

SUM FNP 38

David Lawrence

This is an oral history of David Lawrence given August 7, 1999. The interviewer is William McKeen. Not only is the purpose of the interview to record part of Florida's newspaper history, but to record the life story of David Lawrence for the Florida Press Association.

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Lawrence was the second oldest of nine children born to his mother, herself one of ten children and member of a New York Social Register family, and his father, youngest of eleven children from a New York Real estate family. His father was a newspaper man working for *The New York Sun*, of "yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus" fame when his parents in 1946, inspired by living the rural life, moved to upstate New York near Syracuse to farm a thirty-three acre chicken farm.

Lawrence states he so admired and respected his father he had intentions of an agriculture degree and becoming a farmer. His plan was altered, however, when his parents decided farming was not that glamorous, and wanted to move to a warmer climate. Florida was chosen in part because it was the winter broadcast home of a TV show they liked to watch, *Author Godfrey*. In 1956 the family moved, with his father having no definite plans for employment. In Florida, his father sold real estate, and later was employed on a Sarasota newspaper, ending up working for *The Orlando Sentinel* the last seventeen years of his life. He earned a spot in the Florida Journalism Hall of Fame. Lawrence stated he so admired his father that he decided to go into journalism. He was editor of the Manatee High school newspaper, and at fifteen worked in his father's newspaper office rewriting press releases and working in the composing room. Lawrence describes how newspapers have changed, and discusses the changing nature of the journalist.

Lawrence talks about his years at the University of Florida. He describes how he came to be editor of the *Alligator*, and how he lost his position. He was the *Alligator* editor when President John Kennedy was assassinated, and talks about that.

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Lawrence talks more about the role of Dr. J. Wayne Reitz and the item Lawrence printed that got him fired as editor of the *Alligator*. He adds the *Alligator* offices were in the basement of the Florida Union., and talks more about the times of 1963, including his days at the University of Florida and some his outstanding teachers, Hugh Cunningham and "Buddy" Horace Gibbs Davis, Jr. After graduation Lawrence went to *The St. Petersburg Times*, where he had interned summers. He describes both his life at this point and his job at *The St. Petersburg Times*, along with some of the people he worked with. He expresses good feelings about Nelson Poynter [president 1953-1969 Times Publishing Co., and chairman of the board 1969-1978]. Lawrence says he believes Florida has many good newspapers because of the economic boom, allowing a good financial base for newspapers. Lawrence describes *The St. Petersburg Times* as an elitist newspaper with a soul He believes that people in the newspaper business know little about the communities they serve. Important events in his life include the four years he worked for *The*

*Philadelphia Daily News* and going through the advanced management program of the Harvard Business School. Lawrence recites his list of jobs from the time of his three and a half years at *The St. Petersburg Times* at the end of 1963: he worked the news desk at *The Washington Post*, became news editor of *Style*, and then managing editor of *The Palm Beach Post* from 1969 - 1971, then went to *The Philadelphia Daily News* as assistant to the editor and later managing editor until 1975. He became executive editor for three and a half years at *The Charlotte Observer*, then executive editor at *The Detroit Free Press* in 1979. He was publisher of the *Free Press* in 1985, leaving in 1989 to come to Miami.

He describes his return to Florida in 1969 as the time he began to get a “sense.” He talks about the governors he knew; Ruben Askew, Claude Kirk, Bob Graham, and Lawton Chiles.

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Lawrence talks about his experiences at *The Palm Beach Post*. After he came to the paper, he mentions the paper’s new aggressiveness caused a lot of people to be nervous. He learned on the job, and notes they hired a lot of people new and they were all so young they did not know the normal roadblocks to doing good things. They won numerous awards including the Pulitzer Prize in 1970 for “Migration to Misery,” by Dallas Kinney. Lawrence compares his father’s career with his and notes they followed different paths in the newspaper business: his father spent the majority of his life as a reporter rather than editor.

Lawrence talks about his days at *The Palm Beach Post* in a county with both wealth and poverty. He mentions projects they tackled, including one on drugs, and sending a reporter to Viet Nam.

He left the Palm Beach Post for *The Philadelphia Daily News*, then left for *The Charlotte Observer* where he worked first as executive editor and later editor. His influence there was to present a fuller picture of how life was in that part of the world. Part of his strategy for accomplishing this was to send reporters inside textile mills all around the Piedmont of North and South Carolina.

From *The Charlotte Observer* he left for *The Detroit News*. He moved that paper to better represent the community it served by hiring minorities. Competition between *The Free Press* and *The Detroit News* caused both papers to teeter on the verge of bankruptcy. A proposed merge would have combined business operations, but left separate the newsrooms. Lawrence mentions it took four years in a decision by the United States Supreme court to get the Joint Operating Agreement. The competition between the two papers inspired good journalism, he felt. It also promoted a tendency for each to copy the other, rewriting stories in the hope of doing it better, which was a handicap to original material.

Lawrence left Detroit because the JOA [Joint Operating Agreement] between the two newspapers, which would mean a position of lesser responsibility for him. He mentions he is a very competitive person and did not want to be a part of combined operations. Knight-Ridder Inc. wanted him to run *The Miami Herald* and *El Nuevo Herald*. He accepted this position. Lawrence discusses *The Miami Herald* in some depth, talking about its problems and strengths, and talks about the many changes ongoing in Miami.

After ten years at *The Miami Herald* and thirty years in the newspaper business, Lawrence decided to leave. He felt the newspaper business had become far more of a business than it should. He became interested and involved in early childhood development and education after Governor Chiles had asked him to be on the governor’s Commission on Education. His friends formed a foundation that allowed him to remain in Miami, and The Early Childhood Initiative Foundation was born.

Today, Lawrence says he never looked back. He was asked to run for public office, but declined, saying the timing was not right.