

Gazette Project

Interview with

Bill Lewis
Little Rock, Arkansas,
5 September 2000

Interviewer: Roy Reed

Roy Reed: This is Bill Lewis and Roy Reed in Little Rock on September 5, 2000. Do we have your permission to record this and turn it over to the University of Arkansas Oral History Center?

Bill Lewis: Yes, indeed.

RR: You were telling a story about Witt Stephens going down to his farm in Grant County. I wish you'd finish it.

BL: I went down to do a story about the farm. This was before any buildings had been built down there, but Witt loved the place, and he would go down and ride on his tractor and, I think, did a little farming down there. He was really a country boy at heart. We got into some kind of vehicle—I forget now what—and we were riding around the place. He pointed out this little rise. It was really not hardly even a hill, but there was a lake beyond it, which had been built, I think, and that was where his house was to be. I couldn't help but think about that other millionaire [Rockefeller] on Petit Jean. His hill was a little bit [laughter] higher! But Witt was just as ordinary as an old shoe, and I felt as comfortable around him as around anybody. He was just a great guy, I thought.

RR: Yes. I've got to tell you a Witt story, but I'm afraid I'll forget it. One day at

about six-thirty or seven o'clock—I got back to the office late then—[City Editor Bill] Shelton said, “We’ve heard a rumor that the Stephens brothers have bought Gus Blass department store.” That would have been a big story for Little Rock. Well, I started trying to call him and couldn’t get him on the phone, so I just got in the car and drove out to his house. I walked up to the front door, and he said, “Oh, come on in, come on in.” He offered me a Coke or something, and we sat down. He wanted to know what I had on my mind, and I told him. I said, “We’ve heard that you and your brother, Jack, have just bought out Gus Blass. Is that right?” And he got kind of a frown on his face as if he was trying to remember. [Laughter] He said, “Oh, well, I don’t think so.” He said, “Hold on a minute.” He reached for his telephone and called his brother, Jack, with a straight face, and said, “Jack, did we buy Gus Blass today?” [Laughter]

BL: That’s funny.

RR: “No? Well, I didn’t think so, but the *Gazette* man is here, and I just wanted to be sure.”

BL: [Laughs] Well, the other thing I remember about Witt was that he was a lot like Bill Bowen in this respect. I remember getting a letter from him once, complimenting me on the general output of my work. Nothing specific, you know. He didn’t have any story to refer to, just a very nice, complimentary letter.

RR: Yes. Well, let’s start at the beginning. Tell me where and when you were born and to whom.

BL: I was born September 8, 1929, in Lumberton—well, the country—south Mississippi.

It was between two little towns of 2,500 each, Lumberton and Purvis.

RR: Purvis?

BL: P-U-R-V-I-S. They were ten miles apart, and this little community called Talowah was midway between them. T-A-L-O-W-A-H.

RR: T-A-L . . .

BL: O-W-A-H. There may have been two dozen families living there, and there were two stores. My father was James D. Murphy, not Lewis. My mother, believe it or not, was a professional whistler. Her maiden name had been Swan, and so she was billed as the “Whistling Swan.”

RR: Oh, my!

BL: [Laughs] Just whistled around, as I’m told, at the local theaters like the Saenger [a movie theater in Hattisburg, Mississippi]. She died of pneumonia when I was three months old.

RR: Oh!

BL: And I was farmed out to my father’s sister and her husband, who were Lewises. I grew up with them. I never lived with my father.

RR: What was your mother’s full name?

BL: Alma. A-L-M-A Swan Murphy.

RR: So you grew up with your . . .?

BL: With the Lewises. I was never actually adopted. When I joined the army, I had to show them my birth certificate, which had Willard McKinnon Murphy on it. They didn’t care what name you went in under, as long as they could get you, at

that time. This was 1946. I had to wait all summer for my seventeenth birthday. I graduated from high school at Purvis at sixteen, so I went in the army as Willard McKinnon Lewis. I couldn't explain away the first two names. I went under another name in high school.

RR: McKinnon? M-C-K-I . . .

BL: N-N-O-N. So, when I got out of the army—I had enlisted for two years to get the G.I. Bill—it got a little bit complicated, so I went into a Chancery Court at Hattiesburg and had my name legally changed, but I was never adopted by the Lewises. By the way, the Lewis father died the day I got home from the army. He was my father for all practical or other purposes. And then, let me see . . .

RR: Are any of your parents still alive?

BL: No, they're all dead. I had two siblings, a sister and a brother, both older, and they're both dead. The sister died when I was about nine. She had complications of some kind from some surgery, if I remember. So, then, using the G.I. Bill, I went to college and graduated in three years at what was then Mississippi Southern College, now University of Southern Mississippi, with a degree in journalism. While I was there as a student, I worked half a day at the *Hattiesburg American*, which was the best experience a guy could find. And, let me see, I went from there to the *Clarion-Ledger* in Jackson. I was there six months. Keith Fuller, who later became the president or the general manager of the Associated Press [AP], was then the bureau chief of the AP in Jackson. He had seen my work in the *Clarion-Ledger*, and he had also heard about a job with the United

Press [UP] in New Orleans. He thought it was a good fit, so he told me about it. I was surprised that, here, an AP man was suggesting a UP job. So I applied and got the job. I was with UP [United Press] for four years. It was UP then, not UPI [United Press International]. I joined in October of 1952, and each October thereafter, I was moved, first to Baton Rouge, the first full-time man there with UP, then to Little Rock the next October, then to St. Louis the next October, and the next October they were going to send me to Chicago, and I didn't want to go that far. While at Little Rock, I had gotten acquainted with A. R. Nelson. I called and asked him if he had any openings, and he said, "Yes, but you'll have to take a pay cut." So I took a pay cut, came back here, and that was in October of 1956. I stayed at the *Gazette* for thirty-three years.

RR: Had you and Sue gotten married?

BL: We married while I was in St. Louis.

RR: Okay.

BL: I think I was still there five months after we married.

RR: I thought she was a Little Rock girl.

BL: Well, she's actually [from] Batesville, but she lived here. She grew up in Batesville, but she lived here. Ken and Nicky Johnson introduced us. He was a *Commercial-Appeal* guy here.

RR: Yes.

BL: On a blind date.

RR: It worked.

BL: It worked! Still there!

RR: You were at the *Gazette* in October of 1956?

BL: Yes, just before the [Little Rock desegregation] crisis.

RR: Yes. I had you on seniority. I didn't realize that. I went to work in June or July of 1956.

BL: Did you really? I would have sworn that I got there before you did.

RR: No, I thought I got there the same day or the same month.

BL: Yes.

RR: I guess I was thinking of George [Bentley].

BL: Well, George always told me that he had preceded me there, but I guess I can't argue with it when you hear it from the horse's mouth.

RR: You had, what, five years with the United Press?

BL: Four.

RR: Four?

BL: Yes. October 1952 to October 1956.

RR: You covered what kind of stories?

BL: You know, United Press was unlike the AP. It was not a cooperative. It was a for-profit organization, and so they cut everything to the bone. I guess they had to. Probably the most significant thing that I ever covered at the UP was when I found myself the only UP person in New Orleans. There was a four-man bureau down there, and all three of the others had taken off and left me there to do my tour. During that time, there was a plane crash in the Gulf, and I had to stay there

for twenty-four hours relaying messages to New York. They were doing the writing.

RR: From New Orleans?

BL: From New Orleans, yes, and I couldn't get anybody else because there was nobody else to come in.

RR: Twenty-four hours?

BL: Twenty-four hours! [Laughs] Another favorite story about that time sort of shows the competitiveness of the wire services, and it's still that way, I think, although I'm not sure that UPI is in the game anymore. No, I don't think it is. I was on duty one evening, and the Sugar Bowl people were just about to announce who was going to be the opposition team in the Sugar Bowl. They wanted to issue this press release at seven o'clock, seven p.m. We had a pretty good idea who it was, so the TTS operator in the office printed out a sports bulletin with this name and had it all set to go in case it turned out to be the team we were thinking of. I go to the Sugar Bowl office and get a janitor to let me in another office where there was a phone. I called the office and kept the phone line open. They announced it, I looked at it, ran in to the phone, and we beat the AP by thirty seconds. [Laughs]

RR: You know, people outside the news business don't understand why that's important, but it actually was.

BL: Well, they're on deadline every second somewhere in the world, and that's why. The emphasis was enormous. We had to do things like that. We had to be ready

every chance we could because UP was so much smaller and the competition was just fierce.

RR: Yes.

BL: The UP loved colorful leads and feature stories, and that sort of thing. I remember there was a strike at Jax Brewery. My lead was something like, “Nothing was working at the Jax Brewery except yeast,” and [laughs] they just loved it! [Laughs]

RR: Oh, yes!

BL: [Laughs] I didn’t have many of those.

RR: The reason I was especially curious about your work at United Press is because when you went to work at the *Gazette*, you very quickly established yourself as the fastest writer on the paper.

BL: I credit the wire service with that. You could not mess around and polish stories for a wire service. You just couldn’t do it.

RR: And, very likely, in a lot of cases, the stories end up reading better than they would if you fooled around with them a long time.

BL: I don’t know. I always thought I was not nearly as simple a writer as I would have liked. My sentences got complicated and long, and that was not the UP style at all. I think maybe when I went to the *Gazette*, it was kind of a freedom, you know, to do other things that I had not been able to do at the wire service. But, absolutely, the wire service training, I’m sure, is what accounts for the fact that I was pretty speedy at the office.

RR: We had a great city editor in Bill Shelton. Did you ever feel that he encouraged this sense of freedom in the *Gazette*?

BL: I can only say that I was very rarely changed. My copy almost always went in just as I wrote it. The one thing that he would not tolerate was a feature lead on a news story. And it happens in this paper [*Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*] every day I look at it. One day I looked at it and there were feature leads on every front-page story, all of which were news stories. I can't understand it. Every time I went to the office and Shelton wasn't there, I just wanted to turn around and leave. [Laughs]

RR: What do you mean?

BL: We had a great relationship. It was not a hostile relationship, and it wasn't a really friendly one, but we had a great working relationship. He accepted what I wrote. He had enough faith in me to accept on faith that what I wrote was accurate. When Jerry Jones was there, poor guy! He was so uncertain of himself that it was difficult for him to let anything go without asking a dozen questions or changing this, that, or the other. But I really, really appreciated Shelton. I think he was one of the best city editors in the country.

RR: Yes. I don't think there's any doubt about it, he was a genius at what he did.

BL: The first story I covered at the *Gazette* was a city club meeting, I believe, where—do you remember the Scottish guy, Jerry something-or-other, who was then the planning director for the city? He spoke at a civic club meeting, and this was just when LaHarpe Boulevard was in the planning stages, or maybe

construction was already underway, but it was very early in the game. The point of his speech was that LaHarpe Boulevard would be obsolete the first day it opened. It proved to be true, of course. Shelton didn't change the story, but he ran it. It got inside, and I found out later that it was because this was the first thing I had ever done [laughs], and he just wasn't quite [laughs] comfortable with me yet.

RR: Yes, yes. You went to work at what time, noon?

BL: It changed. I started out going to work at noon and worked until nine. Then, later, I came in at ten and worked until seven.

RR: What was a typical day's work?

BL: Shelton would almost always be there before anybody got there. Maybe Charlie Allbright would be there working. The modus operandi was that I would go in, and Shelton would send me a list of assignments for that day. There may be two, three, four, five, I guess, depending on how many he thought I could do. I just got to work setting up appointments and whatever was necessary to get those done. And, of course, they were supplemented by JNH's, which are "as time allows" things for Mr. Heiskell, and I got just about every dad-gum one of them, I think.

RR: No, you didn't. I got them all. [Laughter]

BL: No! No way! [Laughs] I remember once, during the Congo strife in Africa, Mr. Heiskell came out and said, "There's a Congo in Arkansas. Let's go down and see what it's all about." So I had to go down to Congo and make a story, I mean,

literally! He was always picking these things up at the Little Rock Club. He came in once and said, "There used to be ferry on Moro Bay." This was in the 1800s. That became a JNH. I had to do something on it, Lord knows what. I can't remember now. And another one was he had seen something on television about the vast number of conduits and pipes and subway things and so forth underground in New York. Well, he wanted a similar story on Little Rock, and you can imagine! And then there was the old town branch. There was a creek that ran under downtown that had long since been covered over. He was fascinated by that, for some reason or other. He was always suggesting stories about the old-time [friends]. I think he'd forget that he had suggested these before and somebody else would remind him. I admired that old man, though. He was just a perfect Southern gentleman.

RR: Did you spend much time with him?

BL: No, and I often wondered if he even knew who I was. I think he must have. I wrote the lead story in his hundredth birthday supplement. We ran a little tabloid supplement. It was a big surprise, and they said that if he had found out about it then, he'd have put his foot down. He would not have allowed it for financial reasons. And, as I recall, he was quite pleased with that piece. I didn't write his obit, though. I think Margaret Ross probably did that, if I remember.

RR: It's interesting. You said you're not sure that he knew who you were. I had the same feeling. It was not until I left the *Gazette* and had come back on *The New York Times* that he became aware of my name. [Laughs]

BL: Really? Well, I think we were just peons out there. We were just employees, and he didn't need to know our names. Now, I will tell you that when I was inducted into Sigma Delta Chi, he was also in that class. We were classmates in that little ritual. They were still using the old college thing where you lit candles in this darkened room and all that stuff.

RR: Yes.

BL: And, after it was all finished, he turned to me and said something like, "Well, hello, brother!" [Laughter]

RR: Yes. If you saw him walking across the newsroom or down the hall, you'd never guess that this man had a sense of humor.

BL: Oh, he had a wonderful sense of humor. I'm sure you've heard the story about Carrick's [Patterson] moustache. [Carrick was a grandson.]

RR: Yes.

BL: Carrick was at UCLA [University of California at Los Angeles] as a voice student.

RR: Yes.

BL: And he came home unexpectedly. Mr. Heiskell saw him in the hallway and asked him what he was doing there. Carrick explained that he was just home for a short holiday. He had a little stubble of a beard. Mr. Heiskell asked him what that was for, and Carrick said, "Well, I'm rehearsing for the lead role in 'Gianni Schicchi,'" a little one-act, comic opera. Mr. Heiskell looked at his beard and said, "Well, if it were a cotton crop, it would be a failure." [Laughter]

RR: So in a day's work, eight hours, you might cover half a dozen stories?

BL: Oh, half a dozen was probably conservative. I was a general assignment reporter, and that meant that I did a little bit of everything, as you well know. Another story that I remember from those very, very earliest days, and getting back to the Stephenses—Jack Stephens was chairman of—I believe it was the Democratic Party—at that time. I can't remember the specific reason. I think this had to do with his raising funds for the Democratic Party. I was sent over there to interview him, if that's what it was, and my memory is pretty hazy. He wound up conning me out of five dollars. [Laughs] I wrote, "This story cost me five bucks." You know, five bucks was a small fortune in that day! [Laughs] From one of the richest guys in the state.

RR: Speaking of money, you said to me or Norma [Reed] or somebody one day, you were telling me about the ways that washing machines broke.

BL: [Laughter] Oh, invariably! If we ever got any extra money, there was something that would take everything. But I guess you could look at it the other way: There was always money there to pay for it, whatever it was.

RR: I guess we ought to point out that you and I were across-the-street neighbors at that time.

BL: Right. And you sat behind me in the office for most of that time, didn't you?

RR: I think so, yes. But we didn't share a phone.

BL: No, no. We didn't.

RR: We shared a phone with somebody else.

BL: Right. Didn't have our own phones.

RR: I don't know if they ever did get around to giving a phone to every reporter.

BL: Well, you know, eventually, they did get rid of the old-fashioned switchboard that Mary Grace ran, and I think everybody got phones by then.

RR: By the way, Mary Grace—somebody told me just the other day that Grace was her surname. Does that sound right?

BL: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

RR: I always just assumed that that was her first name. [Laughs]

BL: No, no. [Laughs] Her last name was Grace.

RR: When did you start reviewing music, theater, that sort of thing?

BL: Gosh, that was—it was really early. I would say probably—I came there in 1956. It was probably, at least, by 1960. And the way it came about, the *Gazette* had always used this dear old man, Josef Rosenberg, who taught piano for many, many years. J-O-S-E-F Rosenberg. He just simply got so old that he called in one night and said, "I'm sorry, I can't go to this concert." Shelton asked around if anybody else would go [laughs]—and I very foolishly volunteered. I think the thing that sort of got me stuck in the job was when the Community Concert Association brought the Mantovani Orchestra to Little Rock.

RR: Mantovani, would you spell it?

BL: M-A-N-T-O-V-A-N-I. Mr. Rosenberg was one of these gentle creatures who could criticize people without their knowing it. He could write it in such a way that it didn't stir people up. Well, I didn't have that talent. So I was reviewing

this Mantovani concert, and I said in the review that I liked the Mantovani music. Actually, what Mantovani did was fly to New York from Europe with his own arrangements and pick up an orchestra there and start touring. It wasn't his own orchestra at all. But that didn't matter. I mean, any competent musician can play a score. It was that cascading sound that he brought along and made so popular. At that time, we didn't have a symphony orchestra here of our own, and I was lamenting the fact that the Community Concert [Association] had wasted our only opportunity to hear a real symphony orchestra by bringing this piece of popular junk, in effect. I didn't say that. This pop orchestra, in effect. I mean, it hit the fan! There were angry letters for two weeks afterwards—both pro and con, I hasten to add.

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[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2]

BL: And sometimes there would be three, four, or five concerts or programs a week to review. I think people were not used to anything ever being criticized here as being bad.

RR: What kind of a background in music do you have?

BL: Zilch. Absolutely none.

RR: But you listened to a lot of good music.

BL: To this day, I don't know one note from another. That's been a mystery to me all my life. I grew up in south Mississippi, and I can remember when we got our first radio. It was an old Atwater Kent. For some strange reason, I would listen to the

opera on Saturday and the symphony on Sunday—it's just an interest I had. My father could never understand where this came from. He didn't care for it. It was not his kind of music. It's just an interest that goes back to childhood. I've wondered, "Is this a genetic thing? Did I inherit something from my mother, the 'Whistling Swan'?" I don't know. I don't know where it came from, but by the time I was doing the *Gazette's* reviews, I had, I think, a fairly extensive knowledge of classical music. Nothing like a pro would have. I always made a distinction between criticism and reviews, and I'm probably the only one who makes this distinction, but I always thought that a critic was one who had the technical background. A reviewer was like any other member of the audience who went there and wrote his opinion about it.

RR: That's a good distinction.

BL: I don't know. I may be the only one who makes that distinction, but I never claimed to be an expert on anything.

RR: You had a good collection of classical music in your home. I remember being astonished whenever you gave me a big handful of records you'd gotten to review.

BL: Review copies. Yes. [Laughs]

RR: Tell how that came about.

BL: I had two goals at the *Gazette*, two really personal goals. One was to acquire a collection of classical records, a big library of classical records. That was one. The other was to travel. I never lost sight of either one of those goals, and I

pursued them and wound up realizing both of them. But, at that time, the record companies were just practically forcing stuff on you, and at one time I was getting these check-off sheets of the new releases each month from London, Columbia, all the major record companies, and I could check anything that I wanted, and they would send it to me for review purposes. I tried to write review columns about those things and succeeded fairly often. It was not a regular, weekly thing because I couldn't get the regular weekly one past Charlie . . .

RR: Davis.

BL: . . . Davis. But you had to send these in regularly for them to continue keeping you on the list. I wound up with several thousand of LPs.

RR: Do you have any idea how many?

BL: Well, at one time, I had something like seventy complete opera recordings. The LPs are in there now. Fifty of them would take up a space of about like this.

RR: About a foot on a shelf?

BL: Yes. I have two shelves, which are these two there, from that corner to the back, so I'd say probably two thousand.

RR: Didn't you tell me one time that you had to put some extra support under one room?

BL: I did, yes. It was a little heavy.

RR: That was this house?

BL: No, although this one, you can see it's down about a quarter of an inch.

RR: The floor?

BL: The floor is, yes. That's from all the weight. We've been here thirty-two years, so I don't think there's any danger of it collapsing.

RR: I think you still have a good turntable that plays LPs.

BL: Yes, I do. I had it reworked recently. Just as an aside, I'll tell you this interesting fact of music. Do you remember the Music Club?

RR: Yes.

BL: It's still going. We meet once a month. In fact, we're meeting Thursday night. The membership has changed because two have died, one or two have moved away or dropped out or whatever, and we've replaced them as that happens. There are now only seven members, but we still meet every month irregularly and have a formal program of classical music, plus a very good dinner, and we drink too much and get into some arguments sometimes, but it's the same group. It's been going for over forty-five years.

RR: The albums now, I suppose, are on CD?

BL: CDs and video discs and all that stuff. All the rest of them have these fancy systems—I'm the only non-doctor in the group, and it's always been that way.

RR: Yes. Who chooses the music?

BL: The host. Whatever he wants to play.

RR: You also happen to be a good cook, as I recall.

BL: Well, I had that reputation. I think mainly because every once in a while, I would write a food column. For example, I think I probably had the first pasta machine in Arkansas. We visited Schenectady, where Sue's sister's husband, her brother-

in-law, was a first-generation Italian. He had come over here at age twelve, and his family were fabulous cooks. I've had dinners there that would just actually amaze you with the variety and the numbers of dishes, and all the stuff was handmade. I mentioned one time that I would love to have a pasta machine, and, so, Americo di Cocco took me—A-M-E-R-I-C-O D-I C-O-C-O—he is now deceased, and his wife, Margaret, has moved back here—took me to this little Italian grocery, and they had pasta machines. I bought one, brought it home, and I don't think anybody even knew they existed at that time.

RR: Yes.

BL: And so I would write things like that, you know, how to make your own pasta. In fact, I gave a few demonstrations. Every once in a while there were things that I enjoyed writing just for the fun of it, and maybe sometimes Harriet Aldridge would need a fill-in, when she was going to the Food Writers' Conference or something, and I'd do a story for her. That continued off and on, but what I was going to say is that people would read that stuff, and they would jump to the conclusion that I was an expert because I had written a story. You know how people are about news stories. I guess not as much now as they used to be, but that made me an expert. Even to this day, I don't cook very much at all anymore, but I have the reputation. Why? I have no idea. [Laughs]

RR: [Laughs] Talk to me about Harriet Aldridge.

BL: Well, you know, the first time our paths crossed, in a sense, it was about probably six-thirty or seven in the morning. I was still in bed, half asleep, and I heard this

big boom. I got up and went to the back door, which was the side of the house that faced town. I saw sort of a pink puff of smoke in the clouds up there. I knew it wasn't a natural cloud. It looked like something that had just happened. I didn't know what it was, so I went back to bed, and the phone rang almost immediately. It was Shelton. He told me an airplane had exploded over Little Rock and said, "Get on it." So I spent all day covering that story and going from place to place. The wreckage fell in such a scattered area that it kept popping up everywhere. You'd think you'd gotten the main story and then there it would be some other place. There was some debris on Maryland Street, some out-oh, the house that Billy Sunday Clark's mother lived in, and all those. That story . . .

RR: The story being that the . . .

BL: That the plane had exploded over Little Rock, and the pilot of the plane was Harriet Aldridge's husband, Captain Herbert Aldridge. I worked on that all day. Shelton had Pat Owens to help me do some of the legwork. He contributed hardly anything. I wrote the whole story myself, and he got a byline along with mine. I mean, it really ticked me off [laughs] because I had covered that thing and I had written the whole story. Another thing in connection with that is one that I will never forget. There was one survivor, Lieutenant Smoak, S-M-O-A-K, and I forget his first name. He was at the old Baptist Hospital, and we went out there to see if we could interview him or find out what the situation was as far as he was concerned because he was the only survivor. We were in an anteroom to the room where he was, and one of the other reporters was John Robert Starr.

They came out and said, “Well, he is really, really badly burned,” and he was. He was burned all over his face and just everywhere. They said, “We really would rather you didn’t talk to him now. Come back sometime later, if you agree to that.” I said, “Fine.” John Robert said, “No way! We’re going to talk to him regardless.” So we went in and talked to him for maybe five minutes. But, you know, that was one of those instances where I thought there should have been a little humanity, you know? There should have been some consideration for the guy.

RR: Yes. This was a SAC plane from Little Rock Air Force Base, a bomber, I believe.

BL: It was a B-24, wasn’t it?

RR: Sounds right.

BL: I’m pretty sure it was a B-24.

RR: And it just exploded.

BL: No one knows why. I remember Smoak saying that the heat in the plane was intense, and he was burned very badly. When the plane broke apart, he said he felt this wonderful cool air. [Laughs]

RR: Yes. How many people were killed, do you remember?

BL: Four, I think.

RR: That sounds right. Anyway, Harriet was the widow of the pilot.

BL: Yes, right. And so, of course, she had to make a living.

RR: Did you talk to her about that?

BL: No. She came to [A. R.] Nelson and asked for a job, and he gave her one. I think

she was assistant to Millie Woods for quite a few years.

RR: Food editor.

BL: Yes, assistant food editor to Millie.

RR: What kind of woman was Harriet?

BL: Well, you know, I admired her a lot because she had two sons she had to raise alone. She was from a little town in south Texas, right on the border, the name of which is Eagle Pass. She spoke a little Spanish. She was surprisingly knowledgeable. I think she learned a lot about food on the job, and it was sort of on-the-job training because she had never worked for a newspaper before and had never done any serious writing, as far as I know.

RR: I wonder why she thought she could write?

BL: You know, I have no idea, but to think that she had the confidence in herself to come down [laughs] . . .

RR: Is she still alive?

BL: No, she died two or three years ago. She'd had cancer before, ten or twelve years, and fought it tooth and nail. I think that probably my interest in foods—well, I had done stuff for Millie, and Millie and I were good friends. She was a little bit of a difficult person to be friendly with, but I got to taking her to concerts and things, and we got along great. I would occasionally do a food thing for her, so that's sort of how I got in the food area. Then, when Millie died, or retired and later shot herself, Harriet took over, and we just naturally fell into a friendship. The only thing I found it hard to tolerate about Harriet was that she smoked these

long, brown cigarettes. We had cubicles next to each other, and I took a fan one day to blow the air with its smoke back to her side. She didn't appreciate it very much, but I probably smoked the equivalent of a pack a day down there of other people's used cigarette smoke.

RR: Yes. Well, Millie Woods was a heavy smoker.

BL: Oh, she smoked like a fiend, yes! Absolutely.

RR: That's what finally drove her to suicide, I believe.

BL: Well, interestingly, yes. She had always said that if she got to be so disabled that she couldn't handle it, she would kill herself. She kept a gun practically all the time. I wrote her obit, and I had tried to spare her the indignity of saying that she had shot herself. But the editors insisted on including that detail.

RR: What was Millie's story?

BL: Millie had been on the stage. She had been in South America performing. She claimed to speak French. She was an extraordinary person. I don't know how much of that to believe and how much of it not to, but I have never had any reason not to believe all of it. I never really got a lot of the details about Millie's background. She was married, of course. She had two daughters. I think her husband—I won't say that because I really don't know. I don't remember. She was, I think, a highly intellectual person. She knew a lot about many, many things, and I think she knew her foods as well as just about anybody I know. She talked often of what she would do if she were turned loose in the kitchen, but I've just said that she would probably have done very well. I still have recipes that she

gave me which I've used over the years. She had a distinct writing style that included not just the recipes and the records of foods, but sort of commentaries on life. She could write a food story that you would enjoy reading even if you weren't interested in foods.

RR: She was another example, I think, of a woman who needed to work.

BL: Oh, yes! She had two daughters to raise. Yes, she needed the money, no question about it.

RR: Then there was Betty Fulkerson, who was in the same situation.

BL: Another one, yes. She just had one daughter. Her husband was a prosecutor at the Nuremberg trials, and he died a very early death.

RR: Lawyer?

BL: Yes.

RR: She was the society editor.

BL: Oh, you know, it brings back so many memories. Nell Cotnam. Do you remember Nell?

RR: Miss Nell.

BL: She was a social arbiter here, really. I mean, if you could get to Miss Nell, you had it made! [Laughs] Her trademark was a green eye shade.

RR: Is it true that she called J. N. Heiskell "Ned?"

BL: I think so.

RR: She was the only person.

BL: The only person allowed to do so, but it was okay to call him Mr. J. N., I think.

Everybody knew that.

RR: But she was his social equal.

BL: Yes.

RR: And pretty close to his age, if I remember. Maybe he was a little younger.

BL: She must have been. She died earlier than he did.

RR: Well, everybody died before he did.

BL: Yes, right. In fact, what was that crack that he made about something-or-other, about Jesus . . .? He remembered it because Jesus was still alive? No, I'm not sure.

RR: Yes? [Laughs]

BL: There's a story, but I've forgotten what it is. Something about Jesus was still alive.

RR: I've heard of that.

BL: Oh, he went so back so far that he knew this because Jesus was still alive.

RR: What do you remember about Joe Wirges?

BL: Joe was one of the most unlikely newspapermen I think I've ever seen. Every time I think of Joe now, the image that pops into my mind is that of Willie Nelson. Joe couldn't write his way out of a paper sack. Many people have said that he could sit in the middle of the Arkansas River in a rowboat and get more crime news than anybody down at the jailhouse, you know? [Laughs] And that was true. He had contacts everywhere. He was a great guy and about as country as they come, or he gave that appearance, I should say. Not that he was, but he

talked a pretty country lingo, I think. He was an outstanding reporter. I think there's a difference between reportage and writing. There are good reporters and there are good writers, and I guess the combination is not only great, but—you know, in some of the metropolitan papers, the byline goes to the reporter and not the writer, isn't that correct?

RR: You know, I never worked in the newsroom in New York.

BL: Yes.

RR: And I'm not sure about that.

BL: I'm pretty sure that's true. The byline goes to whoever is giving you the facts.

RR: Yes. Well, Joe was a man of facts, no doubt.

BL: He was, and you could rely on him. He was absolutely reliable.

RR: You took a lot of stories from him on the phone.

BL: Oh, yes. Yes.

RR: How would it go?

BL: I don't think he ever really understood how a news story should have been made up. He'd start out telling you, and the lead may be five minutes later. I didn't really take that much stuff from Joe. Usually, he came in very late after I had left, and it might have been some major thing that was sort of ongoing, and he was working on it and would phone stuff in, and I'd put it together, but not very much of that. I don't remember really very much at all.

RR: Did you ever work the city desk late at night after he had come in and he'd sit down at the typewriter and type out a four- or five-paragraph story and hand it in?

BL: I never worked the city desk.

RR: I did that a few times, and his copy would have to be cleaned up.

BL: Completely, yes.

RR: But he had all the facts.

BL: Yes, he was good at it, and you could bet your bottom dollar on it.

RR: What was his phone manner like?

BL: Joe was always really nice to me. He was just a nice man, very accommodating.

He had been their peon before I came, and he never attempted to lord it over anybody else that I'm aware of. He was just a very nice, ordinary . . .

RR: Did he wear a hat?

BL: Not that I can remember.

RR: I can't either. You want to see him in a hat, but it doesn't quite . . .

BL: No. You're right. It looks like the hat would have been a natural thing, but I don't think he wore one, I really don't.

[End of Tape 1, Side 2]

[Beginning of Tape 2, Side 1]

BL: I think back then there was a sense of fraternity among people as diverse as Nell Cotnam and Joe Wirges. There's just something about being in that business and working for the *Gazette*. It was a real sense of community down there.

RR: What made the paper special?

BL: Well, one thing, I think, mainly it was a liberal paper in a conservative area, but I think it had a really special relationship with its readers who probably would hate

its guts, but would still read it. To this day, people still tell me how much they miss the *Gazette*, and, of course, that's something that Gannett never recognized, that there was any kind of special relationship between the paper and the people who read it, and I think that was part of the downfall.

RR: You were there for a while after Gannett . . .

BL: Two years, yes. Worst two years of my life.

RR: Yes, I'll bet.

BL: But, also, the *Gazette* had a hell of a lot of really, really good writers, and I'm not including myself in that bunch at all, but there were really some outstanding editorial writers, some outstanding news writers, columnists. When you go back and look at it now, I guess it probably doesn't look that good compared with what you have now, but I think it was just extremely well edited. It was absolutely thorough. I never had anybody down there ever tell me to keep a story short.

RR: Yes. Explain why that's important.

BL: Well, the *Gazette* always considered itself the newspaper of record, and I think that it genuinely wanted to include every fact that it could get if there was space—and there almost always was—so that a hundred years from now, people could read that story and know what was going on then. I think that probably originated with Mr. Heiskell, and he was all for that. It's bound to have been expensive because, in those days, I could write a hundred-inch story without batting an eye, and they'd use every bit of it, every word. I've had stories in there that ran over a hundred. Just as an aside, on several Sundays, I would go through

and clip all the stuff that I had written in that paper, not just the Saturday stuff. It accumulated over the week. I'd paste the clippings up into a string without the heads, without the photos, just the stuff that I had written. On three or four occasions, I had twenty-two column feet. [Laughs]

RR: Let's see, that's in a week?

BL: No, in one Sunday paper.

RR: In one Sunday paper?

BL: Yes. Eight bylines. [Laughs] Everything from review to politics, you know—Hugh [Patterson], I think, really appreciated my efforts down there because since then he's told me many times that I was the most versatile writer that they ever had. [Laughs] Never mind the fact that I didn't know what the hell I was talking about [laughter] when I was flubbing reviews of music and plays, and so on.

RR: What do you remember about [Harry] Ashmore?

BL: Well, Ashmore—I remember him as an all-around good guy, somebody that you certainly wouldn't want to shun if he was walking down the hallway meeting you. He was a guy you enjoyed being around. I thought he was authoritative. I thought he applied his authority with a very gentle hand. I didn't see that he was ever dictatorial. He didn't direct somebody to do a story a certain way or anything like that. I thought he knew his business. This was when he was the executive editor and not just writing editorials. He was the head man under Mr. Heiskell. Very smart, smart as he could be, and just a nice guy to be around.

RR: I'm sure you've heard it said, as others of us did, that in 1957 and 1958, Harry Ashmore dictated our stories, or told us how to write.

BL: Oh, I heard all that crap all the time, and it just never was true. The one thing that I think the *Gazette* did without exception was backing up its people. Do you remember the time during the STOP-CROSS [Stop This Outrageous Purge - Committee to Retain Our Segregated Schools] campaign, the STOP people were the good people and the CROSS people were the bad people? The CROSS people had a rally at MacArthur Park during the afternoon, and I was sent over there to cover it. As usual, when that conflict was going on, they had become great rival groups, and the crowd count was just really crucial. Every one of them wanted to turn out more people than the other. I went to this rally, and I counted the chairs and the rows of chairs, and then maybe a hundred for the standees—I don't think all the chairs were even occupied—and I said that the number attending was about a thousand, which was as close as I could get to it. When that figure showed up in the paper, all hell broke loose. I mean, they were up there raising Cain about, "Oh, we had five thousand people, blah, blah, blah." The next day—I think it was Gene Prescott who had made a sort of aerial shot that showed the entire group. They ran that photograph full page. "Count them yourself." [Laughs]

RR: Yes. Yes, they would do things like that.

BL: And, you know, that was really good for morale because you felt like you were backed up to the hilt.

RR: Tell about your part in covering the Central High crisis.

BL: I never got out there. I never went to Central High School during all this. [Jerry] Dhonau went. This was one place where I've always had a little bit of a bad feeling about the *Gazette*. I have no idea that it's true, but it seemed to me that I would have been the logical one to go out there, to Central, to help cover it. I've often wondered if my Mississippi background might have played a small role in my not being sent out there, but, as it turned out, I wound up covering hundreds, I guess, of meetings of both sides. Blacks, whites, the women's committee, the Amis Guthridge types, Wesley Pruden, Sr. I'm happy to say that I don't think any of them ever complained about my coverage. The only one I can remember was—what was her name? Loeb? The first name will come to me in a minute. Milton Loeb's wife—She was the Jewish member of this panel of American women that Sara Murphy got together. We found out that they were going to present their program at the school somewhere, and I went out there to cover it. The pro-desegregation group was brand new. We didn't know anything about it. Mimi. Mimi Loeb saw me there, and she just raised all kinds of stink. She didn't want anybody to be there because she was afraid it would be misreported, you know? Give a wrong slant, or something. Well, she lost, and I stayed and covered it, and we're great friends to this day. She has never complained to me about it, but I think that's the only time—now, there were many times when I would go to a hostile meeting at, say, the Marion Hotel ballroom, and the speaker would be someone like Amis Guthridge, whom I knew and liked personally and

he liked me. But he would say, “And there is that *Gazette* guy sitting down there.” And you really felt a little bit uncomfortable about this. You couldn’t tell when the riot psychology might take over. I was never physically assaulted, though.

RR: You covered a lot of the stuff by phone, as I remember.

BL: Yes.

RR: Including a very famous story. I remember there were guns and knives.

BL: Oh, yes! That was a front-page story. What happened was that [Governor Orval] Faubus said that he had gotten information that there had been a run on the gun shops, the pawn shops, and so forth, and that people were stocking up on weapons.

RR: And that’s why he had called out the National Guard?

BL: Yes, right. The most logical thing on earth for a city editor is to say, “Check it out. See if it’s true.” So Shelton gave that assignment to me, and I called as many pawn shops and gun shops as I could find, and not one of them said there had been a rush on anything. The next day, Faubus was asked about that, and he said, “Well, that was written by an agent for an integrationist newspaper.”

[Laughs]

RR: What were your personal views on the race issue at that time?

BL: You know, I grew up in an era and in a place where there were still separate drinking fountains. Blacks didn’t dare go to white theaters. There was absolute segregation, but in the community where I grew up, there was not a black. Now,

there were some in both Purvis and Lumberton, five miles from us in either direction. In fact, we would take our laundry down to the “nigger quarters,” which is what they were called everywhere universally, and leave it with a black woman. She would wash it, iron it, and we’d go down and pick it up a few days later. But I never really had any personal dealings with black people growing up. They just weren’t around. But I’d have to say that in those early years when I shook hands with a black, and I did many times as a reporter, I had—this feeling preceded that a long way—but I had the feeling that just being touched by a black meant I should go wash my hands. It’s really stupid to think that now, but that’s the way it was. It was just a totally different society. That changed really fast. I’m sure that by 1957 my attitude had changed completely. I thought nothing about shaking hands with black people. I covered them all the time. Do you remember Jeffrey Hawkins?

RR: Yes.

BL: Yes. I covered him any number of times. It just didn’t occur to me. The funny thing is, even though you get to know blacks on a person-to-person level, there are still vestiges of that kind of segregation because they don’t invite me to their house, and I don’t invite them to my house. I think there has only been one occasion when we had a black guest here [laughs]. That’s kind of funny [odd]. The church was sponsoring a traveling group of musicians, and they asked people to volunteer to keep these people in their houses overnight, and we volunteered to keep two of them. I had no idea who it was, and they didn’t know at the time.

One of them turned out to be this great big black guy. He couldn't have been nicer. He was just one of the nicest guys I've ever seen. We had a great time visiting.

RR: Well, with a musician, I mean . . .

BL: Yes!

RR: . . . he must have been right down your . . .

BL: Well, he was not my kind of music, but the white guy was at least as interesting. They are both just really interesting guys. They traveled a lot, and they had been abroad, and so forth.

RR: Do you remember how . . .?

BL: What I'm trying to say is that I had no compunction at all about that. It just didn't mean anything.

RR: But, you know, we all had to grow and change on that question.

BL: Oh, absolutely!

RR: When you were talking about growing up in south Mississippi, it was not all that altogether different from that in Hot Springs.

BL: No, I'm sure it wasn't!

RR: And in my own circumstances.

BL: Yes.

RR: Do you remember having any particular thoughts about the Supreme Court's school decision?

BL: Oh, I thought it was a terrible decision. At that time, I did, and I hated Harry

Truman when he left office. Now I think he was one of the greatest presidents we ever had! [Laughter]

RR: Yes. John Barrow Road. For years, I have been picking at this in my memory, trying to remember what happened on John Barrow Road. In the fall of 1957, one night there was a police report and some incident, and it was thought to be a race riot or a fight between some black and white kids, or some kind of violence. Something happened on John Barrow Road, and it kind of lingered in the public consciousness, off to one side, for days or weeks, and we never could find out what it was, or I don't remember. Does that ring a bell at all?

BL: No, absolutely none. But, you know, at that time we had all kinds of rumors floating around that things like that were happening, and I don't think we checked them out. I don't think most of them materialized. It could have been something, but I just don't remember the John Barrow thing.

RR: Yes.

BL: One thing—let me remind you of. I'm sure you remember it. All during this crisis, at the height of it, in fact, two guys from the California Wine Advisory Board came to town. [Laughter]

RR: Yes, I've got that story in my own files! [Laughter]

BL: Well, these were kind of oleaginous types, you know. Just kind of greasy. They rubbed me the wrong way. At any rate, they were having this wine dinner at the Marion, and I went to it. Not nearly as many people showed up as they were expecting, so I wound up with three bottles of wine in front of my plate. [Laughs]

And I drank most of them, I think. I went back to the office. [A.R.] Nelson, the managing editor, was there, and he knew that I had been assigned to this story. We had parquet flooring then. He said, "Let me see you walk that line." I said, "Go to hell!" [Laughter] But, oddly enough, I knew exactly what I was doing when I sat down to write, and they played that thing on the front page the next day, and everybody at the Capitol was flapping about it. I think it sort of helped to inject a little humor at that time, you know? [Laughs]

RR: I had forgotten the timing of it. It was in 1957?

BL: Yes, well, I figure it was 1957. I've got a copy of it in there. I think the date is on it. I'll check it.

RR: I can still see the rough outlines of the story. It started off perfectly sober. More or less straight news feature kind of lead. Along about the third paragraph, you're starting to [laughter] sound—and, by the end of the story, it was just garbled the way a drunk would sound [laughter], but a pretty good description along the way of what had happened at the wine dinner. [Laughs]

BL: Well, you know, *Playboy Magazine* ran that thing about ten years later without any explanation or anything else, but a comment which made it sound like it was written by an ass, you know? It was this stupid idiot. I wrote them a protest letter, but, of course, I never heard anything of it.

RR: Yes. [Laughs]

BL: And they sure didn't pay for it.

RR: We were talking about various people who worked at the paper. You mentioned

Pat Owens a while ago, Patrick J. Owens.

BL: Yes.

RR: What kind of a guy was Owens?

BL: He was not a favorite of mine, first of all. He must have had a great deal of talent because he wound up editing the *Long Island Newsday*, or something, didn't he? Writing editorials or something there?

RR: Yes, columnist.

BL: Right. Do you remember an instance that I think happened at your house on—where Ken and Nicki Johnson lived?

RR: Southwood Road?

BL: Southwood Road. I don't know how I wound up in this group, but we were at your house, and Owens picked up the phone and dialed Jim Johnson's number at some ungodly hour. I mean, it was really late. He cursed him! I've never heard a stream of profanity like that in my life, and then he hung up. I can't think of Pat Owens without thinking of that instance and how it sort of epitomized him to me. Now, I'm not a Jim Johnson fan by any means, but we always got along together, I thought, personally. He was nice to me and I was nice to him. He always seemed to be sort of relieved when I showed up to cover stuff for him, you know? But to do something like that even to somebody you hate is pretty trashy.

RR: Pat had a reputation for making middle-of-the-night phone calls.

BL: Oh, is that right? Well, it was the only one I was ever involved in, and I have to say I was very impressed with his profanity, his skill at profanity. He was good!

RR: [Laughs] He had come down here from Montana. Maybe they teach them . . .

BL: Well, could be. [Laughs] I think he was a competent news guy.

RR: What do you remember about Bob Douglas?

BL: I had gotten to know Bob when I was with United Press. He used to come up to the office which was on the third floor of the *Gazette*, with his pencil tapping it, like this [tapping sound can be heard on the table], you know, walking around, talk a little bit, and leave. So would [A. R.] Nelson. Nelson used to come up here all the time. That's where I got to know Nelson well enough to call him, and he knew me from that. Douglas was sort of the—I wouldn't say exactly benign eminence, but I don't really remember that he, himself, ever said anything to me in terms of how I should do my work or anything like that. He was just always around. I felt I worked for Shelton. He'd come around, and we were always friendly, and I'd see him at social things and that sort of thing, but insofar as thinking of him as my boss, I just never did do that, even though I knew he was.

RR: He was managing editor for quite a few years there.

BL: Yes, he was. He was news editor before that.

RR: Yes.

BL: I thought Bob Douglas very competent, but often I found it hard to understand just exactly what he did that contributed to the paper. I know that there had to be something maybe behind the scenes or whatever, and I have to say the same is true of Nelson. Now, I don't know what a managing editor does back there in his office, but when they come out, they just wander around and tap pencils on the

desks [laughter]. By the same token, I've never understood Gene Foreman's success. Gene was a great guy, but when you talked to him, you had the feeling that he was thinking about something fifty miles away or five hundred miles away. I wonder what it was about him that caused people like the *Philadelphia Inquirer* owners, or whoever, to see the competence that he had, and I don't doubt that he had it.

RR: I could suggest one thing in the case of the *Inquirer*. His boss, Gene Roberts, had that same quality. He'd be with you, but he wouldn't be.

BL: Wouldn't be, yes.

RR: And he had great powers of concentration, and I suspect Foreman had some of that. That might have been what appealed to Roberts.

BL: But, you know, he was the state editor at the *Gazette*. What does a state editor do? What is there about being state editor that makes you such a standout that people notice you? I've never understood it. I'm not saying that he didn't have it, whatever it was. He obviously did. I just never could recognize it myself. Maybe [that was] my fault.

RR: I don't know, I never really understood editors.

BL: They're not easy to understand.

RR: [Laughs] Do you remember Craig Palmer?

BL: Yes, vaguely. Tall, skinny guy.

RR: No.

BL: No? The wrong one? I may be thinking of Frank Whitefoot, who was tall and

skinny, and I saw his name recently somewhere.

RR: And what was that? I saw that, too.

BL: He's the editor of some . . .

RR: Craig was the young guy from, I think, Ohio, who had . . .

BL: Oh, yes. Yes. Craig Palmer. I don't remember enough about him to . . .

RR: He wrote the story about Jerry Screeton, or Mrs. Jerry Screeton, that got us sued for libel.

BL: It was libelous, yes. I do remember him.

RR: I don't remember . . .

BL: But that's all I remember about him. I really didn't deal with him very much.

RR: I think he ended up working for UPI in their Washington bureau.

BL: Oh.

RR: Last I heard—that's been twenty years ago.

BL: Yes.

RR: What was that newsroom like? What did it look like? What did it sound like?

BL: Oh, it was a jumble of papers stacked on desks. I did all of my work on an old Underwood [typewriter], which, I didn't realize, took so much physical effort until we got computers. I'd pound on that thing all day long and come home absolutely exhausted! I didn't realize that it was just the physical effort of pounding on those keys all day. It started out quietly. In the morning, when I got in, there were rarely ever more than two people there, Bill Shelton and [Charlie] Allbright. The sports department was separated from the newsroom in the back, I

remember. Unfortunately, Orville Henry had control of the air conditioning and he would nearly burn us all up out front because he could turn it off when it got too cool for him. But, then, as the day went on, it got noisier and noisier and more busy, and so forth, and when the Capitol crew came in, that's when it got to be fun to me. One of the things that I loved about newspapering was that it was so unpredictable. I mean, it was a new world every day. You go down there, and I usually had no idea what I'd be doing the next day except for those leftover things that I was still working on. That was just great fun. I really, really enjoyed that aspect of it, and, by the same token, as everybody else came in, it just seemed to liven the place up with everyone sharing stories and that sort of thing, tales about what went on that weren't news stories. It was a lot of fun.

RR: Yes, yes. I had forgotten about that late-afternoon gathering. Yes, a lot of that.

BL: Yes, sure, a whole lot of it. Yes.

RR: You were there, you say, two years after Gannett got the paper. Can you talk a little about those two years?

BL: Well, when they first bought the paper, I thought, "With those deep pockets, we're safe. The *Gazette* will never go under." And then things began to change, and it was obvious they were losing money hand over fist, and I finally came to the conclusion that even the oldest paper west of the Mississippi is not going to withstand this kind of loss, and I knew that the days were numbered. I told quite a few people that. I left under a real cloud, and it came about this way—and it sort of illustrates the attitude of the Gannett people, I think, in a sense—I went to

Sexton Lewis, my cardiologist, for a routine exam, and I'd, by then, had one bypass surgery. I said, "Sexton, I'm not normally a self-destructive person, but if I can't get out from down there, I'm going to stop taking my medication." He looked at me a minute, got a pencil out and a piece of paper and wrote a little note. I took it down to—who was the personnel director, the woman?

RR: Not Mary Nell?

BL: No, it was later. I can see her, but I can't come up with a name. I showed it to her and said, "I want to give two weeks' notice." She said, "You can't. You're out of here. That's it. You're gone." That was to be three months. I took a three-month period of disability.

RR: That's what the note was about?

BL: Yes, it was telling them that I had to get out of there.

[End of Tape 2, Side 1]

[Beginning of Tape 2, Side 2]

BL: What was his name?

RR: [Bergman?]

BL: No, the one who went to Detroit, I think, and got caught using a loaned Ford car? I'll think of it in a minute. [It was Walker Lundy.] At that time, we had a features editor, for whom I had no respect, and we didn't get along very all. I gave him a very curt little note saying that I was leaving and would not be back the next day, and I would be gone for a minimum of three months, and that I had attempted to give notice, but the—Barbara—what was Barbara's last name?—said I

couldn't do that.

RR: She, in effect, was firing you? Is that what . . . ?

BL: No, no! The note said, "This guy has to go on disability time right now, for three months."

RR: Yes.

BL: No, she didn't have anything to do with it. It was all strictly my own doing, you know?

RR: But her response, I'm not sure I . . .

BL: Well, her response was, "If the doctor says you're disabled, you go today."

RR: Oh, okay.

BL: You can't stretch it out, in other words.

RR: She was going along with that?

BL: Oh, yes. Absolutely. So, the features editor, Bill Paddack was a new, youngish guy.

RR: A Gannett guy?

BL: Well, Gannett had hired him, yes. His assistant was Kelley Bass. Do you know Kelley Bass?

RR: I'm not seeing . . .

BL: A real little jerk. At any rate, the features editor took this note of mine around to the managing editor, Walker Lundy. Well, Lundy spread it all over the place. "Look at what this guy is doing, walking out on us just like that!" I didn't have a choice. He didn't come to me. He didn't ask me anything about it. So I came

home and within a day or two, the publisher, Bill . . .

RR: Malone.

BL: Malone—thank you—called me and said, “Can you tell me what happened?” He said, “Let’s just go to lunch, and we’ll talk about it.” So he took me to the Little Rock Country Club. We sat there for two hours, and I explained everything exactly as it happened. And he said, “Well, I’ve been in this business long enough to know that there are two sides to every story, and that’s a perfectly satisfactory explanation for me.” He said, “Would you like a farewell party?” I said, “No, thank you.” The three months passed, but during that time Gannett had hired on a continuing basis a firm—I think it’s in Virginia or someplace— that did nothing but handle its disability cases. They submitted to Social Security Administration my disability claim. They told me at the time that ninety-eight percent of these were rejected on the first application, but that they persisted, and, in time, ninety-eight percent of their claims won approval. Mine went through the first time around, no trouble, and I’ve been retired ever since.

RR: So, the three-month aspect . . .

BL: Well, if that hadn’t happened, then I would have gone back to work.

RR: I see. Yes.

BL: But I’ve always thought it was the smartest thing I ever did.

RR: How old were you then?

BL: Well, I’ll be seventy-one on Friday, and I’ve been retired about twelve years, so I was fifty-eight, I think. Yes, fifty-eight.

RR: So what are your feelings now about Gannett?

BL: Based on the Gannett mismanagement of the *Gazette*, I sort of think of Gannett as the evil empire. Some of the *Gazette* people continued with them and are doing well, like Bob Stover, who is now the managing editor of a little paper in Melbourne, Florida. A bunch of them—well, David Petty was without a job for two years, but he finally wound up managing editor of the little paper that I worked for while I was in college, the *Hattiesburg American*, and then they promoted him to the *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*. It is ironic that I had worked for both of them in the past.

RR: Was he the publisher there?

BL: I think he was the publisher, yes.

RR: I gather your experience over the disability thing, it turned out well for you, didn't it?

BL: Best decision I ever made in my life.

RR: And Gannett was [handling] it?

BL: Well, it was reluctantly cooperative. They were cooperative in the sense that I think, routinely, all these cases like mine go to a law office in Virginia, where they attempt to win social security disability to make permanent the status. I probably could never have gone back there because the feelings were so high when I left.

RR: What had you been doing for the last few years before you retired?

BL: Well, at one time, when the *Gazette* decided to start its first free-standing features

section, I don't know whose idea it was, but it was a lousy one—to make me the editor of that section. They gave Paul Johnson, my assistant, and me this office on the third floor. We sat up there for several months doing absolutely nothing because they were messing around trying to make some decisions. I don't know why it took so long. I stayed with that when they finally got it going, and they moved us down to another area. That was when the *Gazette* was being totally remodeled, and the desks were so close together that you couldn't walk between them. Betty Fulkerson told me several times later that if it hadn't been for me, she would have left then. It was just under the worst possible conditions we were trying to work. I didn't like the job. I didn't like what I had to do. I had always preferred writing, and, finally, I told Douglas, "Let me go back to what I was doing before." By then, I was writing a book notes column, health notes column, travel notes column every week, doing all the reviews. Oh, I was book editor. I took care of the books. I didn't read many of them. A whole bunch of things like that. They gave me a cubicle in the features section. I was pretty much autonomous. I could pretty much do what I wanted to do during most of this time. But then things really turned sour when they got this—what's his name?—Kelley Bass in there. Kelley was practically fresh out of college, and he was throwing his weight around. He would come up with assignments for me, which I would ignore. It was just a total mess. I couldn't work there, and they couldn't work with me, and the stress level was just going through the ceiling, and so . . .

RR: And you'd already had bypass surgery?

BL: I'd had one then, yes.

RR: Well, looking back over the whole, what was it, thirty- . . .

BL: Three.

RR: Thirty-three years. How do you feel about the *Gazette* now?

BL: Up to the day it folded, I felt as much a part of it as I did my family. I really, really gave the *Gazette* my total loyalty. I don't think it always reciprocated in kind, even before Gannett. When Gannett took over, even though we thought the *Gazette* was saved, it became very clear very soon that things weren't like they used to be. In fact, I remember when the Gannett chairman—boy, am I losing these names!

RR: Al Neuharth?

BL: Neuharth—spoke to the staff meeting for the first time, he said, "Don't worry, we don't fix things that ain't broke." Well, it turned out that everything about the *Gazette* was broke, and we didn't realize it. The managing editor, his name I'm trying to remember.

RR: Hanchette?

BL: No. It's just on the tip of my tongue. He made the remark to somebody, and it got around, that he felt that television was the only unifying element in the country, and that the paper ought to look as much like television as it could, meaning ten-inch stories, lots of splashy makeup, color photos, and that sort of thing. Well, this was as contrary to the *Gazette* as anything could possibly have

been. Immediately, they started sitting down on us about writing at length. Well, this is something that the old *Gazette* encouraged all the time, something I had always done, so it was a real struggle. I remember one time I was doing restaurant reviews, one a week, and suddenly there appeared a second restaurant review column. I went to the managing editor, Walker Lundy, and said, “It’s hard enough for me to find one that hasn’t been reviewed already!”—It was not nearly as lively a restaurant season as there is now. He said, “Well, if I could afford it, I’d have four or five!”

RR: You were to do both of them?

BL: No, no. Somebody else was doing the other one. It was sort of a rival column, you know? I think it was called “Cheap Eats,” or something like that. It was supposed to have been another category, but . . .

RR: Yes.

BL: One thing that we haven’t talked about is my travel career.

RR: Oh, yes.

BL: As I said earlier, I sort of began working toward that very early. I’m not sure how exactly it did finally come about, but I think I probably got an invitation to go to India for about twelve days or two weeks, and I came back and wrote, I think, five really long pieces that ran in succeeding Sundays. I don’t know about the management, but I got more response from the travel stuff than almost anything else. I guess they may have been able to see that this might be a nice addition, so they began letting me—I started working on developing the trips. Of course, I

never paid for anything, and they were all free. It was freebie city as far as I was concerned, and most of them were all first class — airfare, hotels, restaurants, totally guided. We were always at the mercy of our guides. We didn't have much freedom to do what we really wanted.

RR: Did you have sponsors, typically?

BL: Oh, typically, the German government tourist agency, PAN-AM, all the other airlines. PAN-AM was the one that took us to Australia, and once we got there, the Australian government tourist agency, which is usually the one that would be involved, took over. But I wound up going to fifty countries, give or take one or two, including some of the little Caribbean island countries that are independent. I had this great, big world map, and I would stick a pin in each country I went to, and it finally got so obvious that [laughter] I decided it was time to take that down. [Laughs] Then, when Gannett came in, that accepting free trips was one of the no-no's. They did not allow anybody to accept anything free. I remember once going to cover some kind of meeting which started with a cocktail party. I shunned everything in accordance with Gannett's policy. I came back and told David Petty, "That was the last time I'm doing that. I'm going to go and have a drink, eat whatever, and to hell with it!" [Laughs] It was really, really awkward to do things like that.

RR: Oh, yes!

BL: Stupid.

RR: About fifty countries?

BL: Yes. I got to India, to Japan twice—in addition to the time I was there in the army. Australia, six countries in South America, Mexico several times, all countries of western Europe except, for some strange reason, Spain, Ireland, and Norway, and got to Leningrad, now St. Petersburg, once on a cruise ship.

RR: What did you say about McCord?

BL: He was always very much opposed to accepting freebies. I think several people on the *Gazette* were at that time. They did not, fortunately, include Carrick [Patterson] or Hugh [Patterson]. My rationale was that if small newspapers like the *Gazette* were not going to pay for this kind of travel and also not allow freebies, then they were going to wind up running the same news stories that appeared in *The New York Times* and about two or three other papers that can afford to pay for travel. I still feel that way. So I cannot tell you more emphatically that I cannot remember ever being influenced positively or negatively by the fact that I took the free stuff. It just didn't occur to me, and if there was anything negative about it, I always wrote it. I think I was as fair about that as I tried to be with everything else.

RR: Did you get any backlash from the sponsors when you'd write negatively about anything?

BL: I never did. Now, one or two times, I had heard from others that if an airline, say, flew you to Europe, they would like at least a mention in your column. I always did, anyway. I thought that was only fair, but it wasn't "What a marvelous flight this was."

RR: Yes.

BL: PAN-AM was good about these trips. I went to Australia and Austria, and several other places. The gal who ran their PR program was a Texas gal. When PAN-AM folded, she went into her own public relations business, and just made a killling. Huge, huge business. She knew everybody.

RR: Have you done much traveling since you retired?

BL: I have been to Europe twice, both times as a result of invitations from a gal who used to work for Lufthansa, who now has her own little agency, and she now represents Sabena. Each time we flew to Brussels, and on one of those trips, we took the Chunnel to London for the day and flew back to Brussels that night. Another time we went down to the Ardennes and stayed in a few chateaus down there. Oh, and the other one was a Danube cruise from Passau on the German-Austrian border to Budapest and back.

RR: Sounds like fun.

BL: It was a great trip. It really was! Sue went with me. It was a nice ship, the *Mozart*, but you can't do that now because in the war, they dropped some of the bridges in the river, and so it's messed it up completely, I think.

RR: Yes. Well, have we forgotten anything about anything?

BL: I can't think of it.

RR: I'm sure we'll both think of something later on.

BL: Yes, probably. Just give me a call. I'm kind of amazed how emotional I still get over stuff like that.

RR: The death of the paper was one of the worst days of my life.

BL: Oh, I'm sure! Well, I couldn't go down there. There was this big rally, and I just could not go down there. I think a lot of old *Gazette* hands did. It was just too traumatic.

RR: Well, Bill, let's wind it up. Thank you very much!

BL: Yes, indeed!

[Tape Stopped]

RR: We thought of something else about George Fisher and the Farkleberry Room at the—wherever it was.

BL: I think it was . . .

RR: One of the restaurants.

BL: Yes. No, it was a room in one of the high rises, I think.

RR: Not Jacques and Suzanne?

BL: No, no, but it may have been in that same building, down on the ground floor.

RR: Okay. Anyway . . .

BL: I'm not sure. What I was thinking, the caricature of McClellan that George Fisher did for this room is more revealing of McClellan's character than anything I've ever seen done by anybody about anybody.

RR: Yes.

BL: It shows him as a hypocritical SOB, which is my opinion of McClellan. We would never use anything from the *Democrat* in the *Gazette* without confirming every bit of it, and he was always giving the *Democrat* breaks on things. Well,

there was some story that the *Democrat* carried, and I was assigned the chore of confirming it with McClellan. He happened to be in town, so I went to his office. There were only two of us there. I had my tape recorder going. He gave me unshirted hell because the *Gazette* editorial page had opposed him on something and, to me, that just showed what a little person he was. I mean, I've never been talked to like that before or since, as if I were responsible for the *Gazette's* editorial policy.

RR: Yes.

BL: He just showed what a . . .

RR: He took it out on you?

BL: Yes, right. I mean, I was a nobody, and how he thought he could get back at the *Gazette* in some way by taking me on. I didn't like him before then, but after that, I just had no respect for him.

RR: Well, I look forward to seeing that caricature, and I'm glad you suggested that we get this.

BL: Another great one is Jim Johnson. It shows him with rebel wings on and a rebel banner, and he's standing—they are sort of [laughter]—just wonderful stuff.

You've seen those, haven't you?

RR: I don't think I've seen any of them!

BL: Well, I wish you could see them.

RR: Well, another time.

BL: Yes! [Laughs]

RR: Well, thanks for the memory.

[End of Interview]