

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH GENE ROBERTS

Interviewed by Ford Risley

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## Gene Roberts Interview

Risley: Okay, it's June 28, 2010, and we're here in Bath, North Carolina. I am interviewing Gene Roberts, the longtime editor of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, among other things. So, we'll start at the beginning, Gene. First of all, tell me where you were born and about your family.

Roberts: I was born in Goldsboro, North Carolina, on June 15, 1932. My mother's maiden name was Margaret Ham. She was a schoolteacher. I am a junior, so my father had the same name I had – Eugene Leslie Roberts. He preferred Gene, and so do I. My father was a renaissance man. He was many things. His father died when he was 14, and his father owned a farm and a country store. And my father had to take over the farm at the age of 14. He wasn't able to go to high school until he was 21. And his other two brothers came along and took over the farm. He went to boarding school at a Baptist school in Winterville, North Carolina, and entered the eighth grade at 21, went on to graduate from there. It was a Baptist academy. And then he went to Wake Forest. He graduated from Wake Forest, worked his way through – he had no support from home. He variously was a cabinet maker, a carpenter, a barber to get through school. He went through Louisville Theological Seminar – a Baptist seminary. He taught college for a while in Bristol, Virginia, and Tennessee – the town is split in two – and at a Baptist women's college, Virginia Intermont College. He later moved back.

He was from Wayne County, North Carolina, where Goldsboro is the county seat. And he moved back to become a [school] principal and met my mother there. She was working for him. She had just gotten out of what today is East Carolina University but then was East Carolina Teachers' College. Actually, when she went there, it was East Carolina Normal, a two-year school. And then later, when my sister and I were in school, she went back to college and got her AB degree. But my father had been the advisor of a student newspaper at Virginia Intermont College and got interested in it. He worked for a while at the *Goldsboro News*. After he and my mother were married, he decided to try the newspaper business. Then he and an advertising salesman from the paper decided to buy a local weekly. At the time, I was probably about 2 years old, and they owned it until I was about seven years old.

My earliest memories are of my father holding me up to let me feed sheets of papers in the flatbed press. It was a small weekly operation, and each page of a paper had to be hand-fed and through the press. Actually, pages one and four would go in, and then you would turn them over, wait, and then print pages two and three. And his strategy was to, in the era of bad roads, the local daily newspaper had trouble delivering on the same day. It was an afternoon paper. So, he aimed his paper at the farm community and started a very popular personal column which he ran on page one called "Rambling in Rural Wayne." The paper would be printed on Thursday, and on Friday and Saturday, he would go out and barter subscriptions for food, and I would go with him. This was before I started to school. On a typical day, we would come back with a half a

dozen chickens or guinea hens with their legs tied together. He owned an Essex, a two-seat Essex, and he built a little box over the seats to put the eggs and fragile things in, and chickens went in the rear of the car. We ate very well during the Depression, and he would share the food with our next-door neighbor who owned the Nash Agency in town. So, the owner of the car agency would keep my father's car in running order in exchange for the food.

Risley: Is it fair to say that's where you got interested in journalism?

Roberts: Right, it is. His basic problem was he was too successful. He ultimately had more circulation in just a rural area than the daily newspaper had overall. It scared them, and they started their own weekly and were giving the weekly away basically to put him out of business. If you bought an ad in the daily paper, they would sell you the same ad in the weekly paper for a nickel an inch. And he couldn't compete with that. And when his paper closed, they stole the title of his column, "Rambling in Rural Wayne," and hired a person to do it. Years later, when I started in journalism, I started doing the column my father had invented for the newspaper that put him out of business although the paper then was owned by a different owner.

Risley: I want to talk about that first job. Where did you go to school?

Roberts: I went to Morris Hill Junior College. It's now a four-year college in the mountains of North Carolina near Asheville, in a little town called Morrisville. And from there, I went to the University of North Carolina and graduated from there in 1954.

Risley: What did you study in college?

Roberts: My major was history, although I discovered I could take more history courses as a journalism major than I could as a history major for complicated reasons. I thought for a time about becoming a medieval historian and was interested in the crusades and that period. But I was interested in history generally. Fortunately, I decided journalism would be more interesting.

Risley: Did you do any journalistic writing in high school or college?

Roberts: Well, I covered country high school basketball for the *Goldboro News-Argus*, and I got 25 cents a box score and 10 cents an inch. And I covered [games] typically on Tuesdays and Thursday nights. I would cover four of probably the worst basketball games that have ever been played. Basically, high schools with less than 100 students and a lot more girls than boys, so there weren't a lot of people eligible for the basketball team. On a game night, there would be girls' junior varsity, boys' junior varsity, and a girls' game, and a boys' game all in one long night.

Risley: That was a long night.

Roberts: I guess my last year or two, I covered the county basketball tournament, which was about fourteen or fifteen games played over a two-week period. About the time I finished high school, I never wanted to see another basketball game and virtually have not. I tune in a little bit on the television but very rarely.

Risley: What was your first job out of college?

Roberts: Well, I spent two years in the Army, mostly in Baltimore and Washington, in something called the Counterintelligence Corps. In high school, I never could master touch typing. And was sort of a dunderhead at it. So much so, I wondered if I could handle the newspaper business. But the Army put me in a typing course and basically said I would remain for as long as it took to get up to forty words a minute.

Risley: So, you learned to type?

Roberts: I learned to type in the Army. And during the last year, I was in Washington in civilian clothes, which was a nice way to do your military service.

Risley: What year did you graduate from the University of North Carolina?

Roberts: 1954.

Risley: And then you spent two years in the Army?

Roberts: Right and then came back and worked for the *Goldsboro News-Argus*.

Risley: Tell me about that experience.

Roberts: Well, as I said, I started out what was considered the lowest rung on the paper doing the "Rambling in Rural Wayne" column and being a farm reporter. It was an interesting time to be an agriculture reporter. There was a revolution going on in agriculture in the '50s. In a county like Wayne County before the war there were almost no tractors. Everyone used mules, and tobacco cultivation was pretty much as it had been for decades. By the '50s, agricultural technology had taken over in all sorts of ways. Not only tractors and better plowing equipment and better harvesting equipment but new seed varieties that would grow and be much more productive than old seed varieties.

My grandfather owned a tobacco farm, and in the summers, I worked on his farm and four neighbors of his. It would be very unusual in the 1940s to grow more than 1,200 pounds of tobacco per acre. If someone said they were growing 1,500, it was possible, but you suspected them of lying. By the time I had gone through college and went in the Army, people were growing 3,000 pounds per acre and more because of new seed varieties.

It sort of sabotaged the government's price controls. They limited acres, and for a while, the government tried to control the situation by banning the most

productive tobacco seed and tobacco varieties. That was a big story when this transition period when I was a farm reporter. The “Rambling in Rural Wayne” was a personal-type column. Who planted the first tobacco of the season? Or who transplanted it from the tobacco seed beds to the fields? And who had the first harvest, and who brought in the first bale of cotton? Who had the first cotton blossom? Farmers were very interested in that because it told them whether they were ahead or behind the other farmers in the area. Then I wrote about wives who put up the best strawberry preserves. If I said something nice about a farm wife’s cooking, I would get fifteen or twenty phone calls immediately saying you haven’t tried my wife’s cooking and we are expecting you for lunch this week and that sort of thing. It was very personal, down-to-earth sort of reporting. I learned a lot that influenced the way I saw journalism.

Risley: Talk about that.

Roberts: I discovered if I was writing about a Coker 139 – which was a seed variety that was ultimately banned, and all the farmers loved it because it not only increased the poundage they could grow, but it increased the quality of tobacco that it grew. And in 1940s, if you got three or four sort of Grade A leaves from the tobacco stalk, out of maybe sixteen or eighteen leaves, you were doing good. But this new seed variety, Coker 139, 80 percent of the leaves were of the highest quality of tobacco, and it sort of sabotaged the market. But I discovered no matter how much detail I gave the farmers, they would read it all, and they wanted more. I mean, their livelihoods were bound up in it. A lot of the farmers that took the paper, I got to know personally. They would see me at a country store, or I would stop out at their farm. And if I hadn’t fully answered all their questions in the stories, they would quiz me about, what did you mean by this and what is going on about that? I also discovered that no matter what I wrote about tobacco and whether I wrote it well or not well, people in Goldsboro – a small town of about 20,000 – didn’t read it unless they were merchants who did their business with tobacco farms. Or unless they, in addition to their town job, owned some farmland. But basically, townspeople weren’t interested in the nitty-gritty of tobacco farming.

And from that, I concluded that one of the advantages of newspapers is everyone doesn’t have to read everything. For those people who really want the information, that *almost* enough is not enough. And if their life is bound up in what you are writing about, then their absorption capacity is almost infinite. And after a year or so of that beat, I covered the county beat and, at times, city hall. I would cover the sheriff’s department, the county commissioners, and the agricultural agent was also on the county beat, so, even after I left the “Rambling in Rural Wayne” column, I also did a lot of farm reporting when I was covering the county beat.

Also, there were two editors at the paper who had a great influence on how I developed. My father was always a sort of journalism coach for me. In high school, I took his journalism course at least two years, maybe even three years. And I even took his printing course. And most people don’t know these days

what a California job case is, but these were how commercial printing was done for years and how newspapers were set in type before the linotype machine. California job cases were sort of the same principle of the typewriter. Different letters were in different little cubicles in the case, and by touch and figure out which letters, and you could handset headlines and body types from these. And in high school, of course, my father couldn't afford, or the school system couldn't afford, a linotype machine, so we kind of learned the primitive method of setting type.

Henry Bell, by the time I came to work for the paper, had gone blind, and it happened gradually over a number of years. And he was an extremely tall man, 6'7" or 6'8," and walked with an aluminum cane that was made in joints so he could make it long enough to work for him. And his hearing had gotten better as his eyesight had gotten worse. And you could walk — there were no offices in this newsroom. He had a cubicle. And you would walk in the morning, and as soon as your feet hit the floor in the newsroom, as soon as you opened the door, he could tell from your footsteps and know who you were. In my case, he would yell out, "Gene, come to my office," and then he would critique my column of the day before. No matter what I wrote, he would say that it wasn't visual enough and that I wasn't making him see and that I needed to write so he could visualize what he wasn't able to see. Day after day after being called into his office, I dreaded the daily lecture, of you know, make me see and write more visually. At one point, he even had me write at the bottom of the column, "Today's Prettiest Sight:" and then describe what it was. Goldsboro was a dry town. You couldn't buy whisky in town, and you could only get beer at a couple of places, mainly in the pool room. I would drive to the pool room at the end of the day to get a beer, and everyone would yell out, "What was today's prettiest sight?"

Another editor at the paper, Gene Price, was not much older than me -- maybe three or four years older -- but much more experienced. And he was the one who sort of set the tone for the newsroom -- cover everything, jump on every story, and write conversationally. At one point, I wrote a story, and at the end of the afternoon, "Come with me." We went into our wire room where we had a couple of AP machines, and he said, "Read this" and I did. He said, "You are writing sort of like AP. Now, let's walk over to the radio station." We walked around the corner to a radio station and they had a radio wire. He said, "Read this. Which do you think is better?" UPI radio writes the way people talk. So, Mr. Bell told me repeatedly to write more visually, and Gene was on me to write more conversationally.

Risley: How long did you work in Goldsboro, and then where did you go from there?

Roberts: Two years. Once I decided to leave, Gene Price tried to talk me into staying. When I was clear I was going to take another job, he called. He had once worked a couple of years for the *Norfolk Virginian Pilot*, and he called up the city editor there and got me basically hired sight unseen. Although, I guess I went to

Norfolk to close the deal, and they just were checking to see if I had two heads or not. Basically, they took me on Gene Price's recommendation.

Risley: What did you do in Norfolk?

Roberts: They hired me as a general assignment reporter. Working on the Goldsboro paper, I discovered I worked best having a beat, and I didn't like general assignment reporting. I figured out you could only be as good as the editor would let you be because the editor on general assignments decided what your assignments were going to be. And there were about a dozen reporters on the paper who had gone through college at about the same time I had gone. And several of them had gone to work straight out of college—Wake Forest or Carolina or University of Virginia—straight to the paper. Two of us were hired at about the same time. The other guy had worked on a weekly paper. I guess a semi-weekly paper that published twice a week.

During vacation season, they used all of the younger reporters as vacation replacements. And it was pretty well understood at the end of the summer they were going to pick two reporters for beat jobs. And the two of us who had come in two years later, and in some cases four years later because we had both been in the Army, we ended up getting the beat jobs because on smaller newspapers, we had learned—certainly not to perfection—but we had done a bit of everything. So, if they put us on city hall or courts or cops or whatever, we at least had done that before. And some of the people who had come on the paper straight out of college were basically doing real estate news and obituaries and had not had the same depth of experience that the two of us who had worked at smaller papers had had. I wanted the waterfront beat and got the city hall beat. And he had sort of wanted the city hall beat and got the waterfront beat. Ultimately, I got the maritime beat and thought it was probably the most fun.

Risley: That must have been a great beat in a town like that.

Roberts: Yeah, wonderful. The most fun on of any paper I worked for was New Years of 1958, I guess. Or New Year's Eve of '57, going into 1958. Or maybe even '58 going into '59, I guess. A tanker ran into a sand shoal about ten miles off Ocean City, Maryland. It was fully loaded with crude oil, and Lloyd's of London was the insurer. The ship's crew had to be evacuated during the storm on New Year's Eve. The owners and Lloyd's of London—the insurer—decided they couldn't be responsible for screwing up a tourist season at Ocean City, Maryland, so they abandoned ship. Maritime law is very specific about abandoning ship. If you start taking things off the ship, then you could be looked upon as salvaging the ship, as opposed to abandoning it. And legally, you could be responsible for whatever happens to the ship. So, when the crew was lifted off by helicopter, they left their uniforms aboard and even their money—money in the ship's safe. The name of the ship, interestingly, was the African Queen. It was named for the movie and Foster's novel. Because the ship had been abandoned to escape liability, as soon as the storm was over, all the fishermen from around Ocean City and Lewis, Delaware, swarmed onto the ship and took everything they

could lay their hands on. One fisherman I later met furnished his entire house out of teak wood furniture out of the captain's cabin. And other fishermen got hundreds of gallons of ship's paint.

Risley: You say it was one of the most fun stories you ever did?

Roberts: Well, that came later. For a while, it was a story about the fisherman sort of looting the ship. Although, since it was abandoned, it wasn't looted. The other reporter who had initially got the maritime beat covered that part of the story. And by the time – and interestingly, it worked out well because while I was covering city hall and wished I was covering the waterfront beat, Norfolk schools were closed by the state under Virginia's massive resistant laws. And basically, it was a state decision, and the mayor of the town – a man named Fred Duckworth, had come to Norfolk to manage a Ford assembly plant there. And he was not a Southerner, but he became a segregationist, and he supported the Virginia decision. But and most of the students and parents didn't take it too seriously the first two or three weeks the schools were closed. And basically, six high schools and junior high schools were closed, and around 14,000 students. And then, after a few weeks, it began to dawn on people, particularly the students, they might not get to go to the college they wanted to. And they might have to go out of town to get educated. And then a reaction began to set in. And parents and students started organizing what was jokingly called "Speakeasy schools" to kind of continue with their education. They would meet in church basements or people's homes and so forth. The schools were closed from late September/early October to late January of the next year, 1959. I wasn't actually covering the schools. I was more covering the more local political reaction to the schools., but at least I got to do some of that story.

Risley: I guess these were the first civil rights stories that you did?

Roberts: Yeah. I got to cover – the education reporter and the federal court reporter covered the two schools that they thought most likely to have violence. And I covered the one that was least likely, Grandee High school, which was basically a middle-class, upper-middle class school. And on the day the schools opened, I was about the only reporter at Grandee High School because only one Black student was going there, and no one thought any difficulty was likely to happen. To be on the safe side, the school superintendent or school principal arranged for all the white students to be admitted, and then a few minutes later, after everyone was in schools, so there would be nobody on the school grounds to cause trouble, the NAACP and the parents brought a girl who was about 14 years old, and a freshman – maybe 15 – to the school grounds after all the school children were left in.

Here was this lone Black girl going to a school with 2,000 whites. She got out of the car, drove up to the curb, and the school was set way back on the street – almost the equivalent of a block back – and she got out of the car and started walking up this long walkway to the school and got halfway and froze and started trembling all over and shaking more than I've ever seen a student shake,



or anyone shake. But she finally pulled herself together and pulled her arms in and stuck out her chin and marched on into the school. At this point, reporters were barred from actually entering the school building. I was, I don't know, maybe 27 or so at the time, and looked younger than I was. So, I pulled off my coat and took off my tie and threw them under a bush and pulled out my reporter's notebook as if I was a student and marched on into the school and nobody noticed. I followed her around for a couple of hours and nothing happened. The students were delighted to be back in school. Some were cordial to her and went over to welcome her. Some were sort of distant, but nobody was hostile or anything.

Risley: What did you learn from your experience in Norfolk.

Roberts: Well, on the school crisis, that the Federal law was clear, and that ultimately the Federal courts were going to prevail. Virginia was largely under the influence of two people. James Jackson Kilpatrick, "Kilpo" he was called in Virginia, who later became a columnist and became the chief apostle of massive resistance, of litigate, delay, sue, do everything you can to stall this. And Harry Bird, who was the senator and the political boss of Virginia, and one of the last great American political bosses in the sense that he had political lieutenants around the state, and they made photo registration difficult for anyone who wasn't a native white Virginian. The laws were designed to keep Virginians who had moved in from out of the state, to make it almost as difficult for them to vote as Blacks to vote. Because either the Bird organization thought whether you were an out-of-state or an in-state Black, you weren't likely to follow the Bird party line, and they were in business to control the vote.

Risley: Did working at that newspaper give you confidence that you could work at a metropolitan newspaper and be successful?

Roberts: Well, yeah. The Goldsboro paper had been competitive. Mr. Bell, he would have the morning newspaper read to him — his wife read it to him -- a she had been a journalist. She would tell him the size of type on the headline and where it was located on the story. And Mr. Bell would come in the morning and yell out, sort of such things from his cubicle as, "On page seventeen, three-quarters of a way down column four, there was a three-paragraph story about Goldsboro under an eighteen-point headline, and why didn't we have the story?" So, I became a competitive-type reporter. I inherited [the African Queen story] when I took over the maritime beat. The ship's wreck was still on the sand shoal embedded, with the deck slightly above water. The bow section had floated away. But more than 400 feet of the ship was still there, included the engine. And at some point, two mechanics from a little town Holland, Virginia — they were elevator mechanics — had the idea that they could fabricate patches to cover the holes in the ship. They went out — they hooked rides with fishermen — they stayed. Told the fishermen they were interested in adventure, and we're going to sleep on the ship. And when the fishermen came back the next day, the two elevator mechanics had had shotguns in their bedrolls, and they were sitting up on the ship. And when the fishermen came back the next day to salvage the — by this point, they were taking

commodes out of the bathroom and anything that had any kind of sales value. And the two mechanics pointed their guns and said, "About the laws of the sea, we have taken possession of the ship. And stay off our ship." And technically, they were right, under maritime law. And the *Washington Post* and the Baltimore papers went out, actually before I did, and wrote stories basically, sort of making it sound improbable that the ship could be raised. And sort of writing adventure stories about the ship.

I got convinced that they were probably going to be able to raise the ship since they had found the ship's blueprints. And they were prefabricating patches – one of them something like 20 x 40 feet – to cover a big hole. The bow section, when it broke off from the ship, the way the storm had carried it back into the ship, and it punched a big hole into the engine. And by the time I got out there, they had a patch that followed the curvature of the ship's hull, and they were putting up elevators in place. Rudimentary, sort of elevators, and they were going to attach cables to the patches and lower them by these elevators onto the ship. And I got convinced they could do it. And several months went by, and I had gotten to know the two mechanics and their wives. And when they came to shore, they would give me a call, and I would check with the families. And I guess I first went out in June or July or something. And the months rolled around – it got to be September or October. And they kept telling me they were close, so I postponed my vacation a couple of times.

But one night, one of the wives called and just yelled into the telephone, "The Queen is up!" And hung up. So, I called back after she had calmed down and checked with the local Coast Guard. By this time, I had been on the waterfront beat since probably February of that year. It had been a busy few months and I gotten to know the tug boat people and the Coast Guard people. I found out that the next day, a tugboat captain was going to go out to assess the ship and assign a tugboat to it. And we went up. But that night, the night city editor – the photographer and I were leaving immediately – and the night editor said, you know, that, "I am not going to let you go on that story because you're one of the – ." My shift on the waterfront beat started at about 11 o'clock in the morning, and I was still around when the night editor came in. And if he needed me for something, he could put me on overtime, which they never paid. But he could at least keep me around.

And they would give you compensatory time or something that you might or might not get. So, he said, you know, that I would go up and get drowned or something. And the paper was so cheap they wouldn't let him replace me. And he was an excellent newsman, but he thought he was too tightly staffed to let me go. And the photographer and I both thought it was a wonderful story, and so we went over to a beer joint across the street and kind of worked out a strategy. And we decided that if we packed our bags and came in the next morning and said, "We're off to cover the African Queen," that they would figure the night editor had assigned us. And so, when I came in, the two of us said, "Well, we're off!" And they said, "Well, keep us posted," and "Sounds like a good story." And we went up with the tugboat people who drove to see if one tug would handle it

or something. And when we got there that night and got up to Ocean City, and then by the time we got out to the boat, it was dark. You couldn't see much. But you could tell the boat was up. And it was an okay story, but it was hard to be too descriptive in the dark. And the night editor was mad that we had and sort of suspended me for not getting his permission to go up. But the next day, we went back out, and you could see everything. And you could see that while the boat was up, there were enough leaks in it that they had only two workable generators aboard to power the water pumps. And they were barely keeping it up. And the tugboat captain said it could be towed by one highly powered tug. But, there wasn't much margin for error. If there was a storm or anything, it could be difficult. And by this time, the Coast Guard they were out. And the Coast Guard commander turned out to be someone I had covered a few times and knew him fairly well – or reasonably well. And he said that he would have to declare the ship a navigational hazard. And I, by this time, had learned enough maritime law to know that if you were a navigational hazard, a ship was not supposed to come within a mile of it. And I said to the commander that it was my understanding that no ship could come within a mile of it. And I said, "How about?" And he said, "Yeah, that's right." And I said, "How about small boats carrying other reporters?" And I laughed, and he laughed. And he said, "Yeah, those too. We aren't going to let any ship come within a mile of this."

So, I'm sitting there with a story, and no other reporter could get to it, courtesy of the US Coast Guard, and it turned into a hell of a story. It took a week to get to Norfolk under tow. A tropical storm threatening to be a hurricane was coming up from Florida. And unless the storm veered away, if it got to Norfolk before the ship, it was likely that the ship would go down. And the tugboat captain, when he heard about the storm, changed from a towing cable to a towing rope and put an ax at the back of the tugboat so that if the African Queen started sinking, the tug wouldn't go down with it. And, of course, all of this was stretching out over six or seven days and just turned into just a good story, day after day. And publications like the *Saturday Evening Post* and the *Times* and *Time* magazine were flying over with light planes and photographing.

Risley: It was that big of a story?

Roberts: Yeah, because, you know, the guys who salvaged it thought they were going to be millionaires. It was sort of a rags to riches kind of story. And I would call in my story early in the evening, and I would file one story a day. And I was the only word the outside world was getting about what was going on the ship.

Risley: So, you had a real monopoly on the story?

Roberts: Yeah. And by the time we got – in the modern age, it's kind of rare to have a six-day exclusive story. And it was only when we got to Hampton Roads – the entryway into the Norfolk Harbor – that other tugs joined the tug. The hurricane veered out to sea a day or two before that. And other reporters came aboard. And the ship got into a dry dock like about two or three in the morning. And thousands of people stayed up to watch the ship come in. And when we rounded

Hampton Roads, hundreds of cars were out on the beach and turned on their headlights and stuff. And the town gave the guys a parade. And about that time, I had been in Norfolk about two years, and I got an offer from the Raleigh paper to cover the state capital beat. And I thought, well, I really liked the Norfolk paper. And in some ways, it had a bigger – not in some ways – it definitely had a bigger staff. And in many ways was probably a stronger paper overall than the Raleigh paper. It was pretty clear I wasn't going to get to cover state government. They had one reporter who had been doing that for years and would keep on doing it for many.

So, late in 1959, I went with the Raleigh paper. Meanwhile, I had sold a story to *True* magazine on the African Queen, and the *Saturday Evening Post* had gotten interested in it and doing a thing about it. And *Time* and *Newsweek* both did larger stories. Anyway, I quickly – or relatively quickly – wrote maybe a 5,000-word article and shipped it off to *True* magazine. And there was another man's magazine called *Swagger*, who called me and said they had read some of my stuff and wanted to do a story. I told them I had already sent it to *True*, and they said, "Well, we'll buy it for \$500." I was then making \$100 a week, so that seemed like a lot of money. So, I called *True* and asked them if they were going to run the story. And they said, "What are you trying to do? Hold us up for more money? We will pay you \$1,000 and not a penny more."

Risley: Wow.

Roberts: It turned out for this \$1,000. At the time, I was making about \$5,000 a year. When I went to Raleigh, we could put a down payment on a house and a down payment on the new car.

Risley: How about that.

Risley: What was your experience like in Raleigh covering state government?

Roberts: It was interesting. During the course of it, I got to cover a segregationist moderate gubernatorial race in North Carolina, when Terry Sanford was elected governor. I was covering the segregationist candidate. The *Raleigh Observer* was a liberal newspaper on the question of race and was attacking the segregationist candidate every day. It was basically hard to quarrel with my stories. I basically quoted what he had to say in speeches and quoted local politicians saying whether he was doing well or not well in the town. And so, basically, he would seize on my crowd estimates. If I said there were 200 people there, he would say the next night there were 400 people. And this was part of the *News Observer's* efforts to sabotage. And I would go in early and count the seats. And I made the mistake one night to sit in. It was a really hot night, and I had counted the seats in the courthouse courtroom and then went out to supper and came back. And it was in a town called Lumberton, North Carolina, which was one of the most segregated places in the South. They had local Indian groups living in Robeson County, and at one point – at *that* point actually – the movie theater had five segregated separate seating areas for Blacks, whites, and three different types of

Indian, depending on if they thought they were pure-blooded Indians to a degree. Many Indians at this point were full-blooded, and whether they were mixed with whites. That was one group of Indians. Or Blacks, that was another group. And the segregation candidate, actually by Alabama and Mississippi standards, was a pretty deliberative sort of segregationist, as he was a law professor at Wake Forest. And he wasn't as wild and woolly as Ross Barnett or George Wallace, but he was a very segregationist.

So, I came in late, was sitting in the window. And when he started saying that he had had 400 people the night before, and I had only said 200, and this was typical of the half-truths in the Raleigh paper. I don't think he deliberately intended to point me out, but he just saw me over in the windowsill and pointed in that direction. And as the rally was getting over, a man who introduced himself as the local editor of the paper said, "Come with me." And I thought he meant there was a press conference or something. So, I started walking with him out of the auditorium or the courtroom, and we got out on the courthouse steps, and he said, "Speed it up." And he started jogging, and then he said, "Faster," and broke into a real run. And I am not sure exactly what's going on or even for sure who this guy is. But he's running, so I start running. And we run and go to the newspaper, which it has a storefront on a business street in town. And he gets out his key, opens the door, and then pulls me into the door into the office. Locks the door, bolts the door. And then we got on our hands and knees in front of the Venetian blinds in front of the building. He peers out, so I peer out. And about four or five guys come running up saying, "Where did that reporter go?" And carrying chains and tire irons.

Risley: He protected you from the mob.

Roberts: I am sitting in the dark phoning in my story, and he doesn't think it's wise to turn on the lights. After he thinks things have calmed down, and I've got my story filed, he called the local police, and they give me a police escort to the next town over, which happened to be Fayetteville.

Risley: Do you remember when did that incident in Lumberton take place?

Roberts: The summer of 1960.

Risley: Where did you go from after you left Raleigh?

Roberts: Well, I got the Nieman Fellowship, then I came back. And actually, it didn't mean anything to me at the time, but it turned out that Frank Freidel, who was Roosevelt historian at Harvard — one of the top professors in history — had been in Raleigh doing research into the Josephus Daniels archives. Roosevelt had been assistant secretary of the Navy under Josephus. And [Freidel] was reading my election coverage and later turned out to be on the selection committee, who decided who would get a Nieman fellowship. I had applied and got one at an early age for Nieman's. I was 29.

Risley: What did getting a Nieman mean to you?

Roberts: A lot. It gave me distance on the South at a critical time in my life.

Risley: You had never lived outside the South?

Roberts: No. I was stationed in Baltimore for a while. And in the summers – in college – I was a door-to-door salesman – Bibles, cookbooks, and other things. One summer I worked in Ohio, one summer I worked in Pennsylvania. But generally speaking, I had not really lived any sustained period outside of the South. And so, the Nieman Fellowship gave me an interesting perspective on the South. I took a lot of history [classes]. You were free to go to any classes you wanted to go to. I took some social psychology courses and a lot of history, and some other things, but my attention got caught in one of social psychology courses. I mentioned I had covered a segregationist during the Terry Sanford elections and the teaching assistant in the course asked me if the counties that went for Lake – the segregationist candidate – fell into any kind of pattern. And I said, “Yeah, actually, they did.” With one or two exceptions, they were grouped together, the counties that went to the segregationist. And the teaching assistant said, “I think I can tell you what those counties are.” And we, by feeding two bits of data into the computer, and one would be the soil content, and the other would be whether there has been any significant demographic change in the twentieth century, whether a city had sprung up in any of these counties or something. And the logic was that if the counties had rich black soil, this would have been where slavery would be most firmly embedded. And unless some city had sprung up in these black belt counties, you would have had majority Black population with a mind-hearty white population still practicing white supremacy and keeping Blacks from voting and being more segregationist would normally be the case in North Carolina. And it worked.

Risley: What did you do after the Nieman?

Roberts: Then I came back to Raleigh. After about a month or two, they made me Sunday editor, which basically meant I put out the Sunday feature sections, sort of a news-in-the-week and review section. Books, record reviews, all that kind of various components of the Sunday newspaper other than hard news.

Risley: How did you like editing?

Roberts: Well, I found it interesting, and I thought I learned a lot, but I wanted to get back to reporting. I had a fellow Nieman named David Crasslow who was working in the Washington bureau of Knight Newspapers, and he recommended me to the *Detroit Free Press*. They offered me the labor beat, so I went to work with them in the summer of 1963. It was kind of awkward because the Daniels family owned the Raleigh paper and Jonathon Josephus Daniels, one of his sons, was the editor of the paper. Another son, Frank Daniels, ran the business part of the paper. And the third son in Raleigh, Josephus Jr., sort of ran the support staffs and building security and things like that. And they built the newspaper with three floors, and

each of the brothers had a floor. And none of the brothers were to go on the others' floor without the permission of the appropriate brother. And only one of the Daniels brothers did not go into the newspaper. He was a doctor in Washington, and he had a son, Derrick, who went into newspapers. And Derrick had the title assistant managing editor and up at the *Detroit Free Press*, but he actually ran the newsroom. So was kind of jumpy about how his this would be received by his uncles. But anyway, they made me an offer, and I took it. Jonathan made me the wrong counteroffer. I think I would probably have gone to Detroit anyway, but I definitely wanted to get back to reporting. And he offered to put me on the editorial board, which I was not interested in. To this day, I've never written an editorial in my life and never had any desire or intention of doing this, although in Philadelphia, I was over the editorial board. I delegated it. I never went to editorial meetings.

Risley: What was your experience like at the *Free Press*?

Roberts: They offered me the labor beat. I knew nothing about labor, although I had been nominally in the guild at the Norfolk paper. So, I went to a secondhand bookstore in Raleigh and found a high school economics book telling me what things like yellow dog contracts and labor terminology that I didn't know anything about. I went to Detroit at a perfect time to covering labor. Walter Ruther was running both for UAW and had been running the CIO up until the merger with the AFL-CIO. And [Jimmy] Hoffa made his headquarters in Detroit, and so it was sort of the nerve center of unionism. I was happily covering labor and had just gotten back from a UA – United Autoworkers – convention in Atlantic City. Ruther would only have conventions in the off-season, not during the summertime. And he resented the AFL-CIO had board meetings in Miami in the wintertime. It kind of drove him crazy. So, he would wait the cold weather to hold his meetings. I had covered, I guess, a weeklong meeting and had just gotten back in Detroit.

I was sleeping late when a telephone repairman banged on our door in Detroit and asked what was the latest on the president being assassinated. Almost immediately after, I got a call from the paper putting me on alert. Then they decided that the story was shifting to Washington. And then, by Sunday, when Ruby shot Oswald, then they sent me out to Dallas to cover the story. And by this point, there were, you know, hundreds of reporters out there by the time I got there. And Derrick and I talked back over the phone and decided what I should really be doing is doing a reconstruction of exactly what happened step-by-step. And it was, turned out to be one of the early reconstruction pieces in modern journalism.

Risley: How did you report that story? How did you how did you reconstruct the story?

Roberts: Well, today, I mean, you know, as reconstructed journalism evolved, you put several reporters on it. But then it was only me.

Risley: How did you do it?

Roberts: What was happening was reporters were scrambling all over town trying to find anyone who had ever met Lee Harvey Oswald or had anything with Marina Oswald, his wife. And I almost by accident discovered some interesting reporting principles in these kind of events, that word gets out that, that says Marina Oswald lived with Ruth Paine, and so everybody is trying to get to Ruth Paine. And suddenly, a hundred reporters show up on Ruth Paine's front yard trampling the daises and destroying her lawn, and then she comes out and is interviewed with a whole bunch of reporters trying to ask different questions. There are no intelligent follow-up questions. And she has her fifteen, or in her case, thirty minutes of fame. And then everybody disappears and goes over and tramples the next witness's daises. And I decided this was too hectic, and the thing to do was to go behind the news mob rather than to become part of it. I also had decided that while they were going to give me a week or two to do this story, that there were time pressures that I couldn't afford to get lost looking for some out-of-the-way address or something.

So basically, not being totally sure the paper was going to pay for it, I just signed up a cab driver for the duration and started going to witnesses systematically a day after the news mob. I found an interesting thing, that the people who had been the center of attention the day before, a day later, were feeling neglected. They had also thought of ten or twenty different things they *should* have said. But they were kind of answering reporters' questions rather than saying what they really knew or remembered. I found that people were sort of inviting me in, serving me cokes and coffee, and willing to take as much time as I needed. And very interesting stuff. Ruth Paine, for example, had neglected to say to the news mob that she had brought Lee Harvey Oswald's rifle back to Dallas. She had, when Lee Harvey and Marina separated, Lee Harvey ultimately moved to Dallas, and she stayed in New Orleans, and then Ruth Paine went down to get Oswald's wife. And at the last minute noticed there was something wrapped in a blanket that turned out to be Lee Harvey Oswald's rifle. And thinking that it might be worth something that they could get a few bucks off of, they threw it into the car. So interestingly, Lee Harvey Oswald didn't know until the night before the shooting that the rifle he used to shoot was in Dallas. And he hitched a ride out with a kid named Wesley Frazier, who was a country boy. He moved to Dallas and worked at the textbook depository, and living with his sister, who lived less than a block from Ruth Paine and Marina Oswald. And he was about as straight an arrow as you can imagine, complete with a Future Farmers of America jacket. His sister saw Lee Harvey Oswald arriving for the ride going into the book depository the next morning just a few hours before the shooting and noticed that he was carrying a long package and that it was somewhat heavy because he was sort of walking with a tilt.

But all of these details didn't emerge in these mass mob scenes with the reporters. Also, at night I would go into the *Dallas Morning* newsroom and use their morgue and their back papers. And interestingly, they had come up with a lot of stuff, but they did it in little snippets and didn't connect it. They just said Mrs. Jones said so and so, and they'd made a separate little story about it. And I



sort of started doing timeline journalism, not even knowing at that point, never having heard the terminology before. But basically deciding on a reconstruction, unless I wanted to be overwhelmed at the end, that I needed to be kind of writing chunks of it each day. And I discovered if I felt confident that I knew precisely what Oswald was doing between the hours of 7 and 8:30 on the day of the shooting. You know that he was leaving Marina Oswald or Ruth Paine's house with the rifle, showing up at Wesley Frazier's with a rifle, and I could account for that. I could go ahead and write that.

Risley: How long did it take for you to do the story?

Roberts: I think about two weeks. It ended up being a mini-Warren Report several months before the Warren report. About it ended up, amazingly, being seven pages in the *Detroit Free Press*.

Risley: A lot of space back in that time.

Roberts: Yeah. And Derrick was of the few editors who would consider something like that. And we were — the *Free Press* — was the number two paper, and we didn't have either the staff or the newsroom that the *Detroit News* had. The way we competed and closed the gap was on big stories, sort of outthinking them or moving faster. It was sort of built into the DNA of the paper, particularly with Derrick. He was an interesting guy. He was almost bored by day-by-day news, but if a big story was happening, he was right in the middle. He threw away the rule book. He did everything. And if the story was big enough, particularly locally, he would just empty the newsroom on the story.

Risley: Is it fair to say he was another mentor of yours?

Roberts: Oh, yeah. And I was lucky. Virtually all of my editors were good editors. When I got to Norfolk the paper still looked pretty much like it looked at the time of the first flight and also during the Civil War. It still ran nine-line depths, and it was very seldom that the lead story would be any more than one column. Bob Mason, who became editor shortly after I got there, he had been with the Sanford, North Carolina paper. He had worked in Norfolk, gone back to Sanford where he owned a piece or was able to buy a piece of the paper. And while he was in Sanford, the *Charlotte Observer* radically changed its makeup and went from looking antediluvian to looking very modern. And they lost 10,000 in circulation overnight because people woke up one day and had a different newspaper on their front steps. And Mason in Norfolk, when he came back to the paper and was named the editor for like a month, he wasn't taking charge of the paper. He simply went to work on the copy desk and spent a month on the copy desks. And then, after that, he went over on the news staff, and at the end of news cycle, he would take the news staff out into the composing room, and they would shift all the type around for that day's paper and working with the actual lead, would rejigger the paper — put in more white space, put in more horizontal headlines, and things. And after about two months as editor, he called the newsroom together and passed out copies of a totally new paper that they had done a

prototype and actually ran off a few copies on the press. And it was just a radical reshaping of the paper. And Mason said this is the way the *Virginian Pilot* is going to look one year from today. And working from this prototype, he instituted a gradual change of the paper. And basically, the first week, all they did was drop one line from these nine-line depths on the lead story and put two points of white space between points of lead between the pages. And after about six months, it was really a stunningly different paper, but nobody had noticed it.

Risley: How about that?

Roberts: And one day, while I was covering the city hall and talking to the mayor and the city manager, who it was their business to read the paper every day, I said, "How do you like the new paper?" And they said, "What new paper?" And I said, "The *Virginia Pilot* has changed drastically." And they said, "No, it hasn't!" And they kept all the back issues in the office, and I said told the city manager, "Ask your secretary to get you a pile from six months ago from your files, and we'll compare it with today's paper." And both the mayor and the city manager said, "Oh my God!" once the two papers were side by side. And this would turn into a valuable lesson in Philadelphia about how you institute change and how dangerous it is to throw a totally different appearance at people.

Risley: I want to come back to that.

Roberts: Okay.

Risley: I guess the Kennedy story was certainly one of the biggest, most important stories you ever covered.

Roberts: They sent me back to cover the Ruby trial. Well, even before the Ruby trial, after I did this long story, they cut me loose to sort of check out angles in New Orleans where he had been and things. And I went out early to the Ruby trial, and I had gotten the impression that meanwhile the FBI and the Warren Commission were sitting on all the evidence in the case. And there were rumors that there were pictures of Oswald holding a rifle, but nobody had seen it, or no journalists had seen it. And there were also various aliases he had used and apparently different identity cards. I sort of figured out that they would have to give a lot of this stuff to the prosecution during the Ruby trial, or I thought it was a safe operating assumption that they would. I started cultivating an assistant district attorney. He finally agreed that I and a local reporter could check all the photographs and the photostats of the wallet cards and everything with his different aliases. He would let us have them from 8 o'clock on Saturday night to 8 o'clock on Sunday morning. And I had to find a photographer who could photograph all this all night long. And meanwhile, I called Derrick, and I told him I had this exclusively except for one local reporter who also had it.

And Derrick wanted, of course, all of it exclusively without local reporting. So basically – and the reporter was somewhat disaffected from the paper – I arranged for the two to talk to each other over the telephone. And Derrick told

the reporter, if the reporter would only use one picture and let everything else to us, that Derrick would sell good pictures abroad for big bucks and give the reporter the money. And meanwhile, I was staying up all night for this photographer, you know, photocopying everything. And early Saturday night, I wasn't thinking straight. I was having two copies made of everything, so I could put them on two different planes to deploy. We were angling for the bulldog edition. Meanwhile, I picked up that the defense had also gotten some of the pictures – not as many as the prosecution. And *Life* magazine had made a deal with Marina Oswald and Oswald's mother to pay them – can't remember anymore, \$10,000 or whatever, for the picture of Oswald holding the rifle. And Derrick knew that *Life* magazine came out on Monday morning. And the Monday bulldog of the *Free Press* came out at 7 o'clock on Sunday night. So, if we got the papers, and the *Dallas Morning News* didn't come out until around midnight with their first edition, so if we made the Sunday night bulldog, we basically had scooped the world on all of it. And *Life* magazine and the Dallas paper only had one picture.

But anyway, the next morning, I wasn't thinking as clearly, and somehow Delta wrapped these pictures on the same flight; or we thought they were going on two separate flights, but in fact, they ended up on the same flight. The flight had grounded in New Orleans enroute to Detroit, and Derrick was leaping up and down in Detroit and calling the president of Delta Airlines, calling the supervisor at the Detroit Airport. And finally, about 3 in the afternoon or something, the plane took off from New Orleans hours late. And it was like two and a half hours to Detroit, which would be right up against the last moment of the deadline. Derrick arranged for the airplane to stop on the runway, back in the days when you could do that. He arranged for motorcycle couriers to be at the runway, and the pilot had, through Derrick's suggestion, they had taken the photographs out of the freight container, and the pilots had it. And they opened the door and threw them out to the motorcycle driver, who came down the white line of the freeway in Detroit. And Derrick, meanwhile, was this very flamboyant guy who was always waving his arms and stuff. So, Derrick had everyone lined up in the newsroom, and he called me in Dallas and asked me to estimate the size of each picture. And so, they laid out page 1 and the inside pages with holes for the pictures as I described them. And those were the days of airbrushing, when you know, reproductive ability of photographs and papers got much better over the years, but in the early '60s, it was still. And they airbrush with liquid chalk. Derrick had the air brushers and the photo people all lined up to just process this, go bang bang, and get them in the paper. And in all the haste, the air brusher on the main photograph of Oswald holding the rifle airbrushed off the telescopic sight. And then the next day, *Life* magazine came out with the front page with the telescopic sight on it and none on the *Free Press*, and every armchair detective in the world said, "Ah-ha! Something is amiss." But all you had to do was go to the morgue in the *Free Press*, and you could scratch off the liquid chalk with your fingernail and the telescopic sight.

Risley: So, what else happened in Detroit?

Roberts: Well, a few months after that, Derrick talked me into becoming metro editor of the paper. On one hand, I thought it would be good experience; on the other hand, I wasn't ready to leave reporting. I had been very reluctant to leave the South, and if I had thought there was any way to cover the civil rights story on a regular basis on the South, I wouldn't have left. But even the best papers in the South basically didn't go out of their state to cover stories. And later, the Atlanta papers even had a policy instituted by the publisher that they were not to go out of the state on the civil rights story. Anyway, I became metro editor, but almost at the moment I became metro editor, the papers went out on strike. I became the only kind of link between the paper and the staff that was out on strike. We found many of them jobs on other night newspapers on a temporary basis. But I was the one who was supposed to talk to people about staying with the paper and what they would like to do when the paper came back into print.

Risley: What year was this?

Roberts: This was 1965. I'm sorry, this would have been late 1964, probably the summer and fall of 1964. And basically, I was every lunch and a lot of dinners and things. I was taking people to lunch and listening to them in a way you don't normally get to in the hubbub of putting out a paper. And learning gradually how important it is to give people time to talk. And I was discovering that in a couple of hours with reporters, they would tell me whether they were happy doing what they were doing — most of them were not — and what they would really like to be doing. And when the paper got back in business, by taking all this time listening to people, I was able to shuffle the whole staff virtually and make most of them happy in doing it because I had found out, you know, a list of options a bunch of things that most of the staff members would like to do. While the strike was going on, it turned out that Harrison Salisbury had read my reconstruction of the Kennedy assassination, and he had become national editor. It was something called national news director. And he was emceeding some radio and television series on the Kennedy assassination and invited me to New York to participate, which I later learned was a way to look me over.

And then, just as the paper, or the paper hadn't actually quite gone back to publication yet, he offered me my dream job at the *Times*. Because he was moving up to assistant managing editor and the southern correspondent, who had my dream job, was taking his place as national editor. And there was no way I could leave the city editing job with the strike going on and being the one person who was making deals with the reporters on what they were going to be doing when we got back. So, I had to turn the *Times* down and explain why and that I would love to be at the *Times*. And Salisbury said he would arrange to have me hired when it was convenient, but he doubted that the southern job would be open. And seven or eight months later, they came at me again with the same job, and this time I took it.

Risley: And what year was that?

Roberts: That would have been about June of 1965.

Risley: So you left Detroit and moved to Atlanta?

Roberts: Yeah, I moved to Atlanta. I was supposed to have about a month's orientation in New York, but it didn't quite work out that way. Things got too busy in the South.

Risley: Right.

Roberts: And Lee Hills, who was the publisher of the *Free Press* and also had the title editor, offered to open a southern bureau and put me in it, or send me to the Washington bureau, or whatever. And said that he didn't mind letting me get reporting out of my system, but at some point in time, he wanted to get me back into editing. He suggested I could run one of their papers as an editor. But I was kind of anxious to get with the *Times*.

Risley: What stories did you cover initially with the *Times*?

Roberts: Technically, I was supposed to be working and spend a couple weeks on the metro desk and supposed to spend a couple weeks on the national desk. And then, after about a week, some story happened in northern Virginia that sounded like good racial story, and they sent me up to the mountains of Virginia. And it didn't seem to be a racial revolt in northern Virginia, or I guess western Virginia didn't turn out that way. And so, something was going on in Jackson, Mississippi. And the night national editor called me in Virginia and said to hop over to Jackson, Mississippi. Well, from New York, you could get to Jackson, Mississippi on a direct flight in about three hours. From the mountains of Virginia, you had to drive to Charlottesville, which took three or four hours, then hop to take a flight to Richmond and then go from Richmond to Atlanta and from Atlanta to Jackson. And it took like a day, maybe a day and a half. Once I was in Jackson, I didn't have to go back to New York. The Voting Rights Act was implemented a few months after I got with the *Times* and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which in theory, was supposed to go into effect immediately, just gradually. It went in effect immediately if you were a national corporation, and you know, places like McDonald's were desegregated in the big cities, but small towns for the next two or three years were still segregated in the South. And I covered George Wallace and Martin Luther King.

Risley: What were some of the most memorable stories you did?

Roberts: In the South?

Risley: Yes, in the South.

Roberts: I got along with several other reports, and both of us in Louisiana, which was one of the meanest towns in the South; it was a lumber paper mill town. And the civil rights people who were trying to carry on a voter registration campaign with marches. White toughs in town would just run into the lines clubbing

Blacks and everything. And between the state police and the local police, there were probably more than a hundred cops. The men the whites would attack – the civil rights demonstrators – would start looking up in the air as the birds were flying over, and they didn't see a thing. And blood would be flying all over, and passions were running high. And although there were no civil rights marches or demonstrations scheduled for the weekend, me and the other reporters in town decided it was too tense to leave town. And we were all hanging around a scruffy motel one Saturday afternoon when a guy in Klan robes came and knocked on our door and handed out business cards identifying himself as the Grand Klackson of the Southern Louisiana branch of the United Klans of America. And Klackson, it turned out, is Klan speak for public relations person.

He invited us to cover a rally across the Coral River and the Mississippi that night. He said the Klan was tired of the Blacks getting all the publicity – although he didn't say Black – and it was time the white folks got some. And so, he wanted to extend us this invitation. So, we had a debate among ourselves – among the reporters – whether this was the wisest thing to do or not. Jack Nelson was hired to cover the civil rights out of Atlanta for the *Los Angeles Times*. So here we were, close friends and suddenly competitors over a civil rights story. But on the Klan rally, there were several other reporters who thought it would be a good story, and Jack and I didn't think this was one of the smartest decisions we had ever made. We decided we would go along. And we got to this rally, and it turns out that the only semblance of order are the Klansmen and their robes. There are all these screaming men, women, and children from the Bogalusa area who were all steamed up and angry about the racial demonstrations. And the Klansmen introduced us or said, "We got reporters here tonight, and we are inviting them to sit down in front."

They turned a flatbed truck into sort of a speaker's podium and had a flaming cross in back of it. And then they started off their talks with racial jokes, and basically, I had heard them, and took a few notes, and then stopped writing. And then some screaming woman starts kicking me in the back, saying, "Look at this son of a bitch. He ain't taking it all down!" And then the crowd just goes crazy. Jack, I don't know if you knew him. He died last year. Jack was a great investigative reporter, and when he was questioning people, it was like he was totally in charge; he knew exactly what he was doing. Jack said, "We got to get out of here. This could be bad." And we decide we are going to go out in back of the speaker's stand and go diagonally across a pasture to our cars. And then we see a group of the toughest, meanest civil rights beater-upers in Bogalusa coming to cut us off. So, we got back in the crowd, and Jack gets up on a stump or a steel drum or something, and he starts looking out for the damn Klansman who had invited us.

Meanwhile, Jack spots this guy – the Klackson. And we go over, and Jack says, "You invited us here tonight because you wanted good publicity, right?" And the Klansman said, "Yes." And Jack said, "Well, you are about to get some bad." And the Klackson says, "What do you mean?" And Jack says, "Well, they are about to kick our asses, and if they do, you ain't going to want to read the *LA*

*Times* tomorrow morning!" And the guy said, "Well, no problem, Mr. Nelson." And he pulled out a walkie-talkie, and he said, "Klackson One to Kleggle Two, send me a couple of armed men." And Jack said, "Two won't do it!" And the Klackson says, "Change that. Correction. Send flying wedge." And in about three or four minutes, like a dozen Klansmen in V formation come and put us in the middle of the group and just drives us through the screaming crowd with their pistols out and all that.

Risley: A flying wedge, huh. Wow. What a great story. Speaking of stories, I heard you talk about the time when you were covering a rally in a Black church in Georgia and what that experience was like.

Roberts: I think that actually was in North Carolina. When I was covering state government and politics, and after the sit-ins started in Greensboro, they spread within three or four days to Durham and Raleigh. And Martin Luther King, of course, thought this was a great development. He had been trying to get some kind of passive resistance started and while seemingly spontaneously happening in Greensboro, Durham, and Raleigh. And they flew in to speak to a student rally at the White Rock Baptist Church in Durham. The paper didn't really have a civil rights reporter, so I volunteered to go over and cover the rally, expecting mainly to see lots of students. And when I got to the church, there indeed were lots of students. But they were outside the church, and it turned out that the older members of the church had come one, two, three hours early to make sure they got seats. The students couldn't get in the church; neither could reporters. I mean, I was the only one I saw. There may have been others.

I found a deacon, and this would have been in February of 1960. But it was an unseasonably warm night, and the windows were partially open. And the church deacon arranged to boost me on his shoulders into a window. And so, I sat there in the window covering the rally. Martin Luther King with his normal spell-binding self. After he had made his speech, Ralph Abernathy who was traveling with him, then asked for donations. And from where I sat, you could see that while there were some people who looked like school teachers and maybe college professors, the great bulk of the audience were Black women who were probably maids and laundresses. And money was so scarce to them. One of the customs gladly practiced by Black maids and laundresses were to tie their loose change up in a handkerchief and knot it so you wouldn't lose a dime or a nickel. And when Abernathy asked for contributions, you could see all of these Black hands reach down beside them and pull out all these pocketbooks, all at virtually the same time. And all these hands reaching in and unraveling their handkerchiefs at the same time and put coins in the plate. Up until then, you know, white politicians basically, the theme was a few Black radicals were doing all this, and at most, Blacks did not want to rock the boat and did not want change. And yet, here you were in this church where every cook and maid was reaching in her pocketbook. That night convinced me or the first time that we were going to see massive change. And up until then, I had thought it was going to be mainly token. That it would be like Norfolk or Raleigh or Charlotte; you have a dozen Black students among thousands of white students.

Risley: That's a good place to stop for a break.

Risley: Okay, we are resuming the interview. Gene, would you talk about your experiences in Vietnam with the *Times*.

Roberts: Yeah, I arrived in Vietnam in early January, and I guess the rationale on the *Times* part was covering civil rights in the South had prepared me for war. When I first got to Vietnam, it actually seemed calmer than the South had been. But this was primarily due to the fact that the Viet Cong, it later turned out, was stockpiling weapons and ammunition for the Tet Offensive. And when the Tet Offensive, of course, started, it was a whole new ball game. And another couple of reporters and I had gone to a prominent upscale Vietnamese nightclub on the eve of Tet to see the South Vietnamese generals drinking \$10 a shot Cognac and things. And walking out of the night club we ran into people that said there had been some kind of big attack in Da Nang. I immediately went to the airport and to fly to Da Nang. And as the plane was in the sky – it'd just gotten off good from the runway – I looked down, and Saigon was going up in flames. But we had reporters there who could cover it.

Ultimately, I went from Da Nang to Hue and was the first reporter in Hue. Hue was the longest sustained battle of the entire war, with the exception of Khe Sanh, which I also covered some. But that was more of an American installation undergoing constant mortar fire. It was not the same as Hue. And the unit I went in with by helicopter, once I figured out the Americans were surrounded in Hue, and I couldn't get a phone line, I went out on a medical evacuation chopper. When I came back a couple of days later, only about three-quarters of the company I had gone in with were still in action. They had like 75 percent casualties. And the Viet Cong had moved into these old brick French colonial houses, of which there were many, many, and using AK47s. These houses, some with four-foot brick walls, were perfect machine gunner nests. And the Marines would clear out a block during the day, and the Viet Cong would move back in at night. And the Marines would have to do it all over again.

Risley: What stands out for you in terms of the reporting and work you did in Vietnam?

Roberts: Well, the offensive went on for quite a while, and the Battle of Hue went on. And then there was, in June of that year, what was called Mini Tet, another effort to take over cities. And Saigon, the fighting went on and Mini Tet for three or four weeks, which is long time in guerilla warfare, which is more hit and run. It was a kind of strange battle to cover. One of the battles took place at something called the Y Bridge in Saigon because it was shaped like a Y. I would get up in the morning and hail a taxi, which were basically these little roads, and the taxi driver would take me within about a block of the battle. And then I would get on my, basically, my stomach, crawl to the battle scene.

Risley: And reporters in Vietnam had access to go pretty much wherever they wanted.



Roberts: Yeah, you had military passes that would allow you virtually on any military vehicle. The problem was you had to find someone going in your direction. And going to battle, you went in a medical evacuation helicopters and often came out with medical evacuation helicopters.

Risley: You were the Saigon bureau chief for a time?

Roberts: Right.

Risley: What did you try to do as the bureau chief? What did you try to do in terms of administering the reporting?

Roberts: You know, basically, these were pretty seasoned reporters. The main thing was to make sure none of us ended up on the same story, that we pursue different things on a different days, except in a few instances, which you had to kind of gang up on a story.

Risley: And how many reporters did the *Times* have?

Roberts: Well, we started out with three, plus me. And then, when the Tet Offensive had hit, they sent me a couple more. But normally, it'd range between three and six people, plus the bureau chief.

Risley: And so, from Vietnam, how did you wind up back in New York?

Roberts: I got a letter in Vietnam. I had been on the national staff. I thought the national staff was vastly understaffed. We had about eight or nine people. And I was only interested if I could double the size of the staff. And I got a telex from him saying, "Fly back and let's talk about this." And essentially, they offered me, well, they had problems with doubling the size of the staff. I said I would take transfers from the metro desk; they didn't all have to be new hires. But I just didn't want—I liked being a reporter—and I didn't want to go back to doing something in which I thought no matter how hard I worked, I just wouldn't have the horses to do that job. And this went back and forth.

I was convinced they weren't going to do it, so I went to see my family in North Carolina enroute to going back. And then I got a phone call saying, "Come back." And they basically said, "The job is yours." And then I said, "How about the people?" And they said, "Well, we'll give you one or two, and if that works out, we'll consider more." I said, "This wasn't the deal." I felt I had been jerked around. I have a standing offer from the *Los Angeles Times*, and my flight back to Saigon had a stopover in Seattle. And I called the *LA Times*, prepared to accept the job on the spot. And out on the West Coast, this was the dinner hour, and all the editors were out for dinner. So instead, I called Harrison Salisbury, and Salisbury said, "Take the job. You wanted eight or nine reports?" And I said, "Yeah." And he said, "Well, decide you aren't going to settle for less than ten. Take two at the time, and I'll back you up." So, I reluctantly accepted the job.

And I got the ten reporters. It took me about a year of wheeling and dealing. We doubled the size, more than doubled the size of staff.

Risley: And where did you put those reporters?

Roberts: All across the country and, in some cases, Los Angeles and San Francisco, we really needed two reporters. We opened a Denver bureau. We opened a Kansas City bureau. A New Orleans bureau, Dallas, and Houston. We were already in Boston and Philadelphia and Chicago. I think I went from one to two in Chicago.

Risley: What do you feel like were your biggest accomplishments as national editor?

Roberts: I emphasized good writing. Today, the *New York Times* is a very well-written paper. But back then, good writing was not the premium. I also built trend reporting into – or, if a number of states were doing something or a number of changes were being made across the land and universities, these were the types of stories I thought we should be doing, in addition to responding to breaking news. And things changed pretty radically over I guess I would say, four years.

Risley: Was the *Times* a newspaper that was slow to change?

Roberts: The news staff from the *Times*, which the newsroom called the bullpen, was really the people who made the rules for the *Times* and decided what the daily report was going to be. And basically, the *Times* national staff – our national report – was about eighteen columns a day. And the bullpen decided broadly how those eighteen columns were going to be spent. About 40 percent had to be stories from two paragraphs to six paragraphs. And they had a name for the – an M head meant one thing; it meant the size of the story. An X head another thing. And you had to have so many M's, so many D's, so many X's. All of that is gone today on the *Times*. And the bullpen didn't like to have any story in the weekly paper – as opposed to the Sunday paper – that didn't have "Today" in the lead. And I was trying to convince the staff to sort of tell us what was really going on in the country in a readable way. I adapted a foreign desk feature, which years ago used to be run once a week and it was called like, "The Talk of Paris," [or] "The Talk of Jakarta." And I kept assigning people to do it, but they were such creatures of habit that I wouldn't get what you might call a mood piece out of the city or something that was going on unique. I remember sending someone to Casper, Wyoming during the round-up thinking, how could you miss on that? And I got back a story that told me how many churches there were in Casper, Wyoming and what the population was and what the square mileage was of the town.

One day a very much hard news reporter in Detroit, Jerry Flint – who I thought of as a hard news reporter – I was talking to him on the phone about an auto story and he was saying, "Boy, you remember your neighborhood and how it was a racially mixed neighborhood, and everyone got working together and so forth." And I said, "Yeah." And he said, "Well all the whites are now in suburbia. There's not a soul left." And this would have been maybe two years after the

riots. And then he said, "Remember the Belle Isle Zoo." And I said, "Yeah." And he said, "Remember they used to have an elephant in the zoo?" And he said, "Things are so bad in Detroit they couldn't afford to feed the elephant. So, they decided to give him to a suburb Royal Oak. And to move the elephant, they tranquilized the elephant, and the elephant never woke up."

And I said, "Wonderful. Write this just like you are talking to me. So, start with the elephant and just tell me basically how Detroit is going to hell in a hand basket." And he did. And this was the first story. And I stayed down until the first edition came up to 10:30 to make sure no gremlins were set into the story. The next morning, I went out in the hall to get my *Times* and reread what I thought was this wonderful breakthrough story. And it wasn't in the paper. And the bullpen had taken it out because it didn't have "Today" in the lead. So, I asked to have a lunch with the associate managing editor, Ted Bernstein, who was a wonderful newsman. But he had decided in his own mind exactly what the *Times* should be. His number two, who had the title of news editor, was Luke Jordan. I explained that if I had run the story and said, "The mayor of Detroit said today the city is going to hell in a hand basket," you would run the story. And the mayor said exactly that, but he said it in the fifth paragraph. And this was a much more readable story. Luke Jordan, the news editor, said, "Well you make a good point. Maybe we should think twice before we make decisions like that." Ted Bernstein said, "Luke, what he's really saying is he doesn't want us fucking around with the national report. Isn't that right?" I said, "Well you sort of got me. And yes." And Ted said, "Well I am not going to totally give you that promise, but I will say we'll give you more running room." But there were mindsets, you know, you had to kind of persuade or subvert or do whatever you had to do. But the writing in the national report became the very best on the paper, I thought, by the end, you know, after three or four years.

Risley: So how did you become hired as editor of the *Inquirer*?

Roberts: I was sort of in charge of the coverage of the two [political] conventions; both conventions were in Miami, which were Knight Ridder headquarters. And I was aware that Derrick Daniels, who had been my boss in Detroit, had become vice president of the news over all Knight Ridder papers. He wanted to get me back into an editorship. But the approach was made by Lee Hills, who at that point was president or CEO of the company; he had been the publisher in Detroit. So, he invited me out to lunch in Miami. He was a very methodical guy, and if he were passing through Atlanta or New York, he would invite me over for a drink or something. He was one of these rare people who took shorthand and kept his own notes. And so, the lunch started with him reaching into his pocket, pulling out a notebook, and saying something like, "On November 10 of 1969, you and I had a drink at the St. Regents Hotel, and I asked you what it would take to get you back with Knight Ridder." "You said if you ever left the *Times*, it would be to go to a paper with a lot of problems because you thought you would have more running room on a paper like that." I didn't recall saying that to him, but this was my philosophy. If you went to an extremely successful paper, that was making lots of money and was considered reasonably good, it would be very

difficult to institute change. And if you went to a paper that was not particularly making it financially and had lots of other problems, you were more likely to be given a free rein out of desperation than if nothing else. And I said, "Yes I remember saying that." And he said, "Well if you want a paper with lots of problems, I got just the paper." And he started talking about Philadelphia.

Risley: What were the problems with the *Inquirer*?

Roberts: At that point, I only knew what he told me. Later, my own perception of what the problems were, was that my predecessor John McMullen was actually a very good editor. And he had made a lot of the right moves and brought in some interesting people. But in the process, the newsroom had basically broken into two camps. One the Knight camp, the people that John McMullen had hired, and the so-called Annenberg camp, all that thought it was unfair to the people who were there previously. One advantage I had going in, was I didn't know which was which and didn't want to know. Some really good people were in both camps. But Annenberg had not paid much attention to the paper in years, and to some degree, he had used it as a vehicle to winning social status, ambassadorship, and things. It was a paper very much in transition. I mean it was definitely better than it had been when Knight had taken over. But it had not come together.

Risley: And it was behind the *Bulletin*?

Roberts: Way behind – not on Sunday. We were like 140,000 ahead on Sunday. But on daily, we were like 190,000 behind. And the *Bulletin* was expanding the lead daily and decreasing our lead on Sunday. And the trim lines weren't good, although they were better after two years of McMullen than they had been before.

Risley: What were the major changes that you thought had to be made at the *Inquirer*?

Roberts: Well, within a month after I got there, I made a decision that so much had to be done, that I was going to not worry about the next day's paper. That I was going to shape my role as change and worrying about the future of the paper. And basically, I decided it was going to take five years just to – and that didn't count what would have to be done with the features sections. This is mainly the news operations, the copy desk, the reporting staff, the sports staff, the business staff, photos. And you couldn't get by with that playing five years out. You couldn't get by with that today because nobody is quite sure that they are still going to be here five years. And it was risky even then. But I decided if I brought in Gene Foreman and some other people to run the day-by-day newspaper, I thought if I gave all my attention to the next day's newspaper, that we would have a better paper. That we would be polishing and honing. I wouldn't have given any single area of the paper an A. So, we would have been polishing and honing a B staff in some places, a C in other places, and probably a D- in photography. One of the advantages I had, was as I said last night, essentially, I quit editing twice to go back to reporting. And I quit reporting three times to become an editor. And

having once been an editor, I tended to, when I was a reporter look from a staff's viewpoint. But I would change, and it made being national editor of the *Times*, having worked on the staff, it was relatively easy for me because I was familiar with the people on the desk, the people on the staff, and I had my own notions of what should change and what shouldn't change. In Philadelphia, I didn't know the staff. But I could read the paper and judge the paper. But I didn't know which buttons to push. I discovered that after a couple of trials and errors, that if I just did things in the normal fashion – if the metro staff lost a reporter, they would be free to hire another reporter. And if the staff is a B staff, and you bring in a new person, most of the new people are going to figure out what their colleagues are doing, what is expected of them, and they are rightfully to make the transition to a new newspaper easier to conform with whatever the norm is.

So basically, we decided to take things department by department and worry about such things as tipping points. And there was a universal copy desk of twenty-eight people, that virtually all the copy in the paper except sports ran through it. Gene Foreman's assessment was of the staff, that if everyone quit, there were only like two or three that he would want to bring back. We broke down the copy desk into what ultimately became four separate desks: foreign, national, metro, business. And each of these basically were five people desks with a slot person, or sometimes six. So, we picked the best two copy editors off the universal desk, picked the very best slot person who was relatively new to the paper and gave three new hires to the slot person. And within six months, it was on a small scale, but it was pound for pound as good a copy desk had existed in the country. And then, when that desk was functioning well, we stole three people from that desk as the nucleus to another desk and added a good slot person. And gave both the number one desk and the number two desk hires to fill in.

I did the same on the news desk, the metro desk, and broke down the metro desk in a city operation and a suburban operation. An interesting thing happened. People would come in and see that the small group they were working with were really well motivated, were doing "A" work, and the new people just started off doing "A" work because that's what it took to conform. Some operations were in such bad shape – notably photography – that I had to wait about four years before I could move on photography. I just figured I was going to have to bring in a new photo editor and give him at least five hires before you could change the tone of the place so that more people were doing what you wanted them to do than were not doing what you wanted them to do.

Risley: One of the things the *Inquirer* was known for was the quality of the writing. Why was that important to you?

Roberts: Newspapers are all about communicating with readers and good writing is essential to good communication. And if you don't have good writing, you may end up with an interesting collection of facts, but you don't necessarily have a story. And my assessment of the *Bulletin* was that they were more AP than AP at the time. They would just cram every conceivable fact into the story. And as you

might read it six times and find some little fact you had overlooked, and it was not a good read. So, I thought they were vulnerable on that score. And I also thought they were vulnerable because of their general approach to news. And that their idea of the big package would be the lead story of the paper and one sidebar. And if the second coming of Christ had occurred, they would've given it one story and a sidebar. I decided that if the story was big enough, we would give it whatever it took. And the first big example of that was a Yom Kippur War, which didn't last all that long. But we decided that at least initially, we would have a page a day on the Yom Kippur War, and if a lot was going on, we would have two pages or three pages. And our sales increased about 10,000 a day during. I would say it averaged about 10,000, sometimes it would go more and sometimes it would be a little less. And after the war, we held onto about 5,000 of that.

And also, I was concerned because, in the process of change in the *Inquirer*, we had brought in a number of news editors or desk people from other newspapers. They did what you would expect them to do. We had a news editor from *Newsday*, and when he was in charge of the paper on weekends, and it would look somewhat like *Newsday*—it would be packaged like *Newsday*, although *Newsday* was a tab and we were a broadsheet. And we had a person from the *Charlotte Observer* and one from the *Akron Beacon Journal*. And on other days, it looked like those papers. So, we designed a simple look for the paper and implemented it—we didn't wait as long as a year—but we implemented it gradually over several months. And then, stuck with that look all the time I was the editor. I thought one of the advantages the *Bulletin* had, was while it was a kind of dusty personality, it had a personality. And with all the change at the *Inquirer*, you couldn't define what the *Inquirer's* personality was. So, it was important, I thought, to have a central look that everyone could agree on with enough flexibility that you could have some creativity.

Risley: Do you think the *Inquirer* ever developed a personality and if so, what was that personality?

Roberts: Yeah, it definitely had a personality. We had an in-depth story on page one virtually every day. To allow some creativity, the rule was that if you put a box around a story, then you could almost do anything you wanted to within the box. And the identifying characteristic would be the box and not necessarily the size of type. But outside the box, we were a six-column newspaper, and you couldn't go outside the box to be in a five-column newspaper, or to have a two-column lead in through a story. And so, having something in-depth every day, doing a lot of trend stories, wrap-up stories, situation stories. Another part of the *Bulletin's* personality of doing one story, the lead-off story, and a sidebar, was—and this was a page out of my *Free Press* experience—we got very good at jumping on a big story and pulling all the stops out.

Risley: I want to talk about that. That's one of the things that the *Inquirer* was known for, was exhaustively covering big events. How did that happen and what events stand out in your mind as being particularly good?

Roberts: Well, going back a minute to the idea of playing five years out. At the end of five years, we were a very good newspaper. Even more than the staff realized because they were in the middle of it. I guess Three Mile Island was in 1979, something like that. But we had been a good newspaper for a couple of years before – had been an excellent newspaper, I think, particularly in the news areas and we brought photography along. With Three Mile Island, we put more than 100 people on that story. When we won the Pulitzer for that, more than 100 people on the paper felt they were a part of this. And they also felt that nobody could have done a better job than they had done on the story. The interesting thing was when the Three Mile Island story started, I was at home with the flu. But by then, we had become so practiced at jumping on the story that even though we hadn't had one of that magnitude – we had had some one-half or two-thirds of that magnitude – the staff and the key editors knew exactly what to do.

John Carroll was involved, and he even came up with a variation, which was when he realized that so many reporters were stacking up in the Harrisburg area, he wanted to name a reporter in charge, sort of a field captain. And we put Rod Norton, who is now with the *New York Times*, but had been with *Newsweek*. Then thought of as sort of a tough, hard charging, not very conventional, and not easily contained. And almost immediately, he called a group of reporters together, and says, "Has anybody got a ham radio operator's manual?" And of course, nobody did. And he sent someone to Harrisburg bookstore to find one. And they came back, and Rod said, "See if there is a short-wave band for nuclear emergency." And there was. And incredibly, the state, the federal government, and Three Mile Island were all using it. So basically, everything they said was public if you had the right wave band to listen in. We put two reporters in a car across the river from Three Mile Island for days, three shifts a day, and listened in on everything that was said, but wrote it so they wouldn't necessarily realize that we were monitoring all the conversations. And on about the fourth day, Three Mile Island started leaking again, and people started shouting over the short-wave band, "It's leaking! It's leaking!" The people in the car, of course, called the home office, who called the governor's office, and the guy who was handling most of the state called the site and said, "We don't know how they found out, but the *Inquirer* knows there's a leak. But don't worry, we lied." And with that, we gave a verbatim transcript in the paper the next day. And at that point, they started watching what they were saying over the short-wave band. After that, one of the big problems in Philadelphia was sort of an attitudinal problem. They sort of thought of themselves as the perpetual number two.

Risley: How did you go about changing that mindset?

Roberts: By taking one or two units of the papers at the time and sticking with them until I thought they were A quality. And then taking on another two, and another two, and another two. And the first years, though you didn't notice a lot of differences. The writing kept getting better. We found some writers, some people who had talent who had been sort of buried. don't know if you know Edgar

Williams. I don't know, at the point I got there he was probably 55 or 60 but was a wonderful writer. But someone had put him in charge of laying out the comic pages every day. But within a year or two, the writing was improving. I'd say about the end of two years, we had a look about the paper that we wanted. And we stopped hiring people straight out of college and we're looking for people with a minimum of five years of experience. And one of the advantages I had was the *Inquirer* being union, had vested severance pay, which meant that if a person decided to leave, and they had done their twenty years, they would automatically walk away with forty weeks of pay. And one advantage of taking things two units of the paper at the time is conformity works two ways. If you raise the level of excellence in a group, people start realizing they either conform or sort of realize they don't fit in or don't like it. And we didn't have to fire or force out a lot of people. A lot of people just decided that they weren't going to succeed in this new group, and they would get their forty weeks of severance pay and move on to another paper.

Risley: Why did the *Inquirer* put such an emphasis on investigative reporting during your tenure and how did you decide on which projects to tackle?

Roberts: [Donald] Barlett and [James] Steele ultimately became probably the best-known investigative team in history. They were the exception that proved the rule. They were the only full-time investigators at the *Inquirer*. We didn't have any others. Other people were put on beats, and we put out the word that if you come up with a good story, investigative or otherwise, we'll make it possible for you to do it if you convince us there's really a story there. Bill Marimow was involved in two Pulitzers – one in his name and one a public service Pulitzer – was never was a full-time investigator. He was covering police or city hall; he was not part of an investigative team. And I think that's important because investigative teams tend to cluster around the office and sort of dream up ideas. And the trick is to have such good communications with reporters throughout the paper that if they run into something good, you hear about it and can make it possible for them to do the story.

And by in large, with Barlett and Steele being an exception to that, big stories in the *Inquirer* were done by a large number of people, not just a limited handful of people. And if you want to tell what's going on, it's the people out in the street, who are likely to run into things. And one of the problems with newspapers is that the average reporter calls in and talks to one person on the city desk, is usually either called the day city editor, or the city editor slot, or the deputy city editor, or metro editor. And this guy is talking to – on a big paper – twenty, thirty, forty reporters during the course of a day. And basically, what he says is, "What have you got and how long do you think it should be?" And if a reporter says, "Fourteen inches." The editor is likely to say, "Seven." And they negotiate a little bit and end up with nine. And this is a total interface that the reporter gets with the editor. And there's not room in all of that for a reporter to say, "Something strange is going on my beat and I am trying to get a handle on it. But this is what I know." And the idea was to construct a staff in which you would have people systematically talking with reporters quite apart from the daily



phone shuffle. And this is sort of a lesson I took away from a strike-bound newspaper in Detroit when I got plenty of chances to talk to people. And I discovered that not only would they tell you what they wanted to be doing in their future, but they would tell you things that they couldn't quite get a handle on as a story but thought there was something there. And then, if you know that, you can arrange for them to take time, or you can link them with a more experienced reporter and have a two-person team look at the story. Interestingly though, although it's certainly true that we were viewed as an investigative newspaper, many of the stories were not what you would normally classify as the common term investigative—catch someone in malfeasance or something. A lot of it was taken on, was just analyzing of what was going wrong with something.

Risley: That's what Barlett and Steele were known for in a lot of their work.

Roberts: Right. But other people did. One of the earliest investigative, the first stories that I assigned on the paper, there just been a flood in Wilkes Barre. I think it happened before I got on the paper. And on television, we saw the Red Cross ride to the rescue and everybody saying the situation is under control. We sent two or three reporters to Wilkes Barre—can't remember if it was six months later or a year later and said what happened. Did everything work? Or is it back to normal? Or is it better or is it worse? And we found people were building right back in the flood plain and there were even governmental incentives to do that, which was crazy. We also found that in the haste to build things back, they had to put in a lot of new fire hydrants. And they bought new fire hoses and the problem was the threads and the fire hoses didn't match the threads in the fire hydrants. So, the first big fire after the Wilkes Barre flood, the fire trucks zoomed to the rescue, but they couldn't attach the hose, and so they just watched the building burn down.

Risley: How would you describe your management style?

Roberts: Well, one element of it is, I believe in what some executives call "management by walking a mile." And there was almost never a day in my eighteen years at the paper that I didn't spend at least an hour milling around the newsroom. And sometimes it might be early; sometimes it might be late. Other times, it might be in the middle of a day. But the trick is to be accessible enough that anybody can bring a problem to. And there are some reasons that newsrooms have to have some degree of hierarchical type of management. Because deadlines have to be made, the paper has to get out, and if you know that a story's in the works, you have to have reasonable confidence level it's going to end up in the newspaper. But then you have to work against it. While you have to give people enough authority that the paper will always get out on time—and we were very good about observing deadlines. The rule was that you could argue about anything up to about forty-five minutes before deadline and then you shut up and get the paper out. And then after the first edition was out, you could come back and start the argument all over again and continue it until forty-five minutes before the second edition. This sort of became a style of the paper. We also sent out page

dummies so people would know what's going on page one and how a story was going to be played so that if a reporter on the story thought it was overplayed, or under played, he could argue about it while there was still some time to do something about it. He might not win, but there was a feeling that you would at least have your say. Playing five years out worked. The paper really snapped together by just about five years. And by seven years, that was the Three Mile Island story, and everybody – almost everyone on the paper. I said more than a hundred were involved. In some ways, everybody was involved.

Risley: So that coverage of Three Mile Island was really a defining moment for the *Inquirer*?

Roberts: It was a sense that the staff recognized that they were a major American newspaper and could rise to whatever the occasion was. When you consider that they had once been defensive and thought of themselves as a second bananas in town, it had come a long way in seven years.

Risley: I've heard you say that part of your philosophy was to zig when the others zag, or something to that effect. Explain what you mean by that.

Roberts: Part of my deal with Lee Hills was that if we started making a profit and made major progress in circulation, at some point in time, my argument was Philadelphia was the kind of city that could support a very good newspaper. And it certainly had its working-class areas, but it also is a major university city with lots of colleges and medical schools. That at some point in time, I wanted a foreign staff and national staff. And we got it. I think at peak, we had maybe seven foreign correspondents, compared to thirty or forty for the *New York Times*, and twenty or so from the *Washington Post*. And obviously, if we had had the same with the national staff – we had half a dozen national reporters out in the country. And if they had chased the big stories of the day, they would've been sort of an echo of what the *Times* and the *Post* was doing. So, if the big papers abroad or in the nation were ganging up on a story, almost by definition, we would not do that story. We figured we could get it off the AP or we were taking the *LA Times*, wire services, and *Washington Post*, and things. And so, we would go in opposite directions. And while we were primarily, it's true noted big take-outs and investigative reporting, we did a lot more than that. In fact, we won Pulitzers for a lot more than that.

Our first foreign correspondent abroad was Richard (Ben) Cramer. Everybody was focused in the Middle East where he was, on either Cairo, or Jerusalem, and what the leaders of the two countries were saying. Cramer's job was to stay out of Cairo, and stay out of Jerusalem, and filter around the country, and get the mood of the country. If you read Cramer, the Begin-Sadat talks were not a surprise because he was painting a portrait of Egypt as a war-weary country of wives who hadn't seen their husbands in four years. The children who no longer could remember their father. Cramer did things like get on a rice barge down the Nile. He played the harmonica, and he would play his harmonica and the Egyptians would gather around and applaud. And they would start telling him

their stories. You know they were sick of war, and nothing was working right. And so, Sadat was under extreme pressure to make peace. And he won a Pulitzer for that – should have won a Pulitzer for that. And it was unconventional, but it was very interesting reporting. It was sort of letters from home kind of correspondence.

Risley: Well, what was it like when the *Inquirer* beat the *Bulletin* and the *Bulletin* closed? What did that mean?

Roberts: After four or five years, or even by three years, I was convinced we could come out on top if we did the right things, and if the corporation could be made to see that this was a long systematic struggle. And ultimately, we did a strategic report that said you cannot judge us on profits because we are in serious competition. And if *Bulletin* decides to cut its ad rates, we have to cut our ad rates. And so as long as they are the dominant paper, they sort of control how much we're making. And we said, you have to judge us on other benchmarks, and here are the benchmarks that we have. We have the lead on Sunday, but we have to increase that lead on Sunday. And that's the biggest bucks advertising of a week. And on daily, we have to constantly be decreasing the *Bulletin's* size of a lead, and more than that, we have to be strategic about where we do it. And one of the difficulties was that there were certain counties, McComb for one, that the *Bulletin* was just miles ahead of us in circulation. Other counties like Delaware County, we were more of a horse race. And so, once they accepted that, which was not easy. I mean it was five or six years of struggles before they bought into this. And meanwhile, the two or three years after I got there, the recession of '74-'75 hit, and it was as bad as this one.

I didn't hear about it until almost fifteen years later, but they tried to sell the paper during that period. They were not sure they could win. And they thought the only person who might buy the paper was Murdoch, and they offered to sell it to him. And years later, I met the newspaper broker who was handling the sale. And I knew he was telling me right because Murdoch came into the building. He came in the building with a cover story that he was interviewing Ross Neil, who was the editor of the tabloid, the *Philadelphia Daily News* about whether he should hire him for his operation. But he came down to talk to me and just to make conversation. And it was clear – I didn't realize it at the time but thinking over later – it was clear he was casing the joint. And he decided not to buy it. He didn't think he. And by five years out, I just thought we couldn't miss. That everything was getting together. We were proceeding in the right direction.

Risley: What was it like when the *Bulletin* actually closed? I mean what did that mean to the *Inquirer*?

Roberts: Well, we talked them into greatly increasing the staff so that Philadelphians would – the idea was to make Philadelphians feel they were not deprived. That they were getting a better single newspaper than the two had been collectively. And we added one hundred people or so. And in some ways a lot more than that because I had enough budget to expand suburban streamers and things of that

sort. And the *Bulletin* sort of played into our hands. I thought at the point, the *Bulletin*, you know, I thought we were still about three years away. And we were then 400,000 or 500,000 ahead of them on Sunday. And we were within about 30,000 to 40,000 up in daily, which we had closed the gap by about 150,000 on daily. They got desperate and decided to change their appearance overnight, contrary to what I told you about Bob Mason. And like the *Charlotte Observer* had done many, many years before. They lost about 10,000 overnight. And people simply decided if they had to adjust to a new newspaper, they might as well take the *Inquirer*.

Risley: How did you manage that tremendous growth in the *Inquirer* after the *Bulletin* closed?

Roberts: Well, we had put a lot of emphasis on the Sunday paper. And we were clearly, I thought, a better Sunday paper than the *Bulletin*. And they made a mistake. They started using color on the Sunday paper. And with the kind of presses that once you were locked in the color, if you tried to get rid of the color, or put in another color picture, you were going to be delayed by two or three hours on Sunday when they were head-to-head with us and couldn't afford to be delayed. We decided not to use color for that reason on the Sunday paper. So, we would be totally flexible. And if anything happened on Saturday, we would just remake the whole paper to accommodate what was happening. You know most Saturdays, nothing happened. But twelve, fifteen, or twenty Saturdays out of the year, something happened that you could really move out on. And we always clobbered the *Bulletin* when that happened because they were locked into a feature color feature picture on page one. But the big thing is, something you have to understand historically about Pennsylvania journalism, that I didn't understand until I was there for a while, but most Pennsylvania newspapers until the seventies did not have Sunday newspapers. And Pennsylvania had a tradition of, and sometimes in the state, of having stand-alone Sunday newspapers — Williamsport being an example.

Risley: Lancaster?

Roberts: Yes. And interestingly, at the point I arrived in Philadelphia in late '72, even Wilmington, Delaware didn't have a Sunday paper. None of the newspaper, I guess, it's a Caulkin chain that had two newspapers in New Jersey, and three — I think it was three — in Pennsylvania. They didn't have a Sunday newspaper. The first Sunday newspapers you ran into were in Allentown and Trenton. And both newspapers had large Sunday circulations, not particularly daily in Delaware because Wilmington didn't have a Sunday paper. And interestingly, starting about the mid-70s, and I think it was because a high degree of computerization was taking place and profits suddenly increased on newspapers generally. And suburban newspapers figured they could now afford — and had the profit margins — to start Sunday newspapers. And all within about a two- or three-year period, we went from the *Bulletin* and the *Inquirer* being the only Sunday newspapers around, until Wilmington starting, and about at least six dailies in our area. Suburban dailies also starting Sunday newspapers. Before that, many

families would buy the *Inquirer* and the *Bulletin*. And then when you had the sudden outbreak of suburban newspapers, people decided they would take one Philadelphia paper and their local Sunday paper. And almost two a person. They decided to keep the Sunday *Inquirer* and drop the Sunday *Bulletin*. And this was why basically our Sunday lead went rapidly from over, I would say a seven- or eight-year period, we went from a lead of 140,000 to a lead of 500,000.

Risley: That's interesting. I've never heard that.

Roberts: It was more because of the suburban papers. And also, by that point, we were sufficiently strong on Sunday that it wasn't really a contest. And I thought the only weakness that we had vis-a-vis the *Bulletin*, was that they had better comics. And so, we set out to get their comics and there was sort of a code of the hills that once a paper took a comics script, they didn't switch around because that would mean it would be hard to get back in the paper the next time you wanted to sell a script. So, we had to convince one of the syndicates that they wouldn't lose by pulling their scripts out of the *Bulletin* and coming over to the *Inquirer*.

Risley: What was your suburban strategy? Did you have one?

Roberts: Well, the Sunday thing was part of the suburban strategy. But yeah, the initial strategy was that we would do generic stories that would cut across suburban boundaries but be of interest to suburban readers. But when the *Bulletin* folded, I had enough staff that we started, to some degree, micro-covering suburbia with neighbor sections and so forth. And doing that, we preempted some of suburban papers. Caulkins, when the *Bulletin* folded, decided to move into lower Montgomery County where the *Bulletin* had been strong. And we put a neighbor section out there immediately, twice a week with lots of school coverage and all of that. And they just couldn't overcome that, the Caulkins paper.

Risley: Do you think your suburban strategy was successful in terms of micro-covering suburban communities?

Roberts: Yeah, expensive but it was working. And I thought you could do the same thing with dailies on it. But at that point, at the point I left, we didn't have the press capacity to do dailies on it. About a year after I left, they completed the printing plant out in Conshohocken, and it was possible to do that. But had I had the capacity to do it, I would have simply changed the metro section for each county in the suburban and for New Jersey. And we had the capacity to do New Jersey. We didn't have a capacity to do anything else.

Risley: What do you think your strengths, and also your weaknesses, were as an editor and a manager?

Roberts: Well one thing, I was a very much insider editor. I didn't go to specific banquet of the day or anything. And for a lot of newspapers, that kind of editor would be unacceptable. And I didn't think rubbing shoulders with the movers and shakers in Philadelphia was my strength. And because I wasn't initially, but I later

became what is over the editorial page. And I brought in Ed Guffman with the understanding that in addition to running the editorial page, that he would move around town. And he was very active civically, but I just thought it wasn't an option. I mean I wasn't geared to be a public editor anyway. But it wouldn't have worked in Philadelphia. It was too much to do.

Risley: How else would you describe your strengths and weaknesses?

Roberts: Strengths are that I am accessible. That I had switched back and forth between reporting and editing. That I think I had a better understanding than most people have of what motivates reporters and what roadblocks they run into and to what degree you have to run interference for your best reporters. And to some degree all reporters, you have to establish channels. You have to, you know, in a paper like the *Inquirer*, if I had been the only one moving about, that is inadequate. A large number of editors had to be interfacing with reporters and giving them time to talk about.

Risley: What would you say your weaknesses were as an editor? What did you do better?

Roberts: Well, I am not good – as many people on the *Times* were – staying on top of every squiggle in the news. I think that's important, but I am too easily mentally distracted to do that. And I am better at thinking ahead and planning ahead, worrying about how the staff is developing, and worrying about overall what our strengths and weaknesses are as a newspaper, and what holes need to be plugged. Foreman was a perfect managing editor for me because he knew every squiggle of the news and he's very well-organized and he was on top of. And I always had a confidence level if I gave Gene something to take on, that it would always get done. You didn't have to worry about what he was doing. He, you know, he would do it well and to perfection.

Risley: Right. Some terrific journalists – both reports and editors – came through the *Inquirer*. The list could go on and on, but I am thinking about people like Bill Marimow, John Carroll, Jim Naughton, and Richard Cramer. Was that gratifying to you that they had successful stints at the *Inquirer* and then went on to do other things?

Roberts: Yeah. Trying to make the best newspaper I knew how I would have preferred to keep them. But, I understood, you know, their needs. John Carroll was a natural to run a newspaper and should have run one. And I am of mixed mind about Kramer, who certainly did some wonderful books that he would not have been able to do if he had remained at the *Inquirer*. But he's a wonderful reporter who could have gone on and on and on.

Risley: The *Inquirer* had a reputation to be a fun place to work and a place with a lot of jokes and camaraderie. Was that important to you?

Roberts: Yeah. And it was more than important; it was a necessity. I mean, when I first got there, we were not paying the best salaries in the world. John McMullen when he left, left me a list of things to do. And one thing he proposed was that we run an editorial campaign to move all the refineries between downtown Philadelphia and the airport. And he said when he was trying to hire people – which is true – your first impression of Philadelphia, if you arrive by air is to go by all these refineries. It looks pretty awful. And he thought the good of the city demanded that they be moved. That didn't seem feasible to me, but I thought that if you could offer people two things – a chance to do the very best journalism that they were capable of and a relaxed work atmosphere with hierarchical management only when you had to have it, and a lot of discussion – that people could have fun and play jokes on each other and still put out good newspapers, so much the better.

Risley: What were some of the memorable parties and pranks that happened?

Roberts: Well Jim Naughton and some others famously put forty-six frogs in my bathroom for my forty-sixth birthday. And I retaliated too, bringing an elephant, a fire truck, and a few things to his house. Gene Foreman was a big fan of Larry Bowa – a Philly's shortstop during some of the Phillies golden years. And Dalton arranged for Bowa to jump out of a birthday cake on Gene Foreman's birthday, which took some persuading. And the staff, I guess it was Carol Horner, was a Boston correspondent and was traveling in Maine and saw a vending machine that if you put in a quarter, a hen rose up and cackled and laid an egg a plastic egg. She thought this would be perfect for Dalton. And took up a collection and bought it. And we got some lucky breaks. I guess after I had been there maybe a year or so, *Philadelphia Magazine* did a story on the *Inquirer* and the *Bulletin* and called it "the press war" and described the editor of the *Bulletin* as looking like a movie star, which he did – George Packard. He looked pretty much like as a George Hamilton. They described me as looking like a frog out of the comic strip Pogo, of the Okefenokee Swamp.

But Rotenberg said that the smart money was on the frog. The staff rented a billboard directly in front of the *Bulletin* and had Tony Auth draw a frog and said with the legend, "The smart money is on the frog." And Lorraine Tait was hostess and arranged for fortune cookies that all said, "The smart money was on the frog." And it was the first time anyone had suggested that we might win. It was a big help in kind of getting the staff to stop feeling like second bananas and so forth. And it was always said that we went after Pulitzers, and that was greatly overstated. But we did go early on the first four or five years I was there. We entered and made a big thing out of just winning as many as we could of the state press association awards. And first kind of establishing ourselves as the best Pennsylvania newspaper was the strategy.

Risley: Speaking of awards, I mean the *Inquirer* was recognized with a lot of awards including seventeen Pulitzer Prizes during your tenure as editor. What did that mean to the newspaper and the staff?

Roberts: Well, when we first started winning them, it was more the change in the attitude. And if you are out billed one of the very best newspapers in the country, you have to build a staff and develop an attitude on the staff that for the size of the paper and given the limitations, that they can be as good as it gets. And as I said, you know, in changing attitudes, winning the Pulitzer for Three Mile Island, was probably better for that purpose than all the rest of them put together. Because it was generally recognized that, you know, nobody was even close on that story. The fact that the whole staff made it possible was psychologically very important.

Risley: What was your relationship with Knight Ridder, and how did that change over the years?

Roberts: It was very good with Lee Hills and with Derrick Daniels, who later, you know, left after, I don't know, maybe five years. And became president and editor in chief of *Playboy* magazine and in charge of their gambling empire, among other things. And it was very good with Jim Dalton. And Jack Knight, when the *Bulletin* folded, called it the greatest fourth-quarter victory in journalism. But it wasn't a fourth-quarter victory; ten years of hard work went into that on a lot of people's part. And we had very strong editors and depth and had as good a reporting staff, and arguably the best copy desk, which basically was Foreman's bag. I think the best copy desk structure in the country. And I thought, probably, we went among large newspapers from having the worst photography, I think to having the best photography.

Jack Knight and Lee Hills and Jim Batton came through the newsroom, and they could all be tight on a buck. Jack Knight started out inheriting one of two newspapers in Akron. He usually bought number two or number three newspapers in a town. He bought the *Detroit Free Press*; he bought the *Chicago Daily News*; he bought the *Miami Herald* when it was a struggling paper against the *Miami News*. And you didn't have to convince him of the importance of journalism. I mean they knew that they survived in these towns by putting out good newspapers. That was a definite asset. When the company began to change, and Jack Knight died, and Lee Hills retired, the attitude about newsrooms and the importance of news gradually changed.

Risley: Was there more financial pressure put on?

Roberts: Well, yeah, definitely more. But I think it would have been manageable if there had been a bedrock understanding that there's a certain level of news presence that you have to have. The attitude went from a good newsroom is a necessity, to a good newsroom is nice, but it's a luxury. And if you have to squeeze to make your profit goals, it's okay to squeeze. And essentially, you know, I didn't fare any worse than any other editor and probably better than most. But I didn't want to just to be the one who would have to dismantle eighteen years of what I had spent building up. And my tolerance to be fair to Tony Ridder, and other people in Knight Ridder, my tolerance level for cuts and constant re-budgeting was almost minimal. And I just wasn't willing to. I think the last year I was there, I



think I had went through something like eleven budget revisions in twelve months. And none of them in and of themselves were draconian, but when you added them all up. And also, when you added and adjust the time-consuming quality of being in almost constant re-budgeting, it means you are no longer engaged in what you want to be engaged in – building the paper.

Risley: And so that's why you left?

Roberts: Yes.

Risley: What year did you leave?

Roberts: Late 1990.

Risley: So, you went back to the *New York Times*?

Roberts: I went to Maryland

Risley: That's right.

Roberts: I intended to just finish out. They gave me a full professorship and tenure. But Joe Lelyveld became executive editor and wasn't sure who he wanted to be his successor. He was afraid that if he named someone from within the paper as managing editor. I was 62 and the *Times* had a mandatory 65 retirement age. So, he proposed that I come there for three years and help him organize the paper. He loved to be engaged in every decision about page one, and in the paper. And he was delighted to do the planning ahead on section and changing sections and things like that.

Risley: What do you feel like you accomplished in your three years back at the *Times*?

Roberts: Well, they were also moving into new presses – a new printing press. They were going to be able to go to color. And they had discovered that much of your advertising was, well they made decisions that the business section, the entertainment section, and any of the travel section – those kind of sections – you could only be in if you paid the national rate, which is much higher and less discounted than the lower national rate. And a few sections like the style section and the food section were local rate advertising. And there was lots of interest in spiffing up these sections. And in planning ahead, we kind of reengineered the business section and virtually every special ad section of the newspaper. We didn't do all that much for the science section because it is already steaming along about what we wanted, but the rest.

Risley: Was it interesting coming back to the *Times* after being away for eighteen or twenty years?

Roberts: Yeah, it was. Three years was about enough. The *Times* was a big institution and it's kind of like moving in an aircraft carrier. It's not you know – doesn't have any kind of an immediate impact. But over time, you can do it.

Risley: What did you enjoy teaching at the University of Maryland? What are some of your memorable experiences while there?

Roberts: I taught a course on the press during the civil rights era, which was the same subject of the book, *The Race Beat*. And I did that for, I guess altogether, I was there about fifteen years. Eighteen or so. Less the three years I was at the *Times*, so about fifteen. And I taught the civil rights course. I taught a course called writing the complex story, which was basically a news feature type course – trend stories, profiles, that sort of thing. And I taught a newsroom management course. And newsroom management was fun to teach, but I guess I ended up concluding it's not appropriate for a journalism school because unless you have a kind of rarified atmosphere which editors were coming by for something. Because most people in journalism schools are going to be, for the first five years at least, reporter or copy editors. They aren't going to be involved in management decisions and trying to get them focused. We had a program called the Humphrey Fellowship Program that brought in some editors from international newspapers. And when you had three or four actual editors in your class, it was a lot of fun. You could, you know, they immediately belonged on what you were talking about.

Risley: When did you decide to write *The Race Beat* and why did you think it was important to write a book on that subject?

Roberts: Well, when I left, you know, I probably felt more into the civil rights story than anything I ever covered. I was very aware of the importance of local editors in the South who, probably more than any editors in the history of American journalism – I am talking now about editorial writers, which I was not one of. But people like Ralph McGill, Jonathan Daniels, Hodding Carter, and Harry Ashmore especially. But probably not more than a dozen editors in the South at any one time had more influence and more stature probably, than any editors before or since. For a simple reason that in most of the southern states, the political establishment totally abdicated any responsibility for enforcing the Supreme Court decision or the 1964 or '65 Civil Rights Act. And editors like McGill and Ashmore, in effect, became the spiritual leaders of their region. Saying, "We may not like it, but we have to do it. And it is consistent with the Constitution and the American ethic." And so, when I left, and I had great admiration for the reporters that preceded me – Claude Sitton, John Herbers, Roy Reed, who I worked with, Jack Nelson. I had an understanding of how difficult it was to cover the South.

When I left Philadelphia, it generated stories in *Time* and *Newsweek*, and some other publications. The book industry in New York kind of obsesses on temporary burst of publicity, and a book agent called. He said he could get me a significant advance to do a memoir, and I told him that wasn't my bag. I didn't

want to do a memoir. I wanted to do essentially this book. And he said he thought, if we acted fast, he could sell it. And he did. And I was amazed that on a book like that he got a low six-figure advance. But he's a very good agent. And we could've gotten more, except I wanted Ash Green. [He] was an editor at Knopf, and I liked the kind of books Knopf's did. And I liked Ash Green's editing style, which was basically like you use him as a sounding board, and he edited with a light hand. And in my case, he had the patience of Job. It took like fifteen years before the book came out.

Risley: You wound up writing the book with Hank Klibanoff. How did that work?

Roberts: It worked well. And I was doing it alone until I decided to take the *Times* job for three years. I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to do anything on it and when I came back, you know, it might be overwhelming. So, I knew this was a subject Hank was interested in. He grew up in Alabama as a Jew in Alabama. And kind of had a unique perspective on it. And he started out in Mississippi and so he knew sort of all the war stories about Mississippi during its worse years. And he's a superb reporter and writer.

Risley: Did you have any strategy in dividing up the work or the writing? How did that work?

Roberts: We did have a strategy. We took the things we were most informed about. I mean, he did most of the Mississippi chapters. And I did the later chapters about the Civil Rights Act of '64 and the Voting Right Acts of '65. And I sort of delved into Gunnar Myrdal and was struck by the fact that in the late 1930s, he thought the biggest problem that Blacks faced was lack of coverage. And the American ethic being what it was, that if Americans had to confront the conditions that Blacks – particularly southern Blacks – were living under, that they would find it so inconsistent with the basic American creed, that they would rise up. And essentially that's what happened. The press really didn't start covering the story. The first big move came with the Emmett Till case. And there were key news events: The attempt to desegregate the University of Alabama; the Montgomery bus boycott; and Little Rock. Those stories unfolded basically over a two-and-a-half-year period. And by that time, the pattern was established that the press – at least the northern press and especially the *New York Times* – was going to cover race in the South.

Risley: What do you think was the book's contribution to our understanding of the civil rights era and the role of the press in it?

Roberts: I don't really know. I know what I intended the contribution to be, which was that a lot of mistakes were made, but that the press covered a crucial story at a crucial moment, an extended moment in history. I mean roughly about ten years. And that certainly reporters and editors were no substitute for the civil rights leaders. But the reporters and editors made it possible for the civil rights movement to tell its stories. And without that, it would have been like the tree falling in the forest and nobody around to hear it or see it. And I thought all of

that was a story worth telling. I was particularly fascinated by, this was where television learned to report the news, really on the race story.

Risley: When the book won the Pulitzer Prize, were you surprised and what did that mean to you?

Roberts: Well, I was surprised and pleased. It was nice.

Risley: All right. Well, is there anything you'd like to add that we didn't discuss?

Roberts: I think we pretty much covered everything.

Risley: Okay.