

Gazette Project

Interview with

Roy Reed,
Little Rock, Arkansas,
31 May 2000

Interviewer: Harri Baker

Harri Baker: This is the continuation of the interview with Roy Reed. This is session number five. I am Harri Baker, and Roy and I are in my home in Little Rock, Arkansas. It is May 31st of the year 2000. We are dealing with the *Gazette* years in a kind of biographical way. As it was mentioned in the last interview, Roy made a list of names of people to remind him of things in the *Gazette* years. We are still going through that list. Roy, where are we in the list?

Roy Reed: Well, we are about half way through, and it occurs to me that one thing that ought to be said about this list of people, as I look at it again. A rather large number of people left the *Gazette* to go either to larger newspapers or to some other kind of career advancement. It is pretty interesting. I talked to you the other day about Bill Whitworth, Pat Crow, and Charles Portis. Whitworth went to the *New York Herald Tribune*, as did Portis. Pat Crow went to *The New York Times* and then to the *New Yorker*.

HB: You are going to include with the *Gazette* Project at the U of A Archives, a copy of Bob McCord's article on Arkansas newspaper men who went elsewhere, aren't you?

RR: I am indeed. If I had a piece of paper, I would write myself a note right now to make sure that I do it.

HB: For the benefit of future folks who are using this, this is reference to an article that Roy and I are both familiar with. Bob McCord of the *Gazette* and many other newspapers, one of the jewels of Arkansas journalists, within the last year, prepared a lengthy article. He worked hard at it, listing Arkansas newsmen and women --- they were mostly from central Arkansas --- who had gone on to considerable prominence in other newspapers and magazines.

RR: There seemed to be something about the *Gazette* that attracted people like that. I guess it prepared them in their skills to do that.

HB: It was impressive to be associated with the *Gazette* material in the U of A Fayetteville Archive Collection.

RR: That's right.

HB: And the *Gazette* oral history project.

RR: In my list here, with those folks that I just mentioned, there is Ken Danforth, who came to work at the *Gazette* as a very young man. He came from El Dorado and went to the University of Arkansas. He was editor of the *Arkansas Traveler*. After a while at the *Gazette*, he wrote novels, and he shifted around from one thing to another. He ended up working for years at *Time* magazine, all over the world as a correspondent. He went from there to *National Geographic*. He did other things and is now working as a freelance writer --- with both fiction and nonfiction --- in the Washington, D.C. area. He is kind of an authority on Yugoslavia, of all things.

Before the late war in Yugoslavia, he had made quite serious plans to retire to the Dalmatian Coast. He loved Dubrovnik. A fellow named Frank Peters was at the *Gazette* during the 60s and left to work in Rome at an English daily paper named the *Rome Daily American*. He ended up as the music critic for the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* where, I believe if my recollection is right, he won a Pulitzer Prize. Ray Moseley, who I think I might have mentioned, was one of the main reporters covering the Central High crisis in 1957. He left the *Gazette* to work for United Press, as it was then. He eventually wound up at the *Chicago Tribune*, where he still works as the chief European correspondent. [He retired in September 2001.] He also, after he left the *Gazette*, worked for a period of time at the same *Rome Daily American* where Frank Peters worked. I believe I am right that Jim Barden, a young man from the *Gazette*, worked there at the same time. All these were socially active young bachelors when we lived in Little Rock. They had a wonderful time. Barden, after his Rome years, ended up at *The New York Times*, first as an editor on the syndicated news service, which goes out to papers around the country. The last I heard, Jim was working as a copy editor on one of the copy desks. He was an Arkansas boy. Pat Owens, I think I have talked about him before, he was kind of a wild Irishman, who came down here from Montana because of Harry Ashmore, whose editorials and leadership won those Pulitzer prizes for Central High. Pat was a wonderful writer. He ended up at various times working at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*, where he was the executive editor and chief editorial writer. [Then he came] back to the *Gazette* as an editorial writer, then

[went] to the *Detroit Free-Press*, where he covered labor. More about that in a minute. He wound up his career at *Newsday* on Long Island as a columnist and an investigative reporter of great distinction. Unfortunately, he had a terrible disabling stroke about ten years ago and is back in Montana. [He died in 2002]. The Detroit thing at the time --- this is a story that is worth telling. It illustrates Owen's character. --- He was fond of drink and the ladies and was a regular at the Officer's Club, along with a lot of other young *Gazette* people. After he left the *Gazette*, he divorced his wife and had a succession of wives and girlfriends. He was married to the same woman twice, as I recall. He divorced her both times. Before he married her the first time --- this is a woman that he met in Detroit --- Before he married her the first time, she went off on a trip to Europe, a pleasure trip to Europe with her two children. She was divorced. Pat stayed home in Detroit, where the newspaper was promptly shut down by a strike, maybe the longest newspaper strike in history. I am not sure. This went on for months and months.

HB: About when was this?

RR: This was in the late 60s. I was living in Washington at the time and that figures into this story. He got tired of working for the strike paper and fooling around doing odd jobs. He up and went to Europe and joined his girlfriend. They toured Europe for the remainder of that strike. It went on for a long time. One day, here came a telegram for me from Owens, saying, "Please wire twenty dollars in care of American Express, Paris, to get me home." It turned out that he sent the same

message to, I believe, twenty friends back home. We all came through and got him home. We got him as far as Washington, where he needed --- The strike wasn't quite finished, but the end was in sight, and he needed to get back. He stayed with us for a couple of weeks while he was waiting to go back to work. My wife, Norma, dreaded it terribly because of his reputation. She has said many times since then that he was the best houseguest that we ever had. He was considerate and did everything right. He taught our son to shoot pool.

H.B: All those useful things.

RR: Yes, all those useful things.

H.B: You mentioned in passing the Officers' Club. What was that? Is that the Little Rock Air Force Base Officer's Club?

RR: No. Before that it had been called the Press Club. That gives you an idea of how the times were. It was a great favor to people like Bob Douglas, Charles Portis, serious drinking men. There are a lot of stories out of there.

HB: Was it downtown or somewhere near there?

RR: Originally across Third Street from the *Gazette*. Eventually, it moved over on Rock Street or Cumberland, or somewhere east. I need to ask some of these old *Gazette* hands about that. It is part of the history.

HB: I had heard of the Press Club. I just had not heard of it under that name.

RR: Ashmore used to go there a lot. He could hold his liquor and entertain visiting newsmen. One of the best stories that I ever heard about this club when it was across the street from the *Gazette* involved the Rev. Burt Cartwright, pastor of

Pulaski Heights Christian Church. In other contexts I have described Burt Cartwright as one of the few Christians that I have ever known. Truly a good man. He risked his job with his sermon on integration at Pulaski Heights Christian Church. Burt also did a lot of writing for the popular press. He wrote a lot for religious publications. He was a gifted reporter. He wrote for the *Reporter Magazine*, now dead, among others. One evening --- he told me this years later --- one evening he had some business at the *Gazette*. I think he must have been delivering a statement to be published, a statement on his behalf or one of the liberal organizations that he was involved in in Little Rock. He needed to see, I guess it was, Ashmore or one of the other editors. He was told that who he needed to see was across the street at the Officers' Club, or the Press Club. I don't remember which it was called. He went over there into this den of iniquity, full of tobacco smoke and drunks. The editor that he went to see was seated at the bar. There were a couple of empty stools. One of them, Bert got up on to talk. The other one he put his opened briefcase on. The briefcase contained this statement that he came to deliver. At the seat next to his briefcase was Attorney General Bruce Bennett, the great segregationist and would-be Governor. He, of course, knew who Bert was. Bert got up to leave and realized that somebody had lifted that envelope that contained his statement. The only suspect he ever could come up with was Bruce Bennett. [Laughter] He just supposed that Bruce was looking for information to tie him to the Communist Party or some such nonsense.

HB: This may be a question that just cannot be answered. Is there any explanation as to

why an unusually large number of *Gazette* writers went on to prominence elsewhere? Did the *Gazette* attract people of that caliber, or did they train people that well?

RR: It was both. During the 50s, the *Gazette* was already becoming known as a good place for young reporters and editors to work. Bob Douglas went to work there in the late 40s. He has told me that he was attracted there because of the quality of the paper and the quality of the editing. He knew about Harry Ashmore long before the Central High crisis. There were others, people who had gone on. I never got acquainted with them. One of them became editor of the *Denver Post*. I certainly was attracted to the paper because of its reputation and its quality and its liberal editorial page. I figured that would make it a congenial place to work. I wanted to work under Harry Ashmore. And then there were others. The paper provided the kind of training that we needed to make our way on any paper anywhere. Bill Shelton, the city editor, was one of the world's great teachers. He probably was not even aware of it. He almost never opened his mouth. He was a great silent man, but he had very exacting standards on both reporting and writing. If there was a gap in the story, he would make you go back and get the information. He would make you ask the right questions to make sure that you were fair in the way that you presented the story. What is most unusual nowadays, he was a good writing teacher. He understood the English language, and he was able to train young reporters in the niceties of the language. Obscure things like sequence of verb tense and false titles, which to this day remains a pet peeve of

mine. This practice of inserting five or six adjectives or nouns in front of a person's name, as if it were a title, without the article "the" or "a" in front of the whole thing. He disliked that kind of thing. He taught us how to write and how to report. He was not the only one. Bob Douglas was one of the best copy editors anywhere.

HB: Does this mean that somebody at the *Gazette* was good at picking editors and copy desk people?

RR: Well, I think so, yes. They had a large field to pick from. They always had a big pool of applicants. I have heard Douglas put a figure to it when he became managing editor in the 70s. At any one time he always had well over one hundred people, as I recall, that wanted to go to work there.

HB: Wanted to be reporters?

RR: Yes.

HB: Did they tend to choose editors from within?

RR: Yes. I am trying to think if I know of an exception there during my time there. I don't remember a single one.

HB: Harry Ashmore himself, perhaps.

RR: Yes. He had been picked because of his reputation as editor of an editorial page in South Carolina. Mr. Heiskell chose him. That was done only because Mr. Heiskell's own son had been killed in World War II. The son was designated heir and had shown considerable promise as a newspaperman before he went off to war.

HB: Well, back to your list of people.

RR: Yes, those were the main ones. There were some others, a young fellow named Craig Palmer. He left the *Gazette* and went to work at the United Press in Washington covering the Capitol, I think.

HB: We should mention that this Palmer is no kin to the Palmers Newspapers? [C.E.] Palmer.

RR: That's right, no kin. In fact, this Palmer was from Ohio. Incidentally, he was involved in one of the unfortunate episodes, a libel suit. The *Gazette* was sued for libel by Jerry Screeton, the old state senator from Hazen. It was over something that Craig had written where he had the wrong wife, the wrong name. I believe it was Jerry Screeton. I believe that I am right about this, that it involved Mrs. Screeton, that he mistakenly assumed that it was Jerry's wife and it was not. I may be wrong about the facts, but there was some such mix-up on the names. Jerry Screeton sued for libel for a hundred thousand dollars and was awarded one hundred thousand dollars. I would say that we all felt at the time that this was a political judgment because it was after Central High and it [the *Gazette*] was still odious on the minds of the people of eastern Arkansas. We felt that the paper was being punished for its editorial stand. There was another libel judgment against the *Gazette* by a man named Bob Troutt. I believe it was for the same amount of money. It was during the same period. The point of all this is that there were a lot of people who left the *Gazette* and went on to other things. I am pretty sure that the same practice in later years, the 1970s, the 1980s, you could probably find any

number of young people. In fact, I know a handful of those. In fact, I was kind of responsible for, at some point, for four or five young people from Oberlin College who ended up working in Arkansas. They started out at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*. Most of them went on to the *Gazette* and from there on to the *Minneapolis Star* and other places like that. It came about because the first one of those, a young man named Eric Black, was a friend of my daughter's at Oberlin. He was an acquaintance of my daughter. Cindy insists to this day that she really did not know him that well. He approached her one day. He knew somehow that her dad worked for *The New York Times*. He wanted a newspaper job and wondered if Cindy would intercede with her father and tell him how to get started. He had no studies in journalism, no newspaper background, but on Cindy's recommendation I helped him get a job at the *Pine Bluff Commercial*. He went there and turned out so well that Ed Freeman, owner of the paper, hired a whole succession of these young men and women. They became known as the Oberlin Mafia among themselves. Young men and women, and they have done very well for themselves.

HB: Oberlin and Pine Bluff are kind of an unusual connection.

RR: An unusual connection, but it worked. The only other people that I have or would really like to mention for a particular reason are some photographers, Pat Patterson, Rodney Dungan, Gene Prescott, Larry Obsitnik. You may remember Obsitnik. Obsitnik was the chief photographer. People called him Chief. He was one of the characters around town. He was the one who took the famous picture

[during the Central High crisis] of the billboard on the bridge, the Broadway bridge. I guess it was an AP&L ad saying, "If Arkansas' own people do not build Arkansas, who will?" I can't remember. --- it was something. I forget the language. --- His pictures are at the University of Arkansas, Special Collections. A lot of those *Gazette* photographs really hold up as works of photography. He was one of the best newspaper photographers in the United States, in my mind.

HB: How did the photographers work in those days? Did they choose their own assignments, did they have a chief photographer choose them, or did they go out and hunt themselves?

RR: My recollection is that the typical picture was taken because the city editor wanted it. Bill Shelton would say to Obsitnik, "We need a picture of such and such event." Obsitnik would then assign it out or take it himself. All of these were self-starters. They were all men in those days. They could react instantaneously, especially after they started using 35MM cameras with the larger Speed Graphics. A lot of pictures were initiated by the photographers themselves. Sometimes Obsitnik would see an absolutely beautiful setting somewhere. This was in the day before color film. He could still make a sunset beautiful or a pear tree in bloom. They were capable of all kinds of pictures, from a civic club election of officers, where you have the standard four guys in a suit standing in a row looking up and posing, to action pictures, sports pictures. Obsitnik was a fixture at all the sports events, so was Prescott, then Rodney Dungan. Rodney Dungan, it ought to be pointed out, took one of the other famous pictures from this

era. This picture of Orval Faubus carrying a pennant at Guion Ferry. He had been to make a speech up there or something. This was during the election season when he was running for re-election and being opposed by the *Gazette* editorial page every day. He was giving it to the *Gazette* every day as hard as he could. Here came this picture of Rodney's on page one. Faubus himself liked the picture so well that he used it in his campaign posters for years afterwards. It caused some of the *Gazette*'s friends to say, "Which side are you on?" They were overlooking the fact that this was news judgment and not editorial page judgment. In spite of what a lot of critics at the paper thought, the news columns were separate from the editorial columns. Very few editorial opinions seeped into the news column.

HB: The picture is also in your biography of Faubus.

RR: Yes, it is. I got Dungan to tell me about taking that picture. It is an interesting story within itself, a story about how newspaper photographers work. He and another *Gazette* photographer, named Willie Allen, and also a great photographer, went up there together. Now why, and maybe Willie was working somewhere else in town, they were friends. They went in the same car, and they had finished the routine dedication or whatever it was. They kind of beat it back to the car for the air conditioning because it was miserably hot. They were both sitting in the back seat of the car. --- Maybe they were in the front seat. --- They were sitting side by side with the windows rolled up. Rodney saw Faubus coming carrying that pennant just slung over his shoulder, hat pushed back on his head, with a grin on his face, and a cigarette. He was carrying the pennant in one hand and a cigarette

in the other. Rodney reacted instantly and as Faubus passed their car, he was on the wrong side for Rodney. He leaned across Willie Allen and shot the picture through the glass. He said that he had no idea that it would come out. He thought surely not --- because of the glass and the circumstances that it would not turn out to be perfect. Interestingly enough, in those days, the *Gazette* did not like to portray people smoking cigarettes in pictures. They brushed, air brushed that out, the cigarette was taken out before it ran in the *Gazette*. No, I think I have that wrong. I think it ran in the paper. Faubus had it air brushed out before he used it in his campaign. Anyway, along the way somewhere, it was taken out of the picture.

HB: Did the *Gazette* have any other little quirks like that? Like not publishing pictures of people with cigarettes?

RR: I am probably wrong about that. I am sure there were probably pictures of people with cigarettes. In fact, I am sure that I am wrong about that. There were quirks. Mr. Heiskell --- I am suddenly drawing a blank on what they were. The only quirk that I can come up with --- but it didn't have anything to do with the *Arkansas Gazette* --- was with the *Detroit Free Press*. My friend, Gene Roberts, the city editor, one day one of his photographers came in with this marvelous picture of a horse in an elevator in a hotel. Why there was a horse in a hotel elevator I guess is lost to history, but there he was. This *Free Press* photographer had a picture of him. Gene looked at it and laughed and then had to tell the photographer that they could not run it. He asked, "Why?" "Well," he said, "Ol' John Knight that owns

the paper has this thing about pictures of horses in the paper. He won't allow them." A few weeks after that, John Knight, who had a string of papers, was in Detroit, and Gene asked him about it. I guessed Gene had okayed the picture, but one of his higher editors said, "No, we can't do it." Gene asked Knight, "What is this about no pictures of horses in the paper?" The old man was stunned. He didn't know what Gene was talking about. Gene told him about this picture. Finally, Knight remembered that years before, he had an editor on one of his papers who ran a lot of pictures of race horses that belonged to Knight, thinking to curry favor with the boss. So finally Knight told him to stop it. So that led to a solid policy that you do not run pictures of horses.

HB: That is how policies are made. Back to *Gazette* photographers. Thinking about something that you mentioned. Is there just one photography staff for news and sports? The sports photographers are not separate?

RR: On big papers, I think they have a separate staff. On the *Gazette* they all did everything. There was not a separate staff.

HB: Not for photographers, the news and sports reporters were a separate group?

RR: Yes. There were a few others who ought to be mentioned. Leroy Donald became the state editor of the paper. I think you probably know Leroy in another context. He was always entertaining around the newsroom. Loved a party, Leroy did. I remember being at a *Gazette* party. --- The *Gazette* parties were wonderful in those days, very loose. — One of the *Gazette* parties [I remember was] after Leroy came to work as a very young man. It was at the same time that a song became very

popular, a song called, “In the Old Cotton Fields Back Home,” I think. Leroy learned the words to that thing and entertained us all evening at this particular party, singing that song. He was quite good at it. He went on for weeks afterwards. Every time you would see Leroy, chances were that he would be humming or singing that song. It was on his mind all the time. He grew up in El Dorado. I think the setting of the song was somewhere in north Louisiana or south Arkansas. Leroy also uncovered one of the great cultural events as state editor. I hope that I remember this right. I am pretty sure it was Leroy. He wrote the first story about hunkering. Do you remember the hunkering craze that swept at least Arkansas, maybe the whole country? He discovered that students at the University of Arkansas were into this hunkering thing. Being exactly just like it sounds like, it was just a whole group of boys sitting around on their haunches. Instead of standing or sitting, they would hunker.

HB: Kind of squat down.

RR: There were pictures of boys hunkering, men hunkering, and it was on page one of the *Gazette*. It added to the craze, of course. I guess he was still state editor when — who was the great escapee from the state penitentiary? Hildebrand, Joe Hildebrand, a young fellow from the northern regions of Pope County, way back up in the sticks. He got sent to the pen for stealing or something, something very minor. He decided that he didn’t want to stay, so he just walked off from there. He didn’t return from a furlough at Christmas. This happened more than once. The first time they came and got him and maybe the second time. Eventually, he

just stayed home, and they kind of forgot about him. Word got out; I guess in one of the little local papers, that Joe Hildebrand was supposed to be in the penitentiary and was not. They went for him, and he beat it out in the woods, and it got to be entertainment for the whole state for weeks. Joe Hildebrand for months eluded the authorities. Finally, there was so much pressure on the sheriff's office there to catch this guy that he had organized manhunts. It got to be a huge thing. They even wrote a song about him, "The Ballad of Joe Hildebrand." I think that was in *Life Magazine*. *Life Magazine* did a feature on Joe Hildebrand. Folks up there were keeping him in food and hiding him out. They finally found him. I believe he was under the floor of his girlfriend's house, a neighbor, a relative or something. They had a place under the floor where he would hide out. They found him and made him go back and spend some more time. Anyway --- John Robert Starr --- I don't think I really want to say anything about John Robert Starr because I didn't really know him that well. He was working for the AP as a reporter. I knew him in the casual way that reporters from around town knew each other. I had seen him around the Capitol and legislature. We called him Bob Starr. I got along with him okay. Later on, a long time after I left, he made a reputation as editor of the *Arkansas Democrat*. I understand that a lot of people did not have a lot of use for him. From what I have heard, I think I would share that opinion.

HB: We probably ought to insert here that as we are doing this interview, John Robert Starr died just a few weeks ago and prompted a wide range of views about him.

RR: An outpouring of eulogies, I guess, for his work at the paper, the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*. Then one or two columns in opposition, I think particularly of Bob Lancaster at the *Arkansas Times*. He thought he ought to tell the truth about this guy, that he was mean spirited, vindictive. The only personal experience that I ever had with John Robert, with Bob, was something that happened after I left *The New York Times* and went to teach journalism at the University. Somebody invited him up there to make a speech. I saw something of him during that visit. We were walking down the hall, and it was the first time we had seen each other in years. We were just passing the time of day. Suddenly, he fairly erupted at me, in what I took to be anger. I don't want to overstate this --- he was not fighting mad, yet he was something more than annoyed. It was over something that happened years before. There was a character in the Ozarks named Joe Weston, editor Weston. I'm sure you remember him. He became a controversial figure in the state's politics for awhile. He was a totally reckless editor of a weekly paper in Sharp County. He began to get in the news. He would hold press conferences in the State Capitol press office. He would denounce this or that political figure and say outrageous things. Eventually, somebody brought a criminal charge against him, a criminal libel, a very little known and little used device. Civil libel, you know, is the usual way of getting at a newspaper man. This was criminal libel. He was represented by Ted Boswell, the Saline County political figure of some substance, former candidate for governor, liberal. Ted took the view that criminal libel was unconstitutional because it was, I can't remember the legal term, to make a

statement on free speech. If somebody had a problem, they needed to sue in civil court, but to use the criminal laws to hush up a newspaper editor was wrong. He won that case in the Arkansas Supreme Court. They got the Arkansas law of criminal libel declared unconstitutional. Anyway, before all that came to a head, after editor Weston had become a well known figure in Arkansas, I came down from *The New York Times* to do a story, a feature story. I did a lighthearted feature about this colorful character. I thought I did a pretty fair job of capturing the flavor of his outrageousness, things that he would say about people and the enemies that he made. The tone of this was lighthearted. I refused to take it seriously. Well, Bob Starr during that same period was having to write about him at the Associated Press, and he took him very seriously. All these years later, Bob was annoyed with me and my story in which I had refused to take this menace to society with due seriousness. That would be about the next to last serious conversation I had with Bob.

HB: Interesting that he kept that in his mind for that long period of time.

RR: Yes. That about winds it up. I can't think of other people at the *Gazette*. I think I have talked about J. N. Heiskell and some of the others.

HB: You have, and we are about at the end of this tape here. Why don't we take a break here?

RR: This is a good idea.

[End of Tape 5 - Side A]

HB: This is a continuation of an interview with Roy Reed on May 31st. Let's get back

to you. You mentioned earlier that while you were working with the *Gazette*, you gave some serious thought to career paths. You said that you had considered becoming an editor. Can you describe the process you were going through in your mind or what you wanted to do for a living when you grew up?

RR: Yes, yes. That is the way to put it. We always want --- the mythology of the newspaper is that reporting is a young man's game. Now I am sure that they have amended that to add to a "young woman's game." I had a serious talk with Bob Douglas about what I should do with my life. At some point I got truly restless. I knew that I should not go on writing the same stories, covering the same events over and over, seeing the same people. The nature of news is different news. I needed a change, and I got a Nieman Fellowship. I don't know if I have described that or not.

HB: You have not. You rejected the idea of becoming an editor?

RR: Yes.

HB: Do you remember why?

RR: Yes, because my friend Bob Douglas told me that he did not think I had the temperament for it.

HB: Meaning to work with other people? Or to supervise other people?

RR: I think he was very gentle in the way that he put it, but I think that is what he meant by it probably. And looking back on it, I am sure that he was right. I was, and a lot of reporters share this kind of --- Well, how would you describe the disposition of a reporter?

HB: Well, one factor is that reporters almost always are working by themselves. Editors are almost working with somebody else.

RR: That's right. You've got it. You need to be good at administration. You need to have an eye for that kind of detail. You are responsible for everything that goes on under you. Reporters, a lot of the really good reporters that I have known, have been prima donnas, which, I guess, is another way of saying egomaniacs. They care very deeply about their writing. So much of their ego is invested in their words. They come to think of themselves as artists. We get carried away with the idea that we are writers and not simple craftsmen. Of course, some newspaper reporters become quite good at their writing. Red Smith, the great sports writer for the *New York Herald Tribune*, and Homer Bigart, on that same paper. There are some really fine writers that have worked on newspapers. And, of course, now and then there are some newspaper reporters who throw it all over to write the Great American Novel, as Charles Portis did. Tom Wolfe, in one of his books, marveled at the fact that Portis quit the most coveted job in newspapers, London bureau chief of *New York Herald Tribune*, to go home to a shack in Arkansas to write novels. Just incidentally, he became very famous for writing novels. So there is all of that working in the typical reporter. Now and then, you find a real journeyman, workman, who is satisfied to just tell the news day after day. I am thinking of George Bentley, who covered the Pulaski County Courthouse for a generation, hell, two generations now, I imagine. He did it superbly. He knew every nook and cranny of the courthouse himself and all the characters who were

in the place. But there are these other reporters who get restless. I was among those. I wanted something else. I had applied for a Nieman Fellowship at Harvard University. I was rejected.

HB: Let me say this . . . the application process should have been about 1963.

RR: The first time that I was rejected was in 1962. I came back the next year and applied again on the recommendation of a number of people, including Harry Ashmore. He had written a letter of recommendation the first time. He wrote a rather indignant letter of recommendation the second time. He demanded to know why they didn't take his recommendation. In those days the Nieman Fellowship had a rough kind of affirmative action going. This was before the days of affirmative action applied to racial minorities. Back then, the folks at Harvard thought they were being quite tolerant and progressive if they got some white Southerners up there to civilize them and to make an attempt to educate them. I was one of those. There were always about three Southerners in every year's group. In fact, I am pretty well convinced that there was a quota.

HB: You may also be underestimating your qualifications. It is possible there was a white Southerner in the group.

RR: I moved my family up to Cambridge for a year. That was one of the greatest experiences of all of our lives.

HB: Did that bother your family? How old were your kids then?

RR: The kids were about eight and ten. They went to Aggassiz School. They learned to ice skate and enjoyed themselves thoroughly.

HB: It was named for Louis Aggassiz.

RR: Louis Aggassiz. Norma sat in on some courses, auditing courses. She enjoyed it thoroughly. I enjoyed it. Of course, the fellows can go anywhere in Harvard they want to go. I sat in on some law school lectures. I liked to shop around. I remember one --- Bailyn. What was Bailyn's first name?

HB: Oh, the historian on the Civil War, or the historian on the American Revolution. I want to say Bill Bailyn, but I will look it up. [Bernard Bailyn] I don't think that was it.

RR: Bailyn, I was in his class one day. I was just wide-eyed to hear his description of the battle of Boston. He turned around to the window and pointed out and said, "Washington's army was down here on Mass. Avenue, and when he got to the ice cream shop," --- What is the name of the ice cream shop? I forget it. Right about the ice cream shop, and he called the ice cream shop, "such and such happened." And suddenly American history came alive in a way that I have never heard it before. The whole year was that way. Those teachers, I don't think I had a single bad one. Louis Hartz did a lecture on political philosophy. His book *Liberal Democracy* [Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* . . . , 1955] is still on my shelf. Tom Pettigrew, who has written extensively on racial prejudice. The great Shakespeare sonnets guy, Morrison, Theodore Morrison. I can't remember a moment in any of those classes that was dull.

HB: Did the fellows themselves get together and share experiences?

RR: Yes. There were twelve of us from the United States and a handful from abroad,

Asia, Europe, South Africa. One of my favorites was a man from South Africa. He got called home early because he felt that his life was in danger. He was a liberal and had no use for apartheid. He found out that government's secret police engaged our CIA to have him followed everywhere he went in the United States. He felt so threatened that he cut his time short.

HB: In fact, we have not specified. This is the year of 1964 and 1965?

RR: No, 1963 and 1964. It was the year that John Kennedy was killed. That was one of the dreadful moments. I remembered walking in Harvard Square after the news. The students, the personal anguish that the kids felt, they were weeping openly out on the sidewalk. The year itself was a good year because of the association with the other Nieman fellows. They were from all over. Some of them, wonderful human beings, some of the most wonderful reporters and editors. There was a guy from *Time* magazine, one from the *Washington Post*, from all over. We would get together about once a week for wine and cheese and once a month for a sit-down dinner. On each occasion there would be a visiting speaker. On the wine and cheese things, usually it would be a Harvard professor. John Kenneth Galbraith came to a dinner. James Reston was one of our visiting lecturers. One of the advantages of the Nieman Fellowship program was that it had enough prestige that you could demand the presence of the leading figures in journalism. In some cases outside of journalism. All of it was so enriching.

HB: You picked a special study field in Southern populism and Southern socialism?

RR: Yes, that is right. Because I had in mind to write a book about Orval Faubus, a

biography of Orval Faubus. At that time we had heard the rumors that he had been raised in a socialist family, that his father was a socialist. We had not been able to pin that down.

HB: Oh really? His father was writing letters to the *Gazette* under a different name. I thought it was fairly common knowledge at the time.

RR: It was not as common as --- He wrote his letters to the editor, as you said, under the name of Jimmy Higgins. This turned out to be his socialist handle if you wanted to hide your identity. Harry Ashmore knew the identity of Jimmy Higgins.

HB: I didn't realize that.

RR: I remember a conversation with Faubus. It was either during my last months at the *Gazette* or on an early trip back after I had gone to work at the *Times*. I was out to the Governor's mansion with Ernie Dumas, at some kind of a party that he had thrown for the press every year. I guess I must have been working for the *Gazette*. I am sure that I was. Ernie and I wanted him to tell us about his father's socialism. He would edge right up to it and then would shut it off. He did everything but say, "Yes, I will confirm it." He would not. Ernie and I came away, and both of us had made extensive notes about the conversation after we got home. I still have those notes somewhere. In fact, I referred to them in the book that I did about Orval Faubus. He was coy about it because he genuinely felt that if he ever ran for office again, which he did, that it might be the kind of thing that might be drawn upon. He remembered the Commonwealth [College] . . .

H.B: I was fixing to say, after the Commonwealth College episode during his first election . . .

RR: Yes, he still felt burnt on that. I should --- this would be a good place to say it. After I eventually went to work interviewing him for the book, much, much, later in the 1980s, he was no longer coy about this. In fact, he opened up his file and showed me his father's Socialist Party card, the correspondence, everything. By then, it had all come out before. That was why I wanted to study the South.

H.B: It is also worth mentioning in those years, Arkansas and the South were full of rural homegrown socialists, often in groups of one.

RR: As I discovered when I started this research at Harvard, populism and socialism --- because at that time, I had Orval figured as a populist, akin to some of the turn of the turn of the century populists.

HB: Populism for white folks only?

RR: Yes, and there were brief interludes of integrated populists. Tom Watson, who is an unfortunate example. I wanted to look into both of these with an eye towards someday writing a biography of Orval Faubus mainly because I was interested in the subject. That was kind of my specialty while I was there [at Harvard]. I kept those notes, luckily. I filled notebooks at the library. I hung onto those. Even though I did not come home and write the biography as Pat Owens and I had talked about doing, it came in handy.

HB: Did you talk about doing it jointly?

RR: Yes.

HB: Do Nieman fellows have to write a paper or something like that?

RR: Yes, you are supposed to turn it in at the end of the year. I never turned mine in.

HB: What was it on?

RR: I still owe them a paper and they have not sent me a dun. I think I eventually said something to Louie Lyons, the curator, about it. He said to just let it go.

HB: I have a feeling that you are not the only Nieman fellow that did not turn it in.

RR: I did everything except for the writing.

HB: Do Nieman fellows also spend that year job hunting?

RR: No, let me put it this way. One of the requirements of the fellowship is that you go back to your paper or TV station or wherever you came from. You are expected to stay there for a year or so. They understand, of course, that this opens up the world to you. I came back and stayed six months, just about six months. I went to work for *The New York Times*. I discovered when I got back that the restlessness that I thought to cure was worse than ever. The world had been opened up to us.

HB: It was a pretty exciting time during 1963, 1964, and 1965.

RR: The civil rights movement was going strong out there. I desperately wanted to cover that. There was not much of it in Arkansas. A little bit. I remember a trip to Pine Bluff. There would be a little surge of interest, but it wasn't much. Later on after I left, there was a fair amount. The main part was in Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, and Louisiana. I longed to be there. I don't know if I have told you this story or not about what brought it to a head at the *Gazette* with me and Shelton. I need to tell this story. I am not at all proud of my part in it. I had

been back from Cambridge a few weeks and discovered that although there was a political campaign going on in the state, I was not assigned to cover any of it. All of these assignments were made before I got back, rationally enough. I guess I resented being left out.

HB: This is would be the summer of 1964, with the primaries going on?

RR: Yes. I missed out on those. I must have covered part of it because I find in my notes I have some stuff from Faubus. I covered only a limited amount of the Faubus/Rockefeller campaign. Somewhere --- it must have been that summer or late summer or early fall --- I got interested in the political situation and the economic situation in Mississippi County. This was at a time when the Delta was trying to move away from a solely agricultural-based industry. They were trying to lure some shirt-making factories and that sort of thing in the Delta, to take up the slack of people who had been left without work on the farms. Mississippi County was a pretty good example. They had some people up there in politics and businesses that were very prominent men. The Wilsons [the R.E.L. Wilson family] and the mayor of Osceola [Ben Butler], a colorful political figure. Two or three other folks in politics. I had been looking for a reason to go up there and to do some interviewing and write about this situation, using Mississippi County as a model. About that time Bill Shelton, the city editor, assigned me to go to Mississippi County, Blytheville, or Osceola, I forget, to cover some kind of convention. It might have been the Farm Bureau. I rather think it was. Wherever it was, I went up there and stayed two or three days. Frankly, I just dusted off his

assignment. I ended up writing just a few paragraphs about my assignment, maybe eight or ten. I spent the rest of the time working on my story, the one that I wanted to do. I guess to be fair to myself, Bill knew I was interested in this and wanted to do it. He rightly expected that his assignment would get priority. I got back and wrote my story. It went on and on, a couple thousand words. He ran the story. It was a good story. Bill and I were in the habit of going for coffee every afternoon at Miller's Coffee Shop around the corner on Main Street, Third and Main just about the same time --- my recollection was that it was about 2:30 or 3:00 in the afternoon. With a certain signal, just the two of us would leave and go get coffee. On this particular day, I guess it must have been the first day after all this with Mississippi County and the story. We got our coffee, and he started talking about the way I had handled the assignment. He never raised his voice, but for half an hour, he chewed my ass out to a fare-thee-well, in the quietest possible way. When he got finished with me, I knew that I had been chewed out. The thrust of it was "You work for me and you don't treat your editor that way." He never used those words, but that is what he meant. Naturally, I was stunned and hurt. I made a stand and tried to explain my point of view. I knew that he had me. He was absolutely right. I don't think that I ever did get around to telling him that he was right about that. I eventually told a generation of students at the University of Arkansas, "Here is a lesson for you," that those who become reporters need to know. If you work for somebody else, you are not a free agent. You are not supposed to be. I had been getting more and more dissatisfied. I thought, "I have

been here eight and a half years. It was time for me to go.” It was about that time that I fired off a very ill-considered and unthought-out note to my friend, Claude Sitton, who was the Atlanta Southern correspondent for *The New York Times*. He was in and out of Little Rock all the time. He spent a lot of time at my house.

HB: Is that where you knew him? When he came to Little Rock to cover . . . ?

RR: I was a *New York Times* stringer at that time, meaning a non-staff, part-time, correspondent, who would get paid fifty or a hundred dollars if I filed a story they ran.

HB: Did you get paid by the inch?

RR: No, not by the inch.

HB: Stringers used to get paid by the inch.

RR: Yes, by the inch. *The Times* did not do that. You were just expected to be proud to be associated with *The New York Times*.

HB: How did you get the job? Did they pick you or did you ask for it?

RR: I reckon that I went after it. It must have been Sitton who chose me for it. I guess that is how it happened. On his trip --- going all the way back to 1957 and 1958 through 1960, he was in and out through here a lot. I at some point became the reporter covering all the stuff that he was interested in, the school stuff, and the politics. Later on, I was to find out that was how correspondents worked. You go to a town and make friends with young reporters on staff with the local paper. You quickly figure out whom you can rely on and whom you cannot. You take them out and wine and dine them and then you pick their brain. I did it myself

after I became a correspondent with *The Times*. I am sure that it was Sitton who made me a formal stringer for *The Times*. Anyway, I sent him a note saying, “I am tired. I need to leave the *Gazette*. I would like to go to work for *The New York Times*. What is the chance that *The New York Times* would let me open a bureau in Little Rock?” That was a preposterous idea, and I guess I knew it was. This was just a way of getting his attention. Unknown to me, when I sent that note to Sitton in Atlanta, he had been selected to become the next national editor of *The New York Times*. He was on his way to New York practically. His first task as national editor was to replace himself in Atlanta. When he got that note, he called me on the phone and asked me if I was serious about it. He explained first that there was no way they were going to open a bureau in Little Rock. Then he explained why. He said that if I was serious about going to work at *The New York Times*, “I will arrange an interview for you.” Within a week I was in New York being interviewed for this job. I made the rounds with the editors up there and it was an experience. Easily the most intimidating experience of my life.

HB: I can imagine. Is that standard?

RR: Yes, that was the way that it was done and still is, I guess.

HB: For all the reporters or just those who are going to be . . . ?

RR: Those from outside, not for those who are from within. You go and you make the rounds. You start --- in my case, I think I started at the metropolitan desk, city desk, whoever was the editor at that time, then went from there to the national desk, then the foreign editor had a shot. Even the sports and business people, they

were introduced. You wind up at the end of the day with the managing editor, although I did meet and say hello to the executive editor, who in years to come would tell people in my presence that he hired me. I am pretty sure that the decision was made by the managing editor and was simply approved by [others]. The managing editor was Clifton Daniel, this very proper *Times* man. I have to digress here and tell two stories, one from my own day of being interviewed there and the other from somebody else. I was such a hick that I had it in my head that Gay Talese was a woman. Gay Talese was a reporter for *The New York Times*. I was familiar with all the by-lines because I had been reading *The Times* for over a year at Cambridge. I fell in love with *The New York Times*. It was my daily paper. I asked somebody, one of these editors about her, meaning Gay Talese. With a straight face he said, "Gay Talese is . . ." Before the day was over, I had found out. I never told Gay that. We got acquainted later on. I never got around to telling him that. The other story is better. A fellow by the name of Mo [Martin] Waldron. Mo, of course, was not his real name. Poor ol' Mo, he is dead and gone. He was the star investigative reporter at the *St. Petersburg Times*. This was after I had gone to work there [at *The New York Times*]. Mo and I got acquainted in other places. He told this story on himself. He got through this day of interviewing. --- I should explain that Mo was a big ol' unkempt man. His hair was never quite combed. His neck size was probably about a twenty, so he never bothered to button that top button. His necktie was never pulled all the way to his collar. His seersucker jacket probably had at least coffee and gin stains on it. He was a real

character. He loved a party and was a cook. He later became quite famous in New Orleans during the several months he spent covering Jim Garrison along with the goings on of the assassination of Jack Kennedy. He rented an apartment and held forth every night and cooked dinner for anywhere from two to a dozen people. On this particular day, he was like the rest of us. He was being interviewed for a job by the high and mighty editors of *The New York Times*, including Cliff Daniel, son-in-law of Harry Truman, an English gentleman in his appearance. In fact, he lived long enough in London to acquire the best tailor in Saville Row. His hair was done by the best barber in New York. He ran with the highest society in New York. He was always very proper and, we thought, absolutely without humor. Mo Waldron finished the interview late in the afternoon. It was time to go and see Mr. Daniel. He sat across the desk from Mr. Daniel as you are sitting across from me now. Mr. Daniel started the interview by saying --- Mo put his hands up in front of his face as he told this in the attitude of prayer. The hands tapping against each other and the head back.--- Mr. Daniel said something like, “Mr. Waldron, what qualifications do you have for working at *The New York Times*?” Mo said, “Well, I once slept with a Junior Leaguer.” [Laughter] Somehow, he got the job anyway. I guess Cliff was not without humor as we all thought. Cliff Daniel died just a few weeks ago. There was a wonderful obituary about him in *The New York Times*.

HB: Let us back up to something you mentioned. Claude Sitton explained to you why *The Times* was not going to open a bureau in Little Rock. What did he mean?

RR: It was just not --- You need kind of a hub city. You needed to be able to get in and

out quickly by air. That was why Atlanta was the place for the Southern bureau. Houston became a bureau city later on. Los Angeles, Chicago, that kind of a place.

HB: In those days Little Rock . . .

RR: Was not a major league city.

HB: Were you hired to be the Atlanta bureau chief?

RR: I was hired to be --- this is a little complicated. The Southern bureau in those days had two people. They had had since the days of John Popham. I have a story about him that I must tell. Maybe I have already told it. The Central High coverage. The day he broke down in North Little Rock.

HB: I guess you did.

RR: Popham was the bureau for twelve years. Then they replaced him with two men, Sitton and John Herbers. At the time, in the fall of '64, not only had Claude Sitton been hired to go to New York as the national editor, but also John Herbers had been transferred to the Washington bureau. So momentarily the bureau was empty. They were in the process of trying to hire Gene Roberts, the city editor of *Detroit Free Press*, to be the Southern bureau chief. For some reason, it took several months to get it done and to get him down there. I was the sole reporter for the Southern bureau for maybe six months. When I say that Claude hired me to take his place, that is not exactly right. He hired me --- well, in a way he did. He knew I would be alone down there for a period of time. I don't know why it took so long to get Roberts on board. He didn't arrive down there until the summer as I

recall.

HB: What was Roberts when he came? Was he the bureau chief? You later became bureau chief, didn't you?

RR: No, Gene and I left about the same time. I had to go to Washington and he to Vietnam.

HB: Let me clarify this. I think many people think the term "bureau" implies a staff. *The New York Times* bureau was just an office with one person, right?

RR: That's right. As I was, in fact, years later in New Orleans. I was the whole bureau. In Atlanta we had a staff of two reporters and an office assistant, a wonderful woman named Dixon Preston, a widow who worked there and started her working life as a secretary with Ralph McGill. He called and hired her to work for him at one time.

HB: I understand that normally a bureau reporter for *The Times*, regardless of what their particular assignment is, is supposed to work in New York for a while.

RR: The standard rule was that if you were being hired for the national staff as I was, you could not go directly to your assignment. You have to spend your first two months in New York for orientation. I managed to get in one month in New York. The civil rights story got so demanding that they cut my orientation short by a month. They sent me on down there and started me covering Selma, Alabama.

HB: This is the spring of 1965?

RR: Yes, the winter of 1965. I was went to work in January of 1965. The first of February I grabbed my family. We did not even have time to look for a house in

Atlanta. We moved to Atlanta in a blizzard. We moved into this rented house, a one-story house with a basement. I immediately went back to Selma. I just dumped the furniture. Poor Norma, who couldn't even drive a car at that time, she got stuck with all of it, taking the kids to school. I went straight back to Selma. I was home for a rare weekend, weeks later, sometime in the late spring. We heard a noise down below the house. Norma said, "It sounds like it is coming from the basement. Do you reckon we are having a break-in?" Come to find out, there were people living down there! [Laughter] We did not know a thing about it. They had the basement rented separate from the upstairs. [Laughter]

HB: I guess the kids were excited about all of this?

RR: Norma, if I owe her anything, she reminds me about that time. That was the beginning of *The New York Times*. The month that I spent in New York is just --- They put me up in the Manhattan Hotel, which had rooms about the size of your bathroom. Every day I would go down to the office on 43rd Street, 229 West 43rd Street, between Broadway and Eighth Avenue. Mostly, we just sat around. Technically, I was working for the metropolitan desk. They would give me some assignments now and then. Mostly, it was done by telephone. Only once or twice did I get out of the office. I don't remember for what then. It was very minor stuff. Everybody understood that you were just kind of getting the favor of the news team. You were told in so many words that you work for a New York newspaper. For that same reason, they had a rule that all the correspondents, national and foreign, had to come to New York once a year and spend a week in

the New York newsroom for what they called “home visits.” I never did like those. They were always uncomfortable. You never had anything useful to do. You just sat around the newsroom and went to lunch with the reporters. It was kind of fun. One year I was so down on New York City, I put up with a friend over in Montclair, New Jersey. It was either Gene Roberts or David Jones. I stayed there in Montclair the whole week. I never went into the city. That satisfied my home visit requirements.

HB: You did not like big cities or New York City in particular?

RR: I did not like New York in particular, although it was a lovely place. I hated the traffic, the rudeness and the jostling on the sidewalk. One of my very few regrets from *The New York Times* was that I never worked in New York, not counting that thirty days. I actually tried to get them, towards the end, to let me come up there for a year and work on the copy desk or something. I felt that I was missing something in the big city. I have been back very few times since then. It is a wonderful place. After I went to New Orleans years later, I would enjoy my visits to New York then. I kind of understood the routine, and I would go out in the evening to a play or something.

HB: When you were with the bureau, what was your relationship with *The Times* staff? Did you send your copy to an editor?

RR: Yes, to the national editor, by way of a telephone recording room in those days. Now they have computers. I have told people that I might still be working there if they had had those Radio Shack devices.

HB: Laptop computers?

RR: Yes, laptop computers. In those days, there was a staff of three or four men who did nothing all day except take phone calls from correspondents around the world. I would dictate over the telephone and be recorded on the other end. These fellows, all native New Yorkers, would interrupt periodically and say, “Would you spell that name?” or “Roy, what was that a couple of lines back? I missed that word.” They were very good. There were the inevitable screw-ups because of accents, my Arkansas accent and their New York accent. An interminably famous case that I got kidded about for years, I filed a feature story and it involved some reference to kayaks and shooting rapids in a kayak. They heard it as shooting “rabbits.” It got into print and it made no sense at all. Those kinds of things would happen.

HB: Well, we are at a stopping place again.

[End of Tape 5 - Side 2]