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Roy Reed, ed. *Looking Back at the Arkansas Gazette: An Oral History.* Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2009. xxvii + 295 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55728-899-8.

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An Oral History That Pays Homage to the Arkansas Gazette

The golden days and the demise of the *Arkansas Gazette* newspaper are captured equally in *Looking Back at the Arkansas Gazette,* an edited compendium of oral history interviews. Roy Reed, a former reporter for the *Gazette* and the *New York Times*, edited the book from transcripts of more than a hundred oral interviews of former staffers. Now a professor emeritus of journalism at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, Reed uses a deft hand in selecting and organizing excerpts from the interviews into eleven thematic chapters. The result is an oral history that makes it easy for readers to find what they want and easy to compare competing accounts of the same events. Reed's pithy annotations also provide an excellent model for other media historians interested in researching and presenting oral history.

Founded in 1819 when Arkansas was still a territory, the morning *Arkansas Gazette* was eventually beaten in a nasty newspaper war by the other Little Rock morning daily, the *Arkansas Democrat.* After pummeling each other into red ink for thirteen years in a fight to see who would blink first financially, the *Democrat* bought out the *Gazette* in 1991 and renamed itself the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette.* For much of the last 190 years of its existence, the *Gazette* was owned, at least in part, by the family of John N. Heiskell, who was top editor of the paper from 1902 until he died in 1972 at age 100.

The chapter on "The War," as the book calls the 1970s and 1980s cross-town battle, is the most compelling in the book. Walter Hussman, owner and publisher of the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette,* explains in detail how his family-owned company decided to buy the afternoon *Democrat* in 1974 and why he switched the paper to mornings in 1978 to compete directly with the *Gazette.* After vicious fights over the advertising rates, the *Gazette* sued the *Democrat* in 1984 for unfair business practices, but lost a jury trial. The Heiskell family than sold the *Gazette* to the Gannett newspaper chain in 1986.

The newspaper war was now a proverbial David vs. Goliath story, but this time Goliath shot himself in the foot. Gannett changed the "Old Gray Lady" *Gazette* into a colorful, feature-loving, formula-driven product. Readers and key *Gazette* staffers began to leave with these drastic changes, and after the Dillard's department store pulled its advertising over perceived negative coverage in the *Gazette*, the war was soon over. Gannett sold its remaining *Gazette* assets to Hussman and his Arkansas-based media company. A national media chain had lost overwhelmingly to a much smaller regional chain of newspapers, television, and cable properties. Little Rock became a one-newspaper town.

Most people outside of Arkansas remember the *Arkansas Gazette* for its Pulitzer Prize-winning stand in support of the racial integration of Little Rock Central High School in 1957, something documented well in Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff's Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Race Beat* (2006). Harry Ashmore, the *Gazette*'s executive editor at the time, is considered one of the South's leading liberal voices on racial issues in the 1940s and 1950s, and he is credited with shaping the *Gazette*'s progressive editorial stand on the issue. Chapters focused on Ashmore and the 1957 crisis are included in Reed's book, but *Looking Back at the Arkansas Gazette* adds most to our knowledge of the Little Rock crisis by telling us how the rank-and-file staffers felt and what they experienced after the *Gazette*'s unpopular editorial position. The range of *Gazette* people who were interviewed for this research project shines here. Reed includes comments from the switchboard operator who took the prank and threatening calls, and he includes stories of how reporters and other *Gazette* staff members were verbally accosted and sometimes threatened.

There are a variety of issues beyond Arkansas history in this book. Many surely will read this book for its information about Ashmore, the 1957 Little Rock School

crisis, the basic history of the *Gazette* and *Democrat*, and even its tidbits on Bill Clinton before he became president. But this book has interesting and relevant anecdotes to feed a variety of research interests. In a broad sense *Looking Back* is a social history of newspaper journalism from World War II through the 1980s. Anyone interested in the changing role of women in journalism should look at the interesting stories from the many female reporters interviewed for the project. Other topics addressed include journalism ethics and professionalism, newsroom technology, journalistic work routines, workplace culture, family-corporate ownership, and various media management issues.

The newspaper's relationship with its readers, too, is an important issue that permeates the book. The *Gazette* saw itself as a statewide paper with broad coverage of serious issues. It went to great lengths to cover everything thoroughly, from sports to planning and zoning meetings. In many cases it gave its readers what it thought they needed–shrugging off charges of elitism. *Gazette* staffers and others believed the newspaper made Arkansas more liberal and progressive in its thinking compared to other southern states. When Gannett changed it more to an audience-driven, news-you-can-use, soft-news format, the *Gazette* lost respect, readers, and the newspaper war.

The book has some minor flaws. Some references to people and events mentioned in the oral histories are not explained with parenthetical notes or annotations, so people without some background in Arkansas or *Gazette* history may be confused in places. The book includes a "cast of characters" section that gives some basic information about each interviewee, but at least one interviewee, Bob Lancaster, is not listed even though he is quoted several times in the book. The dates of the interviews are not given, and it is unclear in some cases when some of the people worked at the *Gazette*. But full transcripts of each interview, with the dates of the interviews, and some additional biographic information on each person interviewed are listed on the Web site for the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History (http://pryorcenter.uark.edu/projects/arkansasgazette/default.asp). The *Gazette* project was the first oral history initiative launched by Pryor, a former Arkansas governor and U.S. senator and House member, who donated funds for a center at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville to record state history. Major funding for the newspaper's oral history project came from the family of Hugh Patterson Jr., who married Heiskell's daughter in 1943 and was publisher when the *Gazette* was sold to Gannett.

The book includes some comments from Gannett editors, but for balance it would have been interesting to hear from some of the new reporters Gannett brought to the *Arkansas Gazette* when it took over, too. The interviewees are mostly staffers with long ties and allegiances to the Old Gray Lady.

The book and Web site should inspire other historians with a model to use in researching and publishing oral histories of major media organizations in other states. For example, how much social history of early local television is being lost each year as staffers who worked in the 1950s and 1960s die? Most journalists will not write a memoir, but they will sit for an oral history interview with an informed interviewer. Anyone thinking about tackling such an oral history project will be well served to read *Looking Back at the Arkansas Gazette for* ideas.

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