

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH MADELYN ROSS

Interviewed by Ford Risley

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Madelyn Ross Interview

Ford Risley: It's May 15, 2009, and I am here in the office of Maddy Ross. And we're going to talk about her career at the *Pittsburgh Press* and the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. So thanks for doing this.

Madelyn Ross: My pleasure.

Risley: Let's start at the beginning. Tell me when and where you were born.

Ross: I was born here in Pittsburgh in 1949.

Risley: All right.

Ross: I went to parochial grade school and then went to Our Lady of Mercy Academy High School. And it was in Our Lady of Mercy Academy High School that I was walking down the hall one day and a nun came out of one of the doors and said, "We need an editor in here." This was the first time I ever even thought about it.

Risley: You were the editor of your high school newspaper?

Ross: Just by walking past. It was not well planned at all. You know I think I was on my way to the ladies room or something. And so I edited that paper which wasn't very much. It was a very small girl's school, but it planted the seed, the notion, and when I went to college at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, I got interested in the campus newspaper there and became editor of it in my sophomore year.

Risley: Oh, really.

Ross: And stayed editor for two and a half years.

Risley: Wow. What was the name of that newspaper?

Ross: *The Penn*.

Risley: *The Penn*?

Ross: With two n's.

Risley: OK.

Ross: And by that time I was hooked on journalism.

Risley: Tell me a little bit about your family.

Ross: Mother, father and a brother. My father was a blue-collar union worker with Clark Candy Company. He worked on the dock of Clark Candy. My mother was mostly a homemaker and then became a doctor's assistant later in life. My brother was an engineer – went to Duquesne and then to Pitt.

Risley: So you had no journalism background in your family.

Ross: No, nothing at all, nothing at all. None of them are writers of any sort, so I was kind of the odd ball.

Risley: OK, so you graduated from IUP.

Ross: Right.

Risley: OK. And did you come back to Pittsburgh or what was your first job?

Ross: I graduated from IUP in English.

Risley: OK.

Ross: Because there was no journalism program then. So I decided to go on for a master's degree in international affairs and I thought that would be a nice background to have in terms of going forward in journalism. So I went to what was then called the State University of New York at Albany and now it's called the University at Albany. And I got a master's there. And while I was there I got a call from the *Pittsburgh Press* because I had interned at the *Press* for two full summers prior to that.

Risley: While you were in college?

Ross: Yes, while I was in college. And so I got a call from them saying there was a full-time opening and did I want it? And I said, of course, and so I finished my master's in two semesters which I don't recommend. But I wanted to get back and get that job before it wasn't there anymore. So I got my master's, came back and went right back to the *Press*.

Risley: What year was that?

Ross: That would have been '72.

Risley: OK

Ross: I started at the *Press* as a general assignment reporter. Then went to the features department and wrote features. I began to volunteer to fill any open jobs in the newsroom only because I didn't have a clue really what was going on in that newsroom. And I had such a narrow view because of never having journalism as an educational background. I just knew

what I did and so I'd see all these other odd-looking people and they were saying the same thing about me. And I was thinking, I wonder what that work is like. And so if there were an opening on the copy desk, for example, I'd raise my hand and say I'd like to do that for a while. So they let me do it. And I loved it.

Risley: So you went from reporter to copy editing.

Ross: On a temporary basis.

Risley: OK.

Ross: I saw these people kind of screwing up my stories all the time. And I thought, gee I really ought to know what they are doing if for no other reason than to defend myself. Then I got there and of course fell right into screwing up other people's stories. And I really did understand what they were up to and so it was kind of eye opening. Then they were just starting regional editions—local news—and they had no staff and I volunteered. I said, "Here let me be your first reporter." And so they put me there for a while and I did that. That was in the days when you were writing to fill up the book. We were always writing 15 to 20 short stories a day. You were just grinding them out. And then eventually I decided I wanted to be an editor, and so I volunteered to work on the city desk as an assistant city editor and they put me there. So through my early career I was volunteering all around trying to get a bigger picture of what was going on.

Risley: And what time what span of years are we talking about?

Ross: I think probably by the time I landed at the city desk I had been there six years. So six years.

Risley: OK, so you had a variety you held a variety of positions over the course of your first six years.

Ross: Yes, most of them reporting and writing and then a short stint, maybe a six-month stint on the copy desk.

Risley: OK.

Ross: But I was writing in virtually in every department except sports. I didn't get to sports. But on the city desk I was assistant city editor which was a fabulous job because of the pace and the opportunity to deal with all the talented people. And you know it was through saying I'd like to learn what those people do that really put me in a position when the new editor [Angus McEachran] came onboard and he was looking around for a managing editor. He's looking for somebody who understands the whole operation. And I was it. And that's how that came about.

Risley: OK, before we talk about that, what was the *Pittsburgh Press* like in your early years with the newspaper?

Ross: It was from a business perspective fat and sassy – advertising coming in over the transom. Nobody had to sell anything. We were the only game in town. I mean there was the *Post-Gazette*, but that was a joint operating agreement and so the *Press* held all of the business functions. So we were it and very, very successful from a business perspective. We had circulation of 600,000 on Sundays. You know from all business perspectives it was in fine shape. The journalism however, was pretty stodgy, uninspired, predictable. And the people all around the newsroom weren't like that. They were great people – exciting, smart, vibrant--and I kept thinking that there is this real big disconnect in this newsroom. You have a lot of talent not being used. Why? What's going on? And I was just an uppity young reporter at the time, had no portfolio at all. But I just didn't like what I was seeing and feeling. We had a lot of complaining in the newsroom from the journalists, which we tend to do anyway, but this was more serious. They were unhappy, really kind of miserably unhappy. We didn't feel we were serving the community as well as we should.

Risley: Who was the paper's owner?

Ross: Scripps-Howard.

Risley: OK.

Ross: Scripps-Howard owned it. And Scripps-Howard's way – even though it was a chain operation – was to let its newspapers run fairly independently on the ground. And John Troan [the editor] was there. Great guy, smart guy – everybody loved him and respected him. But there wasn't that hunger in the newsroom to do better.

Risley: Right.

Ross: So they sent me to something then called Modern Media Institute in St. Petersburg, Florida. [Now the Poynter Institute.] Roy Peter Clark. And I was in one of his very first, if not the first seminar, that he had. Talking all about writing and wonderful things, and I kept thinking this technique of getting people together in a room and just having them open up and talk might be the ticket for galvanizing the talent that was back in the newsroom at the *Press*. And so when I came back from there I proposed to the editor and the managing editor that we start a little group. On everybody's personal time, their lunch hour, we would just sit in a room and just talk about how we could be better. And the reaction was, well I probably would have had the same reaction had I been in their positions at the time, and that was this is a very young person, inexperienced and

doesn't know much about anything. And that was true. And boy, this sounds an awful lot like a union organizing attempt, which it was never intended to be. The newsroom at the *Press* was the one department in the newspaper that was not unionized. We had 13 other unions but the newsroom wasn't one. So I think they had visions of people signing cards. But I made such a pest of myself. I wouldn't take no for an answer. I kept going back, kept going back. Finally, just to get me out of their hair they let me start something. I just asked everybody in the newsroom if they'd like to come and just brainstorm about some ideas about how we could do what we do better. And it started out really small. I believe 12 people showed up, and I came out of there and I wrote a summary of what we had decided. And in that first hour what we had decided was we really ought to throw all the rules away because the rules were getting in our way of writing well and doing things better. So I wrote that, sent it out to everybody.

Risley: You were the assistant city editor at the time?

Ross: I was a reporter.

Risley: Oh, you were a reporter.

Ross: Yeah, I was a reporter. But you know there was no fallout to that, nothing. So we had a second one and we had a third one and every week we were having these lunchtime brainstorming sessions and the group kept getting bigger and bigger and bigger and we had to keep finding different rooms, and eventually there were about 60 to 65 people meeting on a regular basis.

Risley: Wow.

Ross: And its success took nothing more than my convening it. And it was just the same people, same skills, same talent. But suddenly just talking about it and caring about it raised the quality of the journalism astronomically.

Risley: In terms of what?

Ross: What we covered, how we wrote. That first day we were talking about a Gay Talese story I photocopied and handed out. It was a piece of writing in which Gay Talese was talking about an actress and he was talking about the kind of pants she had on. It was some designer name. And one of our reporters said, "We could never write like that at the *Pittsburgh Press*," and I said, "What do you mean? We're not allowed to use brand names." So that was one of those rules that we threw away. And so people started experimenting with their writing and it was funny because the next week after that discussion we had the mayor signing a proclamation with a Bic pen. I mean it was like brand names kept creeping in. Fortunately, the editors were saving us from ourselves. But

the point was the degree of experimentation, of stretching, of doing something different, of trying something new really took off – including the kinds of stories we got. So whereas before, if we were doing a story on organized crime and gambling we would have gone to the organized crime task force and interviewed that person and wrote the story. Now they were saying you know we really ought to find the organized criminals and talk to them because we don't have their perspective. So suddenly the stories were taking on a complexion and a color and a depth that we hadn't been doing. And then those sessions moved from writing, to why we don't do more investigative reporting, to why we don't have a parking lot for staff. I mean it just moved to every aspect that would have an impact on the quality of the journalism. And the editors, I think they were scared to death of what was going on but they let it happen. That was very important on their part because if they tried to shut it down it would have been a mess. But they let it go on and I think they could begin to see. It didn't take very long you could begin to see a difference in what was being published in the paper. And they liked it, so they just let it go on and on. I invited them all to participate, of course. Everybody could come and they did sometimes. And one of the rules of those meetings was there were no titles when you came through the door. You dropped your title at the door. You came in and you just sat down like anybody. So the editor would come in and sit down and some intern would say, "You know I really don't like the way we do this." And it worked, it really worked. And that went on for seven years.

Risley: Wow.

Ross: And you could see the difference. And we went from a paper that had never won a big journalism prize ever, after like 60 to 70 years of being in business, to winning two Pulitzers and virtually every major journalism award. It was just like flipping a switch. When John Troan retired and Scripps-Howard sent us Angus McEachran, nobody knew much about him except he was Southern. He didn't talk like a Pittsburgher. And he came in and he knew all about these meetings we were having because Scripps-Howard was so impressed with the results that they were, unbeknownst to me, photocopying my summaries after each [meeting] and sending it out system wide.

Risley: Wow.

Ross: And so when Angus got there, he said, "I know what you all are doing because I am reading it and I will help you speed this process up by getting the resources. You guys keep going the way you are going and I will get you the resources." And so suddenly the impossible was possible. Whereas in the past a big trip for a Press reporter was to go to Harrisburg, now we were going all over the world for a story. And we won two Pulitzers, back to back, after he got there. And the whole world opened up. It was an amazing experience to live through.

Risley: Remind me what the Pulitzer Prizes were for.

Ross: The first one was for organ transplantation and the protocols, which of course started here in Pittsburgh at Pitt. It was pretty much the richest and not the sickest who were getting the organs. And we kind of exposed that system here but also around the world. We sent these reporters around the globe because they would say, if you think that's bad, in India the classified ads are filled with people selling their kidneys. So they went there, and then they said if you think that's bad, in Hong Kong organized crime isn't about gambling or prostitution, it's about organ peddling. They went there. So they exposed problems with the transplantation system all around the world. And it changed the protocol. To this day it's now the sickest, not the richest, who get the next available organ. And that was because of something that was written here in Pittsburgh. The second Pulitzer was an investigation into the airline industry, particularly the pilots and personnel being impaired by drugs, alcohol or medical problems and never being discovered until it was too late. And we came to that story because we had a fabulous medical writer in Andy Schneider, who was one of those reporters from heaven who knew exactly how to make contacts, how to look and talk and act and feel like the people he was covering. And so they confided in him all the time. He was just a terrific man. In fact at one of the hospitals, Allegheny General, one of the nurses had embroidered a lab coat with his name on it. That skill set was a reason that he got a call one day from an emergency room nurse at Mercy Hospital who said, "Andy, this is so and so. And I just want to tell you that one of our people that we were treating for a massive drug overdose just signed himself out of the hospital." And Andy said, "So, what." And she said, "Well, he signed himself out because he wanted to go back to his job. He flies a 727 for USAir [not Airways in those days] and he's about to go back to the airport and get on the plane to fly it. He's got cocaine in his system out the wazoo." So Andy said, "Well why are you telling me? Why don't you tell USAir?" She said, "Because I am not allowed because of confidentiality. And he said, "Well, you weren't allowed to tell me either." She said, "Yeah, but you won't squeal on me." So now he knows and he's thinking that I am not supposed to interfere with the news and make news. I am supposed to cover the darn thing. So he comes into my office; I am now managing editor at this point. He comes into the office and says, "I don't know what I am supposed to do with this information." I said, "You are supposed to pick up the phone and call USAir right now because this is life or death," which he did. They intercepted this guy and he obviously did not get on the plane and fly it. And that was a one-day story. But Andy, being such a great reporter, came back in the next day and he said, "You know I've been thinking about this. What is it about the system that the airline would allow somebody, who was obviously not a first-time user of cocaine, would allow this person to regularly go to work, get on a plane, and pilot it? Something is wrong with the system." So I said, "Find out

what." And he and reporter Matt Brelis began a year-long investigation. The whole protocol for examination checks monitoring airline personnel changed. And I dare say that at this point in time when you get on a plane you can be pretty sure that pilot is not impaired. And that was because of a *Pittsburgh Press* story that then ultimately won the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service.

Risley: And what year what year did the *Press* win the Pulitzers?

Ross: '86 and '87.

Risley: '86 and '87. OK so when did you become managing editor?

Ross: I became managing editor in 1983.

Risley: OK.

Risley: Was this soon after Angus became the editor.

Ross: Yeah, I would say within a year. You have to keep in mind. This was Pittsburgh, where young women typically were not executives. He took a huge leap on this. I didn't have managerial experience at any other newspaper. I just was at the *Press*, so he kind of violated all the rules. And then in '86 we won a Pulitzer and '87 we won a Pulitzer.

Risley: So what was it like taking over that job?

Ross: You know it was great, great fun. I had a good relationship with most of the experienced and talented journalists in that newsroom already. I was overseeing the investigative arm of the newspaper since we started those writers' lunch program. So I had already been working with most of the people who were there who were very talented. So that was a nice, easy transition with them. Hiring new people was always kind of fun because they'd walk into the door not knowing what to expect, but we ended up with just a terrific staff. At one point we had five Pulitzer Prize winning people sitting in the same corner of the newsroom. And so anything was possible at that point. We had the talent. We had the backing from the top. We had the desire. So there was nothing stopping us.

Risley: Right.

Ross: Until something did.

Risley: Well, before we talk about that, you mentioned that you were one of the first female managing editors. Was that difficult in a rather traditional place like Pittsburgh?

Ross: You know I wish I had great stories about difficulties but I was so busy trying to do journalism that really it never even occurred to me. I can think back now and there were a few things that the guys up in the composing room [said.] You know, they still thought of me as a little girl and that kind of thing, but it was so minor and it didn't matter. And so I cannot tell you I had any trouble because of my gender.

Risley: Good.

Ross: It was full speed ahead for everybody.

Risley: I don't want to get too much off of the subject, but do you think did you think it was important being a woman to mentor other women or to help other women?

Ross: You know we're talking 30 some years ago, or 20 some years ago, and there weren't many women in the newsroom. So mentoring them I thought was no different than mentoring the men. And we were all mentoring each other about journalism. And we really weren't thinking much about hierarchy and people being in powerful positions. I mean, I never thought about it for myself either. It just happened. I didn't plan that. And so that wasn't what was important to anybody at the time. Now if it was me now and that had happened, I would be much more cognizant about the need to specifically say to women, "You know you really ought to be groomed for a managerial position because we ought to have women at the top." But to be real honest that wasn't the priority.

Risley: What was the competition like between the *Press* and the *Post-Gazette*?

Ross: There really wasn't much. We manufactured it because it was good to get the competitive juices flowing in order to get the stories better. But they were morning, we were afternoon. So we were on different cycles. They were relatively small, we were huge. We had the upper hand in the joint operating agreements so they were constrained anyway. They had no sales force, they had no circulation operation to worry about. They didn't sell any ads. They had a newsroom on the fourth floor of our building. So there really wasn't much competition. But if there was a hot running story in town we paid attention to each other and that helped those stories escalate faster and in a good way. But that was about the extent of it.

Risley: So you all didn't say, the *Post-Gazette* has a good story and we need to jump on it.

Ross: That would occur if they broke a good story in our midst and then we would say, "Geez, how did we miss that?" And try to catch up, obviously. We considered the *Press* to be the newspaper of record. So it needed to cover everything that moved. The *Post-Gazette* didn't seem to

consider itself that way, and it was able to pick and choose its areas of coverage and go out on a creative limb on occasion. Which was a nice complement but it really wasn't the same kind of coverage. So they were doing some writerly things earlier than we were. You know you'd see a really nice piece of writing in the *Post-Gazette*, whereas the *Press* was covering the news, grinding it out. But the *Press* started to come around to view that writing mattered. And so you saw more competition in the writing.

Risley: OK, well tell me about the strike.

Ross: I have to, huh?

Risley: Yeah.

Ross: Well, the strike – there were always strikes at the *Press*. As I said, there were 13 unions and back in the bad old days if you looked at somebody crooked they'd go out on strike. There was almost no rhyme or reason for it; somebody was out all the time. It really mattered when the Teamsters were out because then we couldn't deliver the paper. So when this strike started we thought the issues were pretty serious, starting with how this paper was going to be delivered. Are we going to still use the kids? Are we going to have depots and limit the number of employees, so it was all about people's jobs. So we knew it was going to be a tough one. But it went on and on and on, as the world seems to know, and in the end everyone was assuming that there would only end up being one paper. But everybody assumed that one was the *Press*. And instead the flea swallowed the elephant and that was a shocker to both newsrooms – well to the city too, but to both newsrooms to be sure. Nobody saw that coming. And so it was a pretty dramatic moment. And, talk about weird things, for a short period of time I was managing editor of both competing newspapers. At the same time it was obvious the staff of the *Press* was going away except for whichever ones the *Post-Gazette* decided they wanted to keep. They couldn't keep them all, that's for sure. And they had asked me if I would stay on as managing editor, which was very nice of them. But the justice department still hadn't ruled whether buying the *Press* was legal. So for about three or four weeks both papers existed with me as the only managing editor, which was really bizarre. It was like a really bad movie. And we were in the same building, two different floors. The *Press* on the second, *Post-Gazette* on the fourth, and I was literally running up and down between the two newspapers, so I'd run up the back steps to the fourth floor where the *Post-Gazette* was. Of course they were jubilant, and amazed, and delighted, and trying to figure out what the future was going to hold for them. And I'd come down to the second floor and it was like a morgue because we were out-placing these fabulous journalists, many of whom I had helped bring in. They were, you know, family, newsrooms are family. And so down there we were working to send people away and up on the fourth floor we

were working to reorganize into a brand new newspaper. So you know it was very schizophrenic for me personally. But if there was going to be a good paper as the result of this you had to put all that kind of emotional stuff aside and try to think fresh: OK, we have a new newspaper. It's not the *Post-Gazette*, really. It has the name but it's not the *Post-Gazette*. It sure isn't the *Press*, so what is it? What can we invent here that is worthy of the city of Pittsburgh?

Risley: Before we talk about that, tell me about what it was like to work at the *Press* during the strike.

Ross: Well, the *Press* newsroom, not being unionized, continued to work. And we were putting out a once a week tabloid that we were mailing to people because we couldn't deliver it any other way. So we were actually producing journalism, such as it was, and everybody worked and got paid. The *Post-Gazette* newsroom was unionized. They were mostly all out on strike and not getting paid and very unhappy about it. But we were in there working and it got very tense sometimes, because the Teamsters, as you know, are powerful and they have resources all over the country. And as time went on and it started to drag along, they started rallying the troops from elsewhere. And we were running a gauntlet to get into the front door through these masses of angry Teamsters. I don't recommend that. I remember one time at my parking garage across the street from the *Press* – we were at the point at Pittsburgh and across the Boulevard of the Allies, which you know is a wide boulevard – I was parking there and came in one morning early during the strike on the opposite side of the garage, parked the car, got out and came out across from the *Press* where I was supposed to go work. And the street was a sea, for as far as you can see, of Teamsters on the street blocking the street chanting, yelling, screaming. I am not real big, so it gave me a moment's pause there when I stepped off the curb. Obviously I wasn't a Teamster; I mean they could tell. So I stepped off the curb, and people started to notice and they started to block me, and so I turned a different way, and they blocked me. So they had me hemmed in where I would probably be to this day except for the fact that some of the *Press* Teamsters, who I knew from all those years, were out there too. And one of them yelled, "She's OK, she's OK, she's OK." And so they parted and I walked through and into the front door.

Risley: That was a scary moment.

Ross: That was a scary moment because there had been some physical violence already and you know it was really an ugly situation.

Risley: Remind how long the strike lasted.

Ross: Eight months Eight months, which is pretty darn long, and in the meantime the *Press* was trying to figure out how we could publish a real

paper and not a tabloid that was mailed, but a real paper and get it delivered because as time went on the positions hardened and people were getting crazy. And they were talking about how we can get the plates out of the building without being caught and getting them to some other press facility. I sat in on most of the high-level meetings as managing editor, and my recommendation was: Don't do that. You are going to get somebody killed. It's not going to work anyway. It's not worth it, but that was me and not them, and they did it anyway. And somebody almost did get killed and it only lasted a day and a half and they put that idea to rest.

Risley: So you did publish something for a day and a half.

Ross: We published one paper. Couldn't get it delivered, couldn't get it delivered. So that was that. And shortly thereafter Scripps-Howard announced they had had it. They were done.

Risley: Right. Did you have any indication that that's what Scripps Howard was thinking about doing?

Ross: None, none, because Angus McEachran, who was the editor in chief, was really tapped into Cincinnati, which was the headquarters of Scripps-Howard, and he kept reassuring us. And I mean he kept assuring us: there is no way they are talking about this; they are not thinking about this. Probably what's going to happen was we were going to end up owning both newspapers and then we'll shut the *Post-Gazette* down. I mean that was what everybody believed, including him. And when the call came, he was devastated, and called everybody together in the newsroom and got up on the desk and made the announcement. And it was like the death of a family. And so yeah, it was very dramatic, very dramatic.

Risley: Well, tell me about joining the *Post-Gazette*. How did that take place?

Ross: Well, as soon as Scripps-Howard announced they were going to sell, and the *Post-Gazette* decided they were going to buy, I got a call to come up and talk to them. And I went up two floors and I talked to them and they said, "We would really like you to stay on as managing editor." They had a managing editor, so it was kind of awkward. I thanked them very much and I said, "You know this is going to be a whole new newspaper." The biggest thing that I could see immediately was the culture clash. Keep in mind the different natures of the newspapers: one small, idiosyncratic, kind of free to do whatever; the other newspaper, more corporate because of Scripps-Howard. One newsroom was union, one was not. The *Post-Gazette* guild had tried to unionize the *Press* newsroom the prior year and brought people in from national and it was a big unionizing attempt and they lost. The *Press* staff voted the union down. Well, here we are a year later and they have to be in the union now with the same people who had

tried to organize them. Some were saying, “No way we’re working together.” So the culture clash was enormous. And I said, “We are talking about my becoming managing editor. I said forget journalism for a second here, this is more psychology. We are going to have to try to get all these people working together.” You know it was a horrible, horrible rift to try to mend within a couple of weeks to get a new newspaper on the street.

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Risley: OK, we were talking about the culture of the two newspapers after the strike.

Ross: Right. So John Craig was the editor of the *Post-Gazette*. It’s also kind of a funny aside that Angus McEachran didn’t do a lot of speaking in the community, it wasn’t really his thing. I did a lot of that for him. And invariably John Craig was the other person on a panel, and there wasn’t a time we were in the same room together that we weren’t diametrically opposed on whatever it was. About the weather, it didn’t matter. I said up, he said down. We just didn’t agree on much of anything. Well, suddenly now I am his managing editor.

Risley: Why do you think they hired you?

Ross: Well, that’s a really interesting question. I think a couple of things. The one I prefer is that they knew this history of converting a stodgy old newsroom into something that was getting to be one of the best newspapers in the country. I think they were aware of it because they were in the same building. So they knew that was going on. That’s the one I like. The other one is they were suddenly facing publishing a huge newspaper with a huge Sunday edition. They had never published a Sunday edition. So there were so many aspects of publishing this paper that were new to them – and so I think they saw me as able to bring that about.

Risley: They needed an experienced hand.

Ross: Yes, to produce that kind of a paper in this town and quickly, because they didn’t have anybody who had the experience. So I think those two things came into play. We were still learning each other’s name you know. I didn’t know all of the staff at the *Post-Gazette*. They didn’t know us. They had, in the end, chosen about 100 of the 220 people from the *Press* to stay on to add to their approximately 135 people that they had at the *Post-Gazette*. So they had approximately what the *Press* had, but it was 100 of one and 135 of the other. They had selected the *Press* staffers they thought were the most accomplished, so we ended up with two city hall reporters, two environmental reporters, two education reporters. It appeared to be complete chaos at the beginning and we had only two

weeks to get a paper on the street. So we had to move a whole newspaper from the fourth floor down and combine them in the second floor. We had to set up a whole new beat structure. Everything was different and on top of that we had to work together and well. That was a very, very big challenge.

Risley: What day did the new *Post-Gazette* begin publishing?

Ross: January 18, 1993. So it was right in that beginning stage that all of this had to come together very quickly.

Risley: Do you remember any stories or anything that stands out about that time?

Ross: I can remember some generalities that really were destructive that we had to do away with. And that was [the belief] that's a *Press* person and that's a *Post-Gazette* person. And for a long time that mentality still existed. And if you were a *Press* person, you were kind of persona non grata because you had turned down the union, because you got paid when we didn't, because you are getting the good assignments, which wasn't true. But there was a lot of that kind of rancor in the newsroom. The *Press* people for their part—because the circumstances were different—were much more amenable. They - delete previous phrase were happy to be still working in the town that they wanted to work in, so they were happy to be there. One thing that brought us a long way was an airplane crash. I don't know if you remember when a USAir plane went down in Beaver County in 1994. Suddenly, you know, in a crisis situation like that all bets are off. Everybody is thrown together. Everybody does what they have to do and that coverage was terrific. At the end of that coverage much of that rancor had disappeared.

Risley: That's interesting.

Ross: Because they were doing journalism and when you do journalism well there's a quality there, there's a democracy. Everybody was getting bad assignments, but it was just all hands on deck. And so that in a ghoulish kind of way the airplane crash helped us. But as we continued to do more and more journalism together a lot of [animosity] was falling away. But in truth I can't say it all ever went away in my time there. In my last year you would still hear people say, "Well you know that reporter is a *Press* guy." Ten years, twelve years later, that never completely went away.

Risley: What was it like getting a new Sunday paper off the ground?

Ross: Well, you know in many ways it's exciting because it gave everybody an opportunity for a fresh start to examine things that were untouchable before. So you could throw this away and add this and do that. So it was a very inventive, creative process, done faster than you would want

without any kind of market research or anything. But it turned out to be a very good newspaper. We and because we were just coming back and everybody wanted to impress the reading public and make sure they came back. Because the assumption was with only one newspaper in town money was not an object. So the news hole was enormous. We were doing series every time you turned around, doing the kind of journalism that everybody dreams about, and doing it on a very regular basis. And so it was a robust and terrific paper for the first two years. Then reality set in.

Risley: What do you mean by that?

Ross: We learned that we didn't get the combined readership of those two newspapers. In fact, some 80,000 readers had dropped off the face of the earth during the strike. I mean they weren't reading anything. Where did they go? But they never came back, so that smacked us on the nose. The other assumption was that advertising would be as robust as it was in the good old days. But it wasn't the sum of the two. So it was belt-tightening time. Fortunately, the newsroom stayed pretty healthy for a long time. Right toward the end of my tenure they started talking about cutting the newsroom staff which, as you might expect, I didn't think was such a hot idea.

Risley: Right. Well, before we talk about wrapping up your career at the *Post-Gazette*, what do you think are the things you look back on with the greatest pride during your time at both papers?

Ross: I think I played a role in the quality of journalism improving here in this town. And if in no other way than by convening that little meeting in the beginning and staying with that meeting for seven years and kind of watching it grow. That to me was a lesson in many different things, not the least of which was if you pay attention to people it's amazing what they are going to do. In those seven years there weren't more people, there wasn't new leadership. It was all the same players and the only thing that changed was we were talking about it and then we were experimenting and trying. And in terms of the lesson of human dynamics for any industry that was really a fascinating experiment that worked. And that writers' lunch program we were doing was then exported around the country. I mean we were getting calls all the time from papers all over the country saying, "We've heard about this, we want to start one. How do you do it? Who does it?" So I think there were newsrooms all around the country that actually were benefitting from that same experiment. So I felt very happy about that. The other thing was the ethical standards, and I am not taking credit for this alone. I mean it would have been easy to get really crazy and do some stuff you would have regretted in terms of journalism because it was different and it was new and it was fancy. We didn't get crazy and the ethical standards in the newsroom were very, very high. And Angus McEachran

reinforced that. The one thing he could not abide was any kind of ethical breach. We only fired one person in my time there at the *Press* and it was for an ethical breach. Not anything that was in the paper but an internal newsroom thing. But those things were very, very important in our newsroom at the *Press*. And at the top of everybody's mind. So I felt very good about the kind of journalism that came out of there. I edited those two Pulitzer Prize stories and most of the major projects in a very methodical way. Most of all of the major projects I edited; I took that on myself. I was very pleased at how methodical it was done. Mary Pat Flaherty, who is now with the *Washington Post*, she won a Pulitzer Prize, and Andy Schneider won two Pulitzer Prizes. They used to shake their heads at the intensity of the drill and after while they knew all the questions: What makes you think this is a trend and not just an aberration. How many examples do you have? Well, we've seen it six times. Six times in the universe of this United States? And I'd send them back to get more. And the more research they did, of course, the more the story changed which is sort of saying the obvious but it's not often done that way. I mean if somebody would have come in with six examples of something I guarantee you in most places it would have been a story, but it shouldn't have been a story and it wasn't, and the story then changed. So I liked the standards, both the ethical and the journalistic standards that we were setting and adhering to, no matter how much we drove people crazy.

Risley: What would you say your strengths were as an editor or a manager?

Ross: I am pretty good at organizing things; I am a problem solver. So that if things got in the way of good journalism people would come to me. I'd usually be able to figure out something including crawling under a desk and plugging in a computer plug that they kicked out. I believe in servant leadership as a concept. I tried to practice it, and it was you did whatever you needed to do to get out of the way of these great journalists so they could do their best work. The other thing is, I am a pretty decent writer and I think a very good editor of stories. So I could look at complex material and say, "You know I think we've missed the story here. Got a lot of stuff but I think you missed the story and maybe we ought to tell it in a different way." The funniest example of that was when one of our excellent investigative reporters overwhelmed himself with the volume of his information gathering, as happens with many great investigators. He worked about six months on a really important story and I kept saying, "Where's the story. Give me something to look at. Where's the story?" He finally said, "I have boxes and boxes and boxes of court records and interviews from all over the country. I could use some help." So I loaded the boxes and boxes in my Jeep and I took them home. I had scissors and a Magic marker and I would read part of a page. And I'd say this is part of this theme and I'd cut it apart literally cut it apart—talk about low tech--and I'd set it in a stack. That would be the red pile and then the blue pile and this was going through six months of worth of work and putting

them in the right pile. So I had six colors at the end and so each time I'd go in the next day with the one and I'd hand him the red pile. I said, "Here's day one, make me a story." He was very tolerant of the process and wrote his heart out. And in the same way, he wrote day two, day three, day four. And that piece was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.

Risley: What was the story about?

Ross: The story was about the witness protection program and how it was being used and abused and misused and as evidence of that was the fact that he found scores of protected witnesses in a couple of months. He had no inside track; he was just going through court records and that kind of thing. He'd pick the phone up and call them (the witnesses). So it was a very, very bad system and it needed to be told.

Risley: What do you think your weaknesses were as an editor or a managing editor?

Ross: Lack of patience. I wanted people to get it faster. I had no patience with that kind of political bickering stuff that I was describing with the two cultures. I mean I could not abide that and I probably should have been more patient with that, and waited until it happened and all that. But to me it was it was getting in the way of the journalism and that was just an unforgivable sin in my mind. So I let that be known that's not something I could stomach. It happened anyway, but not in front of me.

Risley: Right. Well tell me about working with John Craig. You said before the strike had different opinions about a lot of things. You obviously found a way to work together, right?

Ross: For a while, yeah. I think through the critical years when we were trying to get this to work we did. But there was no doubt that our journalistic notions were different. And I would say standards, but that sounds like one was higher than the other, and I don't mean that. But I mean we did have different views of many aspects of journalism, for example anonymous sources. At the *Press* if we couldn't find a way to get it on the record we didn't tell it. The *Post-Gazette* did use anonymous sources. And so I mean that was kind of a journalistic difference that we never we never resolved. But I think the fact that there were differences between him and me, and that it wasn't any secret, it bothered some of the staff. Mom and dad were fighting, you know, in shorthand. We weren't literally fighting but we didn't agree on some fundamental things. He is a big enough person to live with it. He could live with having disagreements, but I worried about the staff feeling a little torn.

Risley: I know you said you didn't really think of yourself as a mentor to women but do you think of yourself as something of, dare I say a pioneer, in terms of, you know, being one of the first female managing editors.

Ross: Well, I guess because literally it's true in terms of being one of the first. I mean I also heard a lot from women inside my newsroom and outside my newsroom how important it was for them that I had that job. And so I think just having it was maybe inspirational for some and they just liked the idea. When I said I wasn't a mentor, I mean I wasn't a mentor in terms of picking someone out and say, "Sit here and I am going to teach you all I know." I never felt I knew enough to do that. We were all learning together. And many of the people in my newsroom were my age. Many had more experience, so I mean for me to do that to them wouldn't have been unwarranted for one thing. But we were mentoring each other in journalism all the time, and the women journalists got at least as many great stories to do. You asked me for examples of being a woman managing editor and I didn't have too many. I had more examples being a hard news reporter as a woman because that was back even farther. You know being told by my assistant city editor at the time if I was going to go cover that leaking chemical truck to stay four blocks away. And I said, "How can I cover it four blocks away?" I don't want you anywhere near because we don't know what these chemicals are going to do to women. So I mean there was that kind of stuff. As an assigning editor on the other hand, when Three Mile Island blew the reporter closest to us in Harrisburg was Kathy Kiely, now at the *USA Today*. But she was a young woman reporter who had gone to Harrisburg to cover some legislative thing the day before Three Mile Island occurred. So I picked up the phone and I said, "Kathy, I don't know that I want to assign any reporter to this to tell you the truth because we don't know what it is. We don't know how harmful it is. We don't know what's going to happen next." And I said, "But I want you to know that we would have confidence in you if you wanted to do it." She said, "Just try to keep me out of there." And, of course, she did a great job but that caution on my part wasn't because she was a woman. That was because she was a human being. And we didn't know if they were going to come back with two heads, four ears or something. So the women got great assignments. And maybe it was because I was a woman but I don't think so. I think it was just because they were talented.

Risley: Well, how did journalism change and how did newsrooms change during your career?

Ross: Oh, wow, big time I think. I was in both newsrooms for 33 years. And that's a long time, I guess, but even so, I thought the change was fairly dramatic. And it had everything to do with the economy. You know when you don't have the resources, when you don't have the confidence of when the people in charge of the resources, when they start hacking and whacking and cutting, it changes the journalism and there's no doubt about that. I heard it then and I still hear it now: We have to learn to do more with less. Baloney, baloney. You don't do more with less; you do less with less. You know one of the beauties of the old *Press*, and why I

think the *New York Times* is still the best paper in the world, is not because they are so special with their skills. It's because of the variety within any day's paper. I mean when you look at the volume of stories of the old *Press* and the *Times*, there was something for everybody. The *Press* for a long time was like that. It was robust and we had stories for anybody. So regardless of what your interest was you found something in that paper that was interesting or important to you. Now you have major metropolitan newspapers with sometimes five local stories in the whole damn newspaper. You know it can never be great. It's offering an overall vision of the world and of your community that can't really be represented in the space available. It isn't there, it can't be. So I saw a real change in terms of what was happening, in the role of the newspaper in the community.

Risley: What about in terms of writing style or methods of reporting?

Ross: Well, writing style was a big aspect of what we started with the writers' lunch. That's why we called it that, although it just didn't stay writing. But yeah, the inverted pyramid, and the real clinical "just the facts," was indeed the way it was done. And it served its purpose but it wasn't a whole heck of a lot of fun to read and wasn't entertaining and didn't allow writers to write, so I think you began to see that change. Roy Peter Clark had a lot to do with this in terms of emphasizing the writing and so you began to see a change to more approachable stories. Stories that you wanted to read from start to finish.

Risley: Narrative journalism?

Ross: Yeah, but you know narrative journalism may have been given a bad name by that term. Sure, it was narrative, but one could always argue that the old journalism was narrative too. It was just a different way of telling it. But I would say it was not just narrative but more round in the coverage so that you weren't just looking at the sequence of events in a story but you were looking at the people in that sequence of events and you are looking at their personalities and what they have to bear and so it was more than just telling stories. It was, I think, telling stories about the people of our community. So that was one change.

Risley: How about reporting? You talked about how the *Press* and the *Post-Gazette* did more investigative reporting.

Ross: Yeah, we turned to that as added value, because even in those days with breaking news we were being beat by television and radio and satellite trucks. We had, frankly, the ability to do more than that. So we decided as a group, why don't we do what only we can do for this community. And let the others win on speed. And so we were doing a lot of investigative stories and we were teaching each other. At the *Press*, we had a lot of in newsroom teaching events, not just a writers' lunch but we also set up a

series of courses where Roger Stuart, who was the quintessential investigative reporter, would have a class for anybody who wanted to come and he'd talk about some of his techniques. How to read a budget, where to look in the SEC? How do you mine the crime reports? That kind of thing. And somebody else would talk about the arts and where can you look in the arts for investigative stories. We were teaching each other. That was the culture. We also had a time where I asked anybody in the news staff to identify for themselves something they wanted to learn about journalism. Well, some of the most senior people would say, "I'd really like to learn some different interviewing techniques. I do it the same way all the time. I don't think it's very productive and I know that Cindi Lash she gets people tell her the darnedest things. I'd like Cindi to talk about that." And so Cindi would have a class and people would attend. So that was the nature of that newsroom. That all stopped as I think a couple things happened. We all got older and the resources got smaller. So that all stopped in the end. I felt we had kind of reached a plateau. That was unfortunate because there was a lot more to learn but there was no place to do it.

Risley: So when did you leave the *Post-Gazette*?

Ross: In 2005. It left me.

Risley: Right. Was it tough the last couple of years?

Ross: Well, not personally. I didn't see that coming by the way. I mean it was tough in the newsroom because of the resource issue. And there were financial problems that had to be solved. Naturally, I thought they were solving them the wrong way. They were looking in all the wrong places and I said so. I am not a shrinking violet and so I would speak my mind. I guess when I look back for the last couple years, I was the naysayer. Right problem, wrong solution. So we were diverging on a business side too, as well as journalism so. So I think that, and the fact that the new guy wanted somebody new. [David Shribman replaced John Craig as editor when Craig retired.] He asked me to stay and I did, probably against my better judgment. There was some thought in some circles – certainly in my own head, but I think elsewhere too – that I was the obvious choice for that job. But that didn't happen so then the question is now what do I do. And when he came, he made a special effort to say, "Would you stay? And I said, "Well let's try it." And you know for a couple years we went along. Had the economy of newspapers not gone south at that same time, I don't think there would have been any issue. It was that added pressure that kind of caused the points to diverge more quickly.

Risley: Were you disappointed about not being named editor [when John Craig retired]?

Ross: Yeah, oh yeah, oh yeah. I thought it was a given. I really did and so when that didn't happen, I thought, what could that be all about. What's that all about? I don't really know to this day what that was all about. There's some conventional wisdom, which I never understood, which was you ought to go outside. Get somebody fresh, somebody new. Get another pair of eyes. That never made sense to me, when intimate knowledge of the community is so critical to a good regional newspaper. It didn't make sense to me then. And still doesn't.

Risley: I just have a couple more questions, but I think I need to put in another tape.

[End of tape 1. Start of tape 2, side A]

Risley: OK, we were talking about your last days at the *Post-Gazette*. Had you ever thought about leaving Pittsburgh, you know being an editor somewhere else?

Ross: I thought about it for a moment when the strike ended the *Press* because I didn't know that I was going to be picked up by the *Post-Gazette*. So that was a kind of sudden moment where I thought about it. And I got some calls from people I had met over the years as a member of the American Society of Newspapers Editors (ASNE). I knew them all and so they obviously were watching the situation. I had some opportunities. Leaving Pittsburgh for me would be very, very tough. I mean, I am so committed to this town.

Risley: This is home.

Ross: This is home. This is a community that I felt like I worked 30 years to improve through the newspaper. You know my work at the newspaper wasn't a job for me. It was it was more of a mission. Women are like this. You know, they don't even care about money so much. Somebody said to me one time, "Could I ask what do you make?" I said, "You could ask. but I don't have a clue." I mean, I never paid attention. And that's bad. Women are bad at that. But I mean that's how emotionally committed I was to the newspaper as a vehicle for improving this community, so I saw that all wrapped up into one. For me just to go to another newspaper didn't make a lot of sense. And as it turned out then I didn't have to think about it because it was only a day and I had my job back. I stayed in my same desk in the same office. I never even unpacked, so that was that. This time around I actually found it kind of an exciting notion to stay here—I wasn't going to go—to stay here and do something different.

Risley: How did you join that University of Pittsburgh?

Ross: Well, when I got shown the door, I did what you are supposed to do and started working my sources. I called people and the second person I

called was the vice chancellor here of public affairs who I knew through the newspaper. A year or so before I left the paper, he had complained to me about a bad experience he was having with a reporter at the Post-Gazette. It was my habit to invite people in to give them plenty of access to make their case and so I asked him to come in and tell me about it. I concluded that he was right – he had not been treated respectfully and that, in the process, our story was incomplete at best. We did a follow-up story that made it right. So that’s how I knew him and a year later why I felt comfortable calling him in my networking. “I said, Hey Robert, you may have read.”

Risley: Who is this?

Ross: Robert Hill.

Risley: OK.

Ross: He is vice chancellor for public affairs. I said, “Hey Robert, you may have read – because it was everywhere that when they let me go both newspapers covered it and so did TV. So I said, “You may have heard.” And he said, “You know I was just sitting here thinking how could we use – these were his words – the best female journalist in America.” I said, “Wow, you said the right thing.” And so we started talking the day after I was let go. So I pretty much had a chance at a new job almost immediately, so I was in a luxurious situation that I know most people are not in and I can empathize with them. It mattered to me what kind of institution that I would go to if I stayed in Pittsburgh. I couldn’t go to another newspaper. I don’t know that I would be good in a good PR for the nuclear fuels department of Westinghouse or something like that there. So the kind of institution was mattered to me in terms of this continuation of community involvement. So the University of Pittsburgh seemed to be the perfect fit.

Risley: And it’s worked out.

Ross: So happy ending.

Risley: Good, good. Well, is there anything you’d like to that I haven’t thought of that you’d like to discuss?

Ross: Well, only the future of the industry. I mean I know everybody is trying to figure this out and has been for 20 years. I mean these discussions – about what’s going to happen to newspapers when advertising drops off and people don’t want to read us anymore – those were discussions at the ASNE 20 years ago. This should have come as no surprise to anybody and everybody was waiting for somebody else to come up with the next grand idea. And it probably isn’t there in terms of a grand idea except for

the fact that there is nothing wrong with journalism. It's the funding of journalism that's the question.

Risley: The economic model.

Ross: The economic model and I think there are some possibilities out there: an institution such as the University of Pittsburgh that already serves the community in so many ways. I mean there is nothing to say it couldn't oversee great journalism. But, you know, somebody has got to come up with the model.

Risley: The Poynter Institute model?

Ross: The Poynter Institute model, and I think there are some others – maybe a foundation. I mean like a Pittsburgh foundation or one of the existing philanthropies in town would actually fund the gathering of the news. And since it's going to be electronic, you don't have all those other costs. You don't have the delivery, the printing, the paper, so that's probably doable. So somebody just has to step up and do it. And I am looking at you.

Risley: Well, we'll try to provide the instruction. Thank you very much.

Ross: I hope it was helpful.

[End of interview]