I tried last night and couldn't remember how to do it.

DH: Well, you could rehearse, couldn't you?

RF: Well, when I was going over these names last night, I said, “Gene. What is it?”

DH: Were there women in the newsroom?

RF: There was one. Her name was Matilda Touhey, and she had the desk right next to me. The managing editor hated women.

DH: And the managing editor was . . . ?

RF: The managing editor was A.R. Nelson. He didn't hate women as such, but he thought that women just didn't belong in the newsroom.

DH: It wasn't a ladylike occupation.

RF: In fact, he moved the women's department to another floor so he wouldn't have to go by them. There's a wonderful story about Nelson. The *Gazette* had a very strong social page, women's section, and the publisher, Mr. [J.N.] Heiskell – a legendary figure – apparently he brought in this woman to be women's editor. She was a very prominent woman in the community, who had just been widowed and apparently had very little journalistic training, but he made her women's

editor. And she was, initially, just a complete disaster. There's this wonderful story. One Saturday night, along about midnight, the first edition of Sunday's paper had just come out, and the women's section was just completely wrong, wrong cut lines under pictures and all kinds of things out of whack. So Nelson trudged up the stairs to the third floor, and there was the women's editor – her name was Betty Fulkerson, at her desk crying. And she looked up, and she said, "Are you going to fire me, Mr. Nelson? Are you going to fire me?" And Nelson, a very soft spoken and very deliberate man, said, "No, Mrs. Fulkerson, I'm not going to fire you, not tonight. I'm going to wait for some cold, snowy Christmas Eve." Well, she, of course, rallied, and she became quite good. She was with the paper until she retired.

DH: Yes. She had some spunk if she didn't walk out the door at that point. What did they cover as women's news? Was it the typical social events?

RF: Yes. A lot of debutantes, and weddings were very big. The Sunday society page, they played the pictures big. There was a lot of society news, clubs, cotillions, that kind of thing.

DH: I'm guessing they would not have covered black women's weddings or social events.

RF: Not at that time, no.

DH: I guess that was covered by the black newspaper in town?

RF: Yes.

DH: I should be able to call it, but I can't. Daisy

RF: Oh, Daisy Bates. She was executive director of the NAACP.

DH: Right. But they had a newspaper.

RF: Yes. They did. And she and her husband, L.C. Bates, and I can't remember the name of that paper. There was also a black paper in North Little Rock, and they covered some of the same things I did. As a matter of fact, put me to shame on a couple of stories that I just dismissed. I remember one as an example. A young girl jumped off, committed suicide, jumped off a bridge into the river there in Little Rock and drowned, and I wrote two or three paragraphs about it the next day and didn't think much about it. And I saw this guy from the black paper hanging around the police station. Anyway, the next week – this was a weekly – this was the lead story, and the girl's name was something like Clarissa something or other. It said, "Clarissa," whatever, "commits suicide and the black community wonders why," and it carried this girl's life, all that happened to her. It was just a beautiful piece, just extremely well done, and I felt pretty ashamed of myself having kissed this off with a few paragraphs. Anyway, so, yes, they had a black community, a couple of black papers there in Little Rock at that time. Neither was particularly strong, didn't have a lot of circulation.

DH: So were there stories that the *Gazette* didn't carry that maybe would be, you know, news now that you all would not really have considered news then?

RF: The *Gazette* carried an awful a lot of hard news, a lot of government news. There weren't many soft, fuzzy features, like you see so often today, and so it's hard to say. They had a wonderful columnist, Charley Allbright, who did off-beat stuff

every day. He was followed in that job by Charles Portis, who was a novelist, and then William Whitworth was in that job. He went to New York to the *Herald Tribune* and then to the *New Yorker* magazine, and then he became editor of the *Atlantic*. I mean, he's just one of the great magazine editors in the country. So all of them were in that job. "Our Town" was the name of the column. But as far as features, little soft, fuzzy features, there weren't too many of those. Trend stories didn't – the kinds of things that we would sort of expect to see in a paper today, I don't recall there being that many of them, and there were a lot of social stories that didn't get printed. I mean, I never heard any reference, for example, to the lesbian or gay community.

DH: Oh, I'm sure.

RF: And a lot of church-related issues didn't get much coverage.

DH: That was private.

RF: Yes. That's right, but anything that happened in city hall or the federal building or the capitol building or the courthouse or the police station, it was going to get in the paper. They really covered that.

DH: The emphasis was really on what happened that day and getting the story out.

RF: Right.

DH: But you did mention that you had a Sunday column that would allow you a little more latitude about – were you a good columnist?

RF: Actually, I was nowhere near the best that they had on that. I mean, there was so much talent. To some extent, it didn't bother me that much because I had already

– I wasn't at the *Gazette* to stay. I knew even then that if I had any – that whatever abilities, and so forth, I had probably had as much to do with teaching as it did with anything else. I was not just paying my dues by getting my, what we journalism professors call it, media merit badge, where you go out and work on – not doing that at all, but I had known from the time I was in the army that I wanted, one of these days, to be a teacher. I was just trying to get as much good experience as I could have. And I left the *Gazette* because I thought I was beginning to repeat myself there, and I wanted another opportunity. I wanted to see if I could run a paper. But the *Gazette* had wonderful talent, writers like – and I've got a list of them here – Allbright and Portis. Patrick J. Owens was one of the great reporters. He became an editorial writer, in fact, chief editorial writer for *Newsday*, and he won national awards for his editorial writing. Let's see, I mentioned Ray Moseley, and those who weren't particularly strong writers were damn good reporters. Somebody like Ernie Valachovic probably was as savvy a government reporter as you could get. Jerol Garrison covered the federal building, and he was one of the most workman-like, thorough reporters I ever saw. Actually, you could make a very good case that the best writers on the whole paper were in the sports department. In fact, others, who were more deeply involved than I, can talk about this, but you could make a pretty good argument that Orville Henry, the sports editor, did much to save the *Gazette* from extinction. During the desegregation crisis, the governor demagogued the *Gazette* all over the place. Orval Faubus got reelected doing that, trashing the *Gazette*.

And people cancelled subscriptions. I don't know, fifteen, twenty thousand subscribers were lost. When you have a paper circulation of one hundred thousand, that's huge, and it's even more significant because that put the *Gazette* circulation slightly below that of the *Democrat*. When the competing paper gets just a little bit of edge, it has far more impact in terms of advertising revenue than just a few subscribers might suggest, so the *Gazette* was going through some lean times there. But then came football season, and nobody wrote about the Razorbacks like Orville Henry. And so people might curse the *Gazette*, but they'd go out and buy the damn thing just to find out what Orville was saying about the football team. And singlehandedly, I think – they had a good season. They had good seasons in the late fifties. And I think *Gazette* probably rode Orville's coattails.

DH: Let me stop this.

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

RF: There was the state desk. The state editor was a guy named Ken Parker, and his assistant was a guy named Bill Rutherford. They had correspondents, stringers, out in the state. Let me tell you an example of the atmosphere in those days. The state desk cost us a libel suit. A guy over in eastern Arkansas somehow or another got hold of the little distinctive envelopes that the stringers sent their stuff in, *Gazette* envelope, and there was a story, a legitimate story, about somebody being elected president of the Rotary Club. I believe it was in Wynne, Arkansas.

The story was legitimate. What was not legitimate was they found a picture of a black man and included it with the story and sent it in. The whole thing was a hoax. The state desk was always looking, well, all of us, we were looking for things that indicated some degree of harmony – and they ran the guy's picture and immediately were sued and the paper just settled, just paid it off right then, because it was considered inflammatory, in that part of the country, to refer to a white person as a Negro. That was libel *per se*. So there were various hoaxes. I remember we were very cautious about obituaries. We ran a lot of obituaries, every one that happened in Little Rock, and we didn't charge for them as some newspapers do today. But people were always trying to slip in a phony obituary, not always, but it happened several times. And the idea is to, you know, embarrass the paper, and late at night, I would get phone calls, whoever was on the desk – we had somebody on the desk usually until right at two o' clock in the morning. You know, one person who was in the copy desk was still there until the city edition was out. But late night phone calls, some had quite abusive attitudes toward the paper. I wasn't there for the very worst of it. I was in the army at that time.

DH: That would've preceded your tenure.

RF: Right. But there was a lot of lingering animosity.

DH: And I would think that would produce a real camaraderie among the people who worked there, a real galvanization of

RF: Well, in a way, it did, but much of it was just due to the fact you work strange

hours, and newspaper people sometimes find it hard to talk to anybody else. But at the paper were not so many crusaders at all. You didn't feel that way at all. In fact, looking at this list here, I know one reporter whom I really liked, and he was a very dear friend, a guy named Bill Lewis. Covered a lot of arts news, but he was a very good general assignment reporter. Bill Lewis was privately very opposed to integration procedures. He had come out of Mississippi, and he just thought that this was headed to nothing but trouble. We didn't ask each other how we felt about it, and we were trying to just report the damn news. I mean, I don't think any of us felt like we were martyrs or on a high horse or anything like that. One guy – well, there's a couple of stories I'll tell you about that. One was a guy that named Charlie Rixse. Have you ever heard that name? R-I-X-S-E.

DH: R-I-X-S-E.

RF: Charlie Rixse, damn good newsman. He was copy editor, also a terrific reporter. He left to join Bob McCord, whom we talked about earlier, in a new suburban paper McCord was starting called the *North Little Rock Times*. But, anyway, while Rixse was at the *Gazette*, he was one who was saying, "Damn it," – he was talking about the blacks – he said, "They're either people or they're not," and . . .

DH: Pretty simple.

RF: Yes. [Above us?] it was a far more complicated system than that, and I don't know anybody – I suspect that most of us felt like integration was the appropriate thing to do, but we sure as hell weren't carrying signs around or marching or

anything else. In fact, we sort of bent over backwards to try to be as fair as we could. There were several on the staff who had enormous respect, in a grudging sort of way, for Orval Faubus because Faubus, for all his country bumpkin ways, was a damn shrewd politician, and he took the *Gazette* and just beat us to death with it. I've seen Faubus in a press conference, and he would get five or six questions at once, and he would say, "Now, wait a minute, wait a minute." And then he would go and say, "Now, you asked this," and he'd answer. "You asked this," and he'd answer. I mean, the guy was a smart fellow, and his people were fairly sophisticated. And we knew that they were going to hammer us and so forth, but that was just part of the deal. I remember I was assigned for a while to cover this guy who was a blatant racist, a guy named Dale Alford, who was running for Congress, and I let slip into some of my copy some of his racist remarks. And Shelton brought the story back to me and pointed some things out, and he said – in effect, I don't remember the exact language – but he said, "We're not much interested in your views. You tell us what he said, and you tell us the news. People don't buy the paper to get your opinions on it." So it was a pretty sharp lesson: you don't slant the story even though you can't stand the son of a bitch. Don't write a story that, you know, reflects that. The paper was incredibly, to a degree I rarely see today, very fair.

DH: I think I almost misunderstood that. You said you let slip some of his remarks.

RF: Some of my impressions of his remarks.

DH: Some of your impressions. I got you.

RF: Yes. Yes. I didn't phrase that right.

DH: What was the terminology you used in those days? Did you use "Negro" with a capital "N"? Did you allow nigger in the newspaper? We would not publish that word, I don't believe.

RF: God knows, we heard it enough: "that nigger-loving *Gazette*." But it was "Negro" with a capital. Black was not used then. Black was a derogatory term at that point. You didn't talk about blacks or darkies, and nobody'd ever heard the term "African American." And much brighter people than I can comment upon this, but I think you could look at the sociology. The more educated, I think, would say "Negro." Those who were trying to be patronizing would say "nigra."

DH: With an "a."

RF: Yes. With an "a" on it. I mean, this is out of my depth, but that's just my impression from many years ago.

DH: Right. But when it comes to publishing, it would be "Negro" with a capital "N"?

RF: Right. Right. Yes.

DH: I wanted to go back to a couple of things. [tape stops] . . . McCord from the *Arkansas Traveler*.

RF: And we were in the same fraternity, too, Kappa Sigma. We were both [unintelligible] some of those things. I came up there, and we got to be very good friends. And he got me a summer job on the *Democrat* . . .

DH: Yes. You mentioned that. I meant to come back to that.

RF: . . . before I went into the army. He was magazine editor at the *Democrat* at the

time. Bob was one of the best newspapermen I ever saw. He was just absolutely first rate.

DH: What did you think of the *Democrat* then?

RF: Well, I had worked there, and at that time, we didn't think much of it. And I'll tell you why, not just because it was a competitor, but because it was more segregationist. It was very supportive of Orval Faubus. The *Democrat's* lead reporter, a guy named George Douthit, an older fellow, was referred to so often as Faubus's Boswell. When we would see him, we would refer to him as Boz, and he was just in the pocket. The *Democrat* sort of demagogued this whole thing. There's a tragedy, a sad part, of this, too, that may or may not have any bearing on what we're talking about. But the *Democrat* had a wonderful photographer, a guy named Will Counts. Will later taught. In fact, he and I taught together at Indiana University in Bloomington. He retired from there. He was considered, I guess, one of the finest photojournalism teachers in the country. Will was with the *Democrat* when the troops moved in to Central High School, and his pictures were absolutely the most spectacular, magnificent pictures. One of them showed the federal trucks, and there was this industrial development sign in the background promoting industry. And it said, "Who will develop Arkansas if its own citizens will not?" and then there are these federal trucks. Anyway, they were nominated for the Pulitzer, and they should have won. But they didn't, and the reason is because, I'm pretty clear – I'll never be convinced otherwise – Pulitzer Prize judges were not going to give a Pulitzer to a segregationist

newspaper that the *Democrat* was.

DH: So I thought you were going to say they wouldn't publish the pictures.

RF: Oh, no. They published the pictures. Hell, they were – and none of this was Will's fault, of course. But, anyway, the *Democrat* didn't have anybody on the staff who wouldn't have preferred to work at the *Gazette*. That's an arrogant thing to say, but the *Gazette* paid better. The *Gazette* was more respected. Maybe not through all elements of society, but it was just regarded as a better newspaper. More polished, it was more literate. It was just classier in every way. Now, this was at a time – the *Gazette* in later years apparently began to take itself a little too seriously and got sort of far removed, and the *Democrat* got better and got a new publisher, and, you know, so things change. But right now I'm talking about the late 1950s and the early 1960s. So, to answer your question, no, we didn't make much of the *Democrat*.

DH: I wanted to go back to – you touched on the state desk and who worked on the state desk and stringers – I was curious how much news you all covered out in the rest of the state. Obviously, you were a Little Rock-based paper, very clearly. I'm sure most of your news came out of Little Rock and North Little Rock because they had such an able reporter there, but did you all get out into the other parts of the state?

RF: I didn't, but the general assignment guys certainly did. I was sent out on some stories. Actually, I did far more traveling when I was on the *Democrat* because I was general assignment then and went out quite a bit, but the *Gazette* was home

delivered and, at that time, probably had a home delivery operation in virtually every town in the state. I mean, Little Rock, as you know, is in the center of the state, and [the *Gazette*] is what we referred to as one of the state newspapers, and so people all over Arkansas would read it. So, yes, they did get out in the state, but there was a very elaborate network of stringers. Ken Parker, the state editor, and Bill Rutherford would travel, go cover certain things, and if you were covering a candidate, for example, you'd go wherever the candidate went in the state. But at that time, there was so much news coming out of Little Rock that, by comparison, there just wasn't much happening in other places. I mean, if a mill would catch on fire in Warren, Arkansas, well, they'd have a stringer cover it, and they'd get some pictures. Photographers would go there sometimes and bring back pictures. We'd get the story from AP, or from a stringer.

DH: I just wondered what kind of story it would take to get you out in the state, and it was mainly politics, it sounds like, from what you just said.

RF: Yes. [I'm not sure how solid I – pose your question?]. If there were some kind of disaster, of course, but general run-of-the-mill stories, stringers would handle.

DH: And there was a bureau in North Little Rock. Where else were there bureaus? Is that it?

RF: That was the only one. But the stringers were almost always local editors. I mean, somebody's a weekly editor in, you know, Marked Tree and if something happens would make sure the *Gazette* was protected on the story. Ken Parker was very popular with the state press association, and so he had a huge mechanism for

making sure big stories got covered.

DH: And what other editors or desks were there? That's kind of where we were going.

The city desk, the state desk

RF: They had a business editor, a guy named Leland DuVall, who, I thought, did an incredibly smart job. He wrote about agriculture, and he wrote about business. He had more common sense than, I think, anybody I knew. And then there was another guy, a superb business writer, named John Gould Fletcher, but he had had a bunch of heart attacks, and so he'd work at home. He'd get on – I never saw how his copy got to the office, but, anyway, he was a wonderful writer with terrific business insights. I mean, he was covering business ahead of his time. Then we had a reporter in Washington, a man and wife, Les and Liz, but they worked for a number of papers, not just the *Gazette*. Carpenter, Les Carpenter and Liz Carpenter. Liz Carpenter, as a matter of fact, later became Lady Bird Johnson's press secretary. She was from Texas, and often when she sent in stories, her copy would come in by the mail usually, and she would tack on little notes, usually some risqué remark she heard in Washington or something. It was always a delight. Some of her stuff would end up on the bulletin board because it was so good. I don't remember any other bureaus. I'm sure they have them now, but they didn't have them . . .

DH: She covered life in Washington?

RF: Yes, but she covered for a number of papers, and it would be the Arkansas dimension to some stories. At that time, we had a very powerful senator, [J.

William] Fulbright, and he made a lot of news. And one of the congressmen, Wilbur Mills, was head of the Ways and Means Committee, and so on.

DH: But surely she would not be covering those stories. She would just be . . .

RF: She wouldn't cover them as such, but if there was an Arkansas dimension to some story, or an Arkansas angle, she would send it. And they would send in, I don't know, they'd send us probably a couple of stories a week, but they had clients in Texas, too, so they were kind of a bureau for a number of interests. Of course, in Arkansas, no one had heard of Bill Clinton at that point. The state always did have a fairly substantial congressional presence, and these guys were making some noise.

DH: I'm just curious about the role that women played in the newspaper. Obviously that's why I keep keying in on those kinds of things. So did you have other desks or teams?

RF: There was a Sunday desk, and a guy named Gene Fretz. Called it the Sunday Magazine, really wasn't a magazine, just another section. He was very highly thought of in the community in cultural circles. He didn't have much truck with the newsroom. Nice fellow, but we didn't see him much. We had to – After I'd been there for about, I don't know, a year or so, Ashmore left, and a guy named J.O. Powell became editor. He was a much lower profile figure. A very, very polite guy named Jerry Neil wrote many of the editorials, and he was probably more outspoken. He was probably more nearly liberal throughout than the rest of the – the paper itself was not. The editorial policy would not be considered

liberal today by any means, but it was fairly liberal for Arkansas at that time in the sense that it provided – certainly, the *Democrat* provided a pretty clear-cut choice. You could expect the two papers to be on opposite sides of many issues.

DH: No two-newspaper towns anymore. I wanted to go back to kind of the social life in the newsroom. You mentioned that late at night, you know, everyone was still around late at night. The copy desk would tend to socialize among themselves. Tell me a little bit about that. One thing I'm curious about: did people smoke and drink in the newsroom then?

RF: They smoked. Everybody smoked. Everybody. No one drank in the newsroom. They would come to the newsroom having drunk, of course, at times. As a matter of fact, there were a couple of copy editors, I think, that were pretty well liquored up a lot of evenings. There was a little press club right across the street, and sometimes we'd go over there for a beer after work.

DH: It was literally called the Press Club?

RF: Yes. Right.

DH: It was just a little bar?

RF: Yes. Little bar. Not very well attended, but it was nice. It was right across the street. Typically, if I were working late, [and getting] off after midnight – Portis and I shared an apartment together – and so sometimes, even though he'd work mostly days, he had strange hours, and sometimes he would come down here about the time I would get off. And then, on many occasions, he and Jim Bailey, the sports writer, and I would go down a couple of blocks to the Marion Hotel, a

coffee shop, and eat breakfast. And then we'd go home and Portis would read in his bedroom. I had my bedroom, and I'd go to sleep. And he'd read. Pretty soon you'd hear the birds singing outside, I mean, you know, life was sort of turned around.

DH: How did you all come to be roommates?

RF: He came to work for *The Traveler* when I was editor of it.

DH: This is the college paper.

RF: The college paper. He was older. When he got out of high school, he went into the marines. In fact, he saw some action in Korea, and so he enrolled in the University of Arkansas, I guess, as a freshman about the time I was a junior. So I got out before he did, but we just became friends after I graduated. Anyway, we ended up in Little Rock about the same time, so we lived together. There was third guy, Jack Meriwether, who later became [Little Rock] city manager. He had been a student at Arkansas when we were there. In fact, he's from Paragould. So Meriwether and Portis and I had a house, and Meriwether wanted to associate with a better class of people [laughter] and moved.

DH: He hightailed it?

RF: Yes. He was about to get married. So Portis and I had the house together, and then, not too long after that, I went up to Trumann to take over the . . .

DH: I was wondering whether most of you all were single.

RF: Oh, yes. Well, we were. Now . . .

DH: Because it's hard to keep those kinds of hours and have a family.

RF: It is. I'm looking over the list here. Now, everybody on it – well, Matilda never married . . . and Ray Moseley never got married. But Bill Lewis was very social. Roy Reed was very social. People would go over to their house for dinner periodically. Let's see. Valachovic was much older. If there's a guy who was really the most colorful out of the whole staff, it was a guy named Joe Wirges. Has anybody ever talked to you about him?

DH: Never heard that name. Spell it.

RF: W-I-R-G-E-S. He was a police reporter.

DH: Oh, they've always got great stories.

RF: Well, when I started at the *Gazette*, I was his relief two nights a week, so I prayed for his health because I knew if he died I'd get that job. It was a crummy job.

DH: Oh, yes.

RF: Wirges had bizarre ideas about news, and he didn't like to write. And so essentially what he was a leg man. I mean, he would get the stuff, and he was very well connected. I mean, every cop in Little Rock, every Fed, every deputy, every city policeman. They'd call him up. I mean, he was just – and he had great stuff, and then he would phone it in. And . . .

DH: To the city desk?

RF: Whoever was on the desk, and as a matter of fact, many a nights when I was on GA [General Assignment], I would be the one to get the stuff. And I remember one night Joe, who was also quite a photographer – I hadn't been at the paper long at all – Joe brought in these pictures, threw them down on the desk, said,

“What do you think about that?” And this man had caught another man with his wife, and so he had – the guy was asleep – taken an ax and chopped the man’s head off. And there was – so the police came. The guy’s head was sitting up in a chair. The rest of him, the body with all the stuff sticking out of it, was on the floor. It was the most grotesque thing, and he said, “What do you think about that?” And I said, “Joe, I don’t know,” and so I went to – this was when [Tom] Swint and I were good friends – and I carried the pictures back to him, and I think I still called him Mr. Swint at that time. And I said, “What about these pictures?” And he put his arm around me, and he said, “Son, the *Gazette* is a morning newspaper.” [unintelligible]. He said, “People read this paper with cereal and eggs. I don’t think they want to run into this.” So . . .

DH: Draw the line with the head sitting in the chair.

RF: And I had to tell Joe, and Joe made some comment about college boys and all that. But, anyway, Joe was – the guy was a great storyteller. I mean, he could tell stories, and he wrote – this is part legend down there, but Joe sold these stories to the police *Gazette*. They’d pay him for the stories. He found out they would pay him more if he had a picture. So he actually owned a little piece of land that had a little cabin, and so he’d just photograph that cabin and say this was where the notorious bad guy was. And he’d take a picture from another angle and use it in a different story. He did quite a few stories with pictures out of it. So he decided he’d done about as much as he could, so one day he set the place on fire, and while it was burning, he took pictures.

DH: An arson case, no doubt.

RF: But he was a legend down there. Foul-mouthed old guy. Great storyteller and police reporter, I don't know, it must have been twenty or thirty years.

DH: Yes. Some people are made for it. And you just mentioned that you covered cops two nights, so were you on the North Little Rock beat the whole time?

RF: No. This was before I went to North Little Rock. I was general assignment three days a week and then night police two times a week.

DH: Okay. I just need to be clear in my mind of the different assignments that you had. General assignment, North Little Rock . . .

RF: It should be emphasized in all of this that I was a very minor player. Let me tell you, I would read that paper in the morning or at night, and I'd say, "My God, these guys are good." The Pulitzers had been won when I got there, and the real stars, they are the ones who really had something to contribute to this. I was a very minor figure.

DH: And the stars you consider to be Ray Moseley, Roy Reed, you specifically mention as being stars.

RF: Well, there are others: Charlie Allbright, certainly Orville Henry, the sports editor, certainly Ashmore. Within the newsroom, you could argue that the most respected guy, respected journalist, was the guy who never left, and that was a guy named Bob Douglas. Well, he did leave eventually. He went up to Fayetteville and taught. But I mean where Moseley's going off to New York, and Portis and Pat Owens, they were going off. George Stroud went to the *Post*

Dispatch, and Swint went to Seattle. Portis went to New York and later – but Douglas stayed, and he was considered, in many ways, the shrewdest newsman in terms of being able to spot holes in a story and not asking the right questions. He was just a damn good newspaperman.

DH: I'm sorry, what was his position?

RF: Well, he was wire editor, telegraph editor. He later became managing editor, but Bob always perceived that he was always in the dog house there with management because, years before this, before I got there – long time before I got there – there had been a movement to organize the paper, the newspaper guild.

DH: The union. Yes.

RF: And Bob had been part of that, in fact, had been one of the ringleaders. As a matter of fact, he was apparently – this was before my time, but this is part of the folklore – Apparently, there had been a strike. The *Gazette* had gone on strike for a while, and Bob had been involved with the strike. And he thought, when the strike failed, that his future was ruined at the *Gazette*, and I think he always felt that he would always be regarded as someone not to be trusted.

[End of Tape 1, Side 2]

[Beginning of Tape 2, Side 1]

DH: But he was a good editor. He did end up somehow clearing his own name?

RF: Yes. I'll tell you a couple of times, Bob probably doesn't even remember this, but a couple of times, I felt really bruised when a story of mine had been edited.

And I always kept my little carbons, and so I would be whining up to Douglas about it, even though he didn't have anything to do with it. He would go off, and he'd say, "Now, let me show you why this was taken out and this was not." And, really, I mean he commanded enormous respect in the newsroom. He was that kind of guy. Also had great wit, too. He had the driest, most irreverent wit of anybody on the staff, I think.

DH: Anyone else that you care to . . . he was on the list of people. You were talking about Bob Douglas and what a great wit he had. Do you have any examples of that before I move on? I knew him, by the way, at the University of Arkansas.

RF: I can't think of any stories.

DH: Okay. I have a list here of people, and Roy Reed said, "Ask him about these people." Many of them you have mentioned, and some of the names . . .

RF: Roy was there before and after I was, so he . . .

DH: Some of these people he might be remembering wrong. Now he said, in addition to Charles Portis, there were two other Portises.

RF: They came along later. Portis had two brothers, and I knew them.

DH: Did you?

RF: He had a brother, and maybe one of them was a cousin. I'm not sure. I knew them, and I knew – he was from Hamburg, and I've been down there. His father was superintendent of schools. His mother was a teacher, and I knew others in the family or at least met them. But they came along later, so I didn't really . . .

DH: Okay. Didn't know them. It says Richard and Jonathan is what I wrote down.

RF: Richard called me once about something, but I never talked to him.

DH: Matilda Touhey, didn't you mention her?

RF: Yes. I'll talk about her. Yes. She's wonderful. Matilda, as I said, was the only woman on the staff, the news staff. Tiger Touhey, we called her. She was a . . .

DH: Tiger, because she was tough, or . . . ?

RF: Yes. Yes. Nelson just couldn't do without her and, as I said, didn't like women. She was a damn good reporter. She covered the state house for a long time, very well connected. I'm not sure how much of this to get into. Well, there was this wonderful newspaperman in Little Rock named Sam Harris. He had been city editor of the *Gazette* before. He had been city editor at the *Gazette* before [Bill] Shelton. Sam was very distinguished. He worked for the AP. He was sort of one of the elder statesmen of the [paper], a very, very highly respected guy. He went to work for Whit Stephens, who was a big financial – they had a huge empire. These guys make a lot of money. Sam was kind of his public relations man. Sam was married, all that, but he and Matilda were not – I mean, this . . .

DH: Oh, office romance. Tell me more. I love this stuff.

RF: Well, Sam wasn't in the office directly, or he had been, but he and Matilda were friends. And romance – you know, we're talking Catholics here. They don't get divorced and all that – But Sam and Matilda, I thought – Matilda sat right by me, and we were really good friends. And Matilda, I thought one of the really lovely stories. They were just great, great folks. Matilda was in her late forties at this point, and Sam was in his early sixties. [tape stops]

DH: If you can get back in the rhythm of this. If you can't, we'll just pick up another day, but you were telling me about Miss Touhey. And they were just delightful people, and they never got married. They just had this clandestine relationship, I guess. Martha Douglas, did you know that name?

RF: Yes. And when I've mentioned Gene Fretz, Martha – I didn't see her much because she had her own little office – She and Gene Fretz, with their Sunday or entertainment [section], they weren't in the main newsroom. And I didn't know her well at all, but she was a delightful person when I did see her, a great joy. She . . .

DH: Assumed they were together.

RF: Yes.

DH: Georgia Bailey, now that's a newspaper name. Don't know it? And I guess that's everybody. You had mentioned Mr. Heiskell in passing, but apparently he was quite the force.

RF: He was the owner, and he was in his – I mean, the stories about him were just legendary. Elegant, elegant old man, and he was the guy who made it possible for Ashmore to go on that [unintelligible] because he supported the *Gazette*, knowing full well that it was his money on the line. I mean, he owned the damn paper, and he was quite old. He was in his nineties at this point, or late eighties, Still came down to work every day, and he loved Little Rock. He was head of the History Commission and all that kind of thing. He loved Arkansas. But, anyway, J.N. Heiskell was the owner, and he had very interesting ideas about grammar and

usage. He insisted, for example, the *Gazette* at that time still spelled Tokyo T-O-K-I-O because that was the . . . and when there was a

DH: Because why?

RF: Well, that was the classic spelling in history. That's the way it was supposed to be spelled. And so I remember once there was a flood at some place, and it talked about evacuation. And he came toddling up to the newsroom, and he said, "Evacuation is a bowel movement." We never used that, and there were a few other quirks like that.

DH: I wonder if the newspaper still lives by them today. I'm sure not, though.

RF: Oh, and he read the obituaries religiously. He would purify it. I had what was called the crap desk for a while, and that [unintelligible].

DH: Because that was important news to read every day.

RF: Yes. And there was sort of a – he read the paper so carefully, but he only read the city edition. And so we had this horror that one day the old man was going to roll out and see the first edition, and he'd probably fire the whole newsroom. Love the man, and he's a guy who stood his ground. I mean, [unintelligible] everything else to say segregation is our way of life, but he didn't do that. So Ashmore will tell you that Mr. Heiskell was the wind beneath his wings, and he never [unintelligible]. Now, his son-in-law, Hugh Patterson, was the publisher at that time, and then he had a son named Carrick. I mean, the paper sort of went to hell finally.

DH: [Laughs] You're on the record, buddy.

RF: Down the generations and got increasingly arrogant, as I understand. I wasn't there, but I've got a very clear impression that trees die at the top. And this is what happened at this paper.

DH: You described him as kind of tottering into the newsroom. How did the people dress in the newsroom? That gave me a little bit of an image, and I was wondering what, made me wonder what he looked like. What did you all wear to work?

RF: Reporters all wore coats and ties. Nobody ever told us to, and I could have easily not worn one over in North Little Rock. But I felt like that this was a certain mark of respect.

DH: Professionally.

RF: Yes. And so reporters all wore coats and ties. The copy desk didn't. It didn't matter. They [stayed?] pretty casual. Nelson wore a starched, white shirt, brown suit, brown shoes every day. Like a preacher [unintelligible]. He had a great wit, too, but it was very dry. For some reason or other, Nelson would take me to dinner quite often. I guess it's just because about the time I'd come in from North Little Rock, it'd be about the time he got hungry. So, anyway, we would go to a little place called Breier's, which was a wonderful restaurant, about two blocks from the *Gazette*. And one evening we went in there, and, for some reason or other, the place was full of lawyers. And Nelson spoke up in an uncharacteristically loud voice, and he said, "My, God, look at all the lawyers. If there was a car wreck in front of this place, we'd be crushed by the stampede."

[Laughter] Then the lawyers cringed. But Nelson had a wonderful sense. He never said much to anybody, but he knew what all was going on. And several times, even though I was a very minor figure, very junior, very minor, he called me in, and he would say, “Ron, you’re looking a little tired. You need to get out of town for a while. Let’s see what I’ve got.” He opened this folder – and these things were called pay-offs. They were junkets – and he’d say, “You want to go to Hollywood? There’s a movie out there,” or, “What about the Mobil Gas economy run?” And this was a kind of – we didn’t have these purity codes back in those days. We didn’t take ourselves quite so seriously about taking gifts from . . .

DH: Purity code?

RF: Codes. Ethics codes, and you know, so . . .

DH: So the company would pay for these?

RF: Oh, sure. Junkets. They were just pure and simple, and they’d assume you’d write a story about it. This was one way Nelson tried to make your life a little more pleasant. If you could get out of town for two or three days and go someplace and come back with your batteries recharged, you were still making seventy-five dollars a week, and you were still working eight or twelve hours a day, but you felt better about it. So Nelson, in his own way, I think, at least to me – maybe it was just because I was young and very impressionable – but he was a – in his home. He would die if anybody heard him. He was a very caring sort of person, in a strange sort of way, because he was very reluctant to say anything to

anybody [unintelligible]. But I got along fine with him. Shelton kept his distance from most everybody. He was a very, very remote figure. The thing that struck me was not only were these people talented, but they were bright. They were some of the smartest people I ever saw in that newsroom.

DH: I wondered why they were gathered right there, right then. You ever thought about that?

RF: Well, I have, and part of it was due to the fact that, looking over this list, there are quite a few who went to the University of Arkansas. University of Arkansas was not to be confused with Harvard, but it had some pretty bright people there. And the best one or two or three a year would, it seemed like if they were interested in journalism at all, would go to work for the *Gazette*, and I think that was part of it. The *Gazette* was a good paper to work for.

DH: And were these native Arkansans for the most part?

RF: Well, let's see. I think Roy came from Missouri, but he had some Arkansas connections. But, anyway, there were deep ties to the state. Allbright had gone to the University of Arkansas, Portis, Jerol Garrison, I had, Matilda Touhey.

DH: Still referring to the list you made when we were trying to kind of reconstruct the staff in the newsroom.

RF: Yes. Reconstruct the staff.

DH: There is one other person Roy Reed said to ask you about. Jennifer Teeter went to South Carolina to study with you, a favorite at the U of A, taught photography. Do you know this person?

RF: Yes. Jennifer did her course work here. She did not finish her degree, and . . .

DH: I think he just wanted to know personally what happened.

RF: She is a very good photographer and taught here. She did not finish her degree and left [unintelligible] down at Columbia. I think she may be working as a – assistantship for three years . . .

DH: Just looking back through my notes to myself – although you had kind of downplayed your journalism ability, I wondered whether there were stories that you covered that were notable in any way, that you recall, or you thought you did particularly well or, you know, posterity – that’s what we’re looking for here.

RF: Well, I don’t think you’ll find very many of mine. I like to think they were competent, workman like and didn’t embarrass the paper and that sort of stuff. But there was not a lot of room at the top when I was there because the people there were too good, and there was no thought of ever trying to move into their positions. As I said, I was there to get as much experience as I could and then move, so I cherished my time there. I was a minor part of the whole operation. The big stories, the great decisions, I wasn’t a part of it.

DH: And when you left there, was there any to-do? Did you go out on any kind of a note?

RF: No. I left, I like to think, on pretty good terms with everybody because even when – I went off, not out of any frustration with the *Gazette* but just because I wanted a different kind of experience. I had never sold an ad. I had never met a payroll. I had never done any of the managerial kinds of things. In the back of

my mind, I said, "One of these days, I'd like to run a newspaper. I have one dimension here, but I don't have the rest of it." And I had grown up in a small town, so I looked forward to this small-town experience. But even when I was at Trumann, I would go back to Little Rock on weekends and talk about the paper, and, you know, I always felt welcome there. So I don't think I left any deep footprints there at all. On the other hand, I still have friends there, people who worked there when I did. So this was not the kind of all consuming involvement with the paper some of the others had. This was not my particular life's work, nor was I a very big part of it, but it was a hell of a ride while I was there.

DH: Good. Well, that's a nice place to end it, I think.

[End of Interview]