

Gazette Project

Interview with
Charles Portis,
Little Rock, Arkansas,
31 May 2001

Interviewer: Roy Reed

Roy Reed: All right. This is Charles Portis with Roy Reed, May 31, 2001. Just to back up what's on this piece of paper here, we have your permission to record this interview and turn it over to the University, is that right?

Charles Portis: Yes, yes.

RR: What led you to go to work at the *Gazette*? What were you doing before?

CP: I got out of college in May of 1958 and went to work for *The Commercial Appeal* in Memphis, where I stayed for the rest of that year. But I really wanted to work for Harry Ashmore's *Gazette*, so I came over to Little Rock one weekend and asked Mr. Nelson about a job. He gave me a job.

RR: What I'm doing is writing down all the names that are mentioned, so the transcriber can get them right.

CP: Yes, A. R. Nelson, the managing editor. I think he used initials because his name was Arla. I was on the night police beat for a while and then became a general assignment reporter. This was January or February of 1959. The tail-end of all that desegregation business at Central High. The schools were still closed that year.

RR: In 1959?

CP: Yes.

RR: What kind of stories did you cover on general assignment?

CP: Well, a lot of Citizens Council meetings--Amis Guthridge, Jim Johnson. The pro-segregationist people. And meetings of the other side--Daisy Bates, Everett Tucker. But there were other things, as well. Life went on. State Fair stories. Murders, ice storms.

RR: Amis Guthridge. He represented that cast of characters?

CP: To me, he did, yes. He was always available. A lot of people on that side refused to talk to the *Gazette*, but Amis didn't mind. He would talk freely and at great length.

RR: Were you at my house at a party one night when Pat Owens got drunk and called Amis Guthridge on the phone?

CP: Probably. Pat was a great one for that. At some point in the evening he would go for the telephone.

RR: How did they go? What kind of . . . ?

CP: Well, you know, put-ons. Pretending to be some earnest but slightly insane person with some questions to ask. Spinning it out. Pretending not to understand the meaning of simple words. The game being not to laugh and to keep the other party on the line as long as possible.

RR: Owens would enjoy putting on the persona of a revivalist preacher.

CP: Yes, but we turned the tables on him once. Do you remember a guy on the copy desk named Don--something or other?

RR: Yes.

CP: Out of California, I think. A heavy drinker. He slept on Pat's couch a lot when he couldn't remember where he lived. Anyway, he left, went back to California or Oregon. Then Jim Bailey and I wrote a letter to Pat, purporting to come from Don, saying he had married a woman with three or four kids, and they were making their way back across the country, in an old car, staying with friends along the way. That they were now in Beaumont, Texas, getting the car repaired, and were looking forward to a good long stay in Little Rock, at Pat's house. We arranged to have the letter mailed in Beaumont. I think Paul Johnson knew someone there. We let Pat sweat it out for a week or so, after he got the letter.

Waiting for Don.

RR: That guy, Don. I think I can see his face.

CP: He squinted up at you through glasses. He would come sidling up to you in a spooky way and say, "What's your read on De Gaulle?" A smart guy, good at his work, but a little strange, in some California way.

RR: Was he the model for the guy in *Dog of the South*?

CP: Oh, no. I hadn't thought of Don in years. Until you mentioned Pat.

RR: I had it in my mind that it was a particular copy editor.

CP: Oh, no.

RR: Well, I've been telling people for years that it was this Don what's-his-name. Whatever became of Don?

CP: Who knows. One of those copy desk drifters. They could always get work. The good ones. Like Deacon. He once showed me four W-2 slips--representing jobs

at four different newspapers in one calendar year. What about Pat? Is he still in Montana?

RR: He's still in Montana. He had that awful stroke years ago, and it kind of changed him.

CP: The last I heard, he was writing some sex book. It sounded . . . I don't know. . .

RR: Yes, I read it.

CP: I never saw a copy.

RR: Did you ever hear him talk about his politics growing up in Montana? You know, he identified with all those old lefties.

CP: Yes, the Wobblies, the IWW. I knew he came out of that school.

RR: Then he ended up at the *Detroit Free Press*. He was the labor reporter up there for a long time. Knew all those guys. Who were some of the other people in the *Gazette* newsroom at that time?

CP: Well, you, of course, and Bill Lewis, Ken Parker, Charlie Allbright, Matilda Tuohey. I remember asking Matilda, when Pat came to work there, if she would like to meet him. She said no, not just yet. Maybe in three or four months, if he still happened to be there. Otherwise, the introduction would have been all for nothing, wasted, on a transient.

RR: What was it about Matilda? She had that tough air about her.

CP: Yes, maybe from being the only female in the newsroom.

RR: Later on, I found out that she would befriend young reporters. Take them home with her and give them cookies and things.

CP: I've heard that. I don't think Pat got any cookies. I did know she was a devout Catholic, for all her gruff manner. And she was a great promoter of the Strunk and White writer's manual, which was big at the time. E. B. White telling us to cut out all our blather.

RR: Frank Peters? You remember him?

CP: Yes, the best educated person on the staff. Ashmore included. You went to Frank if you wanted to know who Plotinus was. But for broad worldly knowledge you went to Leland Duvall. Leland could explain to you in detail just how a certain banking swindle is worked. Or the workings of some intricate piece of farm machinery. You couldn't stump him.

RR: What happened to Frank?

CP: Well, he left the *Gazette* to become editor of the *Rome Daily American*, an English-language paper there. It seems to me that he succeeded Ray Moseley in that job.

RR: Yes, he did.

CP: I was already in New York, and I remember seeing Frank off there on a west side pier. He was taking a ship to Europe. And later he was the music critic--is that right?--for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. I believe he won a Pulitzer Prize for his work there.

RR: I think that's right. You mentioned Bill Lewis. What do you remember about him?

CP: Bill and Pat were the most productive reporters on the paper. They could cover

anything--get the stuff and bring it in quickly, with a minimum of fuss and grumbling. Not that they were alike in any other way.

RR: A very fast writer.

CP: Yes, and always solid stuff. Just the kind of reporter that editors are always looking for.

RR: Ken Parker--I guess he was state editor at that time.

CP: Yes, he and Pat Carrithers ran the state desk. And they didn't get along very well. I liked them both, but things were always a little tense over there. One morning, early, they had a big blow-up.

RR: I never knew about that.

CP: Yes.

RR: I guess it was before I got to work. Charlie Allbright--did you take over the "Our Town" column from him?

CP: Yes. Charlie went to work for --- Winthrop Rockefeller, I think --- and Mr. Nelson gave me the job. I thought I would do it well, but I could never--I don't know--get into a stride. Clumsy, half-baked stuff. It was a grind. I had to do five of those things each week, plus a long Sunday piece--an expanded feature story with pictures. And when you find yourself trying to fill space, you're in trouble.

RR: Do you remember any particular columns you did?

CP: No. Bits and pieces. All that is mostly a blank. Well, I do remember a Sunday piece on a big cock-fighting meet in Garland County. Pat Carrithers and I drove down there. All these high-rollers in dusty Cadillacs with Texas and Louisiana

plates. With their fighting chickens. Flashing their thick wads of cash.

RR: Let me remind you of one column. You had a friend, you said, whose hobby was collecting old Christmas cards, and that he'd appreciate it if you could mail them to him. Do you remember that?

CP: [Laughs] No.

RR: Where did you live then?

CP: Out on 21st or 22nd Street, off Main, near the old VA Hospital. We had to double up then, on what we were paid. There were four of us in a little furnished house--Jack Meriwether, me, Ronnie Farrar and a guy named --- Hawkins, I think it was. The house of abandoned neckties. Jack was an assistant city manager, and Ronnie was a reporter for the *Democrat*. I don't know what Hawkins did. I'm not sure we even knew who Hawkins was, but he slept there and paid his share of the rent. Our landlord was John Yancey, the much-decorated Marine, one of Colonel Carlson's Raiders. He owned a liquor store nearby, on Roosevelt Road. We made a point of paying our rent on time. One look at Yancey and armed robbers fled the store. Or at least one did. I asked John about the holdup guy, and he said, "Well, his sporting blood turned to horse piss, that's all." Some previous tenant of that house had left a lot of very wide and garish neckties hanging in a closet. I like to think he had turned his back forever on 21st Street and his old life of wide ties. I wore one to work one day --- a big orange tie with a horse's head on it, with rhinestone eyes. Mr. Nelson came over and said, "I don't know, Buddy, that tie--don't you think--I mean, meeting the public--A tie

like that. . .”

RR: But we did wear coats and ties.

CP: Oh, yes, such as they were. There was something about that in the style book at *The Commercial Appeal* in Memphis. Those little booklets, you know, telling you how things were done there--spelling quirks, that sort of thing. At the beginning of this one there was a general edict that went something like this:

“The employees of *The Commercial Appeal* will dress and conduct themselves as ladies and gentlemen at all times.” Well, yes, a good policy, all very Southern, I approved, but it was hard to dress as a gentleman on \$57 a week. Even then.

RR: Newsrooms look different now. I mean the people.

CP: Yes, they’re pretty sad places. Quiet, lifeless. No big Underwood typewriters clacking away. No milling about, no chatting, no laughing, no smoking. That old loose, collegial air is long gone from the newsrooms. “A locker room air,” I suppose, would be the negative description. We wore coats and ties, and the reporters now wear jeans, and yet they’re the grim ones. This isn’t to say we were loose in our work.

RR: That’s exactly right. Something’s been lost.

CP: But our coats and ties and trousers didn’t always match.

RR: Now that thing about the Christmas cards--I don’t mean to wear that out, but it seems to me you got more than one column out of it.

CP: I probably milked everything.

RR: Poor Meriwether ended up getting hundreds of those cards in the mail. I ran into

him a few months after that and asked how he felt about it. He said, "Indignant."

But I guess he was a good sport about it, and it was actually the kind of thing

Meriwether would have done if he had been writing the column.

CP: Yes, that sounds more like something in Meriwether's line than mine. A bad influence.

RR: You mentioned Ray Moseley a while ago. What kind of guy was he?

CP: Well, he was leaving the *Gazette* just as I came, so it was hello and goodbye.

There had been some scrap in the office. Ray and someone came to blows.

RR: Tom Swint.

CP: Yes. But I never really knew Ray. I did run into him again somewhere--New York, maybe. I think he's been with the *Chicago Tribune* for some time now.

RR: Yes, he's their London guy. What about Bill Shelton? What do you remember about him?

CP: Well, his integrity. Seeing to it that we got things right, in big matters and small. No slack. No excuses. He communicated with notes, you remember. He didn't like talking. He would type out a note and put it in your mailbox--those little pigeon holes across from the city desk. Something he could have spoken to you in three or four seconds.

RR: Was he a teacher in regards to language and news reporting, that sort of thing?

CP: Yes, but not in any systematic way, as I recall. He would deal with your errors as they came up. I used the word "afterwards" in a story once, and he lopped off the "s," saying it was unnecessary. I still prefer the "s," but he was usually right. I

don't remember any--program of instruction. It was assumed that you knew your job, more or less.

RR: I didn't realize till twenty or thirty years later, but it was Bill Shelton who taught me sequence of tenses. Does that ring a bell with you?

CP: No, I don't remember getting into that.

RR: He was very strict on sequence of verb tenses.

CP: “. . . to care for him who shall have borne the battle. . .” Lincoln's nice use of the future perfect tense.

RR: Turns out there was an exact way to do it, and Shelton knew what it was. How long were you at the *Gazette*?

CP: A little under two years.

RR: You mentioned something about notes from Shelton, and it reminded me of the bulletin board. Do you remember any of the notes that appeared there?

CP: Yes, those fake announcements and directives. Well, I don't remember any specific ones. Office humor. Some were pretty good.

RR: I think your brother Richard was behind some of that. When he came to the paper later.

CP: I'm sure he was.

[End of Side One, Tape One]

[Beginning of Side Two, Tape One]

RR: Bob Douglas remembers Richard as being one of the best copy editors he had there.

CP: Yes, he and Jonathan were both good editors. Good writers, too, but they no longer bother with it. Richard came to his senses and went to medical school. I never worked on a copy desk. There was a rule at *The Commercial Appeal* that new reporters had to put in a few months on that duty, to get the feel of things. But the rule was waived--a shortage of reporters or something--when I went there.

RR: What do you remember about Harry Ashmore?

CP: Well, you think of the editor of a newspaper as being some remote figure in a back office, going home at four in the afternoon. But Ashmore was out and about in the city room, checking on things, at all hours. He would sit on the corner of your desk and have you fill him in on just what Governor Faubus said, and how he said it, and who was there. He would grill you and make suggestions. More like a managing editor. A very open and genial boss to deal with.

RR: Did you ever go out drinking with him?

CP: No. Or once or twice in a group. We weren't pals.

RR: He was much more than just the editor of the editorial page?

CP: Yes, indeed. He was interested in everything. He would look over the photographs and make selections.

RR: What about Douglas? What do you remember about Bob Douglas?

CP: Bob, yes. I don't remember exactly what he was then--copy editor, news editor--but I know he had more authority than the title suggested. He didn't need the rank. He had a natural authority that everyone recognized. Even his bosses deferred to him.

RR: He seems never to have forgotten a detail of his history.

CP: No, and that was part of it. He knew things.

RR: Wasn't he also the guy you once referred to in your column as the funniest man in Arkansas?

CP: Yes, that was from a story he told me once about a funeral in a country church, up around Kensett. It was an ordinary church with the two aisles--pews on the left and right and in the middle. The service had already started. The coffin was on a platform, a bier, beneath the pulpit. An old man came in late, making his way down the left aisle, when he caught his foot on a sprung board or something. He went into a stumbling trot, trying to regain his balance, and appeared to be making for the coffin--making a headlong assault on the coffin. Everyone froze. But at the last moment he managed to veer off to the right, short of the coffin, and continue his run down the right-hand aisle. I can't remember now whether his momentum carried him on out the door, or whether he just plumped down into a pew at the rear.

RR: You remember Joe Wirges?

CP: Oh yes, Joe broke me in on the night police beat there. He was the day man, the police reporter. He had been doing it for so long, you know, that he was almost one of the cops himself. That's one way of doing it, and he did it very well. I tried to keep a little more distance--not so much stuff off the record--but that way you get frozen out of things. You can make a case for either approach. There was no police information officer then. You had to get the stuff, as best you

could, from individual cops and detectives.

RR: He was kind of a legendary figure.

CP: Yes, indeed, maybe senior to everyone except Mr. Heiskell. Joe had seen it all-- lynchings, electrocutions, shootouts. There was a radio show in the 1940s and 1950s, "The Pall Mall Big Story" or "Front Page," something like that.

Dramatized stories about crime reporters. One of Joe's adventures was on that show. He told me he got \$500 for it.

RR: It seems to me that he died on the same day Mr. Heiskell died.

CP: I don't remember that.

RR: What do you remember about Mr. Heiskell? J. N. Heiskell?

CP: Well, you know, he was in his nineties then, but still fairly active. He would come through the newsroom now and then, usually with a galley proof in his hand, and some questions. I remember doing a story about the river. The Corps of Engineers had told me that the Arkansas River would soon run blue through Little Rock, when all these new locks and dams were in place. Mr. Heiskell came by to ask me about that. The muddy, reddish old Arkansas out there flowing blue? Was I quite sure of that? "Blue, Mr. Portis?" I said I was sure the claim had been made. He went away shaking his head, over the absurd claim or my gullibility, or both. But the engineers were right, you know. The river is blue at times. Jerry Neil told me that Mr. Heiskell stopped him once in the hall and said, "Mr. Neil, have you ever stopped to consider just how different things might be if General Lee had had just one scouting airplane at the Battle of Gettysburg?"

Jerry said he hadn't. But, yes, Mr. Heiskell was there every day. He knew what was going on.

RR: Did you ever write any of those stories--those ideas of Mr. Heiskell that got passed along?

CP: Yes, a "Mr. Heiskell must," something like that. I don't remember any offhand but certainly did some. But, remember, we couldn't use the word "story." It smacked of fiction. Mr. Heiskell said the proper word for a news account was "article." And we couldn't use "evacuate" as of a building or a city being evacuated. He thought it might remind readers of a bodily function. I don't know what softer word we used. There can't be many synonyms for "evacuate." And no photographs of snakes or other vermin, with those same sensitive readers in mind. And we spelled "Tokyo" with an "i" instead of a "y." But I sort of liked those quirks.

RR: JNH.

CP: Yes, that was it. That was the note for those must-do things.

RR: I had a box full of JNH's when I left. Gave them back to Bill Shelton, and he was not amused.

CP: Bill was hard to amuse. I ignored notes, too--just kept putting things off till they were forgotten or dead. But maybe not the JNH ones. I think I did act on those.

RR: You had worked at the *Arkansas Traveler* at the University. Was that your only other newspaper experience?

CP: Well, no, I worked at the *Northwest Arkansas Times*, too. The last year or so I

was in Fayetteville. I did the courthouse beat, the sheriff's office, the jail, Judge Ptak's municipal court. A weird judge, to say the least. Justice was swift there. And I edited the country correspondence from these lady stringers in Goshen and Elkins, those places. I had to type it up. They wrote with hard-lead pencils on tablet paper or notebook paper, but their handwriting was good and clear. Much better than mine. Their writing, too, for that matter. From those who weren't self-conscious about it. Those who hadn't taken some writing course. My job was to edit out all the life and charm from these homely reports. Some fine old country expression, or a nice turn of phrase--out they went. We probably thought we were doing the readers a favor. Ted Wylie was the editor.

RR: You worked there a year?

CP: Or a little more, yes.

RR: While you were a student?

CP: I was a student, yes. It was very early in the morning [when] I'd go down to the *Times* office. In my 1950 Chevrolet convertible, with the vertical radio in the dash and the leaking top. The Chevrolets of that period had a gearshift linkage that was always locking up, usually in second gear. I would have to stop at least once on the way to work--raise the hood and pop it loose by hand.

RR: That was when the Fulbrights still owned the paper?

CP: Yes. The publisher was--Gearhart?

RR: Sam Gearhart--does that sound right?

CP: Yes, and there was another executive--I can't recall the name.

RR: Was Mrs. Fulbright still there? Roberta Fulbright?

CP: She was still alive, but I don't recall seeing her there in the office. Maybe she came by later in the day.

RR: Did the Senator himself ever show up?

CP: I don't remember seeing him there, either.

RR: But you did a whole range of work at the paper?

CP: Within a limited range, yes.

RR: How did you happen to go to work there?

CP: I think I just went down and asked for a job. I was in journalism at the university, and Mr. Thalheimer may have put in a word for me. One of my teachers there. But I don't remember the details. I was just suddenly working there.

RR: What did you do at the *Traveler*?

CP: I'm not sure I ever worked for the *Traveler*, in any formal way. I wrote a few columns, sort of comic pieces, but I don't believe I was on the staff. Ronnie Farrar was the editor at that time. Then Sammy Smith and Kenny Danforth. Or maybe the other way around.

RR: You wrote a particular piece that was reprinted in the *Gazette*. It had to do with-- it was during the Central High crisis. You remember that?

CP: Vaguely. Something about . . .

RR: About *Time* magazine?

CP: *Time* magazine, yes, yes. I remember that. But not much about the thing itself.

RR: How'd you come to do that?

CP: I don't know. You get an idea, and you start fooling around on a typewriter.

RR: They had Faubus on the cover, as I remember, and then it had this cover story about him, which was pretty denigrating of not only Faubus but the state of Arkansas.

CP: Yes, I think that was probably the provocative thing. The smartass stuff about Arkansas.

RR: You remember how that piece ended up?

CP: No.

RR: I happened to see it not long ago. A suggestion that they ought to plow up Manhattan and plant it in turnip greens.

CP: So, my smartass response. But I don't remember that part.

RR: What got you interested in journalism to start with?

CP: Oh, I don't know. I got to be something of a reader in the service. Paperback books, whatever came to hand. I got out of the Marines in May of 1955 and went back to Hamburg. A friend of mine there, Billy Rodgers, had just gotten out of the Air Force, and he had a car. So we drove up to Fayetteville and enrolled for the summer semester at the university. An all-day drive, then. I think Hamburg is actually closer to LSU and Ole Miss than Fayetteville. Anyway, we registered, and you could do that then, just show up with a high school diploma and \$50, or whatever the tuition fee was, and you were in. You had to choose a major, so I put down journalism. I must have thought it would be fun and not very hard, something like barber college.--Not to offend the barbers. They probably provide

a more useful service.-- But, remember, Footsie Britt had been in Hill Hall, too, and we could claim him. Surely the only journalism major ever to win a Medal of Honor. Maybe the only one named Maurice. But the degree was in liberal arts, and the journalism courses were only a small part of that, thirty hours or so.

RR: Were you always good at English?

CP: Well, adequate, I suppose. I didn't have much trouble with it in school.

Diagramming sentences, that kind of thing. If you mean the mechanics of it.

Although Bill Whitworth, for--what, thirty-odd years now--has been trying to drum into my head the difference between "which" and "that." I go pretty much by feel. People who know more about grammar than we know, well, aren't they pedants?

RR: When I was twelve or thirteen, I had begun to read pretty much, and I liked fiction and decided to write novels, and somebody came along and said, "Well, first you have to make a living and one way to do that is to work for newspapers."

CP: Yes, it was probably something along those lines. It was a writing job. They would pay you to write things.

RR: But I never got back to novels, and you did. Were both your parents in education?

CP: No, only my father. He was from Alabama, a graduate of Birmingham Southern College. His brother, my Uncle Cecil, was a lawyer, and he came over to south Arkansas during the oil boom of the 1920s, trading in leases and options. He got my father a teaching job in Norphlet.

RR: Little oil town.

CP: Yes, between El Dorado and Smackover. And my father got to be the school superintendent there in short order. The job paid well--the school district had all that oil money. He was a very young man. I have the idea he made more real money there than he was ever to make again. He later got a master's degree at Fayetteville. But, no, my mother didn't go to college. She liked writing and had a gift for it, but never the time to work at it much. Fits and starts. A good poet with a good ear. But neither of them were wide readers. Again, maybe, because they didn't have the time. And, anyway, the Portises were talkers rather than readers or writers. A lot of cigar smoke and laughing when my father and his brothers got together. Long anecdotes. The spoken word. But he was something of a Bible scholar. And he read *The Congressional Record*, of all things. He had a taste for politics, local, national, all the ins and outs of the game. I didn't get that gene. I've often thought how much he would have enjoyed all this political stuff on cable television, the debates and hearings, all that.

RR: What was his name?

CP: Samuel Palmer Portis.

RR: And your mother's name?

CP: Alice Waddell. He met her in Norphlet. She was the daughter of a Methodist minister there. One of eleven children. None of them left now.

RR: There are three of you boys and one girl, right?

CP: Yes, my sister was the oldest. I was two years younger. She died in 1958.

RR: What was her name?

CP: Alice Kate, which she didn't like. She preferred "Aleece," spelled A-L-I-E-C-E. But I think that was partly to prevent confusion with my mother, who was also Alice.

RR: She died of what?

CP: A cerebral hemorrhage. She was just twenty-eight. Married and with two small sons.

RR: I had a sister who died at 29. It's . . .

CP: Yes, and my father never really got over it. She was his favorite. She had a very quick intelligence.

RR: I had a call the other day from your sister's son's wife.

CP: Sam Sawyer or Paul Sawyer?

RR: Sawyer, yes. Nathania.

CP: Nathania, yes, Paul's wife. She's writing a thesis on Harry Ashmore. She called me about that.

RR: I felt like she was right on top of it.

CP: Oh, yes, she would be. Diligent and well organized. She'll get it done.

RR: Well, Buddy, you have now worked for two newspapers that are no longer alive. Is there something about those papers that--did they have things in common?

CP: Well, the *Gazette* and the *Herald Tribune*, they were both good places to work.

RR: You mean, good people to be around?

CP: Yes, that's it, good company, and a pleasant atmosphere. I've been in other

newsrooms where you could feel the gloom and fear hanging about. People who hated their work and their bosses.

RR: Who were some of your favorite people at the *Trib*?

CP: Well, my favorite boss was my immediate boss, Buddy Weiss, the city editor. Murray Weiss, that is. Demanding, but always very good to me. He later went to Paris as editor of the European edition of the paper. His wife was from Snyder, Arkansas--he met her when he was in the Air Force, I think. He didn't believe me when I told him I knew Snyder well. He had never found anyone, even from Arkansas, who had ever heard of Snyder. But it's not far from Hamburg, in Ashley County. There was a succession of managing editors--Fendall Yerxa, Jim Bellows, Dick Wald--and they all treated me well, too. Better than I deserved.

RR: Who hired you?

CP: Dick West, a Yankee gentleman. He was the city editor before Buddy Weiss. I had sent him some clippings from the *Gazette* and asked about a job. He wrote back to say come by and see him when I was in New York. Not a firm offer. But I gave notice at the *Gazette* and went to New York, and he hired me. A little later he took a job at Grolier Encyclopedia. I remember those first few days at work. I would go over and ask Bob Poteete, the assistant city editor, for permission to call Chicago, Miami, wherever, having to do with some story I was working on. Bob had worked for the *Gazette*, too. He was from Perryville. Finally, he said, "Why do you keep asking me this?" I said, "Well, at the *Gazette* you had to get permission to make long-distance calls." He laughed, at my bush-league ways,

and said, "Hell, call whoever you please."

RR: Maybe that's why they went out of business. Yes, at the *Gazette* we not only had to get permission to make a long-distance call, we didn't even have our own phones. Remember, you and I shared a phone for a long time.

CP: Yes, I do remember. But Bob and I weren't the only *Gazette* hands on the paper. There was Inky Blackmon on the re-write bank. The legendary *Herald Tribune* re-write bank. But its glory days had faded by then. And later there was Bill Whitworth and Pat Crow. We had quite a few Southerners there. Fulbright?

RR: Newton Fulbright?

CP: Newt Fulbright, yes, from Texas. And Phil Carter, Hodding Carter's son, from Greenville, Mississippi. I remember once there was a call from Mayor Wagner's office. One of his aides had some statement to give us. Bob Poteete took the call, and he relayed it to Newt, who relayed it to Phil, who said he was tied up, too--a likely story--and he passed it on to me. The City Hall guy was mad over being pushed around like this, and by all these alien voices, and he said, "This is *The New York Herald Tribune*, isn't it?" I said it sure was. He mimicked my accent and said, "I thought maybe I had the bleeping Birmingham *Herald Tribune*."

RR: Well, it was pretty much the same with *The New York Times* in those days. *The Times* was a better paper for it, I always suspected.

CP: Yes, probably so. Still, you know, we like to think we were hired and promoted strictly on merit, but I've since wondered if there wasn't a certain amount of affirmative action going on then, favoring Southern boys. Hiring guys like us. I

hope it wasn't because we worked cheap. I remember this copy desk fellow one night in Bleeck's bar, in the rear of the *Tribune* building. Across from the old Metropolitan Opera. He was usually a very reserved fellow, but on this night he was drunk and raging. He had been passed over for promotion to, I think, assistant copy editor, and he said, "Well, I've learned one damned thing for sure. You're not going anywhere on this paper unless you went to Yale or you're from below the bleeping Mason-Dixon Line."

RR: Wonder who that was?

CP: I can't--I can see him now, but I can't call the name. It'll come to me.

RR: Was that the one you had the arm-wrestling contest with?

CP: Oh no, that--How did you know about that? That was down in the Village.

RR: You want to tell about that?

CP: There wasn't much to it. It was late one night in some joint down in Greenwich Village. The guy was from *The Times*, I believe.

RR: As I heard it, yes.

CP: We were sitting at the table, a few of us from the *Tribune*. Dennis Duggan, me, Warren Berry, I think. Maybe Penny Brown. And this fellow from *The Times*, who was a stranger to me. He wanted to arm-wrestle, and as I recall, he kept challenging me. So we went at it, and there was a pop. His arm broke. Very strange. He went into a kind of swoon, and it was Dennis, I think, who took him off to a hospital, somewhere down there near Sheridan Square.

RR: I heard he was a big husky guy.

CP: No, no, nothing like that. Just average size.

RR: Well, the story's been improved.

CP: It certainly has. I didn't know it was a story.

RR: Not twice as big as you and that kind of thing?

CP: No, that would have made it a story, but no. It was just a freakish thing. A weak bone or something.

[End of Tape One - Side Two]

[Beginning of Tape Two - Side One]

RR: All right. This is the second tape if I can get it to stand up. We were talking about life at the *Arkansas Gazette*. I just thought of something that Tom Wolfe said about you in print one time, having to do with Malcolm X. Do you remember that interview?

CP: Yes, in a studio at some radio station in New York. I can't imagine what I was doing there. Malcolm X and two or three reporters, including me. I was asking him about the "X" business. About why he would abandon the hated Anglo name of --- "Little," was it? "Malcolm Little?" --- and yet keep the "Malcolm" part, not a very African name. He said the difference was that some slave-owners had imposed the surname on his family, but his mother had given him the name of Malcolm. Good point. A sharp fellow. He treated me with a little less contempt because I said something about Marcus Garvey and the back-to-Africa movement. How it went nowhere. He treated the other reporters with slightly more contempt, I mean, because they were just asking topical questions that he was used to

dealing with. I think he later changed his name again, to something Arabic. He had a presence.

RR: Tom Wolfe, in this essay, said you addressed him throughout the interview as “Mr. X.”

CP: Yes, I probably did. But what can you do? To call him “Malcolm” would have been a little familiar, wouldn’t it? And, yes, Tom came to us from the *Washington Post*. He was polite enough not to roll his eyes when I asked if he might be related to the other Thomas Wolfe. He said he wasn’t, but it must have been a tiresome question for him then. I wonder if it comes up at all now.

Speaking of the other Wolfe, I remember that an old brig rat from Phenix City, Alabama, gave me a copy of *Look Homeward, Angel* at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, in 1954. An old corporal who had been promoted and busted a lot. More ribbons and hash marks than stripes. He said his girlfriend had read this entire book to him, and it wasn’t bad stuff to listen to. Do barmaids still do that?

It must have taken weeks. She worked in a bar in Jacksonville. Or maybe she was the only one who ever did it. I had never heard of Thomas Wolfe. It was a revelation. Chesty Puller, by the way, the legendary Chesty, was our commanding officer. Anyway, Tom, yes, he and Lewis Lapham were our better writers. Good writers are not always good newspaper reporters, but they were.

Lewis came from the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Or was the *Express*? I said, “San Francisco must be a good town for reporters,” and he said, yes, it was okay, but out there you were always dealing with the branch managers of things. New York

was the place. We were in the right place. Tom was a quiet and easy going fellow, one of the crew. The white suit was the only flamboyant thing about him. He raised the tone of things in the newsroom a bit. Probably not enough. We were general assignment reporters, and we sat there in a clump--Lewis, me, Edward Silberfarb, Tom. And Terry Smith, Jim Clarity, Phil Carter, Phil Cook.

RR: You remember Breslin?

CP: Jimmy Breslin, yes. He came later. Wrote a very popular column. I met him but didn't really know him. I think I must have gone to London not long after he came.

RR: I had to cover a story opposite him one time in Haneyville, Alabama, one of those Ku Klux trials down there, and Claude Sitton, my national editor, was on me because Breslin, you know, was a colorful writer, and Sitton wanted more of that in my copy. I treasure the day when I was able to call Sitton and say, "Did you see that long quote in Breslin's column today? Leroy Motten saying so and so?" I said, "It's all made up." Son of a bitch didn't say it. Even had it wrong. I mean he had been trying to badger--

CP: Not well fabricated?

RR: No, not well fabricated. So I took great joy in being able to point that out. That was the last I heard from Sitton on that subject.

CP: Well, you know, Claude and I worked together on all that civil rights turmoil in the South. The early sixties. Or rather we worked against each other. He with the *Times* and me with the *Tribune*.

RR: Did you spend much time down there?

CP: Quite a bit, yes. I didn't care much for beat reporting, covering the same thing day after day.—short attention span—but I went where I was sent. First to Albany, Georgia, where Dr. King was in jail for—I think it was “parading without a permit.” Then to Birmingham and that all-night riot there. Then to Mississippi and then back to Alabama, with Governor Wallace “standing in the schoolhouse door.” I may have the sequence wrong. Those things have all run together in my head.

RR: Oh, you were at Tuscaloosa for that?

CP: Yes, I was there. It was a staged event, more or less. The outcome wasn't in doubt. Those black students were going to be admitted to the University of Alabama. Wallace had been meeting with Robert Kennedy and Nicholas Katzenbach, and he wanted a big show of federal force there, a lot of marshals, when he made his defiant speech—which reminds me of Leander Perez, that segregationist boss down in Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana. Earl Long said to him, “What you gonna do now, Leander? Da Feds have got da H-bomb.” Some of it was the Civil War being replayed as farce.

RR: Inky Blackmon. Wasn't he an old *Gazette* man?

CP: Yes, in the 1930s. He must have gone to the *Herald Tribune* in the early 1940s. Maybe the first Arkie there, unless you count Henry Stanley in the 1870s. The reporter who found Dr. Livingstone in Africa. Stanley grew up on a plantation down around Pine Bluff. Something Bayou. Plum Bayou? He worked for the

old *Herald*, which merged with the *Tribune* in the 1920s.

RR: I forget Inky's first name.

CP: Marion, I think. M. C. Blackmon. He wrote some stories for *The New Yorker*, and I think that's how he gave his name. I probably shouldn't call him an Arkie. He set me straight on that point. "I'm from Louisiana, not Arkansas," he said to me. "I only worked in Arkansas for a time." But he retired to Little Rock, not Louisiana. He stood apart from everybody at the bar in Bleeck's and drank spritzers--those white wine and soda things. Not much of a talker. He did tell me once that he was proud of the work he had done at the *Gazette* in putting together a historical supplement in 1936. A big statehood centennial thing. Mostly a one-man project, I gathered.

RR: One of Mr. Heiskell's ideas.

CP: I'm sure it was. And a good one. Inky, I believe, was the very last of the old veterans on the *Herald Tribune* rewrite bank. Much celebrated in its day.

RR: Those old rewrite men--they were under-appreciated heroes.

CP: Yes, they were. And we still had a version of that system--of "leg men" and "rewrite men." The leg men were these mystery voices from out there in the police stations and courts and boroughs. You never saw those people. They would get the stuff and call it in. The rewrite men would type it all up, very fast, into coherent accounts. All neatly tailored to fit the exact space available--two paragraphs, five, a dozen. Great short-order cooks. They were facile writers, and I don't mean that in a slighting way. They could bat it out. Harry Ashmore could

do that, you remember? He wrote fast about as well as he wrote slow. The news magazines adopted that system--the hunter/gatherers out in the field and the writers in the office.

RR: You said you and Tom Wolfe worked on rewrite.

CP: Yes, and Lewis, too. Inky didn't approve of our banter and laughing during the lulls--unseemly conduct on the rewrite bank. We were all pressed into that duty at one time or another, particularly in the summers, when people were on vacation. Shanghaied into it. I could do it, after a fashion, but I wasn't comfortable working with a pile of facts gathered by someone else. They weren't quite real to me. And every reporter, no matter how senior, had to write obituaries now and then. A good policy. They were regarded as news stories and were to be written, not just dashed off. Of course, we didn't have to report every death in the city either. I'm forgetting Sanche here. He was working rewrite one night and won a Pulitzer Prize. Sanche De Gramont. It was in that category of reporting under deadline pressure. Some Metropolitan Opera star had collapsed and died during a performance. I think it was Leonard Warren. The Met was nearby and Sanche raced over there on foot and got the stuff. Then he ran back and knocked out a full account of it in just a few minutes, right on deadline.

RR: De Gramont?

CP: Sanche De Gramont, yes. A French count. Ancient family. Not that he traded on that. In fact, Sanche later became an American citizen and changed his name to Ted Morgan.

RR: That's Ted Morgan?

CP: Yes. He wrote a good book on Africa, about the Niger River, and a biography of Somerset Maugham. Among others.

RR: It seems to me that Homer Bigart was on the rewrite desk at the *Times* after the *Trib* folded. Did you know Bigart?

CP: I knew who he was, certainly, his reputation, and I think I did meet him once somewhere. But I didn't know him.

RR: He might have been off covering some war.

CP: He could have been. Like Marguerite Higgins. She wasn't working for the *Tribune* then, but she came through the newsroom now and then. Our celebrity people were mostly in sports: Red Smith, Terry's father, and Stanley Woodward-- "Coach," we called him. But then later, Jimmy Breslin and Tom Wolfe. When Tom began doing those pieces for the Sunday magazine.

RR: Do you know if that story is true about Bigart or Marguerite Higgins? I guess it was well known that they despised each other, and when she got pregnant and Homer found out about it, he stuttered, "Oh, oh, oh, oh, really? Who, who, who, who's the mother?"

CP: Tough old gal, yes.

RR: The University of Arkansas Press reprinted a bunch of his foreign correspondence, war coverage, five or six years ago. Pretty good reading, even now.

CP: Holds up, does it?

RR: Yes. You were at the *Trib* how long?

CP: Let's see. Four years—1960 through 1964. Three years in New York and one in London.

RR: How did you like London?

CP: I liked it, but it was hard staying on top of the job. It was a juggling act. I was bureau chief, meaning administrative duties, and I was also the only reporter. So I wasn't chief of much. One reporter, down from, I don't know, a dozen or more, during World War II. In New York they had told me not to bother duplicating the wire service stuff. I was to do longer, leisurely things. But, of course, they wanted both, the breaking news and the longer pieces.

RR: That's a familiar story.

CP: Yes, and then running the office, too. We had other people there--John Crosby, who wrote a culture column, and Seymour Freidin, our Cold War man, who was usually off in the Balkans somewhere, but I was the only day-by-day reporter. Joseph Alsop would come through town, and I would have to send someone to his hotel to pick up his copy. He expected a lot of service and deference.

RR: Another familiar story.

CP: Yes, and we had Telex operators and a secretary and an advertising office. Stringers calling in from Scotland, book reviewers. There were cranks and complaints to deal with. Here's one. There were a lot of freeloaders in London who claimed to work for the *Herald Tribune*. The paper was known there from the international edition published in Paris. These scammers would wangle free

airline tickets and free meals at expensive restaurants, saying they were travel writers, critics, whatever. I finally nabbed one. The manager of a theater up around Piccadilly called to ask if so-and-so, who wanted some free tickets to the opening of a play, was a reviewer for the paper. I said, "No, but tell him to come pick up the tickets at a certain time." I would be there to deal with him. He showed, and we had some words there in the theater lobby. He insisted that he had done some reviewing for the *Tribune*. I took him back to the office and called New York. Someone in the arts section said, well, yes, he had written a single review for them, some years back, but wasn't authorized now to say he represented the paper. My one pitiful bust. I had to let him go on a technicality, with a warning not to try this again. All pretty silly, but we were getting a lot complaints from angry PR people and businessmen. They were flying the scammers, gratis, to Majorca, feeding them, entertaining them, but never saw anything in the paper about it. No reviews, no mentions, nothing. What was going on? The point being that I kept getting dragged away from reporting into these management comedies.

RR: Where were you?

CP: Not on Fleet Street. Our offices were in the Adelphi Building, just off the Strand, near the Savoy Hotel. It was a big fixed expense, that bureau, and probably should have been shut down at that stage of things. Hard to do, I suppose, for prestige reasons, but it really was a white elephant by that time. The *Tribune* should have just kept a couple of correspondents in London, working

unencumbered, out of their apartments. Or in some little cubicle on Fleet Street with a desk and a telephone. Sending the stuff back by commercial cable. We could have called it a bureau. This was the time, you remember, of “Swinging London.” Not that all that many swingers were doing all that much actual swinging. Or no more than usual. Some journalist professes to see a pattern, and he gives it a name that catches on. Others take it up and inflate it. Then your editor wants a “Swinging London” story, so you go out and find some swingers. Tom Lambert told me what I was in for. A good man. I replaced Tom there, and he stayed on for a couple of weeks to show me the ropes and introduce me around. David Bruce was the U. S. Ambassador. Archie Roosevelt was the CIA station chief, though, of course, he wasn’t called that. It was a busy station then. A grandson of Theodore. I bought Camel cigarettes through a Marine gunnery sergeant at the embassy. The prime minister was Sir Alec Douglas-Home. He gave us--a handful of American correspondents--one or two off-the-record interviews and spoke of Lyndon Johnson as, “your, uh, rather racy president.” Referring, I suppose, to Johnson’s barnyard humor. I had Karl Marx’s old job there, you know. He was the London correspondent for Horace Greeley’s *New York Tribune* in the 1850s. Dick Wald was my New York boss, and I told him once that the *Tribune* might have saved us all a lot of grief if it had only paid Marx a little better. Dick didn’t take the hint. Well, a small joke. I was paid well enough.

RR: Did you have trouble, too, with the telephones in London?

CP: Oh, yes, all the time. Those strange clicks and wrong numbers. Broken connections. Tom said some of the clicks were taps, the crude wiretaps of the day. He said the British intelligence services had taps on all the phones in foreign news bureaus. But sometimes it was worse when the phones did work. Randolph Churchill called one day, drunk and rambling on. Something about his son's forthcoming wedding. It was around four in the afternoon, our early deadline, a bad time. I was knocking out a last-minute piece, so I was a little impatient with him, trying to keep him to the point, whatever it was. Impossible--he wouldn't listen. Our chief Telex operator was a little, round old fellow, a cockney worry-wart named Frankie Williams, and he was hovering and checking his watch and chirping away at me. "Oh, Charlie, Charlie, you really must work faster. New York wants this copy now." New York was a fearful place to him. And to Frankie I was one of those hapless Japanese embassy clerks in Washington, trying to peck out a long declaration of war in an alien language. I waved him off and told Churchill we were pretty busy here and that it would help if he could maybe give me the gist of all this. He said, "Perhaps if you would stop interrupting me, I could tell you!" And that his good friend, Jock Whitney, would be hearing very soon about my "brusque manner" with him. Randolph Churchill, wounded by bad manners. I told him to call back when he was more or less sober. I never heard anything from Mr. Whitney, on that score. That's John Hay Whitney, who owned the paper.

RR: And how long were you in London?

CP: A year. As I say, the *Tribune* people had always treated me very well, but I wanted to try my hand at fiction, so I gave notice and went home. On a ship this time, the *Mauretania*, a Cunard liner. I went second class, which was called “cabin class.” Meant to sound less offensive. But I did have a cabin to myself, and there were so few passengers, as it turned out, that we were all lumped together with the first-class group for dining and such things. Everyone was solicitous--the stewards, the officers. Was I quite comfortable? Would I like another cabin? A tour of the ship? A complimentary drink or two? I was assigned to the purser’s table for meals. One afternoon I was out on deck alone, enjoying the bleak North Atlantic. This was November of 1964. It was a cold crossing and a fairly rough one. The purser joined me there at the rail for a chat. Then he began hemming and hawing, trying to ask me something that was embarrassing to him. Finally I got the drift of it. Put bluntly, his questions would have been: Just who are you? Should we know you? If you are so important, why are you traveling cabin class? The Cunard office, he said, had marked me down on the passenger list as one of the notables, to be shown special attention. I laughed and said, well, I couldn’t explain it. Some mix up there. I was no VIP and no mystery figure, only a newspaper reporter, and an unemployed one at that. I said they had obviously mixed me up with some very distinguished passenger, who was now being snubbed by everybody and shut out of all the shipboard fun. But it was okay with me if they would like to continue these courtesies. Later that day it came to me, what must have happened. This had to be the work of

Frankie Williams. He must have called the Cunard people about my passage, telling them Lord knows what. Or more likely he wrote them in some very formal way on a *Herald Tribune* letterhead. Frankie was still taking care of me and the dignity of the bureau. This was one of the *Mauretania*'s last runs--if not the last--on that regular service from Southampton to New York. Too bad. The apple green *Mauretania*. Big jet planes had taken away the business.

RR: Let me just fill in a couple of small gaps. When and where were you born?

CP: December 28, 1933, in El Dorado, Arkansas.

RR: Oh, you're just a kid.

CP: A few weeks ago I had to dig out that birth certificate. An ominous Dr. Slaughter delivered me.

RR: Born in El Dorado and lived in . . . ?

CP: Well, let's see. Norphlet, El Dorado, Mount Holly and Hamburg. All roughly on a line along the Louisiana border.

RR: And went to school in all those places?

CP: Yes, except for Norphlet. I was too young there. I went to the first two grades in El Dorado, at Hugh Goodwin School, then to Mount Holly, and then to Hamburg for the eighth through twelfth grades.

RR: I remember you once wrote a letter to the editor of the *Gazette*, denying that you were from El Dorado. I don't know how you put it, but . . .

CP: I think that was about some reference in the paper, saying I was from El Dorado, period. I was setting things straight. A quibble. I must not have had much to do

that day.

RR: Right, okay. Since the newspaper days you've been in the novel writing business.

CP: Yes.

RR: You have written six?

CP: Five.

RR: And occasional non-fiction?

CP: Now and then, yes. Keeping my hand in.

RR: Was the most recent one for *The Atlantic*? For Bill Whitworth?

CP: Yes, I believe it was.

RR: Buddy, can you think of anything we haven't covered about the *Gazette*, or anything else?

CP: No, that pretty well does it.

RR: Okay, if I think of something else, I'll call you. Thanks very much.

CP: You're welcome.

[End of Interview]