

Gazette Project

Interview with

Charles Rixse
Little Rock, Arkansas,
8 October 2000

Interviewer: Jerry McConnell

Jerry McConnell: Your name.

Charles Rixse: Charles Rixse.

JM: And you realize that we are doing this interview to be used in the University of Arkansas Oral History program?

CR: I do.

JM: Okay. Why don't you just explain to me how you came to work at the *Arkansas Gazette* and a little background leading up to it from your time, say, at the university and when you graduated from the university and go on from there. You graduated with BA in journalism. Is that correct?

CR: I graduated with a BA in journalism and also the same in English.

JM: In 1951?

CR: 1951.

JM: Okay, so go on from there. Proceed from there.

CR: I proceeded from there to go into the army as a draftee. Served two years, including one year as managing editor of the *Cavalier*, the military newspaper of the First Cavalry Division in Japan at that time. When I came back, I needed to get a job. I think you may have been instrumental in both of my first Little Rock

newspaper jobs. I think you recommended me to the city editor at the *Arkansas Democrat*, and somehow you talked them into taking me on. I had worked there about a year when I got married, and then it became necessary before we got married to go work for a radio station.

JM: For the money?

CR: For the money, yes. It was also a television station, but television wasn't a part of it.

JM: Which one was that?

CR: KARK-TV.

JM: What year was that?

CR: 1955, I suppose.

JM: How long did you stay there?

CR: Well, until you could get me a job at the *Gazette*. Actually, I returned to the *Democrat* for several months there.

JM: Well, that was when? When was that? I went over to the *Gazette* from the *Democrat* in August of 1955, and a friend of ours said it wasn't too awfully long before you came over there, was it?

CR: No, it was quite a bit less than a year.

JM: Yes. Okay. And you went to work in sports, right?

CR: Working sports.

JM: That was before I was working. Then how long did you stay in sports?

CR: One turn around the sports horn, from football season until just before football

season when --- you probably recommended me for this, too --- they were looking for a assistant city editor, a night city editor. They decided to promote me or bi-mote me or something to be the night city editor. I was tired of sports already, so I said I would try that.

JM: You had been --- go back just a second. At the *Democrat* you had covered City Hall and everything?

CR: I covered City Hall, and I did a few days of work as a temporary police reporter. I worked almost every weekend there for a while in the sports department. I even did a locker room interview with Bowden Wyatt one time.

JM: That was while you were at the *Democrat*?

CR: Yes.

JM: At any rate, you went to the *Gazette* as a sports writer. Anything you remember about that year or so that you spent there?

CR: The thing I was most impressed with was Orville Henry. Not necessarily his work as a writer, although he was very, very good at that. He was one of the best executives I ever knew at that time because he had organized and run that Friday night war room where they took all the telephone calls for the high school football games. He sat up there and kept it going, and got all the stuff in there pretty correctly. It was a pretty nasty job at the time.

JM: What was your assignment, your basic assignment in sports?

CR: I covered the AIC, the Arkansas Intercollegiate Conference.

JM: Anything you recall about that? Anything in particular?

CR: Well, I got in trouble with Ouachita Baptist University. It was Ouachita Baptist College then. I can't remember exactly what that was all about, but I had some inside information. I made a mistake and wrote something about it. I had to be interviewed by Dr. Phelps, the president, and I didn't tell him anything.

JM: He wanted to know where you got your information. Anything else you remember about your year in the *Gazette* sports department?

CR: Not particularly.

JM: Then you went straight from sports to assistant city editor. Is that right?

CR: That is right.

JM: Assistant city editor under Bill Shelton?

CR: Yes.

JM: And you were there in that position for how long?

CR: Well, I had just taken the job, must have been late August just before school started. Bill Shelton went off to Columbia University to take some sort of post-graduate course. While he was gone, Orval Faubus began the Central High crisis. I was the only city editor around at that time.

JM: When was that, 1957?

CR: Yes.

JM: What do you remember about that? Tell us all you remember about that and your role on the city desk and the coverage of everything. Who covered it?

CR: Well, I remember that I was scared to death at first, but then I kind of got used to it. I got to interview --- what was the Supreme Court Justice's name, the black

one? Thurgood Marshall. Anyway, I got to interview him at Daisy's home.

JM: Daisy Bates?

CR: Daisy Bates, yes. That was while I was still acting city editor. It was an afternoon thing, so I was easily able to do it before going on the night desk. I got the front-page byline for it. I remember that.

JM: Yes, okay. So while you were the acting city editor, what transpired as far as Faubus was concerned in the schools? Was this during the calling out of the Airborne and Faubus calling out the National Guard? Was this when the kids were going into the school?

CR: I am not sure exactly when Shelton came back. It all runs together.

JM: Who? Shelton?

CR: Yes. I don't remember exactly how much of it I was actually in charge for. It seemed like a long time at the time -- probably two or three weeks.

JM: Do you remember any of the stories that you assigned or that you handled?

CR: I remember one that came across the city desk that concerned a Little Rock physician who came out in a role that seemed to support Faubus. The way I sent it to the printer and the way it came off the press were entirely different.

JM: The way you sent it to the printer and the way it came out in the paper were different?

CR: When I sent it to the copy desk.

JM: Oh, okay. It got changed somehow or another?

CR: Yes.

JM: Do you remember who changed it? A copy editor or who?

CR: I was told that Harry Ashmore changed it.

JM: In essence, what was the change?

CR: I thought that the change was, in essence, not factual since it eliminated the doctor's intent to support Governor Faubus. And I think they had made this physician look worse than he was. It was pretty bad.

JM: What physician, do you remember?

CR: Yes, I do.

JM: You want to say?

CR: No.

JM: Okay.

CR: I don't think he is still alive, but . . .

JM: Okay. Which reporters were covering the Central High crisis at that time for the *Gazette*?

CR: I should remember that, but I don't. I can't remember --- it seems like --- what was the lady's name who died recently?

JM: Matilda Tuohey?

CR: Matilda Tuohey and --- what was the running mate's name?

JM: Sam Harris?

CR: Sam Harris.

JM: Sam Harris. Were they involved in some of that?

CR: Yes. I am not sure when Ray Moseley came in, but I am pretty sure he handled a

lot of it, too. The kid that later worked for the *New York Times*.

JM: Gene Foreman?

CR: Gene Foreman.

CR: I think he did a little of everything.

JM: Jerol Garrison, was he involved in any of that that you remember?

CR: I don't remember any. Jerol was mostly the courthouse reporter.

JM: Federal courthouse reporter. I think maybe later on he may have covered some things out in the state, some Ku Klux Klan rallies and stuff like that. Anything else you remember particularly about during that stint? You were in that position for how long? About a year?

CR: About a year.

JM: Okay. Are there any other reporting or other reporters that you particularly remember?

CR: I remember Roy Reed. He was thorough, but he was slow. And Ray Moseley was probably the fastest bureau reporter I ever knew. He could cover anything. I couldn't. Roy and the rest of them couldn't, but he was exceptionally gifted.

JM: Was Ernie Dumas still doing --- was he doing reporting?

CR: I don't believe so.

JM: Was he there then?

CR: I don't believe so.

JM: You don't remember him.

CR: I knew his name, but I don't think I ever worked with him.

JM: Okay. Jason Rouby, was Jason still there?

CR: I think he had gone to Metroplan.

JM: I believe he had gone to Metroplan.

CR: We were competitors at City Hall.

JM: Yes, he covered City Hall for the *Gazette*, and you covered it for the *Democrat*.

Did you ever know Joe Wirges?

CR: Yes, I did know Joe. He was sort of a legend in his own time and rightly so. He was a very down-to-earth man, and he would give you a story that would just shock you every once in a while. I also liked Leland DuVall. I thought that --- Leland may have written the same thing forty or fifty hundred times, but he always made it sound a little different.

JM: Made it interesting?

CR: I didn't say that.

JM: Okay, but at any rate, I like Leland, too. Anybody else you remember particularly?

CR: Well, Larry Obsitnik. He was a legend in his own time, too.

JM: What was your relationship with Larry Obsitnik?

CR: Well, he ran the photography department, and I gave his department assignments. So we worked together very well, and we had a pretty good team.

JM: Anything you remember about the *Gazette* photographers at that time?

CR: Gene . . .

JM: Prescott?

CR: Prescott was a very good photographer and Rodney Dungan came along then, and he was very good. We had an exceptional photography staff. And photojournalism, in daily newspapers, was sort of new then as far as doing photo layouts and everything, so they got in on the front end of that.

JM: What --- of course, you had been around both sides and read it for years and everything. What was general impression of the *Gazette* as a newspaper?

CR: When I was working with the *Democrat*, I thought they were highly overrated, as you usually do when you are working against good competition. When I went to the radio and TV station, I was able to step back and look at what everybody was doing, and I suddenly realized that, although they had a definite liberal bias, they were an exceptional newspaper, really exceptional. As far as coverage of the Central High crisis, I really felt a lot of respect for the *Democrat*. [I think] they did better job of it than we did, but we got the awards for it.

JM: Do you remember anything in particular about the coverage?

CR: Well, they reported accurately, or fairly accurately, things that were going on that we just didn't bother to write about. I don't think people reading the *Gazette* got as accurate a feel for what was really going on around Central High as the people who read the *Democrat*. Although I can't say all that *Democrat* stuff was accurate.

JM: Anybody else you remember around the *Gazette*? A.R. Nelson, the managing editor? Other editors at that time and everything?

CR: The thing I remember best about A. R. Nelson is that you knew if you ever left

the *Gazette* and he was there, he would never let you come back.

JM: He had a reputation for that.

CR: After I left, I did try to come back once or twice, and he wouldn't even talk to me.

JM: Is that right?

CR: Yes. But he was a good guy.

JM: Why did you leave the *Gazette*?

CR: Well, I was very disillusioned by the way the Third Estate conducted itself during the Central High crisis. I was taught that your first duty as a journalist, as a newspaper person, was to report the facts in a fair and unbiased way. In no instance should you try to control or manipulate whatever was going on to suit your own particular purposes. That is not to say that I was not ever accused of doing exactly that because I am sure I was.

JM: So at this point in time what happened? Where did you go?

CR: My relationship with Bill Shelton was never very good either. He was pretty hard to get along with, and I had willingly left the night city editor job just to get away from him. Then I had some interesting general assignment work for the *Gazette*, which I enjoyed very much, and also got to cover the State Capitol some, which I didn't care for too much. But, anyway, about this time I was given a chance to enjoy every newspaper man's dream of going back and working and managing things at the hometown paper. A friend of mine became the publisher of the *North Little Rock Times*, and we went into a whole new field of journalism there.

JM: This friend was . . . ?

CR: Bob McCord.

JM: Bob McCord, okay. So you joined Bob at the *North Little Rock Times*.

CR: That is right.

JM: What did you do there?

CR: I was the managing editor, which means I did everything from writing the style book to writing the obituaries and taking a few pictures.

JM: What was Bob doing?

CR: Bob was trying his best to find a way to make that sucker make money. I don't think we ever got that completely worked out. We did a really good job on photojournalism and doing a hometown paper with lots of feature stories and lots of interesting stuff. I think we did a pretty good job of building circulation. It was sort of a seven-day-a-week job, and I was getting pretty tired of that. My family was growing up. I felt that probably between my salary and Bob's, it was too much to let the newspaper survive, so I went looking for another job and got out of the newspaper field altogether.

JM: How long did you work at the *Times*?

CR: About two and a half years.

JM: And then you went --- was that when you went to the conventions?

CR: No. I spent a little time with domestic insurance company, which was doing a lot of selling of insurance company stocks and so forth, and I did public relations and some advertising for them.

JM: How long did that last?

CR: About a year.

JM: Then you went from there to Convention Bureau business?

CR: Yes.

JM: Okay. And what was your first job?

CR: At the Little Rock Chamber of Commerce. And one of my old newspaper friends from the *Arkansas Traveler*, the one that found me and offered me that job . . .

JM: Was that Bill Henderson?

CR: Bill Henderson. Fine guy. I was pretty much an introvert at the time, and you may have known that. I was scared to death and just knew I couldn't get up in front of 2,000 people and sell Little Rock for a convention, but it turned out to be a lot easier than I thought and a very gratifying sort of civic service work.

JM: Then you went from there to the Hot Springs job. Is that right?

CR: Yes. I went from there to the Hot Springs Convention Bureau, which was a newly founded entity. They had a hotel bedroom tax, which nobody else had at that time, or very few had it at that time. None in Arkansas. I stayed there three years, and it was pretty successful work.

JM: You were the manager. Is that right?

CR: I was the manager.

JM: Or whatever you call it.

CR: The executive director, right.

JM: Then did you go from there back to Little Rock?

CR: Back to Little Rock.

JM: And to be manager there?

CR: They had gotten their room tax by that time, made it more desirable.

JM: You went back there and stayed there for nine years and . . .

CR: There were a lot more [rooms] to tax in Little Rock than there were there.

JM: Yes. As I recall, you left and went and took the job with the Knoxville bureau at the time they were preparing for the World's Fair. Is that correct?

CR: That is correct.

JM: And you helped prepare for the World's Fair?

CR: Yes, we did.

JM: And helped organize. What did you do from that standpoint for the World's Fair?

CR: Well, we did a lot of offshore promotions. Nothing in the way of expensive advertising, but bus tours were getting into, just coming into prominence as a real generator of tourism. We did a lot of work on that both for international tourists as well as United States tourists.

JM: After that then you stayed in that business, basically, and you also had work, if I remember, at Kansas City and Las Vegas and Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. Is that correct?

CR: Yes. We didn't stay very long at Kansas City, but by then I had gotten into the role of helping generate convention centers for cities that needed them, and most of them did at that time. We helped --- when I was at Hot Springs, I certainly think we helped generate the project that revitalized Robinson Auditorium and

built the new hotel on the river there.

JM: The Camelot?

CR: The Camelot, yes.

JM: Yes, okay.

CR: It is the Double Tree now. Then in Knoxville, I helped that city get a convention center that was made from one of the exhibits built by one of the fair exhibitors to include my convention center speculation. It turned out to be a pretty successful one for them. Then I went to Las Vegas because --- that was out of the convention sales side, but that was strictly to oversee and manage the new downtown convention center there, oversee construction. By the time that the facility got completely on line, I decided I wanted to go back into marketing, and I went to Myrtle Beach, which is a great tourist destination.

JM: That was your last post?

CR: Yes, although I also did bureau and center management in the next fifteen years as a part of my consulting business.

JM: Okay. And now you are back in Hot Springs?

CR: Now I am back in Hot Springs [and in Birmingham as of January, 2003] .

JM: Okay. Still playing tennis with the old college roommate.

CR: That is right.

JM: Which is me.

CR: But I am not beating him.

JM: That is all right. That suits me fine. A matter that we didn't touch on though –

we were co-sports editors of the *Arkansas Traveler*.

CR: That is right. We didn't say that.

JM: You might have helped me get that job. Of course, I don't remember.

CR: I might have.

JM: In fact, you had been a member of the staff .

CR: I did some typing for you. I remember that.

JM: Well, that is all right. I wasn't a very good typist anyway. And edited a few of my gaffs and headlines and stuff like that, and I think pointed out a few others. I remember that you had fun with --- I had written a headline that said something was imminent, only I spelled it E-M-I- N-E-N-T. I think you pointed that out to me. I don't think I ever misused that word again.

CR: I don't remember that.

JM: But, yes, I do. I was first tried spelling it I-M-M-I-N-E-N-T and then, instead, I did it, E-M-I-N-E-N-T. Going back to the *Gazette*, is there anything else about that time you spent there that you remember fondly or unfondly or that really made an impression on you or anything?

CR: Yes, I think I would have to say J. N. Heiskell. I don't guess I ever had a conversation with him, but he was sort of the eminence that projected the *Gazette*. I think at that time that eminence was --- I think he believed in the same kind of journalism that I did.

JM: Okay. You thought highly of him as a newspaper owner?

CR: And as a person who was probably pretty fair, although he did have a strike one

time, but that is not always the manager's fault.

JM: Well, that is true. You were, I believe, still in college, I think, when they had the strike, if I remember.

CR: Yes.

JM: Then you were gone in the service as a --- while it was still going on. I remember that was when I first went down to the police beat on the *Democrat*, but you were in the service then. They still had a few employees who they brought in to replace the strikers. I remember that the police were pro-union, and they had faked some reports and things. For the *Gazette* police beat guy to pick out --- it wasn't long until Joe Wirges came back and, of course, they quickly ended that practice because Joe always got along with them. They always got along with Joe. Joe was practically like another policemen at times and probably knew more about their business than some of them did.

CR: I should probably say something about Bob Douglas, too, because I thought he was pretty professional guy at that time, but I don't think I understood just quite how good he was. I didn't realize the guy could write until he wrote that column that he writes now. He is very, very good.

JM: Yes. Bob was probably the news editor at that time? I can't remember who the --
- was Pat Carrithers the wire editor then? Had he moved to that position?

CR: Pat was probably on the state desk about that time.

JM: Do you remember anything about the Friday night football operations?

CR: I was just amazed at how well it was done.

JM: You probably went out and covered games part of the time, didn't you?

CR: Yes, I guess I did.

JM: Then I guess you went and covered college games on Saturday? The AIC games on Saturday?

CR: I did do high school games on Friday nights.

JM: Did Bailey take your place? Is that when . . . ?

CR: Yes, Bailey . .

JM: You went to the copy desk?

CR: . . . always said he was grateful to me.

JM: I remember when Jim came up because I knew it was about a year or so after I went over there, so that would have been about the time you would have been there.

CR: Chuck was there.

JM: Chuck Miller?

CR: Yes, and the quiet guy.

JM: Bill Bentley?

CR: Bill Bentley.

JM: Bill Bentley, yes. He was a . . .

CR: They were all good guys.

JM: Yes, he was a real character. I don't know whether we had any of the part-timers there who --- you know, we had several part-timers there who later went on --- Friday night guys, mostly --- later went on to outstanding careers in the

newspaper business.

CR: Yes, that is true.

JM: Robert Shaw and Bill Simmons and Harry King. I don't know whether you were there or not --- Dick Allen . . .

CR: Bill Simmons, wasn't he on the state desk for a while, too?

JM: That is possible. I am not sure, but he is from North Little Rock. He and Shaw both came out of North Little Rock High School.

CR: I knew he did and Carrithers did, too. And Eddie Best.

JM: Eddie Best, yes. I remember Eddie well. Well, anything else that you can recall about that time or the paper itself, pay or anything?

CR: Oh, I didn't worry about pay much. Nobody had much money anyway.

JM: Oh yes. Not anything else that you remember particularly about that era though in your life?

CR: I know I thought really well of the *Gazette* as an institution, at least the first year or so that I was there. I was proud to work there.

[End of Interview]