

FNP 42

Interviewee: Al Burt

Interviewer: Dr. Jean Chance

Date: October 6, 1999

C: This is Wednesday, October 6, 1999. I am with Al Burt at the Burt Plantation outside Melrose. This is an interview for the Florida Press Association Oral History Project, and I am going to talk today about Al's very varied career in journalism. Al, can you talk a little bit about how you got to this first journalism job?

B: While I was at the University, I worked on summers and weekends for the old *Jacksonville Journal*. It was an afternoon paper [which], now, no longer exists. Then, after graduation, I taught English for one semester at a high school in Jacksonville Beach.

C: What year was that?

B: I graduated in June of 1949, and I taught in the fall of 1949. I had applications in for a number of jobs in journalism, and I took this English teaching job. I had been an English[-education] major and while I was waiting [for job offers], I was going to decide which I wanted to do. I had met the United Press correspondent in Jacksonville, a man named Bill Leslie, who had urged me to go to work for United Press, so that was one of the places that I had applied. During that fall, they offered me a job in Atlanta. At the semester break, I took the job with them. The first thing I did there was write radio copy. They put nearly all the newcomers to work rewriting the news wire for the radio wire. This was probably the best training I ever had, to take a 600- or 700-word story and boil it down to two sentences for the radio. I did this for about six months, I guess. I learned how to work under pressure. They would, what they call split the wire, so that the radio wire coming into it, one of them, was cut off. I would rewrite a bunch of [state] copy to insert in there, and then we would pick up the national wire again. Among the other jobs I had applied for while I was still teaching was with the *Atlanta Journal*. I had been with the United Press for about a year, I guess, and the *Atlanta Journal* called and asked me to come over there. That was where I had always wanted to go, so I moved over to the *Atlanta Journal* and worked there as a sportswriter for Ed Danforth, who was the old sports editor there. He was well-known guy at the time. I wound up covering Southeastern Conference sports for the *Atlanta Journal* for a couple of seasons, I guess. I began to have some back trouble, and I went into the Emory clinic there. They told me I needed to take it easy for a while. [Because of] a combination of things of that sort, I left the *Atlanta Journal*, and I went back to the *Jacksonville Journal*, which had been my hometown.

C: And you still had family?

- B: My parents were still there then. They are passed on now. So, I went back and was a sportswriter for the *Jacksonville Journal*, but I then began to do a lot of desk work. I laid out the pages and edited them and so forth for four or five years. The *Miami Herald* offered me a job in 1955, I believe it was.
- C: In Jacksonville, who are some of the people that you remember working closely with at the *Journal*?
- B: Joe Livingston was the sports editor. Bob Dow, Jr. was the managing editor. Tom Logue was the city editor. There are a number of reporters I remember: Bill Sweisgood, who later became the editor of the editorial page at the *Times Union*, a guy named Doug Danford, who had worked for *New Yorker* magazine and had come back home to Jacksonville. The *Journal* was a collection of talented people. It was a little bit like the "Old Front Page" [a play and movie about newspaper reporters]. They had a craps game every Friday night after pay day in the basement, and the staff had regular poker games, two or three times a week as I recall.
- C: Did they sell the paper on the street during rush hour with people going home?
- B: They did. I think they called it a blueline special, or something of that sort, and sold it on the street, but they also had home delivery. It was much the smaller paper. The *Times Union* was the dominant paper. Working in that sort of underdog atmosphere was terrific. It was just terrific, because the staff felt very much a part of a team. They were irreverent, and many of them were very talented. I saw a side of the newspaper business that I probably have not seen since, more like what I imagined it was like in the old days. It was a pleasant place to work but not much money and not much future [which was] not an uncommon thing in journalism, especially in those days. Anyway, I floated some feelers around the state and got one from the *Atlanta Constitution* and one from the *Miami Herald* and decided to go to the *Herald*. The *Herald* was a place I had heard a lot about and did not know much about. I thought at the time that either the *Atlanta Journal* or the *Miami Herald* were the two places to work in the South. I had been to Atlanta, so I went to Miami this time.
- C: Were you and Gloria married at that time?
- B: We were not married. I was single. I had known Gloria since I was a kid, a teenager, but we had not married yet.
- C: Was she from Jacksonville?
- B: She was from Atlanta. I had relatives in Atlanta, and I knew her through them. In Miami, I began as a sportswriter and covered collegiate sports for one or two

seasons, not very long, and then began doing desk work. Most of my time in sports there was as a desk man: laying out pages, handling pictures, making assignments, and that sort of thing. The executive sports editor was a guy named Bob Elliott, who was a very talented fellow. He let me do a lot of things and taught me a lot of stuff. I began to feel that my time in journalism would be spent as an editor, probably. After I had been in sports, and I think it was 1958 or 1959, they came in and asked me if I would leave sports and take over the Broward County bureaus for the *Herald*. The *Herald* then had a bureau in Fort Lauderdale and Hollywood, and they were looking to strengthen that coverage up there and do a lot of expansion. They had a twice-weekly special section in addition to a local page daily that they ran, so I went up there as the—I think they called me chief of the Broward County bureaus, and stayed there. We opened up another bureau in Pompano. It was a learning year for me. For anybody who switches from sports to news, the first year is painful. I went through that in Fort Lauderdale, thank goodness, [because] it was a good place to go through it. At that time, Fort Lauderdale was not the metropolis it is today, although it was a fair-sized city. After having been there for about a year, Al Neuharth [founder of *USA TODAY*], who was [then] city editor of the *Herald*, asked me to come down and be night city editor at the *Herald*. He had just been promoted to, I think, assistant managing editor. So, in 1959, I think it was, I went down to that job and about a year later, they made me city editor. In between those times though, in January of 1961, I was night city editor, and my shift was one o'clock to ten o'clock or something, which was the way they laid it out. So, I was putting together the local page at night on the desk. I got to work one day in January, and they were having a big meeting and called me in there. They were trying to find somebody to send to Cuba. Cuba had just broken relations with the United States, and there was all this talk about possible war, a lot of rumors mostly, but the relations were quite strained with [Fidel] Castro [communist dictator of Cuba, 1959-present] nationalizing U. S. businesses and so forth. At this meeting, George Beebe was the managing editor and Al Neuharth was assistant managing editor. John McMullan was also an assistant managing editor. Derick Daniels was the executive city editor. They were sitting around talking about who they should send, and they could not decide. They would decide on somebody and then say, oh, we better not send him [because] he is married and has children, and that sort of thing.

C: Now, was Don Bohning . . . ?

B: Don Bohning was not part of it at that time, no. So I said, listen, I would like to go; I would be happy to go. I said, I have been to Cuba a number of times, am familiar with it, and I think it would just be terrific; I would really enjoy it. So, I had gotten to work at one o'clock and at three o'clock, I was on the plane to Havana. I stayed over there for a week, and they were throwing U.S. correspondents in jail, one after the other. Luckily, I avoided that. It was a time when Castro was

preparing for war. They were lining up these artillery pieces along the Malecon, and they had marshaled everybody as part of the militia, even down to teenage kids. The whole island was just a garrison. During that time, I wrote a series of stories. They even had guards on the churches, for example. If you went to a church, you had to pass through Cuban military people to get there. It was a time of turmoil, and correspondents were just being arrested for almost nothing. Whatever they did was wrong. It did not make any difference. There did not seem to be any pattern to it.

C: Did you do anything consciously to avoid being arrested?

B: I did two things. One, I tried to be very open about what I did. I assumed that whatever I did, I was under surveillance, and I tried to be very honest and frank in all of my conversations.

C: How did you communicate with Miami?

B: By telephone, assuming that everything I said was being listened to. It was about a week I was there, and everything that you could see and do and write about was dramatic. I had some really good stories. Everybody over there had great stories, because that was just the way it was. At the end of that period, later that year, I won an Ernie Pyle Award for correspondence. I just had a great time. I just loved it. Right after I got back, the Bay of Pigs [failed invasion of Cuba by U.S.-backed Cuban exiles] came along. I was there in January, and Bay of Pigs was in April, of 1961. The *Herald* did not have good luck with the Bay of Pigs. Their coverage was poor. They knew it, but it was a situation where nobody had very good coverage. You could not get people into Cuba to see what was happening. You relied on the Cuban Revolutionary Council, which was the sponsoring Cuban exile organization. It had a public relations outfit in New York giving out news releases. United Press had a monitoring radio thing on the roof of one of the local hotels, and that was how they were getting their reports. So, it was a nightmare to cover, and nobody did well. The *Herald* did not do well in that, and they felt embarrassed that things had not gone right. As a result of that period, they decided to create a Latin American department, which they had not had before. Meanwhile, they sent me to Washington, and I worked out of Washington for several months. They gave me the choice of going to Washington as the news chief, the number two man in the bureau to Ed Lahey, with the prospect of eventually taking over from Lahey, or being Latin America editor. Both of those would have involved national and international coverage and if I had gone to Washington, I would have gotten into Latin stuff. But based on my experience in Havana in January, I took the Latin [option] because I was just so intrigued by it and it was so much fun.

C: A perfect timetable, was it not?

- B: Yes, it was. So from that point on, until 1965 when I got shot in the Dominican Republic, I was Latin America editor of the *Herald*. Initially, I was by myself. Dom Bonafede was there for a while. Then, he went to the Washington bureau. When Dom left, we brought in Don Bohning, who had been Hollywood bureau chief. Don came in, and I did most of the traveling at the time while Don stayed inside. We switched off some, and he did some traveling too. It was great. I visited all the Central American countries, all the island countries, and nearly all the South American countries with the exception of Bolivia, I believe, and British Guiana which later became Guyana. Things went well. It was a good experience for me, and I liked it a lot. During that period, I was back and forth [to] Cuba a number of times, when it was difficult to get in. It was something I enjoyed. I remember having to go to Cuba by way of Mexico. It was ninety miles from Miami. I had to go to Mexico to get a visa, fly into Cuba from Mexico, and then I came out by way of Spain. By 1965, most of my coverage time was spent either in Central America or in the islands, because that was the area that the *Herald* reached with home circulation in those days. The *Herald* home circulation was curtailed eventually by Castro, but [at one time] we had home delivery in Cuba, home delivery in Jamaica, and home delivery in many of the Central American countries. So, it was sort of the backyard of the *Herald*. In 1965, the Dominican [Republic] began heating up. I had been there in April, I think it was, as things had begun. In the period leading up to that, [Rafael] Trujillo [former dictator] had been assassinated, and there had been a series of governments [eventually giving way to] Juan Bosch, the first democratically-elected president [in] about thirty years. Bosch went into exile. He was the figurehead of the forces trying to throw out the military *junta*. It set up a situation in 1965 for a civil war to break out, with one side representing the Bosch ideals loosely and the other representing the military and more conservative [side]. In April, there had been a [military-backed] civilian triumvirate that was in charge of the country. In April, I had been there, and I spent a lot of time talking to Donald Read Cabral, [a member of the triumvirate and] spokesman for the government. I had been back in Miami just a short while when--I think it was April 24--President [Lyndon B.] Johnson [thirty-sixth U.S. president, 1963-1969] sent in the Marines, because of the civil war that broke out. The stated purpose was to protect U.S. citizens and U.S. property in the Dominican Republic. There was a big controversy about it at the time. U.S. policy, in the wake of Cuba, had been pretty strongly to prevent anything else like Castro from happening again. So, in anticipation of that, everything was all balled up into one policy. Johnson sent in the Marines largely to prevent another Castro. The stated purpose was to protect U.S. citizens and property, and it did that as well. But it was a combination.
- C: What was the *Herald's* editorial policy towards the Johnson policy at that time?
- B: I do not remember it clearly, but my memory is that it was supportive. The *Herald*, because of the closeness of Cuba and the large number of Cubans

there, had always taken a hard line against Castro, a harder line than I did personally, I would say. At the time Johnson sent in the troops, my memory is that they supported him in that move. There was some controversy about it. Anyway, I went back as soon as I could get in. By that time, the military controlled part of the town. The U.S. forces controlled [another] part of the town, and these Bosch forces who called themselves the Constitutionals controlled the old town. I came in during a cease-fire. The U.S. troops went in first and pacified the situation, and these camps formed. Then, the Organization of American States sanctioned the United States occupation and sent in troops of their own so that it was not just a United States thing. It was a O.A.S. project. I went in during a cease-fire, and that set up the accident I had down there when I got shot. The Dominican thing more or less, although it happened concurrently, sort of foreshadowed what happened later in Vietnam with the press and the military, in terms of the press challenging the military and questioning the things they were saying about what they were doing and the motives of what they were doing.

C: Were your stories reflecting this?

B: I had come in after the first three or four days. My stories were trying to tell people what it was like there, what was happening. I had not gotten into much of the policy part of it, yet. Photographer Doug Kennedy was with me. On the morning of May 6, during the cease-fire, Doug and I had hired a car and driver for a couple of days. We wanted to go over to the Constitutionals' side. You have to understand that the situation in Santo Domingo [during the cease-fire] was that people were going back [and forth] between the Constitutionals' side and the U.S.'s side and the military positions [more or less] freely. With a cease-fire, they had to pass through military lines but they were allowed to do this. It was a controlled exchange. That morning, Doug and I went to the U.S. Embassy to see Ambassador [William] Tapley Bennett [Jr., U.S. ambassador to the Dominican Republic, 1964-1966; to Portugal, 1966-1969], whom I had known for some time. We wanted to be sure that we knew how to proceed and what to do and what the military position was. You know, we just wanted to know what the rules were for correspondents. I saw Bennett and talked to him, and he said we could do whatever we wanted to but to be sure we identified ourselves properly and identified our car properly. He called in General Bruce Palmer, who was the commanding general of all the U.S. forces [and, later, the O.A.S. forces too]. We talked to General Palmer, and he said the same thing. So then, we took the car and went through the checkpoints over to the Constitutionals' sector and spent a couple of hours over there talking to people and looking. The United States had released a list of communists that they said were [influencing] the Constitutionalist side in their civil war, and nobody had ever been able to locate these guys. So, one of the things we wanted to do other than talking to the people who were running the Constitutionals was to see if we could find any of

these thirteen communists who were supposed to be behind this thing. We had the list when we went over there. Of course, we did not find them. We looked. We talked to the military commander, a guy named Colonel Caamano, who had been in the Dominican army, and he became, sort of, the military head of the Constitutionalist forces. Then, a guy named Hector Aristy was sort of the spokesman for the Constitutionals. So, we talked to Caamano and Aristy and gathered material. Doug got a lot of pictures. There were blockades along the waterfront and a lot of, I guess you could say, signs of there having been some battles. The day before, I had spent time with a group from Fort Bragg, army paratroopers, at a position on George Washington Avenue, which is a seaside boulevard there, at a checkpoint where the people coming down from the Constitutionals' side toward this checkpoint had to stop and turn right before they would be allowed to go into the [U.S.] sector. At that checkpoint was an armored personnel carrier with a thirty-caliber machine gun on top of it as a barrier, and there were Marines there as well as paratroopers. I had spent the afternoon with them talking to them about what they were doing and why, what it was like and what their concerns were. So, the next day when Doug and I were inside the rebel sector, we decided to go back to that position where I had been the previous day. As we approached that position in our car, a little blue Rambler, it had taped across the front windshield two large words, nine or ten inches high each; one said PRENSA, and the other said PRESS, both meaning the same thing, to identify ourselves and what we were up to. As we approached that checkpoint, coming down the boulevard, a Marine stepped out to the side and signaled us to stop. On one side [of us] was water. On [the other] side was a sidewalk and a low wall and then some large buildings that previously had been homes. I think one [had become] an insurance company. So, we stopped, and then they gave us conflicting signals: come forward, go back, come forward, go back.

C: How far was this officer from you?

B: We were within a city block. I can only estimate, but I would say it was no more than fifty yards, no less. We could see the people. So our driver, who was a Dominican, after about the third conflicting signal telling us to go back, he put the car in reverse sharply. I cannot remember whether the tires screeched or not, but it was very sharply. As he did that, the Marines opened fired on us. Doug was in the front seat next to the driver. I was in the back sort of looking between them. The first shots blew out the windshield. I hit the floor, and the car just rolled backward sideways [with] the rear wheels against the curb away from the water so that the car was at an angle toward where the Marines and paratroopers were. They continued firing the machine guns, [and] the Marines [also used] what were, I think, M-15 jungle rifles. They later became the thing to use. I do not know how long it went on, but it seemed a lifetime sort of thing, just tremendously loud noises, the windshield blown out. You could just feel the car

shuddering. I was lying on the floorboard in the backseat. The driver and Doug were the closest. The driver got hit. His doorway was on the side away from the U. S. forces. He rolled out of the car and came around the side and ran off. All he had to do was cross a sidewalk and there was a wall there he could get behind, and he left. Doug was hit seriously with the first shots. One came across the top of head and just tore a little furrow in his scalp. His leg was broken, and he was hit a number of times and bleeding badly. As I was lying on the floorboard in the back with my right side angled toward the Marines, I could feel the bullets hitting me all up and down my right side. They were coming through the car with loud noises. Remember, it is hard to estimate time in a situation like that. It seemed like a long time, [and] I remember feeling I was going to be killed for certain. I did not see any way These are things that just sort of go through your mind.

C: And you were actually hit nine times?

B: Yes, nine times. I did not think there was any way that I was going to be able to get out of there, so I just laid there. All I could do was just lie there and wait. One fragment hit me in the chin right here, and then blood started coming down. Then, all up and down the right-hand side, I was hit, principally in the side, in the buttock area and down my right thigh. I was lying on that thing in the back, that little hump, so they hit the highest portion. So, then the shooting stopped. Doug started calling out to me, Al, Al, Al. I said, yes. He said, you have to get me out of here; I am bleeding to death. As I was being hit . . . you know, people always wonder, what does it feel like to get shot? Well, it is like being hit with the blunt end of an axe. It just jars your whole body when the bullet hits you, but it immediately goes numb so that you do not feel any immediate pain. So, my whole right side was numb. I did not know how badly I was hurt. I knew that I had been hit and that there was blood all up and down the right side and that I had been hit badly, but I did not know to what extent, internally, the injuries were. And I said, Doug, I do not know whether I can move or not; I do not know what it will do to me if I move. He said, well, if you do not move, I am going to bleed to death. So I said, all right, I will try. So, I kicked the door open, down toward my feet there, and opened it and twisted around in the car and started shouting to the Marines, identifying myself. We were close enough that they could hear.

C: What did you say?

B: I cannot remember exactly. I think I shouted, I am a U.S. newspaperman, I am a U.S. journalist; I was with you yesterday, and do not shoot, something to that effect. There is no way I can remember the words.

C: Were they saying anything back to you at all?

- B: No, they were not saying [anything] at all. I pushed the door open, and I managed to just sort of lean against the side of the car. As soon as I got my feet on the ground, I passed out. The next thing I knew, I was down there with the Marines. Somebody came up there and got me and dragged me down to their position. There was a medic tending me. When I woke up, Doug was not there. I said, did you get Doug? No. I said, well, he is bleeding to death; you have to go get him. So, they then went down there and got him as well and did what they could to help us in sort of a field station there. They put us in the back of a jeep and carried us over to the Embajador Hotel, where they had a little helicopter landing field, and then airlifted us to a hospital ship out in the Bay there, the *U.S.S. Raleigh*, where we stayed for four or five days. Doug was operated on two or three times there, and I was operated on twice. By the time they got through with me, I was in a cast from my chest to my knees on both sides. I believe that May 6 was Thursday and on Sunday, they decided they had to send us to the Army hospital in North Carolina at Fort Bragg.
- C: How did you get word to the *Herald* about what had happened?
- B: There was an NBC crew at the station where I was shot. Ted Yates was one of them. I cannot remember the other guy's name. They filmed me talking to the Marines after having been shot. They filmed them loading me into the back of the jeep to be carried to the hospital station.
- C: So, you were a news maker?
- B: Yes, I was. There was another correspondent for the *Herald* [named] Lee Winfrey who was in Santo Domingo, and the *Herald* found out about it through him. It was a big story for that day. We were the first U.S. newsmen hurt in that fashion in some time.
- C: Were the military people apologetic, or did they just clam up?
- B: Sort of, half of them. The Marines never were very apologetic, just that they told me they had taken some sniper fire as we were approaching their position and that they thought it might be coming from the car. That was not something I was ever able to believe.
- C: Would you not have heard that from where you had been?
- B: Yes. The truth is, they were under orders not to fire unless they were fired upon and then only to return the fire where they could see it coming from. They violated those orders. They were young guys, late teens, early twenties, scared to death, under a lot of pressure, and they just made a mistake. The military spokesman there, some colonel, called the thing a tragic and unjustified

shooting. But, they never really flat-out admitted they just screwed up, which is what happened. Anyway, we went on up to Fort Bragg. I stayed there from May until about August or September. Doug, who was hurt worse than I was, eventually was taken up to Walter Reed [Army Hospital] in Washington because they felt like he needed more sophisticated care than they could give him at Fort Bragg. Doug came out of that crippled. One leg was shortened, and it was a difficult thing He went back to work and worked for a while but, two or three years later, he began to developing these difficult headaches. He could not understand things, and he began to lose his memory. It developed that he had a brain tumor, and he died from that. It never could be determined whether there was any association with his scalp wound and the tumors. It was one of things you could not tell.

C: How old was he at the time he died?

B: I would think he was probably in his early forties.

C: So, clearly, an untimely death?

B: Oh yes. He was engaged to be married to a girl from Detroit, Eileen, and they married in the hospital in Washington. I came back to the *Herald* that fall, and one of the first things I did was go back to the Dominican Republican. I did not know for sure then what life was going to be like for me. The doctors told me there was going to be a gradual process of deterioration, that my back and leg problems would get worse over time.

C: Now, how old were you at this time?

B: I was thirty-eight. So, what they said was generally true. I had a pre-existing kind of arthritic back, and this thing just worsened that. It developed over a period of time. It just got worse and worse. I began to get pressure on the spine that caused me to lose some feelings on my legs so that, now, I walk with two canes or the walker and, for long distances, use the wheelchair. I am getting off the subject a little bit, I think, but that was an experience that I have told a lot of times, and I cannot tell it without being affected by it, still. Someone asked me once how that experience affected me. The way it affected me was, I used to feel that I led a reasonably secure life and that I could do things, [and] as long as I did my part—was careful, followed the rules—I would probably be okay. My experience after that was that I was not okay. I began to feel that I might walk out of any door of any restaurant and encounter something that would be life-threatening. I just began to feel there was no security. Whether that was a justified feeling or not, that was what happened.

C: Would you describe this as, you felt apprehensive?

- B: Apprehensive, totally. I remember being in Havana after that and several people all wanted to ask about this: what happened and how do you feel about it? My memory is we were having lunch at the Floridita one time, which is a famous restaurant in Havana. Somehow I said, well, I can tell you how I feel: you walk out of the door of this restaurant, and you do not have any concern; I walk out of the door of this restaurant, and I think I had better be pretty damn careful because somebody might shoot me.
- C: Do you still feel that way today?
- B: To some extent. Not as much, but I have had nightmares for years about this whole thing, and always the same nightmare: lying helpless and something threatening me.
- C: Like the photos you have on the wall.
- B: But those photos, they have helped.
- C: Is that from *LIFE* magazine?
- B: No, that is taken from NBC film. Those moved on the Associated Press wire.
- C: What did the *Herald* run?
- B: They ran most of these pictures and some others. The one on the left shows me while the Marines were attending me. I have never smoked cigarettes [because] I never cared for them, but they handed me a cigarette and I smoked one that day. Someone said they wondered whether it was me because they saw me smoking. But you know, if they had handed me a tomato, I would have eaten it.
- C: At this stage, were you feeling the pain of the injury?
- B: Not until when I got to the Embajador Hotel, where the field station was and where they loaded me into the helicopter, [did] I began to feel pain. Then, when I got to the hospital ship, they did the surgery. When they put that cast on me, when I came out of the anesthetic, I was in severe pain. Somehow, the way they put that cast on me, it was in an awkward position or something. I was in severe pain there for several days. One interesting thing: while they were operating on me the first time, I woke up during the surgery. I was lying there in this operating room on the ship and I heard some guy say, what happened to this guy, he looks like he got hit by a grenade. All the muscles on my right hip had been blown away from the bullets and the fragments. Then, the other guys said something, and I do not know what it was. Then, I remember them saying, we have to have more blood. Somebody said, well, what is his blood type, and they said whatever

they said. It was not my blood type. And I raised up on the table. They later said, it was like somebody rising from the dead. I said, no, no, that is not my blood type. They said, oh, do not worry; this is universal type [so] you are okay. You know, I was hearing fragments and misunderstanding what they were saying. They thought it was kind of funny.

C: Now, were these Navy doctors?

B: Navy doctors, yes. Some of the people, I communicated with for a while after that. Some of them, later, were stationed at Guantanamo, and I got a couple of letters from them. They were very attentive, very nice, and they did their best, but it was a difficult situation.

C: Did you write about this, eventually, in the *Herald* at all?

B: I never wrote about the shooting.

C: You mention it in your books.

B: I mention it, yes, in sort of a shortened version.

C: Of course, you were in bad shape, and you were in the hospital at Fort Bragg. But then, you were ready to come back to work at the *Herald*, and you wanted to go back to the Dominican Republic.

B: Yes, I did.

C: What made you think that was important?

B: Well, it was the old thing about, you know, if a horse throws you, you want to get back on the horse so that you overcome whatever worries you have about that. My notion was, well, I am not in great shape, but there was no shooting or war at the time there.

C: At this time, had you and Gloria married?

B: No. I did not marry until about a year later. I should mention one thing about when I came back to the *Herald*, one of the great moments of my life, if you do not mind. When I got there, a young Cuban who worked for the *Herald*, named Carlos Martinez, came out to my place, picked me up, and said he wanted to take me to the office on my first day back. When I got there and walked into that big lobby of the building—you know it has about a three-story lobby—everybody in the building was in that lobby. The entire building.

- C: This was the new [building], and not the old *Herald* building.
- B: The building on the bay. Everybody in that building was there, and it was just the most moving thing. Newspaper people are notoriously cynical, non-sentimental, or however you want to put it. But, they were all there, and they all applauded when I came in. It was just a wonderful, wonderful day for me. When I got to the newsroom, they had balloons all over the place and banners and all that stuff. So, it was a terrific time.
- C: Now, at that point, you were having to use a cane to walk.
- B: Yes, I was using a cane. The newsroom gave me a silver-headed cane. I will always remember that. That was my first cane. I have it right there, over by the door. I will never give that up. It was a terrific time. And the city of Miami had an Al Burt/Doug Kennedy Day and a luncheon. They treated us so well. But then, I wanted to go back to the Dominican. Tapley Bennett was still the ambassador there. So, I could go back and see him and have a sort of inside track of being shown around and what was happening. It was still a time of unrest. It was still a time when there was shooting and things going on, but it was not a kind of warfare situation.
- C: How long from the time you were shot until the time you went back?
- B: From May to—I cannot remember the exact month but I would think it was—September or October, maybe even, at the latest, November. So, I went back and saw the Dominican thing as it had progressed to that point and might have seen it a little bit differently then. Some of the other guys who had been there all that time had just gotten used to all of that stuff. I was always struck about [the] people [being] so casual. There were bodies washing up in little creeks around. They were finding dead people, and their bodies were deteriorating. You would hear shots at night, and people had just become accustomed to that. Well, I had come in fresh. I was not accustomed to it, and I had been sensitized by having been shot myself so that when I saw all of that stuff, it had a great impact on me. I was in the home of some friends in the Dominican Republic one night, and there were some shots fired. The housewife could identify the caliber of the shot. They had heard it so often that they could, I think this is a certain millimeter or this is that or that was a certain kind of weapon. I was just struck by the fact that housewives had become so accustomed to those conditions that they could identify them by the sound, the weapons and perhaps even the caliber of them, and just become callous to the idea of bodies floating up every day. I wrote about that. That was my thing: I could come back in with a fresh look. I wrote, sort of, off-the-pace stuff there for a while. It had reasonable success. And I came back. I did some more traveling, but it was clear that I could not do [the things] that had been done before. It just was not possible for me to get out and

move around and encounter the unexpected and cope with it like I had before, so I decided not to try. I briefly left the *Herald* and bought a weekly newspaper up in the mountains, on a lake in north Georgia. You can see the reaction. I wanted to get away from all of it. I stayed there for about a year and came back to the *Herald*. They bridged my tenure as far as my retirement and everything so that it was as though I had never left. When I came back, they put me in the editorial department writing editorials, writing Latin American editorials, which was sort of a natural for me. I had the experience and knowledge from traveling. I did that from 1968, I believe, to 1973. I liked that all right but after having been out and traveling and doing the things I had done, it was really confining. They always called [the editorial department] the room without windows, back there where we worked, and there were no windows back there. You would go in there and write, and you would go out to lunch and have a long lunch, and then you would sit there and research all afternoon. It was like being a librarian or something.

C: Who were the other editorial writers at that time?

B: Jim Dance and Fred Sherman and Jeanne Bellamy. Don Shoemaker was the editor. I think that was it. I do not think there was anybody else. Anyway, when Nixon Smiley retired—Nixon had been, sort of, the Florida columnist for the *Herald*; he was the guy who emphasized folk life and history in Florida and did a very good job at it, he was really very good at it—Larry Jinks asked me if I would like to do that. He caught me completely by surprise. I had always...

C: It was not anything you campaigned for.

B: No, I did not campaign at all.

C: The job sought you.

B: As a matter of fact, he sent Rose Allegato to me. He said, would you be interested? I do not know whether Rose prompted him or not but, anyway, that was the case. I had always felt from the time I went to work at the *Herald*, as sort of a side note, that the ideal way to work for the *Herald* would be to live out in the state, so you could get paid by the *Herald* but you did not have to live in Miami. That sounds bad. I liked living in Miami while I was there. It was an interesting place. But as my health declined and as I got older, it was less attractive to me because it is such a hassle down there. Miami is a place now for young people, not for old people. If you are young and vigorous and you have a lot of ambition, it is a good place to be, but not for an old gaffer like me. Anyway, that sort of ambition to live out in the state had been in my mind for a long time. When Rose came to me at Larry's suggestion, I said, if I can live out in the state.

C: Was she on a city desk then?

B: Either that or an assistant to Larry. I cannot remember that. So, initially, I worked out of Miami two or three months, and Larry said I could pick out a place to live. I picked out this area because I had been familiar with it as a kid. I spent a lot of time here in these lakes. It was a place I always felt at home in. He first objected and said, well, that is too far north and, no, you cannot go there. He said, maybe you could go as far as Ocala. I said, Larry, it is only forty miles, what is the difference? And he said, okay. Larry was a good friend. He set that up for me, and we moved to Keystone Heights, in the Lakes Community near Melrose. We lived there for six months while we were looking for a place to buy. Then, we found this place and moved out here. We moved out here in June of 1974.

C: Can you describe a little what you call Burt Plantation?

B: Yes. It is six and a half acres. It fronts on a clear sand-bottom lake. It is in a grove of live oak trees. These are the trees that have these long crooked branches that run out parallel to the ground with Spanish moss hanging from all of them. It is very picturesque. It is on an incline, I would say about twenty- or twenty-degree incline down to the lake. It is nearly a quarter-mile from the lake to our driveway entrance on the road. There are some tall pine trees that rise well above the live oaks. The whole area once was sand hills, that part of Florida that first came up when the waters receded millions of years ago. Scrub country initially, technically not scrub, but people around here call it scrub country. These live oaks are not typical of scrub country. The little scrub oaks are smaller and scrawnier. What you see near here are typical of scrub. We have lots of azaleas here and lots of camellias. The people who built this house in the 1950s planted them. For us, when we first moved here, it was just like a dream. You know, when the sun went down at night, there was no light anywhere to be seen. Nowhere. No other houses, no street lights, no nothing. There were no sounds. We did not hear anything. I always say, the only thing we could hear was an acorn rattling down the tin roof. It was just like a dream come true, almost. It was just so nice and has remained that way this whole time. We have never gotten tired of living here. There is just something about this place that we feel like we are harmonious with this place, and we like it.

C: It is a good place for a writer to be, is it not?

B: It is. You know, people come out here and they see me. I have my little desk and office looking out into these live oaks. They say, oh, you ought to have it out on the other side looking out on the lake. Well, the lake is distracting. The live oaks are kind of soothing and thoughtful. The lake is distracting, so I like this. Honestly, I think this side is just as pretty as the lake side.

C: You are how many miles from Miami?

- B: 330 or 340, something like that. I was a foreign correspondent in Florida. That is the way I felt.
- C: And, I suspect, in Miami, the editors saw you that way.
- B: They did. I always felt like I wanted to interpret Florida to the *Herald* and interpret the *Herald* to Florida. There was a lot of misunderstanding there.
- C: So, your stories were appearing now as a column, as a weekly column topic?
- B: Initially, they were stories in the run of the paper and a column twice a week. The *Herald* used to run their columnists on the comics page: Larry Thompson, Jack Bell, Jack Kofoed, and those early columnists. My column was there, at first. After *Tropic* magazine got going, then they decided . . .
- C: And this was on Sunday.
- B: Yes, on Sunday. It was a weekly magazine, a Sunday magazine. They eventually moved me over there. So, I had the last page in *Tropic* magazine. It was a somewhat restrictive format, but I had enough space to write.
- C: Well, you also did photography, your own photography.
- B: I did, yes. I took pictures, because it was not practical to have a photographer with me wherever I wanted to go. We would be here at home and just get a notion, well, we want to go to Apalachicola. We would go, leave that day, and it was not practical to try to get a photographer to go with me. So, I took pictures.
- C: By this time, you are married to Gloria?
- B: We were married, and she traveled with me. It made it very nice because she could drive and I could work while we were riding, or I could drive and she could go over papers or file things for me or make suggestions about where we were going and what we were going to do. So, it was very much of a partnership thing, and we shared it. It was a pleasure. The best years of my life are the ones I spent travelling Florida. It has been a great experience.
- C: How would you decide where you wanted to visit?
- B: The first trip we took, I wanted to get acquainted to [Florida]. So, we went up the west coast of Florida, all the way up to Pensacola, and came back across the top of the panhandle, and came down the east coast. That was sort of my introduction. After having done that . . . Nixon Smiley, when he did this job,

concentrated more or less on history and folk life. I wanted to do it a little bit differently. Everybody does things differently. So, I wanted to acknowledge those things but to sort of try to identify where Florida was going or what was happening to it. I thought the way to do that was, one, to try to go into every part of the state and to go back to those places year after year, maybe not every year but as often as possible, to clock what was happening to it, how they would change and so forth. So, one way was just purely geographical. With that, I would read as many state newspapers as I could and call on people I knew around the state for ideas. Nixon had done two or three books about Florida of different sorts. I had thought that if I approach the thing this way, in sort of an overview of Florida, that in time I would be able to do some books about Florida. I did not know at what point that would kick in, but I thought that would be a good possibility, and that was the way it worked out. If I had not been into an area in a while, I would look for a reason to go there or, sometimes, I would just go there and see what I could find so that part of the state would be represented in the course of my year.

C: Could you give an example of going into an area and finding a unique person to write about, and how you would locate that person if it was not someone that you already knew?

B: Wherever we traveled, I would always pick up the local weekly paper and look at it and read all the chicken dinner stuff, you know, about what was happening. One time we were in the panhandle over near Bonifay, and I picked up a small paper, a publication over there, and there was about a two-paragraph story which said, this family has been named the Farm Family of the Year. It said they were from Pompano. [I thought], that is strange; that is odd. So, I called them up and asked him if I could come out and talk to them. I talked to him, and they had this wonderful story of having tired of city life and developing this, sort of, apprehension about some doomsday thing that might someday happen in the cities and decided they wanted to be self-sufficient on a farm. From that, I developed it. I may have done a column first. I do not remember. But, their name was Slach, and they were an interesting family. Both the man and the wife were willing to do these things that made them self-sufficient on the farm, or very nearly self-sufficient, about as close as you can come these days. So, I spent some time with them. In particular, [we went back] when [they had] a hog-killing, it was an interesting experience. And I found out how they, these people who had never lived in the country before, were learning how to live in the country and to be self-sufficient. They approached their first hog-killing by reading about it in a book. They were slicing up the hog and reading from chapter to chapter as they were slicing. The first time was a disaster, but they got better at it.

C: And you actually observed the process?

B: I did. I went there. I had visited with them, and then they told me they were

going to have a hog-killing in November, I think it was. I said, okay, let me know when you are going to do a hog-killing; I am coming back. So, I went there, and we stayed two or three days while they did the hog killing and had neighbors in and all kinds of stuff. I frequently would poach off of small items in newspapers. I remember being over in the Pensacola area, and [there were] two stories, in particular, that I liked a lot. One, I saw where a small town had been named Gandyville, after a man named John Gandy who was 107 or 108, or something like that. You know, these stories get in the paper. There was something about this, and I cannot remember what it was, whether there was a picture of him or what. It was not a large story, just a small one of those chicken dinner notices. I went up there to see him, and he was just a wonderful old guy. He had a long beard, and he was very talkative. He talked about his life and about his beard. It made a wonderful little human story about a community that had been named after him. Another time, I had gone to a festival in Pensacola at which a group appeared that called themselves the Shapenote Singers. I had heard about the Shapenote Singers but never had seen them. So, when they got through—there were several different acts—I went over to the Shapenote Singers and talked to them a little bit, found out where they lived, and asked them if I could come see them. I went over there, and it is a very interesting thing how they do that and how they came to do it. It made a nice piece. Another time, I found an old guy who was a fiddler, and he played the fiddle for dances and things all around. So, I found out where he lived, and I went to see him. He had a violin that he thought was made by Stradivarius [Antonio Stradivarius, Italian violin-maker, 1644-1737]. It turned out it was not, but he thought it was. We had a long discussion about where he got it and how much it might be worth. He played the fiddle and told me about his life here and all. Both of those things were in my book called *Becalmed in Mullet Latitudes*.

C: That was when you came up with this map of Florida divided into regions of latitude descriptions.

B: Yes. At some point as I was writing about Florida, I began to think more in terms of long-distance stuff rather than the daily current stuff. While I did the people things and situational things, I tried to find out things about Florida that represented a trend or were more or less permanent. I wrote once about Florida time, about what Florida time is, and I came up with this division of Florida into seven territories. That became the lead piece in the book *Becalmed in the Mullet Latitudes*.

C: And that book came out in what year?

B: 1984, published by a small publisher in Hobe Sound who had published a collection of columns by a friend of mine, Ernie Lyons, who [was] editor of the *Stuart News*. Ernie was a wonderful writer, and he turned out some nice stuff.

He wrote Scripps Howard, and they published it. Anyway, I tried to mix it up. I tried to do things that represented . . . I made a conscious effort sometimes to write things that were not perishable.

C: So you were conscious that your writing style was changing.

B: It was.

C: Going from daily to timed pieces.

B: That is true. When I wrote about Virgil Hawkins, the first black to apply to the University of Florida law school, nobody was paying any attention to Virgil Hawkins [any more], but I found him. I knew about his background.

C: How long was this after he had been denied admission?

B: The years are in the book, but I think it was fifteen years, maybe even twenty. He was working in a little community office in Eustis. But, I thought that Hawkins represented something in Florida history that was interesting and what he had to say about that ought to be recorded and that it would be useful for people to read about for years. I thought the same about Manning Dauer [University of Florida political science professor], whom I had never known while I was in school there, but he was the guy who came up with the One Man, One Vote thing, and he was in his last years at the University [of Florida]. So, I went about trying to do things that were interesting and current sometimes but also trying to put together things that told us something about how Florida got to be what it is and who made it what it is, who were the people who were pivotal in these things as they happened.

C: John Degrove seems to be a returning character in your writing.

B: Because he was the father of growth management. He had been a university professor of [Robert] "Bob" Graham, the former governor [of Florida, 1979-1987]. I got to know him over the years, and we became friends. I thought he was a man who represented a period in Florida during which concern about what growth was doing to Florida became uppermost, at least on the front burner. His thoughts about it were representative of, sort of, a movement in Florida at that time. So, I was making a conscious effort to do more than write quaint stories. I was trying to do serious work, to tell you the truth. I did not want to be just some funny old guy who was wondering around the state writing about characters. I wanted to make this as significant as it could be made, or at least make that effort. If I did not succeed, okay, but I was going to try. I think people in these jobs can do that. I think they can make that, but they have to sit down and work that out for themselves. They have to understand what they are trying to do and

take a long view. They have to satisfy their editors, who want stuff today and immediate and kooky and all that stuff, and then they have to satisfy their own ambition to do something serious by writing this other stuff.

C: How much mail at that time would you receive from readers?

B: I received quite a bit. Of course, I was up here and the stuff would go into the *Herald*, and they would forward it to me. I had a good reaction. It tended to be from people who were old or had been associated to Florida for some time. It also came from some people who were new to the state and wanted to know something about it. I cannot say that I always succeeded, but I tried to do things that I thought were useful. I just wanted to feel like . . . anybody likes to feel like the work they are doing has some meaning, and I wanted to put as much meaning into it as I could.

C: Do you have a feeling that weekly newspapers tend to find different news elements in ordinary events than the metropolitan and larger daily papers would?

B: They do not have the constraints of space usually, although they might have the constraint of having people who have time to write at length. They place different levels of importance on events. A paper like the *Miami Herald*, ordinarily, would see Virgil Hawkins, for example, when I wrote about him and say, well, what is the point of writing about that guy? That happened a long time ago and he is not doing anything now, so what is the point of it? I would have to convince my editors that it does have a point, that this guy represents something and what he says about it has some application to today's events. There is something in his experience that we can learn from, and it contributes to our understanding of the state. As I said, I was a foreign correspondent in Florida trying to interpret Florida to the *Herald*, but I also had to bring the editors along with me.

C: As you are developing this work, you are becoming more author than reporter. What are some of your thoughts about how your writing changed?

B: Fortunately, while I was Latin American editor and then later as editorial writer, I had the opportunity to write more than just straight news stories, so that gave me some kind of beginning. Even when I started this job, it was a learning process of how to write about things that imparted information and expressed opinions about them at the same time. In the *Tropic* column, I tried to be informational as well as make commentary.

C: I noticed on your column when you wrote for *Tropic*, they would have a map of the state, and then it would have a little star that would indicate where you were writing.

B: Yes, because in south Florida, the north part of the state is just jungle country.

They do not have any idea, most of them, where it is or what it is all about.

- C: In a sense, you started teaching English as you left the University of Florida as your first real career job and, years later, you are still teaching it.
- B: In a way. I guess that is true. I suppose I felt that one of the big things in Florida is the lack of understanding about it. It is such a large state, and it is so diverse, both physically and with people and cultures, that it is pretty hard for anybody to understand all of it. Once you feel like you have gotten some grasp of it, it changes, so that if you are not there all the time, moving around, seeing people, and doing things, you will lose a true feel for what is happening. So, I always tried to develop that sense of what the state was and what it was becoming, trying to maintain some sense of its past. You develop, sort of, a sense of mission about it, like you are some preacher or something. You want to tell everybody about it. You know, this is better than what you think it is; this is good and serious stuff. It is a diverse culture, and there is a lot here for people to know about and understand and appreciate, and they often do not. They often have a one-dimensional idea about these different parts of Florida.
- C: How do you keep up? What do you read every day, for example?
- B: Every morning, I come in here to my computer, and I have a list of about, probably, twenty-five newspapers on the Internet that I look at. I have the *Miami Herald* and the *St. Petersburg Times*. I have the *Palm Beach Post*. I have the *Keynoter* in Marathon and the Keys. I have the *Florida Times Union*, the *Tampa Tribune*, the *Tallahassee Democrat*. You know, you can get almost any newspaper now on the Internet. It is not the full paper, but it is the heart of it, the core of it, and you can go through that. It is almost impossible to do all of it every day, but if you go through a few papers . . .
- C: What time do you get up? What time do you start the day?
- B: I usually get up about seven, and I try to come in here about eight in the morning. I am always a little bit fresher in the morning than any other time. If I see in one paper that something is happening over here in a certain area, then I will go to that area and look at it in the local papers if I can. I look at the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* and sometimes the *L.A. Times*. So, I spend a lot of time looking at stuff.
- C: Before the computer, before the Internet, it was a lot more difficult.
- B: A lot more difficult. I would subscribe to papers, so I had to get a big mailbox. That box would be full every day, and the room would just be full of trash all the time because I would read a paper and throw it over and then read a paper and

throw it over.

C: Would you clip? At that point, would you make clippings?

B: I would clip, yes.

C: So today, you print out, make hard copies?

B: I do not always print out. Sometimes I do, but I make files and keep them on disk or in the hard drive. You know, the computer has made it immensely easier. When I first started, I would have to either phone in stories, dictate them on the telephone, or mail them in, occasionally send them by Western Union, although that was beginning to fade some. So, it was a problem.

C: When you started in the very early days in Atlanta, were you using a little portable typewriter when you covered sports events?

B: Yes, I did. I carried one of those portable Smith-Coronas. Then, they came out with . . . I think Royal was what I had first. They came out with those little thin portable typewriters. They were very sporty-looking. I got one of those, and I was very proud of it for many years. So, that was what you would do. Then, you would go to the sports events, and they would have an open [line] through Western Union. You would type a page and hand it to the guy. Then, he would type it, and it would go into the newspaper office that way. Now, of course, everything is instantaneous. It is so easy.

C: Do you use a laptop when you are on the road?

B: No, I have never used a laptop, although they have them at the *Herald* now. They did not have them when I started. I have always just used this machine here. I usually come back here to do most of my writing. While I was still using the portable typewriter, I wrote on the road some. Most of what I do does not require any immediacy about getting into the paper. It can wait a day or two.

C: How useful is a tape recorder to you?

B: Very useful. I carry a tape recorder all the time. Especially if you are talking to someone who has an unusual accent or uses words in unusual ways. It is almost impossible to be accurate without a tape recorder, I think. If somebody is talking, for example, as fast as I have been talking here today, there is no way you can get that and get all the inflections and little special things that people do with words.

C: Do you take notes at the same time?

- B: I do. If I were talking to you now, this recorder would be going and I would be sitting here recording observations about you and about how you reacted to certain things and, maybe, making a note to myself to be sure to look at this point in the tape recorder. If you have to go back and listen to the entire thing, it is a time-consuming job. For example, years ago, I talked to Harry Crews [professor of English, UF, 1968-1998]. He was living out here on Lake Swan. He was this English teacher writing these wild novels, and he was just an absolutely terrific interviewee. I mean, when he started talking, it was like being in one of his classes. It was inspirational stuff. I still have the tape, and it is just a terrific tape. I mean, you listen to that thing and you want to go out and write something. He is really good. I think later on as he got older, maybe he got worn out a bit [because] he was not quite as good when I interviewed him. He was always good, but he was not quite as detailed or quite as enthusiastic as he was the first time. I cannot imagine; he must have been just a wonderful teacher over at the University. I remember once, we just talked and talked and talked. At one point, I asked him about his mother. You know, he writes this stuff, this graphic sex and violence and gore and all this stuff. He had mentioned something about his family. I said, how about your mother? He had written this book, *A Childhood*, which was so good, and he talked about his family and so [I said], how does your mother react to this stuff? He said, my mom is my best reader. That little town up in south Georgia where she lives, when my books came out, they just insisted on putting her on the library board, even though she had never read a book except mine. You know, he just went on like this and talked about it absolutely honestly and frankly. It was just rich, rich stuff. And when you interview some[one] like that, all you have to do is just sit down and put the words down. They have already done the job for you. And now and then, you find people like that, not always but now and then, you find somebody and you just let them tell the story because they are so good at it.
- C: As you do your collections, how do you make your decisions about what to include versus what you exclude in a book project?
- B: The first one, *Becalmed in the Mullet Latitudes*, I wanted it to be representative of the time I had been writing about Florida. I wanted each part of the state to be represented, and I tried to pick out things that I thought did that. You cannot do that totally, always, because sometimes the things might not be your best work. So, you try to pick out the best pieces and the ones that are most representative and tell the most about the state. You know, I had divided the state up into these seven areas. I wanted to do things and pick out people and situations that explained those or told something about them. I tried to do it that way. When I did *Al Burt's Florida*, the second of what was sort of a trilogy, that was more of an overview of the state in which I injected my opinions and thoughts about Florida to a greater extent than I had in the others. I just used the things that forwarded

that sort of theme.

C: You seemed to have a mission, I felt, in *Al Burt's Florida*.

B: Yes, I did.

C: Some little warning notices, for example.

B: I wanted to talk about things about what was happening to the state.

C: Environmental issues were big.

B: You know, when I started this job, I did not have any agenda, with the environment or anything else. My only thing was I just wanted to find out about the state and write about it as I would write about a foreign country, as I had written about Latin American countries. But, as I began to go along, I found out more and more. The environmental issues cut across everything else, because of what was happening to the state. They affected every other thing that was going on. After having been around a little while, people started calling me an environmentalist. It had not been a conscious decision on my part that I wanted to do this or that I wanted to take this attitude. I responded to what I saw, and that was it. I now feel like anybody who did that, anybody with reasonable intelligence and sensitivity, would have to come out with something resembling an environmental view of Florida because it is so important. It is just so important. The growth impact is just so great. It is a matter of self-defense, I always say now.

C: The newest book that is just out [*The Tropic of Cracker*], the cracker element is the real theme. Is this your favorite of the three so far?

B: It might be. You know, I like them all. It might be *Al Burt's Florida*, but I am just completely tied to all of them. The *Tropic of Cracker* thing . . . you know, first, I wrote about the *Mullet Latitudes*, and then I wrote about *Al Burt's Florida*, and then I wrote about the *Tropic of Cracker*. Well, all three of them are pretty much the same thing. But, the *Tropic of Cracker* theme, I began to evolve this thing in mind. First, I found justification for regarding cracker as a positive term, referring to people as crackers and that being a positive, not a negative, thing.

C: It is not a scatological phrase.

B: Right. It has nothing to do with race. I tried to use that cracker theme, as I said, in a positive way, and I tried to make some justification of why I did this. The term has evolved over the years, and I am making an open attempt to push along that evolution a little faster so that it is a positive term. I think the term should

mean, and should refer, not just to people who were born in Florida or not just to people who are rural Floridians or any of that but people who have an appreciation for Florida history and heritage and have some concern about what is happening to the state. To me, that is a cracker.

C: How much reading about Florida history do you do?

B: As I got into this job, I bought every book I had, and these bookshelves out here were full of Florida books. I have passed on some of them to some colleagues who are doing similar stuff now, but I tried to read everything that came along. In particular, if I went into an area, say Pensacola or St. Augustine or something, I would get the local books about the local histories and read them. They would give me some sort of perspective on what was happening in the place and might suggest what the future of it was.

C: How much library research do you do?

B: Initially, one of the justifications I made for moving here was that the University of Florida library would be accessible to me. In my first years here, I did go over there a lot and spent a lot of time doing that. As I began to collect my own books and, then, as the computer came in, that was not necessary. [The library] is still a great place to go and there is still a lot of stuff over there to be had that would help a lot, but the problem is the parking over there is so difficult. I have such a problem with mobility anyway. When I cannot find a parking place, then I have this long trek in and out. So I depend less on the library now than I used to. Initially, I used it a lot.

C: Does computer linkage help?

B: Yes. You can look up and see what is there. If you go, you can know in advance. You can be more specific about what you are looking for. The University is a great resource and has been over the years.

C: But you did not move to Gainesville. You came to Keystone and then to Melrose.

B: There was no reason for me to be in Gainesville. You know, I did not have to go to some office anywhere, so I just picked out a place I wanted to live, a place that looked nice to me. Gainesville was close enough that I could go in and do those things. The people of the university have been very nice to me. My first years here, they gave me a parking pass and all that other stuff.

C: Is there a similarity between your career and Marjorie [Kinnan] Rawlings' [fiction novelist], who was about thirty-five miles away?

B: Maybe a little, not a great deal. I mean, she came in from New York in 1928, I

think it was, and I have lived here all my life, with short terms out.

C: But she did have a newspaper career.

B: She had a newspaper background. The things she wrote about certainly strike a chord with me. Her book *Cross Creek*, still, I can read that and just think it is wonderful. The way she wrote about people and about that place is extraordinary, I think. She wrote about the crackers in a positive way. I do not know to what extent that might have influenced my feelings. I am not sure, but it is not any kind of conscious thing on my part to parallel what she did.

C: You had an interesting interview with her husband.

B: Norton Baskin was a terrific guy. When I was in school at the university, that trial occurred in Gainesville. I did not have enough sense at the time to go down there and try to get in. I might not have been able to get in anyway because it was so crowded. But, I remember going over to Cross Creek to go fishing and things like that with friends while she was there. But, I never met her, and I never knew her. I knew Baskin later on, and he was a very entertaining guy. He was a smart guy. He had a lot to say, and he was very informative with me about their relationship, about the stormy sort of relationship they had. Apparently, she was difficult to live with, and he was the kind of guy who could probably have lived with anybody.

C: Do you think writers are difficult people?

B: Yes, I do. They are difficult because they get all wound up in their head and people do not know what they are thinking, or understand, and it gets very complicated sometimes. So, I think it is sometimes hard to understand them. They might have the best of intentions and best of motives, but their behavior and the way they express it in everyday language or everyday behavior might puzzle people a little bit. I do not know whether that defines it very well or not, but I think that is true. They see things a little bit differently from other people, and they try to back off a little bit and take the long view of things. Sometimes, things like making idle chatter and being social are not as important to them as they are to other people, and so they are not as good at it as they should be. If they can be good at it, they would be. But, you tend to be good at what you like. You tend to be good at the things that interest you or the things that you care about. If you do not care about small talk, it is pretty hard to be good at it.

C: What do you think influenced you to become a writer, a professional writer?

B: I really do not know.

C: Can you pinpoint a time as a young boy? I mean, I suspect you knew early on.

There must have been an English teacher somewhere back there who used to say, Al, you are a very good writer.

B: There are two things about that. One, I was always a good reader. From the time of preschool, I was reading. I was always a good reader. When you read a lot, you develop interests of the sort that writers have, I think.

C: Do you remember favorite books early on that you were fond of?

B: Just the usual. Nothing really significant that I could point to. You know, just the things kids would read. I did not read Shakespeare at age six or anything. I was not that serious.

C: Did your parents encourage you to read?

B: They did, yes. My mother was a good reader, and she used to read to the kids a lot at night. The sound of her voice reading, I think, was part of the reason I was a good reader. I wanted to read and enjoyed reading a lot. The other thing is that I did not always want to be a writer. When I was freshman over here at the university taking C3, the comprehensive English course, the bane of my existence was that writing lab I had to do once a week. It was a two- or three-hour thing where you had to go in and write an essay. I would just be haunted by that thing from week to week, [about] what I was going to write about and whether I could do it or not. It is interesting to me to now to look back and see how much that bothered me. I guess I wanted to do it but did not know how to do it, and it was just a frustrating thing for me. But, I worked at it, and finally did reasonably well with it. It was difficult.

C: Now, you were not a journalism major then?

B: I started off to major in journalism because I had been working at the *Journal*.

C: Before you came to the university?

B: Even before I came to the university, I had been working at the newspaper and had done a little bit of radio work, but not much. So, I took journalism courses. I took enough journalism for it to qualify for a minor. I took the courses from both [Elmer Jacob] Emig [professor of journalism, UF, 1927-1957] and [William Leonard] Lowry [associate professor of journalism, UF, 1930-1955]. My intention was to go to journalism, but I began to have doubts along the way about what I would do, about what kind of job I would get when I got out. I think part of that reasoning was, I would look at the *Jacksonville Journal* and see these guys there who were wonderful guys and people I liked and enjoyed associating with, but they were . . . well, a lot of them had drinking problems and you know.

C: Did it seem like a dead-end job?

B: Yes, sort of.

C: Or a dead-end life?

B: I did not feel like I wanted to spend my life working for the *Jacksonville Journal*. As much as I liked it and as fond as my memories are of that place, it was not a place I wanted to spend my life working. I wanted an alternative. I also had gotten some advice from a guy named Malcolm Johnson, in Tallahassee, who was a friend of my family's. Malcolm's parents and my parents were good friends. I knew him less well than I did them (his parents). When I was at the university and in a little bit of a quandary about what to do . . .

C: Now, at that time, was he editor of the *Tallahassee Democrat*?

B: Either that or the head of the Associated Press bureau in Tallahassee, one of the two. My parents said, call Malcolm Johnson and let him talk to you about what he thinks about this matter. He was the only person we knew who was a journalist of any stature. So, I did, and he said, well, you know, I think you would be just as well off to study English and history and political science. So, I got to thinking about that, and I did enjoy the stuff in English. Also, going to a university, even during those days, cost very little. My family was not very well-off, and it was a financial strain to keep me in school and to keep me going. I had a chance for a scholarship. It was a scholarship [for education students]. A roommate of mine had applied for it. I had never heard about it, and I had not considered the education part of it all. It was the Lewis Scholarship. I applied for it, went through a competitive exam, and got the scholarship. It was \$400 a year, and this was a big thing. So I said, okay, I will do this: [for my subject fields,] I will have a journalism minor and an English major. And that is what I did. It was circumstantial. Malcolm had sort of leaned me into thinking that was a good thing, and then I got the scholarship, so that is what I did. Now [you can get] a degree in journalism, [but not then]. There were just two men, two professors in the department [back then]. It was nothing like what it is now. If I had been faced with what you have over there now, I probably would have stayed. At that point, I was just stumbling along. I did not know what I was doing.

C: What is your life like now with a release this month of this latest book? What is your calendar like this month?

B: Well, it is surprising. You know, you think when you get through with the book, the work is done, but it is not done. Now, all of a sudden, with the last book and with this one, you just have all these things you have to do. You know, people

want you to go to these signings. They want you to come talk. Last week, I went down to Clearwater and talked at the Nature Expo and Birding Festival, at a dinner down there the night before the thing opened. I have done a lot of talks over the years anyway; when a book comes out, there is just this fresh thing. Florida Southern College put me on their lecture [calendar] for this fall. Chesterfield Smith [prominent Florida lawyer] is going to lead it off, and I am coming along about second or third. I cannot believe the company I am in. So, I am going to down and talk about crackers to the Florida Southern College, and I talked at Clearwater. I am going down to Vero Beach and Palm Beach. I have already been to Tallahassee, did a signing over there, and Sandy D'Alemberte [president of Florida State University] came out, he and his wife. That is nice. A book comes out and if people have ever heard of you before, and sometimes even if they have not, they sort of look at you with new respect, whether the book is any good or not. It is just something about it. It is nice, and I like it. But it takes up a lot of time. For example, I have another book I would like to start on. I would like to be working on it right now, but my schedule is so busy this fall that all I can do is just do the things I have to do on a daily basis plus handle these talks. I am going to talk to the thirtieth Grand Reunion of the Florida Defenders of the Environment early in November. For me, that is like writing four or five columns. I have to construct a speech, and I have to say something meaningful to these people. It is a lot of work. If somebody asks me to speak, I do not just stand up and do it off the top of my head. You know, I feel a responsibility to create something for them, and that is what I try to do.

C: So, it does not sound like you have a stock speech that you give all around.

B: I do not have a stock speech, although portions of it may be repeated. I try to create one for each group, if it is a serious group. Sometimes, if it is just at a bookstore, maybe, I might go in and just read a couple of pages out of the book and then just talk to the people a little bit. But, if it is to a group like the Defenders or Florida Southern or some of the library groups and things, I try to create something for them.

C: When you do the signings, do you have a feeling for who the Al Burt army is, who is looking for your next book to come out?

B: Yes, it is the people you would expect. There are probably three categories of them. If they are new to Florida, they are people who have some interest in learning about it and who are thinking seriously about it, not the people who are just here with a vacation mind set. Then, it is Floridians who are concerned about what is happening to the state. They usually respond well. Then, it is the old-timers. When you use the word cracker, you run the risk of attracting people who might have a little different view of what cracker means than you do, so sometimes you have to be sure that they understand what your views are, that

cracker does not mean red neck. I have to be sure that these people do not misunderstand me. I try to make that clear.

C: You mentioned that you know what you want the next book to be about but that you have not had time to get to that. What is it going to be?

B: I have two things in mind. One that I would really like to do—and at my age, you do not know when the next book is going to be the last one, you know—while I can do it, I would love to write about this area. A tentative title would be something like *Scrub Country*, not a technical term but a description, and write about why I live in this area and why I think it is unusual and what there is here [and] why this is, kind of, the forgotten part of Florida, the underappreciated part of Florida, but represents something really important to the state. It represents, I think, a significant and substantial part of the Florida heritage. So, I would like to do that. Not very far from here, two or three miles from here, the first settler came into this area in 1847. There is a cemetery over there where he is buried. There is a hill over there where his house was. I am living over here just two or three miles away, and I have history as a kid over in that same area where this first settler came. There are some old families here that have interesting histories about how they got here and why they chose this place to live. So, I think that it can be a book that is interesting to other parts of the country and the state, not just this part, about an area that I think is unusual and that I have a great fondness for. I want to do this. This would be something I want to do personally, and I hope I will be able to do this. I am counting on it, when I get all these signings out of the way.

C: Does it matter to you if the new book is a commercial success?

B: Well, I would like it to be, but no. You know, the thing I did, starting with *Al Burt's Florida*, was I sat down and I thought, you know, you are getting old, and if you are going to say anything that you think is worthwhile, you better say it and you better do it. So, I sat down and decided I was doing this for me. This is what I wanted to say and what I wanted to do and if it did not sell, I did not care. I wanted to do it, and I did. So, that is the way I am taking each one of them now. I hope that people will like it, and I hope it will be a commercial success. But I am doing it because I feel, almost, a compulsion to do it. It is something I want to do, that I want to say and want to express myself about. I do not know whether that is therapy or creative energy but whatever it is, that is what I want to do.

C: We are always supposed to end the interviews by saying, is there anything that we have not talked about that you think would be important for us to include?

B: I cannot think of anything. I have rattled on so much that I do not even know what I have said here today, but I think we have gone to the heart of it. One

thing, moving up here was part of all this process. I was moving to a place where I wanted to live, not necessarily where I wanted a job or work or anything. This is where I wanted to live. This is where I wanted to be. And then, I started doing the work I wanted to do. I wanted to say things, and I wanted to be expressive about Florida in a way that may be not totally different from what other people have done but certainly represented my individual views about the state and what I hoped for Florida and what I saw and was concerned about. *Al Burt's Florida* especially, that was my purpose. That was what I wanted to do, and I have done the same thing with *Tropical Cracker*. And this other thing on the scrub country, if I do it, and I want to and plan to, it will be an expression of my own and my own feelings, and I hope it will be something that people would care about. I hope it will make a contribution to this area. This is an ugly duckling area in Florida, and I feel like a mama with an ugly child: [saying] you just do not understand; this is a good kid.

C: Are you concerned that you will introduce more people to how wonderful this area is and they will come in and ruin it, like in south Florida?

B: I am a little bit. There are a lot of people who have moved up into this area because of me. They call me and tell me, they have moved in because of something I wrote. So, I have been a little concerned about that, but I have to write what I write. I do what I feel, and I am not going to be concerned about that. I hope people around here will not get mad at me about it, if I bring people in. I do not know how many there have been, but I know there have been some who tell me about it. There are people on this lake who came here, they say, because of me. But, I do not know. I do not think people in Florida ought to be so protective of the state. They do not want people coming in, you know. I think what you want is people who come and care about where they live and will treat it right and will try to do the right things by it. I mean, you cannot tell people not to come in. It is a great place to live. Why would they not want to come here? I have never tried to take the tack that, let us put a wall up at the border and let nobody else come in. I just think that is self-defeating. I think what we want is good people to come in and to educate them about Florida and get them to care about it so that they will do the things, better than what we have done in the past, to protect it. If they care about it, they will be a deciding factor in what happens to the state.

C: Thank you.

[End of interview.]