

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH FRED BEHRINGER

Interviewed by Russ Eshleman

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## Fred Behringer Interview

- Eshleman: I'm interviewing Fred Eshleman today at the Blue Bell Country Club for our latest oral history of Pennsylvania journalism interview.
- Behringer: Hi, this Fred Behringer and I'm helping Russ with a test of this equipment to make sure it's functioning okay.
- Eshleman: OK, Fred, tell me where you were born and tell me a little bit about your parents.
- Behringer: I was born in Ambler, Pennsylvania, in Montgomery County, a Philadelphia suburb. My father Dewey was basically in sales. My mother Frances was a long-time public school teacher, for close to 50 years. That's the resumes.
- Eshleman: What year were you born?
- Behringer: 1935.
- Behringer: It was Ambler High School then but it's Wissahickon now.
- Eshleman: OK, tell me about growing up in terms of your interest as a kid.
- Behringer: Well, most relevant I guess was when I was in junior high school I was a sports fan from early on largely because my parents were went to a lot of baseball games in Philadelphia, went to the Eagles games, and so forth. My last year of junior high school I was at a football game, and I was walking off the field and the secretary from the high school office, who was a friend of my mother's, stopped me and said the local newspaper in Ambler is looking for somebody to do some sports reporting and cover the football games. Would you be interested?
- Eshleman: What year?
- Behringer: That would have been 1949.
- Eshleman: OK.
- Behringer: As it turned out I did that very year in high school every summer during college and from college on. So I basically had a one-line resume for about 50 years.
- Eshleman: How about that? What newspaper was that?
- Behringer: That was the *Ambler Whitemarsh Valley News*, but the next year the *Ambler Whitemarsh Valley News* hired a sports editor from the competing *Ambler*

*Gazette* to replace me. And I was out of a job, but then the *Gazette* hired me to replace him. So I got back in.

Eshleman: That's a weekly.

Behringer: They were weeklies. And in 1952 the *Gazette* was sold to a man named Bill Strasburg, who will be well known to anybody in Pennsylvania newspaper circles. Bill remained publisher of the *Gazette* and the subsequent newspapers that he bought or started through about 1989, and so I worked for and with Bill all through that period. I started as sports editor part time when I got out of college. I became managing editor of the *Ambler* paper, and as the papers were added I simply became the editor of each one as they went along. So I was basically editor of the company.

Eshleman: Oh great, great. Let's get back to your childhood again. Siblings?

Behringer: No.

Eshleman: No, OK.

Behringer: None.

Eshleman: And were you an avid reader as a kid?

Behringer: I would say so, yeah, nothing in particular – just whatever related to school. I think the first thing I was able to read successfully was major league box scores.

Eshleman: Oh there you go. OK and you were a Phillies fan I would assume.

Behringer: I was an avid Athletics fan right until they left town. And then I gradually went with the Phillies.

Eshleman: Were your parents newspaper readers? Were there always newspapers in the house?

Behringer: Yes.

Eshleman: OK.

Behringer: Primarily *Bulletin* readers. I'm not sure the *Inquirer* was ever a regular part of the household while I was still there.

Eshleman: The *Bulletin* was still the dominant paper of course back in those days.

Behringer: And the evening paper was a habit especially with two people working in a home.

Eshleman: Now you mentioned the *Ambler Gazette*. Was that something that your family took as well?

Behringer: Yes, I'm sure it was taken regularly. Almost everybody in Ambler did. It was not much of a newspaper until Bill Strasburg came in and built it. It was kind the newspaper that had 28 two-inch stories on the front page.

Eshleman: You mentioned going to college. Where did you go to school?

Behringer: I went to Brown University [and] majored in English literature which never was of any use subsequently. I spent most of my time as sports editor of the college newspaper – one of the most enjoyable things I ever did.

Eshleman: Well, tell me a little bit about that. How did you get involved with the Brown newspaper?

Behringer: Well having done sports writing for the *Ambler Gazette* when I got to college, I was interested in getting on the newspaper staff. And I started out right away with newspaper and for just first couple of years was a reporter. In my junior year I was an editor and my senior year the editor. It was fun sort of pretending to be a big-time sports writer sitting in the press box at Yale and Princeton, like you knew what you were doing. But very enjoyable and I think a good learning process. We had a daily and there were a lot of 2 a.m. nights getting it out.

Eshleman: Now when you were on the road if you were at Yale or you were at Penn or something again perhaps how did you finalize your stories?

Behringer: Because we were Monday to Friday and the events were normally Saturday. I had plenty of time to go back to the office and type them. Obviously [I used] a manual typewriter at that time.

Eshleman: When you went off to college was it y our intention always to get back into journalism as a career or?

Behringer: Yes, I knew when I went to college that I was interested in journalism. I was interested in Northwestern because of its reputation as a journalism school but it was pretty far and pretty expensive and I didn't really do a very good job of evaluating majors at the places that I was interested in going. As it turned out Brown did not have a journalism or communications major.

Eshleman: How about over the summer? Did you go back and work for the *Ambler Gazette*?

- Behringer: I did each summer between high school and college and then through college. So I worked I guess a total of seven summers. And I did virtually everything there except I never learned to run a linotype machine.
- Eshleman: Tell me about some of those early reporting experiences, not just sports but perhaps the news and so forth.
- Behringer: Nothing real exciting. We had maybe a murder every couple of years, some interesting fires that you would go to, but pretty much small-town stuff. And when I say everything I typed obituaries. I rewrote wedding forms. I covered town council and school board meetings. Just pretty routine.
- Eshleman: When you were in high school and again college, how big was the paper in terms of size?
- Behringer: It was probably about eight pages and about 2,000 circulation in the beginning. It was probably 16 to 20 pages and maybe 5,000 circulation as we grew it a little bit. That's while I was still in school.
- Eshleman: Now on those days was Ambler a small enough town that everyone knew everyone else and you obviously.
- Behringer: Pretty much. Ambler is a borough one mile square with about 6,000 people and the paper did cover surrounding townships and they became much more a part of the paper's life as they grew.
- Eshleman: Sure yeah, yeah. Getting back to some of the stories that you covered, can you recall any? You mentioned a murder every couple of years or a good fire perhaps. Can you think of anything specifically when you were first starting out again?
- Behringer: Not so much while I was in school during the summer. Really I don't recall anything out of the ordinary in that period. Soon after school I was full time at the paper. Things got a little bit more interesting. I know one time there was a shooting on a Wednesday evening right after the paper had been printed and we actually put out an extra. as a separate publication on the newsstands to report on that.
- Eshleman: Right, right. I guess I should ask you did you also shoot photos yourself?
- Behringer: I did not, perhaps surprisingly. I do now. We had a speed graphic with the big 4 x 5 slides that you pulled in and we had a part-time photographer, so I had neither the interest or the capability.
- Eshleman: Sure. I guess I should ask you about the size of the paper in terms of the staff in those days. Was there an editor and several reporters?

Behringer: Let's take it from the time I just got out of college.

Eshleman: OK.

Behringer: At that point there was a publisher, an editor, two other news people, a part-time photographer, an advertising manager and then a batch of people who set type and made up pages and ran the press. Maybe 15 people all together.

Eshleman: In terms of the weekly itself, what was the weekly routine in terms of gathering the news and when the paper went to bed?

Behringer: At that time we were printing three sections of eight pages, a total of 24. The press could only print eight so we had to finish an eight-page section, print it, and finish another, and print it, and then finish the last one and print it. So the first one would be what was then the women's section, then some of the timeless local news. The last one would be the local news and then sports was in between and of course police, fire, classified ads, obits, and so forth.

Eshleman: Let's go back to the women's pages I guess you called it. What kinds of things were in that section?

Behringer: Oh weddings, engagements, recipes, stories about the local women's club meetings kinds of things that would not make the women's section today.

Eshleman: Did you ever have to cover any of the women's club meeting or was there a correspondent who did that?

Behringer: That was that was pretty much press releases from the organizations. We did not have the staff to actually go to club meetings unless there was something unusual.

Eshleman: How about in terms of covering local government. Did you get involved in covering municipal government, for instance, Ambler borough meetings?

Behringer: Yeah, very definitely and I would contest it was not the aggressive objective kind of coverage that I would have probably liked to have seen. Largely from not knowing any better. You sort of sat there and wrote down what happened and rewrote it into news stories almost like taking minutes of the meetings. At that time I don't think it ever occurred to us to go interview the other side after the meeting occurred – that kind of thing. So it was pretty bland, pretty basic. And there was a risk--because you knew everybody and they knew you--of just getting too close to the subjects and perhaps not being as probing as you should.

Eshleman: Do you recall any of the issues that you may have covered in those early days in terms of local government kinds of issues?

Behringer: A lot of the issues were revolved around land use because zoning was relatively new at the time.

Eshleman: We're talking what years again?

Behringer: This would have been in the late 50's and on. The idea of preserving open space was very new. The idea of building super highways was just coming into being at that time. The turnpike was being enlarged. The 309 Expressway was being constructed. They were major issues. Things like should police forces be restricted to one little town or should they be combined into one larger country force.

Eshleman: They're still talking about that issue today.

Behringer: Yeah, never resolved that.

Eshleman: How about the local politics part of it? Were there interesting races to cover?

Behringer: There were no local politics. There were only Republicans.

Eshleman: This was Montgomery County.

Behringer: Montgomery County, Pennsylvania. I couldn't even remember the last time the first time a Democrat won office. But there were none in my early memory.

Eshleman: And no primary races to speak of.

Behringer: Not much, no. It was pretty much cut and dried. The committees decide who would be on the primary ballot. They were nominated and then they were elected.

Eshleman: I actually remember when I first started with the *Inquirer*. I covered Abington Township and Shelton Township and Bob Hanna was the boss in Shelton Township. And he was quite a character. He literally was the boss in that area.

Behringer: Bob would be turning over in his grave with Democratic dominated Shelton Township these days.

Eshleman: Exactly. Well let's go to some other type of stories. How about crime news? Did you get involved in covering the police department?

Behringer: Well again it was not the probing kind of coverage that we should have been doing. It was pretty much stop at the police department. In those days they would just hand you the incident forms and you'd make notes and write that there was an accident at one corner. It might have been a breaking and entering at the store. Nothing usual, nothing very major and no investigative type of reporting. Just in those days the police actually gave you some information. And you rewrote it and reported it. I'm not sure whether that was better or not, but at least we didn't have an issue right then of what was public.

Eshleman: That whole idea of relationships with sources police, government officials, when did you detect it changing from getting along to more of an adversarial kind of relationship?

Behringer: I don't think there's any question but that Watergate played a major role in that at all levels including the local community level. I think I sensed going along. At one point I covered a couple of borough and township governments and a couple of school boards as well as editing the paper. I think I began to feel I was getting too close to some of the people and some of the boards. And I sort of backed away from the actual coverage and tried to let some objectivity enter]. But Watergate was definitely a factor.

Eshleman: In those early days again, was there competition for you at those meetings with the police departments. Was the *Bulletin* or the *Inquirer* coming out here to cover news?

Behringer: Only on a major story. I'm talking murder, a large church burning down, something like that. I would say it's probably at least into the probably at the point where Annenberg sold the *Inquirer* that there began to be more aggressive city coverage of the suburbs. And even then when the *Inquirer* and *Bulletin* were competing very vigorously in the 80s, ownership evolved so that the McClain family, which owned the *Bulletin*, became the majority owners of Montgomery newspapers. And they set up what was called a suburban news service which meant we simply gave the *Bulletin* copies of our stories and they ran them in their suburban section so they got some suburban news. Not very fresh without having to do anything or pay anything. I don't think that contributed to their viability.

Eshleman: This is sort of out of the loop. Do you remember your first byline story?

Behringer: Well, it would have been a football game report for the *Ambler Whitemarsh Valley News*.

Eshleman: OK.

Behringer: And the only byline stories for some time were on sports events. I did have a sports column. I think was called "Sports Shorts."



- Eshleman: What kind of things did you write about with your column?
- Behringer: That might be a local high school kid who played on a college team, some kind of a local team going into a state playoff [or] possibly hiring of a coach – nothing very exciting.
- Eshleman: When you are working full time for the paper once you get out of college. Were you one of the few college-educated people in the business? As I understand there were a lot of people with just high school backgrounds who were reporters.
- Behringer: That would certainly been true on the weekly newspapers. I wasn't that close to the daily staffing but it wouldn't surprise me. Bill Strausburg had a master's from American and degree from Ohio Wesleyan, but he was probably the only other one at that time .
- Eshleman: Now tell me about some of your colleagues in those days. People have the impression of reporters being hard drinking and when you go out and report the story and spend the rest of the evening in the bar and then doing it all again the next day. What was your impression if that if that was true?
- Behringer: I can remember a brother and sister, Jackie and Irene Mortimer. Irene was a reporter and not a drinker to my knowledge, certainly not college educated. Very aggressive and hard-nosed, sort of the front page kind of reporter. Jackie worked in the shop, when he was able to function in the morning, and you knew where he was every night. And there was that atmosphere to an extent. Dorothy Drake, who worked with me at that time, and for decades later became managing editor of the *Ambler Gazette*, was a probably typical at the time. Not college educated but very bright. Actually knew shorthand and her notes were better than anybody else's. But she was objective and aggressive compared to most of the people I dealt with at the time--and went on to a memorable career. She was president of the Pennsylvania Women Press Association and very well liked around the state. Would be a good subject for you but is no longer with us.
- Eshleman: Oh, I see. That's unfortunate. Tell me a little bit about those early days again in terms of controversial stories. Does anything stick in your mind about a particular story you or your papers covered at the time.
- Behringer: In that period not much. I do remember there was a run-down gas station on main corner in Ambler that just was out of keeping with the whole rest of the town and what the town was trying to become. And I mentioned that I used to run a little column in the bottom corner of the front page: Local Life. And it was just four or five quick paragraphs, usually innocuous. But in one of them I mentioned that it wouldn't be

nice if that gas station were to go away and be replaced with something better. That was not well received.

Eshleman: What were the repercussions?

Behringer: Mainly from the owner of the gas station who basically ranted and raved a lot. So you can see how controversial we were. That's what comes to mind in my memory.

Eshleman: With a situation like that I don't know that he advertised or was that always a consideration back in those days?

Behringer: At that time there weren't many major advertisers worth worrying about, usually two-column by four-inch ads. So that if you lost one you'd get another.

Eshleman: Sure.

Behringer: I also recall a letter to the editor which turned out not to have been written by the person who claimed to have written it and that told us that you needed to verify the authorship of letters to the editor. That was very embarrassing, not only to us but to the people involved.

Eshleman: Yeah, sure.

Behringer: Wish I could give you more controversy.

Eshleman: Let's talk a little bit about this whole idea of community journalism versus what's going on down the road in Philadelphia. Was there a perception that you were on different mission than the city papers?

Behringer: I think so. Basically we felt everybody in the community had a right to know what was going on and we were trying to carry out that right and be their eyes and ears at whatever was happening in the community. And I think we got more thorough and probing and sophisticated about it as we went along. So and I certainly don't see that kind of coverage anywhere else. There were suburban dailies at the time, but they were not much of a factor in the Ambler community. As we spread and they spread, then there was a lot of competition with them.

Eshleman: You mentioned Watergate as sort of a turning point in terms of the relationship between reporters and newspapers and their sources. Can you think of specific events that you covered or one of your reporters covered that sort of showed you that the times had changed?

Behringer: Probably the development of a community called Chesterbrook in Chester County. One of the newspapers we started in the Norristown area, the *Montgomery Post*, became a daily, *Today's Post*, which existed as

a daily for about ten years starting in '72. And a major story for several years there was a planned community that developers wanted to put in a rural township, and the reaction to that and the irony that among the public officials who fought so hard to keep Chesterbrook out were those who moved into Chesterbrook and found it a very desirable place to live. But it occupied the attention of that township and their public officials. And the developers were literally for years of front page almost every week. And the city papers did begin to get involved in that, as well as the local weeklies.

Eshleman: Tell me again in terms of your career when you started shifting from being I guess a reporter to getting into editing and management. When did that happen about what year and what kind of things did you do?

Behringer: I continued to do quite a bit of reporting until the *Montgomery Post* became a daily and then there was no longer time to do it. I liked to do it – and regretted not doing it. So there was really about almost a 15-year period where I continued to cover things as well as do editing. Editing was so much different there because you would draw a page plan loosely on a piece of paper and then the production department would execute that and you'd go into something else. You weren't involved in as you are today in actually producing the pages.

Eshleman: The good old days when you just had a pencil and a ruler and you could go to town and write it.

Behringer: Exactly.

Eshleman: Well, tell me about the company itself and how it changed over the years.

Behringer: Well, it grew by publication. It merged with the Willow Grove and Hatboro papers in 1957.

Eshleman: Hatboro?

Behringer: Was the *Public Spirit* which became *Today's Spirit*. And the *Times Chronicle* and *Glenside News and Globe*, based in Jenkintown, were purchased in 1959. The *Montgomeryville Spirit*, which became *North Penn Life*, was started in the '70s. The *Montgomery Post* was started in '71 and became *Today's Post* in '82. And grew to about 15 weeklies through '89 when the company was sold and expanded some more. And *Today's Post* and then *Today's Spirit* were dailies from the early '70s to the early '80s. Circulation probably got as high as 170,000, much of which was free distribution, and dropped back to probably 100,000 in '89 when the company was sold and now is probably 40,000. I have to qualify the 40,000 because there are magazines and specialty publications that would not be in the newspaper total.

Eshleman: Right. What do you think was happening in those days in terms of allowing the expansion and addition of new newspapers? Were people reading more?

Behringer: No I think it was simply the efficiency of a central printing operation. It was much cheaper to print 15 papers on one press in one building than it was to print 15 papers maybe in five presses and five buildings. So that the little presses and their operators got bought out and the central printing operation is what led to the suburban groups.

Eshleman: OK, and at that time had the city dailies discovered the suburbs yet?

Behringer: I think probably Gene Roberts [editor of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*], more than anybody else, discovered the suburbs. My understanding is that when Gene came to Philadelphia he spent a lot of time just driving around the area before he ever really went to work in the newspaper building. And the *Bulletin* had some suburban coverage but it wasn't a case where there were reporters in the suburbs. They had schoolboy sports editors and they would cover major police and fire issues, but I think it was until the '80s that they really discovered it.

Eshleman: OK, getting back to your own personal career. Had you ever thought about leaving community journalism and taking a shot at one of the dailies?

Behringer: I thought twice very briefly. Phil Schaeffer, who was editor at the *Inquirer*, called me one New Year's Day, probably around 1960, and wanted to know if I was interested in talking with him. And I thought about it for about a day and decided I wasn't. And then a friend of mine was an editor at the *New York Herald Tribune* called me about an opening there. And I thought about that probably for two days and decided that was too much of a move and too much of a chance and I think the *Tribune* folded about a year about that.

Eshleman: Good decision.

Behringer: Good choice.

Eshleman: How turning down the *Bulletin*. Why? That wouldn't have involved a move necessarily.

Behringer: The *Bulletin* never really asked me to

Eshleman: Oh yeah, you said the *Inquirer*.

Behringer: The *Inquirer* would have been before the *Bulletin* ownership.

Eshleman: Yeah.

- Behringer: I don't know. I basically liked what I was doing and I guess I had gotten comfortable with the lack of restrictions, lack of supervision, lack of anybody bothering me, telling me what to do.
- Eshleman: Sure. Well, now tell me about the various positions you held throughout the years.
- Behringer: Well, I was basically editor of the Montgomery newspapers: first editor of one paper, then editor of three, then editor of six, finally editor of 15. I was named a vice president of the company somewhere along the line. And that was it. I guess my final title was vice president and editor, and I held that for probably ten or twelve years until I retired in 2001.
- Eshleman: As an editor did you actually get involved in line editing stories or was that more someone else's duty and you were just overseeing the operation?
- Behringer: Well it became more someone else's duty. I dropped quite a bit of the detail in 1995. We started a weekly newspaper, *Main Line Life*, to compete with two other weekly newspapers on the Main Line. And for the better part of six months I pretty much worked full time on that paper in the Yardmore area and got away from what I had been doing for the most part and then did not really come back to all that, so I guess I got a little lazy. And I acted more as an editor and less in the day-to-day operation.
- Eshleman: But as the editor you would field complaints I'm sure. You had 15 papers underneath you. I'm sure you had your share. What kinds of things were people concerned about?
- Behringer: Oh, not covering things that you thought they should, covering things in a way that you thought they shouldn't. Putting things in the police report that I didn't think should be in the police report. It was amazing that almost every young person who got in trouble with the law had an 85-year-old grandmother who would have a heart attack if she read about it. We had numerous suits filed against us over things in the newspaper, usually over police reports. Only one went to trial and that was thrown out before it got anywhere.
- Eshleman: Libel suits?
- Behringer: Yeah, none of the others went to trial, although we did settle two with the insistence of the insurance company. There was no pattern to those complaints. One of them--the one that wound on for about ten years and finally got settled--was not based on anything we reported that was untrue.
- Eshleman: Wow. Looking back over your career what was your favorite job?

Behringer: Probably sports editor. I just liked sports; it was fun to cover. And I continued somewhat active in that area and then ultimately we started two golf newspapers at Montgomery Newspapers and that led to an after newspaper career. So I've been close to sports in terms of the fun of it. I really enjoyed covering local government. I felt that I did that well. I'm not a great creative writer or feature writer. But I was pretty quick and could get to the gist of something pretty quickly.

Eshleman: Speaking overall about community journalism in the 15 publications and so forth. What contribution do you think they made in terms of journalism in the area? Were they influential in terms of local public decisions?

Behringer: Oh sure, yeah. Probably the best-read column in the newspaper was the letters to the editor and at election time or at a time of a controversial zoning issue the letters page overflowed onto other pages. There's no question that public officials were aware of community sentiment through that, and I think they were also well aware that they were being covered when they were meeting.

Eshleman: Right. Do you think your papers affected change any place. And can you think of some specific instances when one of the papers or an aggregate caused public officials to do something that they might not otherwise do?

Behringer: Some specific highway and traffic issues where we had editorial campaigns that resulted in change in the communities. I think open space was another area where preservation of open space. We definitely had an impact on those decisions. Some areas like flood control, which is obviously badly needed, we spouted off at length and got nowhere, so it was not always a plus.

Eshleman: Tell me about some of the more difficult stories that you covered over the years. I'm thinking of personally difficult for you because of the nature of the story or difficult again in the aggregate sense for the newspaper.

Behringer: A story that always comes to my mind when I talk about different stories challenging stories was the story of Jay Smith, the high school principal in Upper Merion Township who was convicted of murder. I knew Jay Smith because we were both in the same Rotary Club. He was not in the Rotary Club at the time of his arrest. And certainly knowing him I had no temptation to report it in any other way. But one of the most sensitive areas was how the reporter Chris Hepp, who may still be reporting in Philadelphia.

Eshleman: He's actually the city editor of the *Inquirer* now.

Behringer: Chris did credit to a daily newspaper reporter in what he did for *Today's Post*. He got very close to a woman who worked at a dry cleaning establishment in King of Prussia with Jay Smith's wife. And Jay Smith's wife had given the woman in the dry cleaning store some material about Jay before she died and the woman gave it to Chris. And there were some very incriminating things in there, clippings from magazines where Jay had advertised his sexual desires, things that definitely would be of interest to the law enforcement people. We at some point were contacted by the FBI to for anything we had that would relate to Jay Smith and we basically said we had nothing, no notes whatever. We did tell them we had this material and we did say if they subpoenaed it we would give it to them. I never was comfortable with that; I'm not comfortable with it today. But I felt it was the only existing copy of material that bore directly on criminal case that it might have had an influence in determining the case. And I didn't feel that the luck of it having been given to us should keep it from them right or wrong.

Eshleman: Sure.

Behringer: We did keep a copy and I think I still have it. And then when Jay Smith was convicted and was in prison he acted as his own lawyer and he had all day, all week to write things and file complaints, so he sued me, and Chris, and other editor in the newspaper, and a publisher for \$25 million. At one point he got an extension because the prison had run out of paper and pencils for him to write his documents. And ultimately he got released and the case went away for his failure to file something in a given time. And never saw him again.

Eshleman: I ran into Jay Smith and ended up interviewing him in a one-on-one situation after his release from jail. I was working in Harrisburg for the *Inquirer* and there was a bill before the legislature. It was a crime-related bill and I can't recall anymore what it was about but Jay Smith was there to testify before a house or senate hearing. And prior to that I remember going into a conference room a closed door conference room and interviewing him one on one. I was thinking, "Oh, here I am with Jay Smith," which was an odd kind of situation.

Behringer: For sure.

Eshleman: I guess Susan Rider [the murder victim] was from your area.

Behringer: She was a teacher in Upper Merion Township.

Eshleman: Upper Merion, right.

Behringer: Teaching in King of Prussia.

Eshleman: OK, how aggressively did you all cover that story?

Behringer: Oh, I like to think we covered it as aggressively as anybody else. Chris was on it almost full time and when we reported on the documentation we got from the lady in the dry cleaning shop that the Philadelphia papers credited us with that story when they reported it.

Eshleman: That's good.

Behringer: It was the story of Colonel Jay, the swinging colonel. Actually had a picture of him at the motel in New Jersey from the reader but you could tell it was Jay.

Eshleman: Other stories that come to mind?

Behringer: In a different township where the Chesterbrook development took place there was a police chief who was very, very difficult to get along with and we had a reporter whom we had inherited from one of the mergers and was covering that police department. It finally got to the point where he absolutely refused to provide any information so long as she was the reporter. We wrestled with this for quite some time and we finally decided to take her off the beat because we weren't getting the news out. Again that was one that I wasn't comfortable with and thinking back I sometimes wish we hadn't done [that]. But he had his way. He ultimately got to be one of the township supervisors and continued not to be a friend of ours for many years.

Eshleman: Do you think sources had a different expectation of you as a community newspaper and opposed to city papers and even suburban dailies?

Behringer: Probably. When I started to cover local government the typical township government was three supervisors sitting at a table in the local firehouse one night a month and rubber stamping what they had talked about over coffee through the month without any public awareness. And so they expected you to simply to convey what they decided to convey. I guess we were victims of that for some time until the townships grew. There became more supervisors that Pennsylvania finally had a meeting and open record law in 1957 which had few teeth but that did somewhat reduce the executive sessions of the obvious control of information.

Eshleman: Sure, of course that law was amended a few years ago, not necessarily improved upon.

Behringer: Right, we still don't have a meeting or record law of any real effectiveness.

Eshleman: I know this covering Harrisburg all those years. The Legislature, of course, is exempt so they were able to have their private committee meetings and caucus meetings and actually budget without doing it in



the light of day. Do you think the public's understanding and appreciation of the press has changed over the years? In other words were people, let's say prior to Watergate or in the earlier years, more accepting of the press and more believing of what they read as opposed to today?

Behringer: Sure, I might separate community newspapers from metropolitan papers. I think Watergate also contributed to the change; no question today the respect isn't there I think in some cases. In some cases I think it's because the publications are not as thorough as responsible and as effective as they were. I guess I'd speak specifically in suburban Philadelphia where, with the exception of the Caulkins Company, one company controls virtually every suburban weekly and daily of note. A company noted strictly for the bottom line, a company with very little interest in the quality and fairness of the information that's produced. And because the products are so poor to be blunt the reaction to them is pretty negative.

Eshleman: Yeah, and you think that's one of the things that is contributing to circulation decline?

Behringer: Oh sure. An example is Wissahickon School District where I went to high school at one time was covered by four reporters. Now it's covered by one. And that reporter's stories appear in four newspapers under the same ownership.

Eshleman: Right. It's going to be interesting too as we get into the future and more people are getting their news from their computers. Newspapers continue to publish online and you've got to wonder whether the fact checking and the accuracy would be there as it was when you were sitting there going to reading a story.

Behringer: Well, I think the way we produce newspapers has contributed to that for some time now. It used to be that you would type a story, you would then read it and make pencil corrections and correct it. Then it would go to an editor or a copy editor who would read it. Make pencil corrections and type those corrections in. Then to a lineotypist or typesetter who would set it and a proof would be pulled. A proofreader would read it, make corrections on the proof, and those corrections would become part of the final project product. Now a reporter types it, looks at it on the screen, sends it to a copy editor who looks at it on the screen, makes corrections and off it goes. So you eliminated all those sub steps.

Eshleman: You obviously witnessed the changeover in your career from probably typing on a manual typewriter to using computers. We just talked a little bit about that some of the downsides of that. What about the good sides?

Behringer: We had a woman who set type at the *Ambler Gazette*, Grace Dyer, who could produce two column of type an hour on the linotype machine and

she was considered the fastest linotypist in the county. She was a marvel. And the others might do say a column and a half an hour so that's you know that's a day to produce a type for a page. Now once the material is ready to go onto the page

**[End of tape 1, side A]**

- Eshleman: What was the biggest change you witnessed in your career in terms of how reporters and newspapers operate? Was it the technology or was it the philosophy?
- Behringer: I think the biggest is the consolidation of ownerships and there are so many fewer voices reporting on what goes on in a given community. Technology would be a close second.
- Eshleman: In terms of starting out one step further to the readers and the consumers. Is it a good thing or a bad thing?
- Behringer: Oh, it's a bad thing without any question. General Register Company is the company that bought Montgomery [Publishing Company] newspapers in 2001. And early on I had a meeting with the editorial director of GRC and the editor of the *Norristown Times-Herald*, which was a neighboring newspaper to Montgomery newspapers and a competing one. And the guidelines were laid out so that newspaper and Montgomery newspapers were never to have a reporter at the same event because that would be duplication. And I remember saying to them something to the effect then there will be only one voice reporting that community. And I got back the blankest stares you could ever imagine, like, "Why is that significant?" There used to be some really bad community newspapers. But there were different viewpoints. There was a *Main Line Chronicle*. Uncle Ben Cramer could steer so close to the local eyeball it was incredible. But he was a voice in the community and in Lansdale in Norristown and in Jenkintown and Abington. All around the Philadelphia suburbs, there were dozens of community newspapers. Montgomery newspapers were guilty of taking over some of those. GRC is guilty of taking over almost all of them. And so have so few interpretations of what's important, so few avenues for people to express themselves that it's tragic.
- Eshleman: You mentioning Ben Cramer reminded me of something. Did you ever write editorials or opinions?
- Behringer: Oh, sure
- Eshleman: Did you ever have a particular crusade or crusades that you went on and a particular issue that really got you wrangled?

- Behringer: Probably nothing that qualified as crusades. We would do a campaign to get a new road built or something like that. Obviously the editorials would be part of it and over the years I probably wrote more about open space than anything else because it worried me so much that development was overtaking the suburbs to the point that there was no land left. And we would react to decisions of local government and school boards. We'd react to state issues. Occasionally we would get into the national political area but I wasn't comfortable with that and we didn't do it very often.
- Eshleman: So your papers were strictly local. Did you end up ever using national stories in your papers?
- Behringer: Only if they affected the local area. If there was a plane crash in Florida and somebody from the area was a victim then that would be reported. If somebody from the area was involved in a police situation in another area that would be reported.
- Eshleman: Do you think newspapers are still relevant at the local level?
- Behringer: Yeah.
- Eshleman: Why?
- Behringer: Well I don't see on the Internet or any place else that the local information is being reported at all thoroughly. It's not being reported in print as thoroughly as it should either. I know I'm old fashioned, but when there's something of interest on the Internet that requires more than one screen I usually print it out. And I think there's still a market interest for stories that are more conveniently read in print form. I think statistical information that lends itself to brief reporting, calendars of events, the police log is probably is better on the Internet and will ultimately be only on the Internet. But interpretative stories of local government, educational issues, features about interesting people in the community-- and I'd underline that--I think there's definitely an interest in that and will continue for some time.
- Eshleman: Do you have much contact with younger people, people in their teens or in their twenties.
- Behringer: Well, not now. We have one granddaughter, who is 10, and we go to birthday parties and do babysitting and events and things like that to an extent. From about 1980 to about 1990 I taught part time at Temple – communications law and several journalism courses – so I had a lot of contact in that period. I thought that was tremendously helpful. I'm not sure I helped them, but they sure helped me.

- Eshleman: Do you think those young people today are as do they want the local news that you and I both want?
- Behringer: No, I'm not sure what the cutoff is. It's probably somewhere around 35 or 40 probably when you get into home ownership there's at least a renewal of interest of what's going on in that town with zoning, school boundaries and that kind of thing. And the hot-button issues still generate interest. North Penn school district where we live just went through a redistricting of the elementary school boundaries and our family was just distraught for weeks over the apprehension of what was going to come out.
- Eshleman: It's interesting. I have three kids. My oldest is 25 and he doesn't subscribe to the newspaper. And of course he grew up in a house where the newspapers were piled to the ceiling and I always say to him. Well I can get by online. I go to CNN.com or I go to ESPN.com. Why should I buy the *Inquirer*? I keep thinking well maybe when he gets married and has kids he'll get back into caring about local news again. Sometimes I get discouraged by that.
- Behringer: I went to an editor and publisher newspaper technology conference in New Orleans maybe seven eight years ago. And on one of the panel were eight journalism majors from a university in Louisiana. And they made a presentation and someone from the audience asked how many of them read a newspaper everyday. And the answer was none.
- Eshleman: It's discouraging. One of the things I do with my journalism students is give them a weekly current events quiz. One, I want them to read the paper to see how stories are written and what is news. But also I want them to understand what's going on and if I didn't require that with a quiz, they wouldn't do it. They wouldn't read the paper which is hard to believe for journalism students. What newspapers do you read now?
- Behringer: I read the *Inquirer*, *USA Today*, the *Ambler Gazette* and then sporadically the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, the *North Penn Reporter*, the *Norristown Times Herald*, and the *Daily News*.
- Eshleman: So you have a full plate in terms of keeping up with the news every day.
- Behringer: Well it's really the *Inquirer* and the *USA Today*. And I'm surprised how much I've gotten to like *USA Today*.
- Eshleman: Yeah, actually I enjoy it too. Do you think newspapers as we k now them are going to be around in ten years?
- Behringer: Not as we know them but not as perhaps changed as some would have us believe. I think it was Ted Turner in 1985 who said they wouldn't be around in ten years then and now it's 20 and we're still there. The short answer is yes with fairly significantly changes.

- Eshleman: What kind of changes do you think especially to attract young readers? What do they have to do?
- Behringer: Well, I think the most effective thing they can do is to tailor the content more closely to each reader, as long as there are international issues and political issues, as long as there is an interest in the viability of where one lives, the quality of their schools, what the sports teams do. I think there's a place for the printed newspaper.
- Eshleman: You mentioned that with the longer story you tend to print it out which I do too. Do you read newspapers online?
- Behringer: I've got to say very rarely. And usually it's going after a specific story.
- Eshleman: Yeah, I actually do the same thing. And I find when I do read newspapers online I become a very selective reader. If I pick up the paper I may not be interested in business news. But if I pick up the paper I always look at the section. What I was saying is that when I read a paper if I read online I tend to be not as good as a reader. I don't read everything, whereas if I pick up the newspaper I do read everything. Do you find that the same?
- Behringer: Yeah I go through every page of a newspaper that I read. Obviously except the classified ads and if there's something I want. A wedding page or something I'm obviously not interested in. I will look at what each story is and I've always felt that was the main difference between a printed paper and the Internet. You are sort of window shopping with a printed paper – looking at each item in the window to see if you want to explore it further. With the Internet you are sort of looking for a specific thing – and ignoring the other things as you go to it.
- Eshleman: OK, I think we're drawing to a close here. Is there anything else you'd like to add in terms of your career, jobs you've held or advice for future journalists?
- Behringer: Oh, as far as the career goes I certainly never regretted any part of it. I enjoyed it. I felt that our publications were of service to the communities. We early on tried to draw a distinction between the typical small town paper and what we did and we were successful enough with national and state recognition that I thought we achieved that. Probably the best break I had in my career was to have worked with two publishers who were very much editorial minded: Strasburg, who was always listed as the editor of the *Ambler Gazette* even after he retired – he became the editor emeritus – and Art Helm, who you may have known who was a reporter with the *Inquirer*. It wasn't so much that they left me to my own devices but that they had a respect for the value of the editorial content of the newspaper and an understanding that without that the bottom line wasn't going to be there anyway.

Eshleman: Yeah unfortunately I think they are getting a hold of the publications. You mentioned 10-year-old grandchild. If that grandchild decided to get into journalism what would your advice be?

Behringer: Oh boy. Read, read, read. Get a very sound basic foundation with the English language which I rarely see which I rarely saw in the young journalist that I hired in my later years. And not don't expect the greatest financial rewards but expect to have a lot of fun.

Eshleman: Of the journalists you hired over the years, would we recognize any names-- people who went on to do big, great things.

Behringer: A lot of people went to the *Inquirer*, *Bulletin*, and *Daily News*. Ed Ratomakers became managing editor of a newspaper in Texas, I guess in El Paso. Mike Sisik, who was a high school sports reporter right after me, went to the *Los Angeles Times* and is a college sports reporter for the *New York Times*. Mike Misinelli—I'm not sure you'd consider that a success.

Eshleman: I was listening to him on the way down here today.

Behringer: Kevin Mulligan at the *Daily News*, Ted Salari at the *Daily News*. I'm not going to remember most of them. Vince Casper at the *Daily News*. A lot of them went on to the *Bucks County Courier Times* and went on from there. Tom Kelly became a Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer at the *Pottstown Mercury*. I'm trying to think of more people.

Eshleman: That's good.

Behringer: We were weeklies and probably always looked at as training ground for dailies, so it was common for us to lose somebody in a year or two years.

Eshleman: Sure, yeah. I mean it's good training. It's obviously good training. Well, Fred, thank you.

Behringer: I enjoyed it. I appreciate the opportunity.

**[End of interview]**