

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH CHARLES M. MEREDITH, III

Interviewed by Ford Risley

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Charles M. Meredith, III Interview

Risley: OK, we are here in the home of Charles Meredith. It is Monday, August 11, 2008, and we are doing an oral history interview with him. Tell me when and where you were born and a bit about your education.

Meredith: I was born in Reading, Pennsylvania, in 1935. I went through Quakertown Schools until the ninth grade and then I went to the Hill School for my last three years. I graduated in 1953 and then I went to the University of Pennsylvania Wharton School and graduated in 1957.

Risley: You got a bachelor's degree in business?

Meredith: Bachelor of Science in business from the Wharton School, right.

Risley: Did you have any siblings, brothers or sisters?

Meredith: No siblings. I am an only child, spoiled rotten.

Risley: Well let's go back. I know your family had a long connection with the *Free Press*, but tell me just a little bit about your family's connection.

Meredith: Well, my grandfather bought the *Free Press* from Uriah Stauffer about 1912 or 1913. He was the sheriff of Bucks County, the last sheriff to hang a man. In those days capital punishment was administered in each of the sixty-seven counties of the Commonwealth. And my grandfather happened to be the sheriff and was also a Quaker. [He] didn't believe in capital punishment. So when the last person that died on the gallows in Doylestown, he turned his back on the whole proceedings and had his deputy sheriff spring the trap which sent this villain on to the next world. He was a Pennsylvania German deputy sheriff by the name of Hans Dinklelaucher. Hans Dinklelaucher was in love with sending people to the next world. Grandfather came back; he owned the *Perkasie Central News*.

Risley: He already owned the paper?

Meredith: Yeah, he owned the *Perkasie News*.

Risley: Would you spell that?

Meredith: Yeah, *Perkasie Central News*. It was the *Central News Herald*.

Risley: OK.

Meredith: My grandfather came back to his newspaper which he owned in Perkasie.

Risley: OK, I am sorry to interrupt. So he was the sheriff and also owned the newspaper?

Meredith: That's right.

Risley: Was it a daily or a weekly?

Meredith: It was a weekly. And the Quakertown *Free Press* came up for sale. In those days, you didn't add on a newspaper. You sold a newspaper that you had and used the money to buy the next newspaper. Looking back on this whole thing, what grandfather should have done was borrow the money, held on to the Perkasio newspaper, and bought the Quakertown *Free Press*, which he didn't do.

Risley: Do you know what year that was?

Meredith: It would have been 1914, somewhere around there.

Risley: OK.

Meredith: And the first thing that he did was he moved the headquarters to what used to be the Quakertown National Bank building, and he put four giant pillars on the front of the building which he had made in Vermont. On your way out of town, I'll show it to you.

Risley: OK.

Meredith: So grandfather ran the *Free Press* as a weekly.

Risley: I am sorry to interrupt again. What was your grandfather's name?

Meredith: Charles M. Meredith, Sr.

Risley: Senior, OK.

Meredith: So one of my favorite stories about my grandfather had a PNPA [Pennsylvania Newspaper Association] connection. Grandfather was the vice president. In those days the president of PNPA came from a daily newspaper. The vice president came from the weekly newspaper. There were 50 daily newspapers and 100 weeklies, I think, about that time. So grandfather was a vice president. He was very well connected by that time and the whole state knew everybody. It was a very charming. He made a lot of talks and speeches all around the country. He was also head of the National Editorial Association, which was a national group of weeklies. It must have been in the 1930s because Gifford Pinchot was the governor.

Risley: Sure.

Meredith: He served two different terms as governor. In those days you couldn't serve two successive terms.

Risley: He also served in the Roosevelt administration.

Meredith: Exactly. Well, Pinchot was a great a big speaker. Always talked forever and the publishers knew that he was going to talk forever. So he gave this big speech about how wonderful Pennsylvania is. It has glorious mountains, it has the grand canyon [of Pennsylvania], it has lakes, it has mighty industry, it has farmlands, it has everything. The only thing it doesn't have is an ocean. And at the end of this hour all the publishers were nodding off and sleeping. They asked for comments or questions and my grandfather stood up. He knew him. And in those days everything was very familiar. People called each other by their first name, not like it is today. And my grandfather stood up and he said "Governor I don't have a question but I have a statement." "What's that Charlie?" said the governor. And my grandfather said, "Well, if you could suck as hard as you can blow, Pennsylvania would have an ocean."

Risley: [Laughs] OK, so we were talking about your grandfather.

Meredith: So grandfather continued on as publisher until he died in 1941. And my father succeeded him.

Risley: Meredith, II?

Meredith: Meredith, Jr.

Risley: Junior, excuse me.

Meredith: So he ran the newspaper until he died in 1969 and I succeeded him.

Risley: OK.

Meredith: My father, while he published the *Free Press*, ran unsuccessfully for the state legislature and later ran unsuccessfully for the United States Congress. I remember the Congressional race because I was ten at the time and helped him in his campaign. It was a fun time. Father converted the *Free Press* from a weekly to a daily.

Risley: You wouldn't happen to know what year that was.

Meredith: 1954 or '55, somewhere in that period. And it remained that way until I sold the newspaper to Times Mirror in 1996.

Risley: Was it a morning or an evening paper?

Meredith: Afternoon.

Risley: OK.

Meredith: I was successful in politics where my father was not. I became a county commissioner of Bucks County for two terms. Then my father died and I was at the fork in the road. Should I stay in government service or should I come back to the newspaper? I chose to come back to the newspaper. I'm glad I did and things went very well. I was president of then PNPA – now PNA – somewhere around 1979. I forget when.

Risley: Can I come back to that?

Meredith: Yeah, sure.

Risley: OK, let's just talk a bit more about the paper. Did you start working at the paper right out of college?

Meredith: My first job I worked in circulation at the *Reading Eagle*. Of course the *Reading Eagle* and the *Reading Times* were owned by the same family, and the job was to try to make sure that every home in Reading had both newspapers, morning and evening. It was quite an experience, knocking on doors trying to sell subscriptions. It was a great experience. Then I came back to the *Free Press* about a year later, I guess, and started working in advertising. And I ended up being my father's general manager.

Risley: This was before you became a county commissioner?

Meredith: Right. Father was teaching at the University of Pennsylvania. He taught community journalism

Risley: Oh, really.

Meredith: He taught for] about 15 years I guess ago as a hobby, and he never took a nickel from Penn because he wanted to do something for the university. But I remember those times when he would periodically take ill, I would teach the class for him. So I remember that whole process which was wonderful. Then after my year as chairman of PNPA, I got tapped to serve on the board of directors of the American Newspaper Publishers Association.

Risley: Oh, really.

Meredith: And so I served for eight years with that board, and I represented the smallest newspaper of all the newspapers. It was fun because Katherine Graham was on that board. So was Punch Sulzberger of the *New York Times*, and Warren Phillips of the *Wall Street Journal*, Stan Cook of the *Chicago Tribune*, and Bob Murray representing the Chandler family for Times Mirror. It was quite a group.

Risley: That's an all-star lineup.

Meredith: Yeah, there were about 18 of us [were] I guess on the board – Don Newhouse from the [Newark] *Star Ledger*. It was quite a time. I enjoyed it greatly.

Risley: I know that circulation figures run up and down, but what were the circulation figures of the paper?

Meredith: We would run 7,000 to 8,000 each day.

Risley: Who would you consider to be your main competitors?

Meredith: Well, the main competitor was the Allentown *Morning Call*. And, of course, Times Mirror bought the Allentown *Morning Call*, and then when we sold the newspaper to the Times Mirror, the *Morning Call*, our arch enemy, became kind of our surrogate parent looking out for the for the Times Mirror.

Risley: Didn't you write a column for many years?

Meredith: Yeah, I wrote a column for the *Morning Call* every week for four or five years. I still write columns for the *Free Press* and I also write a column for the *Bucks County Herald*.

Risley: Oh, really.

Meredith: But they are different columns.

Risley: How would you describe those columns?

Meredith: I am very lucky. My editors let me write about whatever I want to write about. So sometimes it's politics, sometimes it's people, sometimes it's places and things. It's just kind of whatever I want to write about. Very typically it's something in the news. One of the examples that I use is when the RU 486 morning after pill became an allowable item. I called local pharmacies to ask them if someone brought a prescription in for RU 486 would they fill it. And I would call pharmacies and ask them. Some said yes, some said no. And I called five or six physicians saying would you prescribe RU 486? And some said yes, some said no. That's very typical of the kind of stuff I do.

Risley: Basically, it's just whatever interests you.

Meredith: Right. It always has a local angle. I recall in the case I just gave you I would talk to physicians and pharmacies in this region so the readers would know the names and places.

Risley: Why do you like writing a column?

Meredith: Because I am curious. Just like you are, I am curious.

Risley: Well what do you think some of the things that the *Free Press* did under your family's ownership that you are proud of.

Meredith: I think basically the same thing that every family across the country is proud of and that is the community newspaper is a historian. And it's the cheerleader. It promotes the area. It rallies the troops when things are difficult, praises them when things go well, criticizes them when things do not. I would think that would probably be very typical to what people respond to that question. We have no Pulitzer Prizes that we won along the way.

Risley: What about events that happened in the Quakertown area that the newspaper covered that were historic or you know particularly memorable?

Meredith: Let me think about that.

Risley: All right. Well, what about you yourself? What do you think are some of the most significant contributions that you made to the paper under your ownership?

Meredith: I guess I better go back and think.

Risley: All right, no problem. How big was the paper in terms of the staff?

Meredith: Well, the news team was about ten – and two photographers, one for sports and everyone else in general news.

Risley: OK, what about on the business side?

Meredith: On the business side, we had probably on the advertising side we had probably six salespeople and two of them would be in classified. And we had a circulation department of probably another five I would guess and the mechanical staff in composition and in the pressroom was probably another ten.

Risley: OK.

Meredith: So, it probably ran to 60 people.

Risley: Was the paper always an afternoon paper? Did you ever switch to morning publication?

Meredith: No, it was always an afternoon [paper].

Risley: Tell me about your years with in the leadership of the PNPA. Why did you get involved there? What do you think was important about what you all did?

Meredith: I thought [it] was an important thing to have a place where all the newspapers in the state could interact with each other, learn from each other. I think in my year [as president], the one thing which I will recall was we wanted to we wanted to increase the newspaper shield law in the legislature, the Sunshine Laws. We had legislative meetings with publishers in Scranton, Philadelphia, Harrisburg, Erie and Pittsburgh. So all the state representatives, all the state senators, and the local publishers – weekly and daily – [met] and we had these five different meetings. And what I thought this would be a kind of a no brainer. I mean goodness all we are talking about is letting the sun shine in so the people can know what is happening in government. But that was not so. There were angry shouting matches. It was just it was quite a show. It turned out. We didn't get the Sunshine Law passed in my year. A couple of years later we did, but it was pretty weak in the knees. And it is still pretty weak in the knees. That was probably the most important thing I did in my year.

Risley: To at least get the process started?

Meredith: And it was it was not a friendly topic but it was fascinating.

Risley: Right.

Meredith: And it gave everybody lots of stuff to write about.

Risley: I guess you learned a lot about state politics.

Meredith: Exactly.

Risley: Well, how did the newspaper business change during your career? You must have seen a lot of changes.

Meredith: Well, we went from hot metal to cold type and offset printing. The *Free Press* was the first web offset newspaper in Bucks County. That was fun. We did that in 1971 or '72. That changed things tremendously. [Before then] you could not bend headlines. You could not make them fit in the days of hot metal. When you wrote headlines an "M" counted two spaces and an "I" counted a half and you couldn't squish things together or pull it out. Now of course you just do whatever you want to. I remember a linotype operator. If he if he was really good he could set a galley of type in an hour and a galley of type is about a yard long. With cold type we were yards and yards and yards in an hour. The speed was just mind boggling.

Risley: What about women in the newsroom?

Meredith: Yeah we started seeing women in the newspaper. In my day when I ran the newspaper, we had we had an advertising staff that was [all] female. Our ad director was female. All the salespeople were female. The classified people

were female which lead a lot of people to call these women “Charlie’s Angels” as in the old TV show.

Risley: How about in the newsroom?

Meredith: In the newsroom we had about half and half – half male half female. So that was quite a change because when I started into the business, it was almost 100 percent male – almost. The American Newspaper Publishers board was all male until my time. We had we had two women out of the eighteen. Kathryn Graham being one and Helen Copley of the San Diego Copley News was the other. Now I would bet it is 50/50. And certainly you would never find an editor or publisher being a female [back then]. Today, well it’s like, it’s like schools. My old school, the Wharton School, in my day there were zero women. Today over half of the undergraduate Wharton School is female.

Risley: That is true in journalism programs.

Meredith: I am sure it would be. So it’s a very different scene.

Risley: What about the competition from television?

Meredith: It wasn’t a factor in my day. The national advertising was affected as more and more advertisers began to move to television. But the local advertising was not affected by it. There was no such thing as cable TV. In this neck of the woods there were just three TV channels. They were all Philadelphia based. And advertising was too costly for the local stores to buy, so our competition came from an occasional shopper that would start or the competition from other newspapers.

Risley: So you never considered, as some evening papers did, switching to a morning circulation.

Meredith: We did. We did at one point. We put our toes in the water and published a morning newspaper for about two months – and an afternoon paper at the same time. And because it was so expensive to do we stopped doing it. What we should have done is, we should have just made a change and go to morning [publication].

Risley: Do you think looking back that was something you probably should have done?

Meredith: That was an error. We were right in trying it, but what we should have done, we shouldn’t have just put our toes in the water. It would have been better.

Risley: Why do you think Pennsylvania has had so many family newspapers throughout its history?

Meredith: Well because there are so many so many towns. In our town [there are] 10,000 people. There will be thirty doctors, engineers, twenty lawyers [and] one editor, one publisher from the same company. Small towns all have their voices. And big towns and cities do too, and Pennsylvania has a lot of them. Pardon me, I have a frog in my throat.

Risley: Do you need something to drink?

Meredith: I am OK.

Risley: OK, how do you think things have changed for family newspapers over the last several decades? Has it gotten tougher?

Meredith: Well, the family newspapers are disappearing. The chains have purchased all the dailies there are no others. Well, in Scranton and in Erie you still have local families running the newspapers. But I think that probably is it. Well, Reading still has the same family running the paper--and Lancaster, yeah Lancaster also. But holy smokes.

Risley: Well what about what has changed. What is happening in the newspaper business that's made it harder for families?

Meredith: Well, what has happened is the advent of cable television, but more so the Internet has affected advertising both display advertising and classified advertising drastically. I mean for the past seven eight years advertising has been falling apart and that is what drives the economic engine of newspapers.

Risley: Sure.

Meredith: So we are going to charge a whole lot more for the newspaper and we are doing that.

Risley: What about just the growth of chains and public media companies. Has that been a factor?

Meredith: It's been a factor, and now that the chains are having trouble too.

Risley: Sure.

Meredith: And so the one area that I think has done very well is the community newspapers, the small weekly, and especially the free weeklies. Who would believe that one of the newspapers that I write for – the *Bucks County Herald* – wasn't even around here seven eight years ago?

Risley: I'm not familiar with it.

Meredith: It's basically in the New Hope area and it's a tabloid. It's free and it prints 72 pages a week, and it's full of advertising. But it's absolutely 100 percent local stuff: the fire companies and who is doing what in the Rotary Club. It's the traditional meat, bread, and potatoes of what we've always been about. So those papers are doing, I think, extremely well. But the dailies are not; the dailies are shrinking.

Risley: Now as I understand it you have a son. Was he with the paper?

Meredith: He was with the paper for about five or six years and he left.

Risley: Before it was sold?

Meredith: Yes. It wasn't the best thing for him. And so he and so he left the paper. Our daughter, Anne, came in for a couple of years and edited the paper and didn't like it. She didn't like the deadlines and the constant pressure. What does she do today? She's a screen writer and doing very well. She lives in Beverly Hills, California, [and] has been very successful. Although it's funny, she didn't like deadlines but she's in the deadlines business now.

Risley: Different deadlines.

Meredith: Yeah there are things where she's got to get it done and all of that. Then our youngest, Catherine, is a photographer for the Allentown *Morning Call*.

Risley: Oh, really.

Meredith: So she is still in the business.

Risley: Is that Catherine with a C or a K?

Meredith: C.

Risley: Okay, so you had three children?

Meredith: Three children.

Risley: Did that factor into your decision to sell the paper?

Meredith: Yes, I mean it was obvious that it wasn't going to be a good fit for our son. Our daughter left it as quickly as she could and Catherine had no interest in owning.

Risley: Owning a paper.

Meredith: Right, right.

Risley: Well, is there anything that we didn't discuss?

Meredith: There are a couple of interesting stories that happened in my watch. One was the borough was not treating sewage as thoroughly as should – putting poisonous effluent into the creeks. And this wonderful lake that we have outside of town – Lake Nockamixon, a state park and a lake that is about six seven miles long and about a mile – was polluted. And Quakertown borough's sewage treatment was causing the pollution. And we spent a whole lot of time making sure that the public knew that its own government was screwing things up to a fair degree. And [the borough] finally got it fixed.

Risley: Do you remember when that was?

Meredith: That was in the probably late 1970s

Risley: OK.

Meredith: I would guess, 1980.

Risley: OK.

Meredith: And the second was a big fight that we had with the Quakertown Hospital. We felt we felt that the directors of the hospital were not paying as close attention to how the hospital was being run as it should. It was a battle royal. We ended up being sued.

Risley: Oh really?

Meredith: We all settled it out of court, so it never went to trial. Almost went to trial. But that was an important time for us.

Risley: Do you remember when that was?

Meredith: That would have been the early 90s, 1990 or 1991, something like that.

Risley: Do you have any long-time employees that stand out in your mind on the news side or the business side that were with the paper for a long time and had a real connection?

Meredith: Well, Dennis McAleer was our pressman. And when we finally decided to leave the business, we sold the printing company to him.

Risley: Oh really.

Meredith: So he is still running it. He prints college newspapers and weeklies.

Risley: How do you spell his last name?

Meredith: McAleer. He bought the printing company. So he still goes in and does it.

Risley: Well, if somebody else comes to mind. You can e-mail me. Well, I think those are all the questions that I had. Is there anything else that you'd like to add or anything that I didn't think of?

Meredith: Well, one thing I should tell you about is my father.

Risley: Sure.

Meredith: After the Second World War, he decided that he should start a radio station which he did. WBUX was the call letters and it had studios in Quakertown and Doylestown. And during my days at Penn, he sold the radio station to James Michener, the famous author, and Don Meredith who was a quarterback for the Dallas Cowboys and an announcer on Monday Night Football, and Walter Conti who had Conti's Restaurant in Doylestown and who was a trustee at Penn State.

Risley: Oh, really. OK

Meredith: Famous guy. He did wonderful things for Penn State.

Risley: Why did your father decide to try to get into radio?

Meredith: Well, radio was a new thing in the 40s.

Risley: And it was not unusual for a newspaper to own a radio station.

Meredith: Exactly. So he decided that would be a good thing to do.

Risley: AM station or FM?

Meredith: AM station.

Risley: OK.

Meredith: And I think it had to leave the air at dark. I think.

Risley: OK.

Meredith: It was 1570 on the AM dial. It still is.

Risley: How about that.

Meredith: 1570, WBUX.

Risley: Do you remember how long he owned it for approximately?

Meredith: Well, he started the station right after the second [world] war, so it would have been about 1946, I guess. And he sold it, probably 20 years later.

Risley: OK, so he had it for quite some time.

Meredith: Oh yes, he did.

Risley: OK. Did your family ever try doing anything else – owning any other newspapers or magazines or any other type of media?

Meredith: We started a newspaper in Emmaus, just outside of Allentown. And we had that from about 1959 to, well, we had it for about 25 years I guess.

Risley: Oh, really.

Meredith: And we sold it to the family that owns the *Leighton Times*.

Risley: Okay, what was the name of the Emmaus paper?

Meredith: The *Free Press*. We also we bought a little weekly newspaper called the *Indian Valley Echo* and that was in the Telford-Souderton area. We owned that for I guess about 25 years also.

Risley: OK, so your family did have some other newspapers.

Meredith: Sure. Oh, there is one other thing.

Risley: Sure.

Meredith: [During] the centennial of 1976 – the bicentennial of this country – we led the effort to move the first mayor of Quakertown’s house, which was a farmhouse, a mile and a half to its present location. The family sold the ground and the house to the developers who were going to build a shopping center. So we said, “Well you don’t want this house. You are just going to tear it down. How about if we move it? They said fine.” So we led a community fundraising affair to move the house, which we did. That was quite a show.

Risley: Is it now a historic site?

Meredith: Yeah, a historic site. It is about a mile from here, and on our way out, I’ll show you a couple things.

Risley: I’d like to see it. Is that type of thing that you think a good community newspaper should do?

Meredith: Sure and I'll bet you that there are examples of things like that all over the country. It's very typical kind of stuff that newspapers do.

Risley: The kind of story that might get overlooked by the Allentown paper or the Philadelphia paper.

Meredith: The other thing that I should add is the newspaper saved the YMCA.

Risley: Oh, really.

Meredith: The YMCA was on very, very hard times. Yeah it's called the Upper Bucks YMCA, and the Upper Bucks YMCA purchased a tennis facility because it come up for sale and the Y thought it could use the tennis facility to expand its interest in its membership and it turned out that it did. But it didn't have enough money to make it work. So the *Free Press* led the effort to raise the money to get the YMCA out of hock and we also found new directors to run the place or to supervise it. That was very successful. But that's a very typical thing that newspapers do.

Risley: Just one last question: Is there anything that's unique about the newspaper competition in this area that made it challenging? What was the newspaper environment in this area?

Meredith: It was very competitive – very competitive for both advertisers and the readers.

Risley: And why is that?

Meredith: Because we live cheek by jowl with our competition. Allentown is only 15 miles away. In those days Bethlehem had its own newspaper. It was about the same distance. Doylestown, the county seat, was 15 miles away. The *Perkasie News Herald*, *Pennsburg Town and Country* [also] were competitors for advertising. So you had a lot of competition for readership and advertising. Pennsylvania is that way. You have to go just five miles and you have a new town

Risley: Sure

Meredith: Pennsylvania has 2,600 municipalities.

Risley: More than any other state in the country.

Meredith: More than any other state, yeah.

Risley: So that makes the newspaper competition even tougher than it might be in other places?

Meredith: Oh, without a question. Oh sure, without a question And I think it made us better.

Risley: Sure

Meredith: Because we had to be we had to be quicker. We had to really know what was going on to hold on to the readers that we had and increase the circulation. It was not easy to do.

Risley: OK, hey listen, thank you very much.

Meredith: Sure thing.

Risley: It has been terrific.

[End of Interview]