

FNP 70

Interviewee: Ed Johnson

Interviewer: Ralph Lowenstein

Date: September 3, 2003

L: [This is Ralph Lowenstein and I'm at the College of Journalism and] Communications at the University of Florida and I'm interviewing Edward L. Johnson in my office, 3110 Weimer Hall on September 3, 2003. Good morning, Ed.

J: Good morning.

L: Edward, you state your full name.

J: My name is Edward Lee Johnson.

L: What is your current address?

J: 2237 NW 7<sup>th</sup> Lane, Gainesville, Florida 32603.

L: You have a home also in St. Augustine. What is the address there?

J: [The address is] 2 Dondanville Road, Apartment 612.

L: Okay, where were you born and educated?

J: I was born in Acton, Indiana. Acton was then, and is less so now, a village in Marion County, Indiana.

L: What size was it?

J: [It was] small. It was larger then than it is now. In years since, Acton has really become a part of Indianapolis. The house I was born in was my grandmother's house. It still stands. It's not yet a historical site.

L: What did your dad do there?

J: Well, he was a young guy who was in the middle of the Depression and was working, I believe, at the time both as a hired hand with his father who was farming and worked at the Ford motor plant in Indianapolis. At that time, 1931, it was even worse than it is now about employment for blue collar people.

L: What is your actual birth date?

J: [It was] October 31, Halloween, 1931.

L: That was my mother's birthday.

J: On Halloween?

L: You never forget that birthday.

J: Well, you don't because people are always reminding you of it. I can remember in grade school writing class themes on reactions of people. They thought that was just terrific. I never quite figured out why.

L: You were raised there?

J: No, actually my parents lived in the country in a cottage on my grandfather's farm within ten miles. Because the doctor was in Acton, why, that's where my mother went. I was the first born and that was of some note. After that my dad worked and lived in various small towns in central Indiana because he became, eventually, a sales representative for a large feed and fertilizer company, Ralston Purina, and Allied Mills and stuff like that. [He] did that until the war [World War II] started.

L: Did that require moving around?

J: It required some moving around, but in large part provided a pretty idyllic childhood for me because we lived in small farm communities which are always interesting places to grow up for a kid. I moved to probably four or five different grade schools and enjoyed that.

L: Where did you go to high school?

J: I went to high school in Anderson, Indiana, which at that time was, I believe, the third largest high school in the state of Indiana. Of course, since then the town has shrunk because of the [closure of] General Motors plants. [It's] a small industrial city in north-central Indiana. High school was an enjoyable time. I always worked at a part-time job. The reason I mention that is, when I was about to graduate from the high school, I had then discovered journalism [in a] way, I [also] figured, I'm not prepared either fiscally or with any determination to go to college right now. So, I enlisted in the Air Force two or three weeks after I graduated from high school.

To return to that introduction to journalism, when I was in eighth grade, I had an English teacher as many people have in those secondary school teachers who flip the switch in kids and this little old lady was one of them. She, after grading a few themes which high school and junior high school students did then, she said, you really ought to continue to write. [She said], you're a better writer than

anybody in the class, which I thought was a big deal then. Of course, given the class makeup it really wasn't much. That prompted me. I took a printing course in middle school, which also was something of a requirement, particularly in a town like that. That furthered the introduction to it.

In high school I took the two journalism courses that were available and became the editor of the high school paper. [The name of the paper was] the *Anderson High School X-Ray* and "The X-Ray Sees Through Everything." It was a weekly, a typical high school paper. It was a pretty good paper. We had a good advisor. We printed it ourselves on a big old press in the basement of the high school. In fact, the guy who was the advisor then, I'm talking about 1949, the last time I talked with him was last year, that would be 2002. He's a professor emeritus at Ball State University. [He] remembered more about what I did and my family than I ever thought possible. [He is] an incredible guy.

L: What was his name?

J: Ben Ervin [is his name]. After I enlisted [in the Air Force], I was stationed out in Texas and shortly thereafter the Korean War started. I stayed in Texas. I had a three year enlistment then I was discharged about four months after my enlistment was up because it had been extended because of the war.

L: You were an enlisted man?

J: I was.

L: What were your duties?

J: [It's] interesting you should ask because I had intended to take advantage of two or three different opportunities for occupational development. The Air Force, like many services, administers tests of various natures. At about the time I was to be sent off to attend a fairly lengthy control tower operators school, I was redlined by a unit there at Lackland. This unit did experimental research in psychological testing, qualification testing and so forth. I was assigned to a small outfit called the Perceptual and Motor Skills Laboratory. I worked for two civilian psychologists, great guys. In fact, I ran into one of those just when I was in Tallahassee. I took him to lunch. He barely remembered me, unlike Ben Ervin.

Bob Gagne and Brad Reynolds [were] both probably clinical psychologists. One of the things about that was, in addition to understanding both the uses and the shortcomings of testing and test design, was the experience I had toward the end of my tenure there. I was the NCO [noncommissioned officer] in charge of a traveling testing group. We had a couple of semi-trailers converted to psycho-motor testing. [We] tested hand [and] eye movement and so forth. The

purpose for this was that the Air Force had funded a considerably sophisticated study of doing testing of potential aviation cadets who had passed the requirements of that time and then were sent off to the various flight training places as well as the permanent bases for flight training. We did the testing, but we didn't do the qualifying testing. We did a secondary testing that measured certain skills that were intended to predict success or failure in flight training. A good reason for that [is], as you would understand, if you could predict that [success or failure] you would save tens of thousands of dollars on each guy. You could wash [him] out before he got there and subsequently wash out [on his own].

So, we did all of these tests and we amassed all of this data. Then, my team would travel to these bases around the Southeast and the Midwest and retest them as they were finishing their flight training. That was the first time I was in Gainesville, Florida, by the way. I brought my caravan right down 13<sup>th</sup> Street all the way to Bartow. The testing was, in retrospect, a pretty interesting [experience] and very professional. I think these guys were really very adept. At any rate, I remember this lesson from that, which was aside of the interesting work and the group I worked with. I was at lunch one day with Dr. Reynolds and he said, I am recommending to the Air Force that we stop this testing. He said, it's very interesting, and of course we talked about it for awhile. He said, there was a predicate we had in mind about people that emerges here. What emerges is this, he said, yes, it's true that the medium will predict the success, but what it doesn't predict is motivation. He said, we have measurable results that say, this guy could do anything if he just wanted to, but he just doesn't. If he isn't busted out of flight training, he'll be a lousy pilot. By the same token, there are guys who would say this is a klutz, he can't do it, but his will is so strong that, by George, he's going to do it, and he does. He said, the idea of recommending the exclusion of both of these is just an inappropriate recommendation, safe but inappropriate.

He made the recommendation and the Air Force bought it. I said, okay, and I put all this on the shelf. Well, I learned a lot from that just about life in general, as you would. Every once in a while in my subsequent years I would be working with someone or working for someone or having someone working for me and I would remember that. What a great time.

L: So as soon as you got out of the Air Force, did you go on into college?

J: [When] I got out of the Air Force, it was a matter of choice by then because the Korean War was kind of leveling off. They had some of us on an extension. I knew then, from my experience in working in this and with the GI Bill, that I was going to college. I figured I'd finally decided I was ready. My father was then working in a disabled capacity. He had had a heart attack at age 41 that was

disabling, but his doctor had said, you've got to get out of this Midwestern climate. He had thought, well, his medical retirement and warmer weather would have something to do with that. So, he decided that if he could find something to do [he would move]. I remember driving into the Southeast with him. He would move to the Carolinas or Florida.

So, on the strength of that, and early that year, I applied to both the University of Florida and the University of North Carolina and was accepted by both, much to my surprise. We moved to the South early that summer. I worked in Anderson for a while at two or three interesting jobs and then joined them. When school started in the fall of 1953, they were living in Tampa and that's where I lived during my years at the University of Florida.

L: So, you entered here as a freshman here in 1953?

J: That's right.

L: Did you know you were going to go into journalism?

J: In fact, I wasn't going into journalism. I had been discouraged from going into psychology by my bosses in the Air Force. They said, don't waste your time, with a few pretty trenchant reasons that I'll always appreciate them for. I came here and figured that I would major in economics. I started out with the "C" courses [general studies] in University College. In the second semester, I had an economics course taught by really an incompetent graduate student. I praise him to this day because he made sure that I wasn't going to major in economics.

L: I had the same experience at Columbia [University].

J: Did you really? I mean the poor guy, he may have been doing some great graduate work but he was a lousy teacher. Of course, my experience in a classroom had been pretty scant for the previous four years. The place was full of veterans, as you would imagine. I think I got a D in that course and was lucky to get it. I thought, this is a course of study that is totally alien to me. I mean, the guy could be speaking a remote mountain language somewhere. I took a few economics courses two or three years later and I enjoyed them, but not this one. So, I figured, I've got to do something about that. Well, two things happened. A friend of mine who was a year ahead of me mentioned how much he enjoyed a class he had taken at the College of Journalism. I thought maybe I'll think about that. School gets out, I go back to Tampa. The second thing that happened was, I thought I've got to have a summer job to augment my GI Bill, so I think I'll sign on as an able-bodied seaman on one of the ships out of the banana boat harbor down there.

So, I went down to the hiring hall and I talked to this guy. I said, I'm out of school for two or three months and I would really like to sign on. He said, yeah, I can get you on board. I said terrific, when can I do it. He said, how about Monday? And I said, okay. He said, can I see your union card? I said, I don't have a union card. He said, you've got to have a union card. [I asked him], where do I get one? He said, well, you just apply and they'll get you one. I said, okay, how long will that take? He said, two or three months [laughing]. I said, I'll get back in touch. Walking from the docks toward downtown Tampa, I walked by the old *Tampa Times*. They were owned then by the Smiley family. I thought, hey, here's an editor of a high school paper, I had good grades in my eighth grade English theme writing, what could be better? So, I walked into the *Times* and I talked with Hampton Dunn, who was the managing editor, a great old guy.

L: He later went to work with AAA.

J: Yes, and Hampton said, well, okay I'll tell you what, you go talk with Leo Stalnaker. [He was] the city editor, who died recently. You probably knew Leo at the University of South Florida. [Hampton said], he'll finish up your application. So, I talked with Leo. Both these guys were patient. You can imagine. By the same token, this was definitely the second paper in Tampa. So, I did this little application and I left. I thought, I'm not so sure about this. I went home to my parents' house. That was some[time] in the middle of the first week or so out of school. Monday morning at five o'clock, my dad came to my room and said, you have a phone call.

L: He called at five a.m. in the morning?

J: [This was] at five o'clock in the morning. I picked up the phone and it was Hampton Dunn. All he said was, Johnson, my copy boy just quit, do you want the job? I said, copy boy? He said, that's right. I said, okay, and he said, be here in fifteen minutes [laughing]. So, I made it down there in a while. I worked as a copy boy at that paper for about five or six weeks that summer and then I became a reporter doing little features and stuff. I thought, this is really fun. This paper was right out of *Front Page*. In fact, Ralph, we have meetings, Geezer Fest we call it, of people who were alumni of that paper. [We do that] to this day, we just had one. We meet in Tampa.

L: You tell stories?

J: Well, yes. Of course, we just started after that. That's what I did, I came back to school [and] I did a couple of journalism courses. Of course, one of the first courses [I had], Buddy taught.

L: Buddy Davis?

J: Yes.

L: That's Horance G. Davis, Jr. So, you had a course with Buddy when you came back. That would be your sophomore year.

J: That's right. I remember he was teaching, then, the way he became famous for. He would stand on his desk. [It was] just a very fascinating, challenging, intellectual exercise. I mean, you'd have to be dead in that class not to get something out of it. [It was] just marvelous teaching.

L: There's no doubt about it that Buddy was one of the great teachers.

J: That's right. That's when I began my study of journalism, and, of course, became an upper-division journalism student.

L: You went to work on the *Alligator*, too?

J: Yes, I did a little bit on the *Alligator* that year, but not very much. The second year, the summer between my sophomore and junior year, I went back to Tampa and I worked as one of the three or four heavy hitting reporters there. It was a great experience. I came back. In my junior year, Red Newton came up to interview for interns. Red Newton, V. M. Newton, Jr. was managing editor of the *Tampa Tribune*.

L: That was the larger paper, then?

J: Yes. He knew he was going to prune the *Tampa Times* staff when he came up here, as he told me years later. [He] offered me an internship for the following summer and a student correspondent's job here on the campus.

L: It was still a circulation paper back in those days.

J: Oh, yes, so I did that for several papers, including the [Jacksonville] *Times Union* and the *St. Pete[rsburg] Times*. There were quite a few of us who did that. My first chore involving the [*Tampa Times*] was to tell Hampton I was not going to be coming back for the third summer. They were accustomed to that. My junior year, I did more work on the *Alligator* and worked that summer as a reporter for the *Tribune*. My senior year I was managing editor at the *Alligator* and doing some other stuff that kind of was preparing me for going into newspaper journalism.

L: When you graduated, did you go directly to work for the *Gainesville Sun*?

J: No, I'm glad you mentioned that because I had worked for the *Gainesville Sun* and had a rather interesting experience in my sophomore year. They had been looking for a sports stringer. I went down and worked a little bit for Joe Halberstein. He was a terrific guy.

L: He was a sports editor?

J: He was a sports editor, yes, and really a one-man gang as the *Sun* was as I learned then. I went to the *Sun* on a part-time basis doing stuff like filling in.

L: Was that during your senior year?

J: That was during my sophomore year. I digressed when I was telling you about the sequence. When I worked down there I discovered I was working almost forty hours a week with, do this and do that. Billy Pepper, William Pepper III, was the [city] editor; his father was the editor and publisher; and Calvert Pepper, his uncle, was the business manager. They were thinly staffed [with] little, if any, focus on the university community. It really cost me, academically, a lot because I think my grades that semester were the worst I'd had. I was trying to do stuff on the campus, I was trying to keep up with my studies, and there were these constant [assignments such as] will you cover the city commission tonight and so forth. I figured I need the money now but when it's over, it's over. That's when I went back to Tampa that summer and didn't return to the *Sun*.

Anyway, when I graduated [in] 1957, I was interviewed for a couple jobs other than the *Tribune's*. Red had assumed that I was going to go back to work there.

Bill Fields, the managing editor of the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* had interviewed me and wanted me to go up, so I went up to Atlanta and I think he offered me \$10 a week more than the *Tribune*. I said, I think I'm going to take this job. I got back to Tampa and I remember thinking, one little thing that's kind of off putting to me about the Atlanta offer was that Bill Fields was a nice man, a sweet man, but I remember when I was talking to him, I noticed that the pockets on his pants were badly frayed. I thought, either he can't afford pants or he's got his hands in his pockets all the time. I thought that's a peculiar thing, but I figured [he was] another eccentric.

I got back to Tampa and I told Harold Tyler, city editor of the *Tribune*, I said, I've taken a job in Atlanta. Tyler's response was, you can't do that. I said, well, yes, I can. He said you don't want to go to Atlanta. He gave me all the reasons why I should stay in Tampa. He said, besides, Red will really be mad. I thought later, that's an interesting piece in the hole. I talked with several guys I've worked with and it's a great bunch of reporters there, at the *Tribune*, then and later. I really was talked out of going to Atlanta, and fairly easily [at that]. I

called Mr. Fields and said, I'm sorry that I have to renege on this and [that I was going] to go back to work in Tampa. He said, it's okay, I understand. That's when I started working as a reporter in Tampa.

L: How long did you work there?

J: I worked there for six years or so.

L: What types of jobs did you have and things did you have there?

J: I started out, as most reporters there did, with police and courts, but I covered about everything. I covered city hall. I covered county commission. I covered the governor's race. I covered every major beat virtually in the city.

L: Did you get married during that time?

J: Yes, I did. I met Carole at the *Tribune*. She was a student at the University of Miami, her folks lived in Clearwater, and she was working part time that summer after her junior year in the library at the *Tampa Tribune*.

L: What was her maiden name?

J: [Her name was] Bauer.

L: So, she was working at the *Tribune* as a librarian?

J: Yes, she was a librarian's assistant. That was where we met and we were married in 1960. I worked on the copy desk. I did a couple of interesting things. I worked as assistant feature editor. I had a lot of good experiences at the *Tribune*. It was a paper that had a lot of editorial vigor and a tremendous reach statewide, as did the *Miami Herald*, [but] the *Tribune* especially. It's interesting to me to be looking back at the circulation reach of some of those papers.

L: How did it compete in those days with the *St. Petersburg Times*?

J: The *St. Petersburg Times* really was not considered big time competition at that time. Nelson Poynter had really not focused on making the *Times* the great newspaper that it is. It began to take off, and the juxtaposition of various elements, to my way of thinking, were costly to the *Tribune* eventually. They were [also] advantageous to the *Times* because, at that time, from a circulation standpoint, I don't believe that the strategy of the *Tampa Tribune* was quite appreciative of the fact that the *St. Petersburg Times* circulation [area] really only had one direction that it could go, which was north. They wouldn't strengthen

their Bradenton [and] Sarasota coverage. They were not at all cognizant that the *St. Petersburg Times* could move into Tampa, that just simply wasn't on the boards. The *Tribune* at the time had heavy circulation in Pinellas Country.

L: What do you mean, they wouldn't strengthen the Bradenton, Sarasota coverage? You're talking about the *Tribune* and not the *St. Petersburg [Times]*?

J: I'm talking about the *Tribune*, yes. The visualization of the state bureau's was a fairly simple one by most papers. They would have a bureau in Gainesville, they'd have a bureau in Bradenton, a bureau in Sarasota, maybe a combination, a bureau in Tallahassee, [and] Lakeland; and other papers operated the same way. That was true for fifteen or twenty years during that period in Florida journalism where the classic news coverage was that way. Technology had changed that a lot.

L: Let's pause just for a minute because I think this is an interesting aspect of media growth. When I came here almost thirty years ago, there were bureaus of the major papers here, in Tallahassee, Ocala, and lots of other places. Today in Florida, you don't hear of newspaper bureaus anywhere except maybe in Tallahassee, nor do they circulate [there] really. What happened in those say twenty or twenty-five years that caused the demise of the bureaus or the newspapers reaching out to cover the whole state? What happened?

J: Well, I think a lot of it was simply the economics of it, the false economics, to my way of thinking. The bureau presence in some of these places really was more than just having a person there. This was a visible person in the community.

L: Yes, I remember.

J: When managers began to feel any kind of compression on their budgets, their decisions were often ones of, well we're going to trim off a little expense here this way. I think that, as much as anything, you could describe it by something Larry Jinks, then managing editor of the *Miami Herald*, mentioned to me one time. [He was] a great newspaperman and good friend. I remember when the *Miami Herald* did a sampling of the area around the campus here at the University of Florida. I could subscribe to that home delivery of the *Miami Herald* and I did. I saw Larry at some kind of a function.

L: At that time he was managing editor of the *Miami Herald*?

J: [Yes.] I said, you know Larry, I kind of enjoy getting the *Miami Herald* on my door step. He said enjoy it while you can. It costs us a buck and quarter a day to get that paper to you.

- L: I know that's a problem with transportation, it's expensive.
- J: I think one of the factors bearing on the drawing back was, the circulation focus on selling papers where the bureau is, rather than selling papers in their stronger areas based on the news coverage of those areas. In other words, there were a lot of people in Miami [and] in Tampa who really are interested in what's going on in this part of the state. It would be nice to have circulation here and it would be important to have circulation here, but that's the not the only reason for doing it. I believe that in that change of manning, there was an overemphasis, you had your news coverage where your households were. That is true to a point, but after that, it's no longer valid.
- L: In other words, did something happen to the state of Florida that maybe they were right? Was it that the city has gotten larger, with Cuban immigration for example, that people in Miami didn't really care about what was going on in Gainesville anymore?
- J: That's an element of it, there's no doubt about it. My theory is that this was one of the things that was an overreaction that has led to what my greatest fear of the fate of newspapers [is], the irrelevance of newspapers. In our lifetime, you can look back at various measuring points and you can see the decline of relevance in newspapers. It is not a compelling medium, it's just not.
- L: Is that because of a change in the audience or a change in the newspaper?
- J: [There have been] a lot of changes, I think as much in one as the other. You see, the changes in one lead to the changes in the other. Once that commitment is made, then you contribute to the shrinking of your marketplace. I find it fascinating that in the past few years the focus of marketing on circulation figures had subtly declined. You see less and less [of people saying], we've got X number of papers now. No longer. Now, the marketing is based on pricing and not volume.
- L: Would you explain that a little more clearly?
- J: It's much easier now for a circulation director or a marketing director to say, we can get more for our product simply by adjusting price structures here or there, rather than simply adding new numbers. We can sell this to our advertisers that way.
- L: You mean, rather than getting more circulation, they can say, we have the demographics, we get our papers in certain places, and near the malls or whatever and this is what's important to you.

J: Exactly.

L: So, we don't need the large circulations, although circulations have been going up.

J: They have been going up, but statistically not significantly. The emphasis is no longer there. What this leads to, to me, is, when the circulation focus of newspapers is adversely affected, when there's a change in this, [then] more emphasis at that institution at that paper is placed on the marketing, on the sales, on the revenue picture where you already have a pretty heavy pressure on revenue and profit. Either overtly or otherwise, this, to me, has been chipping away at the institutional responsibility of newspapers. I think that there's been a subtle affect on papers by shoppers, free papers and other things that have been income driven rather than somebody saying, well, yes, it's true, we've got to make a buck here, but we also have an institutional responsibility to provide news that is of a dependable nature to these people who will eventually become customers of our advertisers, become subscribers and so forth. I think that's deteriorating.

L: I would hope we can come back to that because to me that's really one of the crucial points. The newspapers, their focusing on economic competition, on advertising, on, like you say, cost per inch and everything else like that. It seems to me that there's not an emphasis on covering the area in such a vital way that people have to have that newspaper.

J: I'm convinced of it.

L: It seems to me that people have to have the newspaper because they have to know what movies are playing and what's on sale at Dillard's or all the inserts and everything else, but they don't find that that newspaper is vital to know what is going on in town. Actually, the newspaper is very competitive. It has competition in advertising everywhere, but it seems to me that the newspaper really doesn't have competition in news. It's the only news source, still, no matter what you say, that there is no other really significant news source.

[End of side A1]

L: Ed, we've got you through the *Tampa Tribune* days after six years of working there, then what happens to you?

J: I had known of the sale of the *Gainesville Sun* to Cowles Communications.

L: That's the Pepper family.

- J: The Pepper family sold the paper to Cowles Communications. Really, [it was] the corporate identity of Mike Cowles, one of the Des Moines [Register] family Cowles. Mike's claim to fame was, of course, the establishment and publishing of *Look* magazine. That [sale] happened in September of 1962.
- L: The Cowles were buying up a number of papers, weren't they?
- J: No, that was, I believe, the first surge of acquisitions in response to Gannett's purchasing of papers. People began to think, my God, what's going on here as some of these small papers are just being vacuumed up by Gannett? Even then, it was much less vigorous than it became later. It changed the characteristics of newspaper publishing a lot, and probably more than we really understand.
- L: They changed it from local ownership to sort of chain ownership.
- J: That's right, and I think that the best way to relate to that in a short form would be to compare today's small daily ownership to today's weekly ownership. Today's weekly ownership is like the daily ownership of twenty-five years or so ago.
- L: These are locally owned.
- J: Yes, if not locally owned, it was a small company that owned maybe two or three papers or something like that.
- L: So, Cowles bought the *Sun*.
- J: They bought the *Sun*. He had already purchased *Ft. Pierce News Tribune*. [He] bought the *Sun*, and then either then or shortly thereafter [he] bought the *Star Banner* in Ocala. Lakeland [*Ledger*] was a year or two later [bought] by Cowles.
- L: Lake City, did that become a Cowles property, and Palatka also?
- J: Yes. I was aware of that. After a while, anything that happens has got to be good. About two months later, I was called by Jack Harrison at the *Tribune*. I didn't know who Jack Harrison was. He asked me if I would be interested in interviewing for the job as executive editor of the *Sun*. I said, yes, why not?
- L: That was about 1960?
- J: That was about 1962 in early December. What was at play here was that Jack had been told by Mike Cowles, his father-in-law, to find a new editor and new staffing. At the time the executive editor was Billy Pepper [and] the managing

editor was Whitey McMullen, who later worked for WRUF for some time. I, of course, knew Billy and the Pepper family, but I also knew the paper. I learned later, and I'm going to jump ahead and then come back to this, that Jack had interviewed four or five guys from around the state who were editors, either managing editors or executive editors, and had gotten nowhere. I learned this because one of them, Barney Waters who was then at *Cocoa Today*, told me when Gannett tried to [hire] me a few years later. He said, you know, I was interviewed for that job in Gainesville, [but] I couldn't work for that guy. Barney was very outspoken.

L: By "that guy" he meant Jack Harrison?

J: [He meant] Jack, yes.

L: Jack was married to who?

J: Lois Cowles was his wife.

L: Lois Cowles Harrison was his wife. When you were chosen to be interviewed, you weren't really an editor.

J: That's right, I was assistant feature editor. I had just gotten an award from the American Political Science Association for some reporting I had done and was sort of a blip on visibility, I think, but the main [thing] was that by then Jack was asking Hugh Cunningham for people he knew for this [job]. He said, well, why don't you talk to Johnson, as if [to say], he'll do anything. So, I came up and I spent a day with Jack and we just kind of talked around a few things. He said, well, what do you think of the *Gainesville Sun*? I said, well, I'll be frank with you, I am one of those journalists in Florida who probably wouldn't walk across the street to read the paper, let alone work for it. I said, there's only one way you're going to find somebody to run this newspaper, and that is, a lot of changes are going to have to be made and some will be painful. I said, I don't know whether you're interested in doing that or not, but I just thought I'd say so.

L: Can we pause for just a moment and say, why did everybody in the state have such a low opinion of this paper as it existed under the Peppers?

J: I don't think that it was necessarily a low opinion of the paper. I think, like [a few] other papers in the state at that time, there was no visibility editorially. There was just no identity. Like some papers today, they just kind of chugged it out and that's it.

L: It was just not known outside of Gainesville. It was just a workaday paper and that was about it.

J: That's right, but I think that Barney's approach was, he just didn't cotton [didn't agree or fraternize with] to Jack. He knew that there were big problems with what he wanted to do and a big space of time and energy between what he said he wanted to do and what he had to do.

L: But Jack Harrison was not a known figure in the state.

J: That's right, he wasn't. He was known a little bit in Ft. Pierce because he worked down there and joked about it. He said, I worked as a printer in Ft. Pierce for a couple weeks and then I became publisher. When they bought this paper, Jack and Pat Cowles, his name was Gardner Cowles as well, but Mike's son. Pat and Jack came to Gainesville and, admittedly, to me they were very interesting guys. Jack was self-effacing as I got to know him. He really knew what he didn't know, a trait I'm afraid he lost later on.

L: He did not come up through the newspaper business. He married the publisher's daughter essentially.

J: Essentially, yes. Jack once told me that what he really wanted to do was to teach art history, [he wanted] more of an academic life.

L: When you said to him, a lot has to be done before I'd come up here, what was the reaction?

J: His reaction was, well, yeah. It wasn't an effusive response of yes, that's right. He said, okay, what would you do first? I said, from the papers I've read the *Sun* excludes its biggest audience, the University of Florida. For some reason they ignore the fact that it's right down the street. I mean it's the town, and yet, other than the football team, that's all I can find in it. He said, that's the same way I feel about it, it has to include the university.

So, I went back to Tampa and I called Hugh Cunningham for one thing. I said, what have you gotten me into here? He was not in a position to say, take this job, but he said, these guys really want to do something with this paper, that's my take on it. I don't know they really know much about how to do that or what it's going to mean to the paper and so forth, but I don't know that they really care. I think that it would be an interesting thing to do. I thought, I'm going to give it a whirl, so I called Jack and I said, okay, when [do] you want me to come to work? He said, how soon can you get here? I said [I can be there] January 1, I've got some stuff on the fire here I just have to finish.

L: What month was that?

J: That was in early December, so I took two or three weeks. I told Red and Jock

Murray, an editor there at the *Tribune*. He said, well, that sounds pretty good, and you know if turns out to be something you don't think it is, give us a call. I thought, boy is that ever good to hear.

We came up here [to Gainesville] and rented a little house in 1963. Actually, it was worse than I thought. The first thing was that I didn't know then, and it took a long time to learn, what the relationship was between Jack and Billy and Whitey. By then, though, Jack had given him the message, you're really through here.

L: Billy at that time was the publisher?

J: No, he was the executive editor.

L: You were brought in as executive editor.

J: That's right [laughing].

L: Whitey McMullen was the managing editor.

J: The staff was about three people. It really was an empty box.

L: What was the circulation about that time?

J: [The circulation was] about 12,500 as I recall, something like that. But I'll tell you something, Ralph, nobody really knew what the circulation was. Bob Tartaglione and I used to laugh about this because the Pepper family printed the paper. The only thing they knew was the press run, and even that was up to the figures given to them by a man named Warren Torlay.

L: Was he the press chief?

J: He was the circulation manager, but he didn't work for them on a direct basis. The press would run and it literally would go through a hole in the wall on a conveyor belt. From that point on, it was Warren's newspaper. If he wanted to dump them all in the prairie, that's it.

L: He was an independent contractor?

J: He was independent.

L: Weren't they members of the Audit Bureau of Circulation?

J: I don't believe they were. If they were, they lied about it. They would have

conflicts all the time in the numbers, or Warren cooked the books. I don't know, but that was one of Jack's big problems. He knew he had to get hold of that.

L: He [Bob Tantagleone] became the circulation director.

J: He became the circulation director in early 1963. [He was] a terrific guy, just a terrific guy. He was on the circulation staff at the *Ft. Lauderdale News*, I believe.

L: His daughter now teaches on this faculty now, I think, part time.

J: Yes, I remember when she was a little girl. Bob and I spent a lot of time together talking about what we were going to have to do. We became good friends as well as close co-workers.

L: How long did Billy Pepper stick around?

J: [He stayed until] early in 1963. He left first and then Whitey left. Whitey had, all the time, I think, he had a talk show of some sort at WRUF, as I recall.

L: That was before my time.

J: Then, he went to work for the radio station full time as news director. He told me one day, he said, for God's sake keep emphasizing local news, that's all we use. Just pick up the paper, that's it. Both [of] these [were] likeable guys. Billy was kind of losing interest, as I recall, in it. His wife was the daughter of a guy who was a developer of some department stores in Texas, and not long after that they moved to Texas. They've since moved back to Gainesville, by the way, since his retirement.

L: Who moved back to Gainesville?

J: Billy [moved back].

L: He writes letters to the editor.

J: I'll never forget one night. This is when I was a student working down there and just Billy and I were down there. I remember somebody saying that there had been a car struck by a train over [at] High Springs or somewhere like that and a couple of people were killed. I had called the sheriff and the other sources, [and they said] sorry, we can't release that until the families are notified. I said, well, can you tell me where they're from or anything like that? The guy was adamant, he was just not going to say anything. Billy was nearby there finishing up some sports story and I said, boy, that's a dead end on that story. He said, who did you talk to down there? I said, the sheriff's office over there. He said, hmm

and sat there for a little while, and after a while he picked up the phone and he called the sheriff's office disguising his voice. I don't know what he was disguised as, but he said, hello this is Reverend so-and-so over here somewhere, I understand a couple of my parishioners have been in an accident over there and I've got to talk to their families, could you tell me who they are? [Laughing.] The guy told him. [It was] unethical, but very productive. He said, there's nothing to these guys. That is one of my more vivid memories of Billy.

They had left and we began in 1963 to try to build the paper. I was essentially executive editor, managing editor, editor of the editorial page, [and] sometimes reporter. As I was about to say, it was one of those eighteen [or] twenty-four month periods that you have the same reaction that you have to thinking about your army basic training. I really am glad I did that, but I wouldn't do it again for a million bucks.

L: You wonder how you did it, right?

J: That's right, you wonder how you did it.

L: Did they give you the resources to begin building the staff?

J: I thought so, but in retrospect I realize, no. One of the side things there that I think is of consequence, and I remember my rationale about this, is that I talked with Hugh Cunningham about having some of the university journalism students work for the paper. One of the reasons for that is that his argument was compelling to me especially because he was saying they really need hands-on experience. My way of explaining to them was based on my own [student] experience at the *Tampa Times*, in which kind of walking down and applying for a job is laughable. I thought if that had not occurred, I would not have been in this business, so you've got to have something. I thought my own experience with the *Alligator*, that's really a beneficial experience. You get good training at the university, but you've got to have some kind of experience in a newsroom where you know where the water fountain is, you know those little dynamics that go on. It's like many other jobs of course, but I thought if this can be worked out where it's beneficial [and] fair, I think that it really would be a good thing for the paper as well as the students.

L: We're talking about setting up a sort of a student newsroom in the paper itself.

J: We didn't realize it at the time, but that's what it evolved to. What it did lead to was [that] after two or three years, I began to hear from these students who had worked [at the *Sun*] earlier. They'd call [and say] thank you. I thought we're on the right track here.

- L: Actually, in those days you didn't have the staff either, so it worked to your advantage as well.
- J: Exactly, it really was a perfect moment for both institutions.
- L: Students were working a couple days a week?
- J: No, it wasn't at that level yet. The formative organization was there, [and] it was fine tuned over the next two or three years or so.
- L: It was moving toward producing the local section, wasn't it pretty much?
- J: Yes, exactly.
- L: Eventually when it reached its peak, were they doing it every day or just a couple of days a week?
- J: [They worked] two days a week. Some of these students of course were experienced. I mean, they'd worked at a paper for a year or two and decided to get a degree and so forth, so it was a meshing of staffs. You had to do a lot of different things with both. You had to tell each group that the other group is worthy of their professional respect. You had to be able to tell them and to demonstrate to them that you are depending upon them, it's not a rehearsal, this is for real, it goes back to your basic training. All of this is true when somebody tells you spell their name right. You're not going to be necessarily graded on this, but you also are going to be inhibiting [or enhancing] your hiring attraction in days to come. It wasn't that dogmatic, but my point is, we, both Hugh and I, worked to make this a welcoming environment for both.

There was some really difficult moments with some of the old staff. I remember a great example was a little old lady there, Eleanor Crom, who was the society editor. Early on in that year, Eleanor said she had a good story working on some function at the country club. I said, oh, that's nice, Eleanor. She said, it was a wonderful affair. She said, do you know, Ed, there was only one of those university people there? I thought, uh-oh.

- L: It's sort of interesting because that was an unusual experiment. I'm not sure it occurred at any other paper in the country, that I know of, quite like that. It eventually, under your leadership, evolved into a situation where two people here, John Rosenrod and Ed Weston, in terms of the journalism faculty, came down on those two days and actually sat in as sort of the editors. The students really produced the local news section of the *Gainesville Sun* two days a week. It was a fantastic experience. That was going on when I came here.

- J: Well, interestingly enough, by that time I would go to APME [Associated Press Managing Editors] meetings or ASNE [American Society of Newspaper Editors] meetings and invariably some person who was an editor of a paper at one of the university communities in the country would ask about that because there had been a story in *Editor and Publisher* about how it worked. It was not a very enlightened story, but it was enough [that] if you were in Green Bay, Wisconsin and you read that, you'd say, I wonder if that would work here. The value to all parties is evident if you look at it coldly. These guys would say tell me how this works. I said, I will tell you everything I know, [and] I will also invite you to come down for a couple of days and see how it works. I'll tell you one thing, it depends a lot on how proprietary you are about your newspaper because there's a risk there. You have to have a lot of confidence in the faculty people who are involved, and you have to extend the confidence to the students involved that you would to a rookie reporter. It's no magic here, but you have to take the time to do it.
- L: Especially since you're changing every semester, you have a whole bunch of new rookies. It's an awful situation.
- J: That's right.
- L: It was an interesting experiment that later the *Gainesville Sun* under your leadership grew and grew to the point where they didn't really need this anymore because you still had to turn out local pages the other three, four, or five days and it became really somewhat of a problem in space and everything else. You and I had the idea of doing the same system but transferring it up here [school of journalism] so we would become a bureau of the *Gainesville Sun* and you would get the campus coverage. What was interesting about that is, all of the factors that genuinely screwed that situation up was you were willing to give a full page every day but the faculty then decided that that was too much work. They said they could only do it two days a week, which really defeated the whole purpose in making a bureau. I mean, it's your interview and not mine . . .
- J: No, I'm glad you mention it.
- L: I have to say this because the *Sun* was willing and you were willing to really let the students get this experience. Then, there were other faculty members who were so dedicated to the *Alligator* that they felt that this was a betrayal of the *Alligator*, that the *Sun* was now competing with the *Alligator*, which it really wasn't.
- J: Oh, it was nonsense.
- L: It is nonsense, it wasn't in any way or whatsoever. This was fantastic

experience for students who couldn't work on the *Alligator*, who couldn't devote the time to it. In fact, no student had to do it if they worked on the *Alligator*. Then, the administration didn't like it because, truthfully, it's to the newspaper's advantage to cover the university. It's the only industry in town, the university, actually administration, that did not want to be covered. They're much happier not having any coverage whatsoever and churning out their own public relations releases. The two things together ended the program. The journalism faculty essentially, except for a few like Rosenrod and Weston, who had transitioned back up here, was not cooperating and not wanting to do the work. The university was not wanting to give the students access to the information. We still did it for a period of years, but I have to say this, basically, it wasn't the *Gainesville Sun's* problem, it turned out to be a faculty and administration problem.

J: Yes, and I'm not sure how hard it was to convince the *Sun*. After a while they figured, well, if they don't want it [why should we continue]?

L: Exactly.

J: You make an interesting point there about the administration's position on that, which is a lesson that should be attended to to this day.

L: Let's talk about this. I mean, we're getting ahead of ourselves. We've talked a lot, but talk about the University of Florida, because there's no other paper that we're interviewing that has this situation. This is a one industry town, that's the University of Florida. It had, by the time I came here, 28,000 students. Now, we've got 48,000. You're the editor of the paper, you're looking at this administration, you're trying to cover the university, what problems did you encounter?

J: First of all, you'll remember my relating the conversation I had with Jack about purpose. Number one there is that this paper has got to penetrate Gainesville west of Thirteenth Street, we've got to.

L: In other words, get out of downtown and back over to where the university is.

J: It was an attitude by the ownership of the paper at that time which was in retrospect even more puzzling to me now than it was then, how you couldn't see that. You're talking about an audience of faculty, staff, and some graduate professional students who have lived in this town longer than most of the people you're trying to sell the paper to. I mean what is this?

L: And they're the most affluent part.

- J: Absolutely. Jack knew that very well. He went to the point, and even later to the absurd. Jack kind of soured on Gainesville itself later on because he felt that his efforts in that regard were not really appreciated, and, of course, they weren't. I told him, I said, hey if you're looking for approval from news sources, you've got to be careful. Here's the thing about the university administration then, even later, now, and as a matter of fact as it extends to any factory town, any one institution town. The first thing I asked for and the first thing I got, I said, I want a heavy-hitting reporter who will cover the University of Florida only, that's it. This job will be the pre-eminent position of the reportorial staff at this newspaper for as long as I'm here.
- L: If I might add, you've had a series of them.
- J: That's right.
- L: There have been none, to my knowledge, since you've left.
- J: Yes, the closest they've come to it [is] putting Diane Chun on the medical beat. She does a pretty good job with the challenge.
- L: There used to be one guy that did nothing but cover this university.
- J: Absolutely. The last one, as I recall, is Ron Cunningham who is now the editor of the editorial page.
- L: Then the other fellow that went to work at the *St. Petersburg Times* was so good.
- J: Oh, yes, Ray [Washington].
- L: Ray, at one time, but then there was another one who was really a great guy. Anyway, there was one person that was virtually that person's only job, that was that person's beat.
- J: Well, exactly. [That was Wayne Garcia.] Of course we started out with Clif Cormier and Skip Perez. If there was any kind of a caste system on the reportorial staff, there's no doubt where number one was and that was deliberate, and it was important that the university administration understood it was deliberate. If you put something in place like that and then you add to it a group of bright, ambitious, vigorous journalism students who are like ants on the administration building, this is not a happy moment for a secretive administration. You figure, if nothing else, the best I can hope for is that some kid is going to turn up something and tell this guy who already knows where all the bodies are buried, and it's going to be tough for us. The thing about it that was interesting

is that this was never constructed to be an anti-university role, it was simply [designed to] cover this institution.

L: Most of the stories were positive, like what's going on at the medical center. If you looked at it, very few were exposé type stories, but they don't want to be covered except for PR.

J: I know that.

L: I suppose this is true of any industry, they've got a PR staff that they pay big bucks to, so they see the newspaper as an outlet for the PR releases. The newspaper has no right to cover them independently.

J: Of course, you know as well that this is the attitude particularly in the past few years of any institution of that nature. The military, industry, all of these [do not want to be covered]. The *New York Times* Company [is an example of this].

L: They didn't even their meetings covered by the outside of the *New York Times*.

J: If you called right now and asked to speak to one of the guys in the newsroom or the ad director or something about some function, well, you'll have to talk to the corporate PR down there.

L: Let's move ahead for a minute to the Jayson Blair thing. It's sort of interesting, the *New York Times* did cover their meetings on Jayson Blair, but they were covered by a *New York Times* reporter. I'm sure that that reporter had carte blanche to do whatever he wanted to do.

J: Oh, he did.

L: On the other hand, take the reader who is reading this and they're winking and saying, oh, yeah, this has absolutely no credibility at all even though it probably was a completely factual story.

J: Well, I think it was, but I also, like almost everybody else as an outsider, recognized that if that's what they're doing, why are they doing it in the coverage of a story that is related to the coverage. You figure, if nothing else, you want some guy from the *New York Press* or the *Observer* or one of the tab[loid]s coming in and asking stupid, embarrassing questions to make sure the people understand that yeah, we suffer greatly and this is included. I felt the *Times* itself less, mainly because of the tendency to do that. Any institution, the University of Florida, the military, any number of things that did that.

L: You did get the coverage. What are the problems that you face as executive editor? Looking back over the years, and I know you became publisher later,

but as the editor you built a good professional staff, other than coverage of the university, what are the major problems that occurred to you? How many years were you editor altogether?

J: I was [editor] from 1963 until 1985, thereabouts, and then I was publisher for a year and a half, but I was also executive editor for the same period of time.

L: So, it's about twenty-three years.

J: When people will say, how long were you at the *Sun*, I then have to add in that from 1963 to 1971 that I was the executive editor under the Cowles company. [It was] a long time.

L: Then, the *New York Times* bought the paper in May of what year?

J: [They bought it] in May of 1971.

L: They really bought the existing structure, the staff and everything else. Did they make any significant changes when they took over the paper from Cowles?

J: First of all, there's a common misunderstanding about the acquisition of the *Sun* and the other papers by the *New York Times*. This was not an outright purchase as some of the later papers were. Mike was in trouble financially with *Look* magazine, he had these papers that were making money, the Sulzberger family was having revenue problems at the *Times* in 1971. I remember Max Frankel was the bureau chief in Washington about that time, and I was up there.

L: Max, he worked under me at the Columbia journalism school.

J: Oh, he did?

L: He was a year below me.

J: We were shooting the breeze in his office one day and I said, Max, I realize this is really kind of an overstated thing, but if there's anything at all that any of the, I think I assumed some of the responsibilities for the other papers, group papers can do, just let me know. [I said,] I don't know what that might be. He said, send money. I laughed and he said, seriously, we're having some hard times. So, you had that to consider as an element, the fact [of] the financial problems at the *Times*.

The acquisition of the paper and the other papers owned by Mike at that time, including other publications [such as] *Family Circle* magazine and a couple of other things Mike had picked up, *Us* was one, this was transferred to the *New York Times* Company totally by stock exchange. Mike's take on this was *New*

*York Times* stock. Now, where this plays into it is, Jack's role and Pat Cowles' and others. This gave Mike something like 20 or 22 percent ownership of the *New York Times Company*. His intention was to unload the stock as quickly [and as] advisedly as he could, which he did. Mike and "Punch," Arthur O. Sulzberger, they both in conversation had confirmed to me and a couple of others who were just reminiscing about it, that this was a moment in the operation of both these companies where it was advantageous to each to do this.

Mike was converting his problems with *Look* magazine. He thought he was going to be able to recover from the decline of weekly news magazines.

L: The whole trend was against him.

J: The trend was against him, but it gave him a way out but without having to sell off the papers to others and his ego was not damaged.

L: It was more like a merger than a sell.

J: That's right, but it was understood that Mike was to have no . . .

L: Did they make any changes when they came in, the *New York Times*?

J: When that move was made, I remember Mr. Ivan Viet, who was one of the corporate officers of the *Times* and "Punch," Arthur R. Sulzberger, came to Gainesville. We spent a couple days with them and were just charmed by not only their courtesy but their knowledge of the newspaper business. They listened carefully to what we had been doing and to what the plans were and so forth. Of course, it didn't hurt to make the statement of what kind of newspaper the *Gainesville Sun* was, that that was the year Buddy won the second Pulitzer [Prize] for the paper. So, they were pretty impressed by what was going on at the *Gainesville Sun*, and things were humming along pretty good at that time.

The first, and really the most consequential thing, was that they enhanced the employee benefit plans almost to an unrecognizable level. Cowles wasn't exactly the great corporate beneficiary in the sky. But to give them their due, that was an era in newspaper acquisitions, and others as I mentioned a while ago, [where] things were picking up in which there were a lot of good things happening to some papers and there were a lot of bad things happening.

L: So, did the *Times* give you a bigger budget as well?

J: It wasn't [that they said], I'm here to enlarge your budget, but I think that the key was that the *Times* put the papers on a different financial operational basis. You knew that if you could see your way to add a couple of people or do something and got your budget approved, that was going to happen. Before, it was, oh, my

God, we didn't do as well last month so we're going to really have to screw things down this month. The financial operation was quite different. It was quite a bit more stable. I don't mean to say that it was just wildly generous, because it certainly wasn't. The overriding element of consideration was [that] we've got to make the *Times* newspaper less dependent on the revenue lineage from New York City, we've got to broaden this because it rises and falls with the economic indicators.

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- J: As I was saying, it diversified the revenues for the *New York Times* paper, but probably more importantly it indicated to the financial analysts in publishing on Wall Street that this was a very significant move on the part of a company that analysts had begun to consider as too conservative financially. Their forecasting was for a downward trend.
- L: So, you're now part of the economic team, but in general belief, I would say, that Knight-Ridder and Gannett were interested in the quality of every newspaper within the group whereas, I'm asking you about this, the *New York Times* is primarily interested in the quality of the *New York Times*, but not as interested in interfering in the quality of the other newspapers that are part of the group. They're seen as a revenue source or as part of the revenue stream but not part of the quality stream. Is that overstating the case?
- J: Yes, it is overstating the case in this regard in that that's the way it started out from *Times*' standpoint. The economics of the *Times*' revenue picture began to pick up almost immediately thereafter, partly because of this merger. The financial analysts read more into it than there was. The *Times* was going to recover on its own. The quick infusion there was helpful, but really it was pretty small potatoes. I discovered later, and I don't know whether it's worth mentioning or not, that financial analysts in publishing are often pretty ill-informed. To say that the *Times* was not interested in the quality says two things, one, they did become interested in the quality of the paper. Pride of ownership largely was the reason, but I would not overstate the interest of Knight-Ridder or Gannett in the quality of their papers. I don't subscribe to that. I've seen too many examples where the right hand didn't know what the left hand was doing.
- L: It's still the bottom line, right?
- J: Oh, yes, definitely, and particularly so in the last few years. I think that there was an honorable beginning particularly in the case of Knight maybe until they merged with Ridder.

L: Let's move a little bit ahead, Ed. We talked about the campus newspaper problems or experience. What other problems did you experience? Let's say, during these years there was the great integration, in fact Buddy Davis, Horance G. Davis, Jr. who was mentioned before as the editorial writer for the *Gainesville Sun* and also a full time faculty member at the University of Florida College of Journalism and Communications, won a Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing having to do with segregation and integration. What was the role of the paper generally vis a vis the community? You had two communities. You had the university community and an old line Southern segregated community. I mean the integration really hadn't taken place before you got here, or essentially very little, so would you talk about that a little bit?

J: Yes, that's an interesting point I think because events merged with intent at the *Sun* in this regard. I returned to my original conviction that Jack approved at the outset. That is, the necessity to dissolve as much as possible the town/gown [citizens vs. university]

differences, to merge the two as much as possible into a single community. There's two sides to that.

L: In other words, using the newspaper leadership to form that merger, not just in the coverage of the news but in society as a social entity itself.

J: Exactly. For a couple of years we ran a little ear on the front page of the paper that said "Health Education Research the University of Florida." Before, [that would have been different]. In fact, I ran across this old nameplate the other day [that read], "The University City." Well, that was the extent of it. There was an overt effort there to merge the two at the time of the recognition of the civil rights movement. What got us there, in addition to the extension of recognition, if you will, to the university, was the stepping back from the traditional old-boy, first-family-type relationship in the old audience.

[That was] a delicate maneuver because I remember the first year or so where it was commonplace for people, movers and shakers or at the time, county commissioners or somebody, [to] come in and virtually demand something. I remember trying to patiently explain, well, yeah we'll judge it on its merits. The pressure from what Miss Crom referred to as the Country Club, which in this day and age is laughable. [It was] obviously a recognizable segment of the community, but just that. It certainly had interests, but in the classic sense a group of people, usually whole families, but there were oppositions from whole families too, it wasn't cohesive who were encouraging [us] to be independent. These were families who had been here for 100 years.

L: Was any integration in the staff going on at this point? Did you have black

advertising people [or] black reporters?

J: We had an Ben Childs who did a "black news" page where black, mainly social, activities were done. I repeated it out of the paper and [it was] laboriously distributed to black subscribers. It was a preposterous arrangement.

L: What do you mean? It didn't go into general circulation but only the circulation in the black areas?

J: That's right. Well, early on I told Jack Harrison this has got to go. He said, yes, it does, I agree, but what are we going to do with Ben? I said, Ben will be a reporter as he is now, only when he writes, it will meet the standards of the rest of the paper, which at that time were not all that high. That's what we did. I remember talking with Ben, a nice, sweet old guy. I said, this is what we're going to do, [and] he said, oh, Mr. Johnson, that's never going to work. I said, Ben, it has to work. This is a community and people who aren't black, who aren't Negro, as I would say then, want to know what the whole family of man is up to here in this town.

L: He would be given assignments, not just black assignments?

J: Well, he would generate a lot of his own assignments because we didn't know. We were as ignorant as a lot of the others. We weren't coming in and saying, oh, this is what we're missing, we didn't know what we were missing. He was invaluable in that regard. He later grew ill and was unable to do it, but by then a lot of the integration of the news coverage, obituaries and stuff like that, had managed to get the foot in the door. Other than the intention of the ownership/management of the paper, the main reason that worked was because we had him to identify really what was news and what wasn't. Now some of what he considered newsworthy wasn't really. It was really social meetings somewhere, but we were doing that for white people too.

That was another thing that we had to eliminate, which reminds me of a story about news coverage in papers of that day. I was teaching an API session up in Reston [Virginia] and we were talking about small stuff like that, how do you get this stuff in the paper and particularly social things involving interracial stuff. So, we talked about how that should be kind of integrated depending on the level of coverage that you are going to do with the newspaper. This guy from somewhere, he may have been from Ann Arbor, it was a Michigan editor as I recall, at a university community. He said, you know, I don't understand why you want to put all this chicken crap in the paper in the first place. This stuff is only going to be of interest to maybe a half a dozen or so people. He said, how deep do you go with this? Somebody said, yeah, how deep do you go with this? Another guy said, well you know we've got to have all the versing of people in

and out of the hospitals and so forth, but how deep do you go? The question was turned to me as the moderator of this session. Fortunately for me, I said, I'll tell you how deep you can go, for the past several months my newspaper has been running a monthly compilation of dog bites. There was this long silence, and I said, but let me tell you why. There were some incidences of rabies and the health department said, is there any way we can publicize this because some people don't realize they may have been bitten by a rabid dog. I said, yes, you give me the list [and] we'll publish the list of dog bites. People said God, that is really scraping it, literally scraping up the sidewalk, Joe Blow was bitten by a dog. Of course, it was funny, but on the other hand it was amazing to me, people would say, my yard man said that he saw that so and so was bitten by a dog. I said, my God, people are reading this.

L: Of course, it was the day before we had a leash law in the city.

J: That's true, but my point in this is that this helped us overall to evaluate, what is the level of coverage that you need to address to unify distinct audiences like this. Our people were all intermingled racially, employment levels and so forth. We kept that in mind for some time, but Ben had given us this impetus.

[Phone interruption.]

J: Interestingly enough, what this led to was the integration of the staff. It came in the form of a hire I made, interestingly enough, by the way, it was beginning to be a very beneficial effect on the students. There were some black students and I remember integrating a couple [of] restaurants downtown with a very frightened group of black students. What happened was, I was looking for a reporter who could cover the news generally to replace Ben. When Ben eventually died of his illness, I told Jack I want to make this a full time job, Ben was working on a part time basis, and I want to make sure that the person we hire is black. He agreed to that.

L: At that point, Jack Harrison was [still] the publisher here?

J: That's right, but he was about to move to Lakeland. So, I interviewed a young woman named Doris Grimmage, who was referred to me by someone, I forget who. She grew up in Live Oak. [She was] a graduate of Live Oak High School, and she came in one day and I told her that I really wanted her to be a reporter and we would help her as much as we could. I said, tell me about yourself, your education and so forth. She said, I graduated from Live Oak. She said I studied journalism for about a month in the Job Corps. I said, really, tell me about that. She said she was out in Iowa, and she said it was really an interesting experience and they were very nice to me and I learned a lot. [She said] the only thing that bothered me about it was that the people around there

would often come by the paper to look at me. I said, well, what do you mean look at you? She said, to look at me, they'd never seen a black person. I said that's remarkable. She said, [it's] especially so if you live in Live Oak. So, I hired her. We brought her along for a while, and then she reached her reportorial level, she eventually married, and changed her name to Doris Chandler and she's today the business editor of the *Gainesville Sun*. [She's been] a long term employee, a terrific kid.

L: She's been there a long time, wonderful.

J: One day, this is just another aside, Iphigene Sulzberger, "Punch" Sulzberger's mother, the matriarch of the family, and a wonderful person . . .

L: Adolph Ochs's daughter?

J: That's right. She was in Gainesville with a couple of guys from the *Times*. She's walking through the newsroom and I was introducing her to the staff. She walked by Doris's desk and Doris stood up. Doris is almost six feet tall. Mrs. Sulzberger shook her hand [and] she said, I'm very pleased to meet you. She looked and reached over to her necklace and she says, Phi Beta Kappa [collegiate national honor society]? Doris says, no ma'am, Live Oak High School [laughing]. Of course, Mrs. Sulzberger said, that's very nice.

L: It must have looked like it, [a PBK key].

J: Yes, maybe it did [laughing].

L: Let's say you're making these changes and so on. Let's take the old-line community, the good old boys . . .

J: They didn't like it.

L: Did they put any pressure on the newspaper?

J: Yes, they did in various ways, some you could anticipate. The combination of the coverage [and] the editorial policy [made them upset]. Along with editorials that were done by Buddy, Roy Ivan Johnson, a retired English professor at the university, myself, [and] Jack, but mainly Buddy, whose brilliance with the editorial writing was sometimes very blunt. I [also] started using guest editorials. I would solicit stuff from people around.

L: Like op-ed [opinion-editorial] pieces?

J: That's what they amounted to. I deliberately would salt these with commentary by people who were very zealous civil rights individuals. We would run some

letters and stuff like that, but at any rate our position was very clear to the community. The reaction of the community itself was not universal measurably. There were people in the community who were firm supporters. There were people on the faculty who were offended. There was more commonality there than a lot of the university people particularly, would care to admit. We had some pressure brought on us. There was the editorial pressure. Usually, I'd say well write me a letter and I'll run your letter and so forth or something like that. We had advertisers that would say, I'm not going to advertise in your paper. It was the beginning of the weekly that later morphed into two or three others that, I think, they are still publishing.

One day I was at Bob Tartaglione's office, our circulation director, and he said, you know, we're taking some pretty good hits on our circulation. He said, you ask, and I didn't want to tell you about this unless you asked, and since you asked, I'm going to tell you. He pulled open the bottom drawer of his desk and it was full of stop slips, there were almost 3,000 of them, and vitriol on the reasoning [behind these canceled subscriptions].

L: It was given because of the editorial policy?

J: It was because of the coverage, editorial policy, the "foreign Jewish ownership." All of this is preposterous. I said, you know we're committed to this. He said, yeah, I know, that's why I told you. I just want you to know that even some of our carriers have been threatened. I said, Bob, I've been threatened too.

L: What year was that roughly?

J: You know this was closer to the 1970s than the 1960s because the civil rights movement essentially in Gainesville was energized around 1965 or so when the speech was made and the March on Washington [occurred]. It gradually improved, but you know that really wasn't seen as a threat to the segregationists until the 1970s when a lot of people accepted it and then those who didn't became more and more hardcore.

L: It's when they started seeing school integration.

J: That's right. That was one of the things, yes. I remember one time Mack Futch, he was an assistant state's attorney [called], and he said, I wanted to let you know that we have a short list that's turned up in the community here that has kind of upset us about the possibility of some violence. [He said,] I wonder if it would be okay if we had a guy in your backyard for a few nights? I said, what are you talking about? He said, well, you're on the list. He said, we really think it would be judicious if we put a guard on your house. I said, certainly. So, if you want an example of what makes you really want to think closely about what

you're doing, you can listen to the footsteps outside your daughter's bedroom window and say, I'm glad that guy is out there.

- L: At about the same time, in Lake City, somebody fired a gun into Don Caldwell's office, the publisher. They passed by and he was shot at with a shotgun and a bullet.
- J: You're dealing with hardcore people. You're dealing with people who threw the fire bomb into Judge Jimmy Atkins' living room. It was not a clear-cut, easily dealt with social thing because there were overlapping interests, there were people you would think would be on one side that were on the other. It was complex.
- L: You had the advantage of a university community that was sort of liberal also that was giving some support. It wasn't unanimous like you were going against the community, actually the community itself was sort of divided.
- J: That's a mixed blessing, Ralph, because I remember when there was an incident, in Ocala as I recall, and there was a promised demonstration in front of the *Sun* because of our coverage or lack of coverage down there by the real zealous civil rights proponents.
- L: It was in Ocala?
- J: There was an incident in Ocala.
- L: Why were you supposed to be covering Ocala?
- J: Who knows? And we learned about [people saying], we're going to picket the *Sun* as a segregation[ist newspaper], I mean all this malarkey.
- L: Let me follow this. The people who were objecting were people who thought you were segregationists?
- J: No, what they really were objecting to was that we weren't [supportive] enough. Here, we were taking plenty of hits for being proponents, but not enough.
- L: You weren't ahead of the cause.
- J: Yes, so we heard about this and thought man, what do you [have] to do? What I did was, I had catered a couple of coffee urns and a bunch of donuts, and when they showed up, I invited them into the lobby and said, come on in and have some coffee. It really burned the leadership because the participants, there were only about thirty or forty, came in and had a good time. We said, you're

always welcome here, but we're going to do what we think is right and so forth. In this case, we're right, you're wrong, and good luck.

L: Of course, that was a noble era for the *Gainesville Sun*. You won a Pulitzer Prize for the editorial writing.

J: Yes, there was a lot of recognition for it and we had a standing. We knew that in that incident and a few others like them, that morally we were right, we were in the right place. The reason I mention this is because you mention the university's proponents of civil rights. That's true, but there were also some real zealots who without question of anything [or] any kind of moderation [would say,] this is what you should do, never mind that if you do that you would essentially lose your moderate audience. It would be destructive to the message you were trying to use.

L: They wanted you to get even farther to the left of them.

J: So, we had that element to deal with. It was ammunition for the group largely in old Gainesville to say, see there, see what that bunch out there [is doing]? It was still that division and it was a division of sorts that really never left. I feared that it has become a little more accentuated in the past few years, maybe it's because there's no overriding social issue that binds us together, but I feel like there is a detachment between town and gown.

L: I agree to some extent on that except that old line group has pretty much died off.

J: That's true.

L: It doesn't really, in a sense, exist, as far as I can tell, anymore. The university community has grown so much that it essentially overwhelms. There are 10,000 people employed at Shands [Hospital] and the town really is a university now, largely.

J: Here's another element that really is important to that societal mix, that is that this university is now so large that there are major schisms of interest that take the attention of people who have more interest in that than they do in what's going on down at the courthouse or something like that. It's understandable.

L: This is a city, in a sense, in itself. The university community is almost a city.

J: Yes, it is, and you couple that with the urban sprawl and the fact that they're malls. So, there's been a dissipation of that, but . . .

- L: What was the circulation? Jack Harrison was succeeded by Bill Ebersole.
- J: Yes, Bill had been the ad director.
- L: He became the publisher, then you became the publisher as [well as] the executive editor in 1985, and then you had that dual role for a year and a half.
- J: I went to the [New York Time Group] staff, really. There were some things that I was having problems with placating Jack about. I told the president of the company, I don't want to spend the rest of my life doing this. As a result, over the last three or four months or so, we worked what [we wanted].
- L: I thought that was a promotion.
- J: It was.
- L: Well, was it overwhelming to be both the publisher and the executive editor?
- J: As it turns out, it probably was. I had some mixed feelings about that because Jack told me specifically, I don't want you to replace the executive editor, you can do that. I foolishly said, oh, yes, I can do that.
- L: You could do that if you worked thirty more hours a week.
- J: One thing that did lessen was, I had several responsibilities as coordinating the news coverage by the group of papers and so forth, but when I assumed the role of publisher, a lot of that I dropped. That was assigned other places and so forth and a lot of it was reinstated when I left the *Sun* and went to the staff position. One of the reasons, frankly, that it was Tallahassee was because I didn't want to undermine the successor here.
- L: You said a term that I don't quite understand. You left the *Sun* and went to a staff position?
- J: Yes.
- L: I don't understand what you mean by that.
- J: My responsibilities were not to the *Sun*. My responsibilities were to all of the papers in the group as the senior editor.
- L: Well, first you went down to Louisiana, right?
- J: I was there several times, but I wasn't there as a staff member of the paper.

L: Oh, you weren't, I thought you were.

J: No, I went directly from editor and publisher of the *Sun* to senior editor of the *New York Times* regional newspapers.

L: You were really in charge of news and all of the regional papers?

J: [I was] not in charge of [them].

L: I mean, you were an advisor.

J: My job included a lot of things like coordinating the coverage of mutually interesting things, national political conventions and so forth.

L: What is the title again?

J: [My title was] senior editor, *New York Times* Regional Newspaper Group.

L: How many newspapers were you involved in?

J: At the time, [I was involved with] about twenty-five.

L: How long did you do that?

J: [I did that] until I retired in 1995.

L: So, you did that for about ten years?

J: Yes. As I mentioned, there were a couple of reasons for moving. Even today people think I'm associated with the *Sun*, and it's been a long time. I can tell you as an aside, when we moved back to Gainesville briefly after I retired, I spoke to the retired [UF] faculty [organization]. Mickie [Dr. Mickie Edwardson] had asked me to do this. She said, I would like you to tell them about your experiences working with these eastern European papers. I said, I'd like to do that because there are a lot of similarities in their problems and mine when I started editing the *Gainesville Sun*, surprisingly. She said, that's great. So I talked to the retired faculty for a while. She said proudly, this is the biggest crowd we've had since Steve Spurrier [head coach, University of Florida football team, 1990-2001]. So, I made this talk and I thought it was pretty good. Margaret Warrington was there and a few other friends who said that was very interesting. But the first question, I think David Chalmers asked [was], what do you think of the *Gainesville Sun*? I thought, oh, man.

L: It's not fair, really.

- J: I don't care, but my answer was and is [that] I'm not even a subscriber to the *Gainesville Sun*. I can't answer it [because] I haven't been here. I can tell you that I know and like the work Ron Cunningham does and he's a good editor. Other than that, my feelings about it are the same as yours, you have good days and bad days.
- L: It's interesting when editors are asked to rank newspapers and tell what they think about newspapers. I find it amusing myself because how many people read other daily newspapers on a daily basis. I read the *New York Times* everyday, I read the *Gainesville Sun* everyday, [so] I'm really qualified to talk about those two papers.
- J: On that particular day [that you read them].
- L: But what can I say about the *Washington Post* and the *Philadelphia Enquirer*? Actually, every year there are editors and others who gladly do that and I don't think they know what in the hell they're talking about.
- J: They don't know what they're talking about, they really don't.
- L: Sure, there's a certain reputation that floats around, but I've discovered that people usually hate the newspaper that's published in their own hometown. They have more respect for some other newspaper. The *New York Times* is arguably the best newspaper in the world, and the people in New York City, generally speaking, don't like it.
- J: That's right.
- L: Could you comment on that?
- J: This, I think, is a broad attitude by a lot of people. We both have experienced this. In most things, the definition of a consultant is anybody who lives more than 100 miles away who has a briefcase, that's about it. I've seen that over and over, as you have. You can talk with a group of guys about their papers and you might point out something, and if they're really honest they'll say, I didn't know that, I didn't realize that we were doing so well.
- L: My doctor said to me, I think the *Wall Street Journal* is really good. [He said,] I read that every day and I think that is really the best paper. I said to her, well, do you think you're really well informed about everything that's going on in the world by reading the *Wall Street Journal* every day? But people think that, whatever they read they think has got to be the best paper around.

- J: That's right, and to kind of segue to that earlier point you made about that Jayson Blair thing . . .
- L: Yes, we've got about fifteen to twenty more minutes and we've sort of gotten your career and the highlights there, but I just do want to segue up to that because it's something that we're awfully interested in and you were a part of the *New York Times* organization. First of all, let me ask you how does a Jayson Blair incident occur in an organization as committed to quality as the *New York Times*, in your opinion?
- J: In my opinion, and to some degree it's an informed opinion, is that there were mistakes made in the developing of this reporter that really are mistakes of an organizational approach to things. One of the things that I did with my staff work was to appear and participate with *Times* people at a lot of job fairs, conventions, and things like that interviewing potential interns. I saw on occasion where [there would be] particularly interracial interviews. There would be editorial [or human resources] staff people from the *Times*, interestingly usually women, good people [and] brilliant in many respects, who would be so impressed with a black potential *New York Times* intern. On more occasions than one, I also heard a *Times* editor or senior reporter or an interview person, a black person, who would say, don't get taken in by the shucking and jiving of a person who is glib and who is playing the role of one that you are going to be sympathetic toward. Usually, they acquiesce to the greater wisdom.
- L: But in this particular case, the managing editor was black.
- J: Yes, but now there are several things involved with that. Let me illustrate a problem I have with that that I mentioned a while ago [that] Abe had suggested.
- L: We're talking about Gerald Boyd the managing editor.
- J: We're not talking about him right at this point. What I would like to relate is this: For a week or so back in the 1970s, I think, Abe Rosenthal was here as a visiting lecturer and guest with the faculty and spent a lot of time at the *Sun*. He was a friend then and he is a friend now. We were in my office at the *Sun* on one of those days and Abe was sitting there. He said, you know Ed, he said, I don't know how you do this. He said, you guys have something in the paper and it may be adverse to the interest of somebody and the next day the subject of that story is leaning over your desk [and] locked onto you. That would never happen at the *New York Times*. He said, I never hear this. He said, there are rings of people and procedures and stuff, we could make a terrible mistake [that's] very offensive to a person [and] very unfair and I may never hear of it. [He said,] unless a guy knows the way through the labyrinth, he's stuck. I said, what about an ombudsman, Abe? He said, I don't think that really works. He said I think it

takes on a life of itself. He said, basically the responsibility is the editor's, and what we've got to do is find a better way to make sure that this doesn't happen and it has to be within the staff that you have. Well, I'm convinced they never did that in years after that.

L: Well, now they're talking about making it, they frankly said they are going to name some names.

J: Well, [they'll do that] for a year, that is for one year and then they're going to review it. I think they have to do that. It may work.

L: Very often it's somebody on the paper that is sort of expendable and [who doesn't] have a tremendous amount of credibility, they almost never will bring anybody from the outside.

J: That's right, very few papers invest that position with prestige [and] power.

L: There are very few of them.

J: That's right, and the reason is [that] a good editor is going to say, it's my job to notice and do some things like that. I can't just create another boss. Some really manage to do that. There have been a lot of things tried, as you know. A lot of the focus groups are that way.

[They try] all kinds of avenues, this is all what they're grasping at. I would submit that there's been no solution yet that really works. I do know this, I know that if you're going to try to do that responsibly, you have to do it every day and the entire editorial staff has to understand that this is part of their job. If a guy comes into the *New York Times* and manages to make it to an assistant city editor and he's got a gripe that he cannot fix, it better go right up the echelon quickly to somebody who can fix it.

L: The thing that sort of surprised me out of this whole thing at the *New York Times* is that so many people said that they just never complained about errors, and with Jayson Blair they saw the errors all the time. They knew he was making all these mistakes on everything on back and they said, well, you know newspapers make so many mistakes [that] we expect it. That is the part that should have been shocking point.

J: It is a shocker. The whole series of things that involved Jayson Blair was mind boggling. When it first surfaced, I must have had half a dozen e-mails from guys I know around the company. [They said,] what do you think of this? I said, boy, this is big. My reaction, unfortunately, was accurate. Regardless of the personal identification, the background, the motives of this kid, the thing that is most important is that in problem X, which happens to be the Jayson Blair thing,

the mechanism didn't work. That's it. It's not whether it was deliberate or not deliberate.

L: Journalists screw up. There's always somebody who is willing to do something unethical and they get canned or reprimanded, what happened was this occurred repeatedly.

J: That's right.

L: That's what they haven't gotten a grasp on.

J: That's right. My part about this is Gerald [Boyd] [managing editor, *New York Times*, resigned over the Blair incident.] is a nice guy, he's a good editor, and I believe him when he says, I didn't smooth the path for this kid. I think that the truth of the matter is, one, he didn't know him all that well, and, secondly, a lot of guys between Gerald and Jayson Blair thought he did. That's the problem, because in situations like that, the individuals really are not the first responsibility, it's the mechanism that's the responsibility. That's when the first doubts about this young man appeared in the minds of an editor or something there needed to be an avenue where it was something other than just a drop in his personnel folder or something like that where somebody needed to say, hey, there's a potential for disaster here.

L: But don't you think too, Ed, that in a case like this there was something about Gerald Boyd and Howell Raines, the executive editor, that whatever people thought, they still didn't feel like this was a person who was approachable . . .

[End of side B3]

L: I think that "Publisher," Arthur Sulzberger, Jr., finally came to the realization that he just wasn't the chain of command. The staff themselves did not believe that these two were approachable. Don't you think that that was sort of part of the problem?

J: Yes, and my scenario of that would be something like this, and it's not just the approachability, if you will, but certain things. For one thing, when Howell was selected as executive editor and Gerald was managing editor, there was the usual partisanship on those who weren't [selected] that existed. I don't think there ever was a real attempt to heal that. I think that it just kind of, for one reason or another, continued and those who were offended by either Gerald's distance of communication or Howell's abrupt manner or Arthur's seeming absolute conviction that he was right in this, that they never really were convinced that, okay, this is a decision that is not what I would have made for the paper.

As you well know, there is a lot of institutional identity in the people who work there, more so than most people ever realize. I think that was built upon, the Jayson Blair thing was simply one of those things that added to it. If you were a sub-editor and you figured, this is an engaging kid but he's really a time bomb, and you mention that, put it in his review, or even mention that to Gerald you're not going to say, by God, we've got to get rid of this guy, like the memo did. There's a way of just sort of [thinking], well, yeah, we've got to do something about that. This kid had a lot going for him. He had the personality, he had the false credentials, he had several things, but he also had things going for him that he really didn't have.

L: He said he had an internship with the [*Boston*] *Globe*.

J: You know, Gerald was convinced. Some of the more ardent Blair critics thought he was sort of the avuncular, rabbi for this kid.

L: This is sort of like the worm, you know the last worm. There was a little crack in the whole system and this guy found a way of getting through and there was no patch there.

J: One of the things that I don't know the answer to, and I doubt if I ever will or anyone except for very few people is this. Arthur Sulzberger, Jr., prides himself on this personal identification with the people who work at the *Times*. He has an incredible memory. I ran into him at a meeting in Belgium two months ago [and] he remembered me. Well, he worked for us here at the *Sun* briefly during his apprenticeship, but that was a long time ago. I know that as compared to corporate bosses across America, he's different. That is mixed up with heritage, it's mixed up with the family, it's more than just a company, of course. Well, he also knows a lot of people at the *Times* on a personal basis from working there as a reporter and others. Despite the fact that he was Arthur, a lot of reporters and some editors know him well enough, on a first name basis, to meet him in and the hallway [and say] Arthur, I want to talk to you about a guy named Jayson Blair.

L: That could have happened?

J: That could have happened.

L: That could have? That surprises me.

J: Now, whether it ever did, I don't know, because I do know that the atmosphere is such that a person could make that statement without saying to Arthur, I disagree with your selection of Howell Raines and Gerald Boyd and this is why. They

wouldn't have to do that. The way he is, he even every once in a while [will say], what do you think about such and such, and he means it. He's like his father in that respect. I simply am puzzled by the fact that here is a chief executive officer unlike so many in America who could be on Mars as far as the middle management regular employees are concerned. He is approachable. He has known people who are there and who would know this.

L: You're talking about Sulzberger?

J: Sulzberger himself would know this. People either didn't do that, they didn't know to do that, or they did and he ignored it. I don't think that if somebody said that that he would have ignored that. He would have said, hey, we need to talk with Gerald or Howell about this. [He would have said], can you send me a memo or any number of more receptive responses other than, don't bother me.

L: Don't you think there are about four or five people working on books now?

J: There are probably more than that.

L: People aside from Jayson Blair himself are going to write books that really probably are going to look at it a little bit more introspectively. Let's go back to one thing you and I were talking about in the very beginning of the interview, and we can probably conclude on this because it's really an interesting aspect. You were associated with the *New York Times* for so many years and with so many of the papers in the *New York Times*' system. The *New York Times*, as I said, arguably is the best newspaper in the world, and yet you mention that you thought that this was very damaging to that credibility. You seem to feel that, despite how good that they are and were and so on, this is very damaging to that credibility and it's damage that is likely to last for quite a while. Would you explain that a little bit?

J: Yes, I think your statement is correct.

L: No, I'm quoting you. I'm not sure that I believe it. I'm neutral about it, that's what I was surprised about when you said that because a great newspaper is still a great newspaper, they'll recover rather quickly. I guess that's what I believe, but I think that you don't believe that.

J: I don't believe it for this reason, Ralph. If you look at it in a basic journalistic term, say a news peg of the Jayson Blair story, you have a community of people who are opposed to virtually anything that you can attribute to the *New York Times*. You have a political administration at the present who are constantly looking for a chink in the ethical structure of the *New York Times*.

L: That's because it's so powerful.

J: It is powerful and it's too often right. I don't mean right-wing, I mean correct.

L: Yes, of course.

J: So, you have this period of time where the vulnerability of the the paper's central characteristics, its integrity, its independence and so forth is high at a time when the level of numbers of critics and virtual enemies is also high. Even in the minds of moderate people, disinterested people and so forth, if the whole issue of Jayson Blair and how this happened is resolved, as you say, it's still a great newspaper and so forth, even with that, the best thing that somebody who has an offense about the *Times* can say is, oh, it's another Jayson Blair. Many of us would then say who's Jayson Blair, [and then the person will say] well, let me tell you about Jayson, and the whole thing gets revisited.

L: It's like Janet Cooke [fabricated a story about an eight-year-old heroin addict] and the *Washington Post*.

J: [It's like that] only more so.

L: The *Washington Post* never really fully recovered from that. I would say when something like that happens, that outrageous, it's hard to recover.

J: But to put the cap on it. My suggestion then is this. I would suggest that within five years [or] ten years there will still be criticisms of the *New York Times* and the facts of the matter will have been lost in the mythology of it. That's bad. It will be rewritten.

L: It wasn't what he was involved with, the lies that he was involved with were not really even of exceptional nature that changed the course of this nation whereas Janet Cook actually had gotten a Pulitzer Prize. This was just a series of little lies that just piled up.

J: As we mentioned earlier, the terrible thing about it and the thing that will give it a long life span is that so much of what happened is attributable to managerial process. This is not some KGB [Soviet intelligence agency] agent who manipulated his way into the *Times* company. This is an example of how a system failed. It's very difficult to defend even the reactions to it, the corrections, all the explanations, the changes in staffing, the resignations involved. In fact, as it begins to play out, it becomes more complex and therefore more obscuring of the original offense by this guy, because the doubts remain in a lot of minds. [People wonder,] hey, if this guy got away with it who else is getting away with it, who hasn't been caught? It's a classic problem of

liability and responsibility.

- L: The problem with the *New York Times* is the position that it holds as one of the most powerful newspapers. I say that not in a neutral way, it is the most powerful newspaper in the United States if not the world because it is a newspaper of record. It is the newspaper that is cited and that is quoted. It holds a position unlike any other newspaper in the history of the United States. I would say it's almost unlike any other newspaper in the history of the world with the possible exception at one point of the *Times of London* when England was the predominant [world] power. Okay, we're the predominant power, this is the newspaper that represents, not the government, but the predominant nation in the world. As you said, now, they've found a major error.
- J: What it really did, most importantly, is to introduce significant doubt. Already you see critiques of the *Times* on the internet saying, you think Jayson Blair is bad, look at Judy Miller's reporting on Iraq and the weapons of mass destruction or look at so and so. Well, this is not going to stop. I think that was recognized first by Rick Bragg when he came up with this business about Panama City. I think that was explainable, careless maybe, but explainable. I think that he recognized and said as much in part of his resignation statement.
- L: What was that incident?
- J: He did this wonderful feature on the oyster fisherman in Panama City. It turns out that most of the leg work on that was done by a stringer. That was pretty soft ground, but I think that he recognized that in light of the firestorm over Jayson Blair that all of these impressions of the paper had changed. That's why people like Judy Miller and others are going to be the vehicle that critics at the paper are going to say, okay, you've dealt with Jayson Blair, well, what about Joe Blow? What that does, if nothing else, is to introduce a false sense of being a little bit cautious where you shouldn't be cautious. You should be reasonably cautious, but you shouldn't just say, oh, gee, well, you know, we don't want to take a risk like that because of Jayson Blair and blah blah blah. That affects how editors do their job. It may be a subtle influence, but an assignment editor, for instance, may be looking at a story that wasn't quite what he expected and he thinks, we're going to spike this because there are a couple of unanswered things out there and I just don't want to risk it.
- L: Ed, finally let me ask you this question. Is there any quick fix for the *New York Times* or any other newspaper in a place like this other than canning the editors? What does a newspaper do to really come to something like this?
- J: Well, I think that the only thing that is going to give them a degree of relief on this is to apply the remedies that they are considering and hope that for the next ten

years that nothing remotely like this happens again.

L: Okay, Ed Johnson, thanks very much for being with me today and for the Florida Newspaper Oral History Project. It was great talking to you.

J: Thank you very much Ralph, I appreciate it.

[End of the interview.]