

This interview is part of the **Southern Oral History Program** collection at the **University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill**. Other interviews from this collection are available online through www.sohp.org and in the **Southern Historical Collection** at **Wilson Library**.

P.1. Southern Journalism: Media and the Movement

Interview P-0008

Joel Bulkley

15 August 2014

Abstract – p. 2

Transcript – p. 4

ABSTRACT – JOEL BULKLEY

Interviewee: Joel Bulkley
Interviewer: Joey Fink
Interview Date: August 15, 2014
Location: Chapel Hill, North Carolina
Length: Approximately 1 hour and 17 minutes

Joel Bulkley was born in Connecticut in 1944. He moved to Chapel Hill in the early 1960s as a student at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and wrote for the *Daily Tar Heel*, covering the civil rights demonstrations in Chapel Hill. In 1967, he helped Robert (Bob) Brown start a new semi-weekly newspaper, the *North Carolina Anvil*, and served as co-editor until the *Anvil* stopped running in 1983. Bulkley still lives in Chapel Hill and now publishes *Community Sports News*.

With more than fifty years of reporting on news in Chapel Hill and Durham, Bulkley's interview is full of insights into the tone and tenor of local journalism and politics in Orange and Durham Counties. He characterizes the civil rights news coverage in the *Durham Herald* and the *Raleigh News and Observer* as "pathetic" in the 1960s, explaining that reporters rarely went to the demonstrations; instead, they gathered information on attendance and impact from the police officers or the business owners. Bulkley was so well known as the local reporter who attended all the demonstrations that when police saw his yellow convertible, they followed him. He interviewed delivery men at picketed restaurant, gauging the true impact of the boycotts on business by the reduction in supply orders. Asked whether his attendance at these demonstrations was as a participant or witness, Bulkley replied, "Some of both." He commented on political changes from the early 1960s to the late 1970s, noting that power in Orange County shifted from the conservative, rural base in Hillsborough to the more liberal, urban base in Chapel Hill, and reflected on the role of local journalism in this shift.

In 1967, Bulkley joined Bob Brown as co-editor of the *Anvil*, a semi-weekly publication on local arts and politics, with Brown's stated goal to "raise hell in the public interest." Throughout the interview, Bulkley reflects on the *Anvil*'s accomplishments and struggles and relationship to local activism and politics, explaining that "we thought the paper could be an instrument of change. He discusses *Anvil* writer Leon Rooke's interview with basketball player Charlie Scott, the first black scholarship athlete at UNC Chapel Hill, and how *Anvil* reporters had access to black leaders in Durham, such as Howard Fuller, because "they didn't want to talk to the *Durham Herald*, and the *Durham*

Herald didn't want to talk to them." Bulkley had a reputation for asking "tough questions" of political leaders, and sometimes "the muckety-mucks" of UNC and Duke tried to dodge him, as with the 1969 Allen Building takeover on Duke's campus. Bulkley explains that he saw the *Anvil* as "a means to educate, to do something." He also reflects on the struggle to finance the paper through the printing press that Brown ran, the long days and often nights that he worked to get issues out, and on bartending for thirty years at He's Not Here to help pay the bills.

Bulkley was truly an "eyewitness" to change in central North Carolina. The issues, he reflects, "got harder" from the 1960s to the 1970s, "harder to figure out, harder to deal with, harder to mobilize around." He offers anecdotes to explain this, comparing his reporting on integrating a restaurant to reporting on employment, equal pay, and equal opportunity ("tougher nuts to crack"). When asked how he characterized his role as a local journalist, he replied, "Practical politics-slash-work [...] a lot of work."

TRANSCRIPT: JOEL BULKLEY

Interviewee: Joel Bulkley
Interviewer: Joey Fink
Interview Date: August 15, 2014
Location: Chapel Hill, North Carolina
Length: Approximately 1 hour and 17 minutes

START OF INTERVIEW

[Sounds of an adult and child(ren) talking in the background during the first 22-23 minutes of the interview.]

Joey Fink: This is Joey Fink with the Southern Oral History Program. It's August fifteenth, 2014. I'm in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, interviewing Joel Bulkley for the (Music) and the Media Oral History Project.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

Joey Fink: Can you tell me, just to start off, a little bit about where you're from? Did you grow up in the South? Did you come to the South? If you did, what brought you?

Joel Bulkley: No, I'm a native of Connecticut. I came to school at the University in the early sixties. I was the first paid reporter on the *Daily Tar Heel*. I covered student government for a while. I was the summer school editor, was the managing editor. I covered all the sit-ins in Chapel Hill for the *Tar Heel*.

JF: Can I ask you when you started covering the sit-ins for the *Tar Heel*, had you been going to them or participating in them previously, or did you go to them as a reporter to cover them, or a little bit of both?

JB: Some of both. I was interested in what they were doing and the role that students had in the organizing or activities. And I was working for the *Tar Heel*, so I said, “How about—I’m going to go to this anyway, so how about if I just write a story?” They said, “Fine,” because they were often at nights or on weekends where other people didn’t necessarily want to work.

JF: Um-hmm.

JB: I had some fun incidents. I had a yellow convertible with a white top. I would go to the organizing meeting, and they’d say, “Well, we’re going to such-and-such a store where we’re going to have a sit-in.” Well, sometimes I was going down Franklin Street on Stroud Hill, and the cops were coming up the hill, and they’d see me. They’d fall in behind me. So, I had to trade, eventually trade my car so that—couldn’t have the police get there before the demonstrators.

JF: So, they knew your yellow convertible meant, “(0:02:20) there’s something going down”?

JB: Yeah. And for a while I had Connecticut plates until I got them changed and became an in-state student, since I had to pay my own tuition, so it made a big difference.

JF: You were at some of the protests that stand out in memory, even from the written record, such as you mentioned earlier a protest where demonstrators were urinated on and a protest where ammonia was poured on demonstrators.

JB: Yeah, one of them happened right near the library. There was a convenience store called the Rock Pile at the intersection of Estes and Franklin. The demonstrators went inside. The owner locked the door and dumped ammonia on them. I was sitting in my car outside. I didn’t have any idea what was going on until they called the police. And

I think the sheriff had to come, because the city boundary used to be the creek, so it was outside the city. But eventually they came, and the rescue squad people came, because some got ammonia in their eyes, and they went to the hospital. They were okay, luckily.

JF: When you reported on these events, did you get any pushback or directive from your people at the *Daily Tar Heel* on how to report on it?

JB: Not for any one story. The editor and I were called to the Dean of Students' office once. We also were covering those demonstrations in Raleigh at the legislature and outside the hotel downtown where the legislators stayed. And occasionally a student would get arrested, so we'd have to report that, too. And Dean Cathey said, you know, "Why do you do this?"

We said, "Well, you know, this is a student newspaper. Students are getting arrested. That's what we do." He said, "Yeah. Well, you know, Joel, the paper gets mailed to every legislator and trustee and bigwig or whatever." And I said, "I don't know anything about that. I just write what I see and what I know." And he said, "Well, [0:05:00] I wish you wouldn't do that." And the editor said, "Yeah, well, we'll take that into consideration."

And we went back and kept doing what we were doing, which was run an aggressive student newspaper. The paper sent reporters to Ole Miss when Meredith integrated the university. I went to Birmingham and Bull Connor and the dogs in [19]62 or [19]63, or whatever it was. We had this wonderful *Readers Digest* travel money, which is kind of strange, considering how conservative they were. But we would just have to front the money and produce receipts and get reimbursed for gas or meals or hotels or whatever. And they sent—I think they sent nine people to Ole Miss, and the

stories in the *Tar Heel* were better than the *New York Times*, because we could go on campus. All you do is put your finger over where it said UNC on the student ID, and it looked just like an Ole Miss ID.

JF: [Laughs]

JB: So, we could go to the student union, go to the cafeteria, talk to people, where the *Times* and the AP guys, they were all out there on the other side, off-campus somewhere. And the *Tar Heel* won a lot of awards for stories that generally didn't appear anywhere else. And our idea was, well, if we're going to send people to Ole Miss, then we certainly ought to be able to send them to Durham or Chapel Hill to cover what's going on here. And the Chapel Hill paper would only write stuff like, well, "Last week the police arrested a hundred demonstrators and, you know, three sit-ins," and that would be their story for the week. We were a little more explicit.

On the night where the student got urinated on at Watts Grill, a lady pulled the blinds, but we could still see her squatting over this student. And then, they really pulled the blinds tight. We couldn't see. So, the sheriff came and took them to the jail, which was in the basement of the police department downtown. We went down there. I talked to Chief Blake. He said, "You'd better go downstairs and talk to Luke Calhoun, the student who was urinated on." I said, "Okay." Luke Calhoun said, "Yeah, she squatted on me and urinated on me."

One effect of that story was to drive Watts Grill out of business, because even the college kids who maybe didn't support sit-ins—they weren't too sure about this civil rights stuff—they didn't see that they should be supporting a business where people did things like that. Because some of this stuff occurred over Christmas vacation. So, I wrote

a story for the first *Tar Heel* in January, saying, you know, these things happened. That was about the worst.

JF: When you said that the police chief called you in to have you go down and speak to Calhoun—.

JB: Yeah, he said he was urinated on. I said, “Yeah, right. Sure, Chief.”

JF: So, the chief was looking for you to either corroborate or dismiss the story?

JB: Yeah, he was a good guy, an honest guy, who showed time and again that people deserved to be treated with dignity. The cops were pretty frustrated. They were working a lot of overtime hours but they weren’t getting paid. They’d get comp time eventually. So, some—they’d try to bang the knees of the demonstrator into the metal post at the top of the stairs. The kids would all go limp, so the cops would have to carry them. And the chief had a meeting of all the officers and said, “If it happens again, you’ll be fired.” [0:10:00] It didn’t happen again.

JF: Um-hmm. So, the police were sort of frustrated.

JB: A lot of extra hours, always on weekends when they maybe would be off or were scheduled to be off. And it was often the same people. Sometimes people would get arrested two or three times on the same Saturday.

JF: So, you were writing for the *Daily Tar Heel*. Did you write for other papers or (0:10:38)?

JB: I did some stuff for *Newsday* in New York, kind of feature stuff, but I didn’t know anybody. I mean, I worked for the *Durham Herald* as a stringer, but they had a Chapel Hill reporter. So, sometimes I’d call them up, and they’d say, “Well, we’ve got it covered,” or “We’re not doing anything on that,” or whatever.

JF: What did you think of the coverage by the other newspapers, like the Durham *Herald* or the *N&O*, the Raleigh *News and Observer*?

JB: It was pathetic. You know, like they would, if there was a demonstration somewhere, they might go. They might not. Or they might just call up the police chief and say, “Well, what happened today, Chief?” And he’s say, “Well, so many got arrested,” and whatever. And that would be the story. You know, because, again, it’s weekends. They probably don’t want to work weekends anymore than anybody else does. And there was a, you know, occasional TV report, but not much.

JF: So, when—can you tell me, sort of moving on to the late sixties and the creation of the North Carolina *Anvil*, could you tell me sort of how you met Robert Brown, the early conversations with him about starting the *Anvil*?

JB: I had known Bob Brown for years. If you lived in Chapel Hill and did anything, like go to a play or a demonstration, Bob would be there. He lived on Franklin Street in a big house, kind of where McDonald’s is now. Anyway, he was publishing a literary magazine, and I had helped him collate it one time, because he needed volunteers. And I was in and out of school a bit, since I didn’t go to a lot of classes. I kind of majored in putting out the *Tar Heel*.

JF: [Laughs]

JB: So, I’d go to summer school in order to be academically eligible to go to school in the fall. But maybe I wouldn’t go to school in the fall. I’d worked for the Chapel Hill paper for a while. They wouldn’t—at the time, they said, “No more civil rights stories, Joel. You’ll cover government and schools, whatever.” I said, “Okay.” I needed a job to pay my rent.

One time Bob came to see me, or he saw me drinking a beer after work, or something. And he said, "I'm thinking about starting a newspaper. I've got this printing company going," so he could do his magazine instead of having to pay somebody else to print it. He said, "Would you be interested?" I said, "I don't know. What do you have in mind?"

And he really was just thinking about how to do it. And I said, "Well, I mean, I would think it should do the things that aren't done here," or whatever. He said, "Well, my office is in Durham in the Lakewood shopping center." And I said, "Well, include Durham. You know, maybe we could sell a few subscriptions." I naively thought that we could sell a few copies. But he said, "Well, I'll think on this some." And we talked on and off, and then he finally said, "Okay. [0:15:00] I'm going to do it."

So, he got a typesetter. But we didn't have the right—enough things. You need drawing boards and file cabinets, kind of basic stuff, so it took quite a while. I quit the paper, but it took quite a while to get it organized. Then we said, "Okay, we've got this newspaper, and nobody knows anything about it." So, we decided we were going to sell—or get everybody, every liberal group's membership list: the ACLU, the Community Church, any group we could, the Unitarians, the Quakers. But, of course, the same names were on every list.

JF: [Laughs] So, you'd get twenty lists, but you'd still only get the same amount of names?

JB: Yeah. But anyway, we made a master list and we mailed it when the paper finally got going. Ah, that was a nightmare. We had all the names on stickers. But we, of course, didn't know anything about the postal rules. You have to separate them all by zip

code, and we didn't have a lot of the zip codes. So, they wouldn't let us mail them until we got it all organized. And then, of course, we found that the lists weren't really current. These people move around a lot. And so, a lot of them came back at, you know, forty cents apiece, or whatever it was, to get the right address.

But, meanwhile, we're supposed to be doing this thing once a week. Well, we're also—he's running this printing company. You know, we're like working all day doing printing stuff to pay the rent, and then work on the *Anvil* at night and weekends. I was a bartender at He's Not Here. I worked Saturday and Sunday daytime. Many a day, I'd go from Friday night work to Saturday bar work, just go home and wash my face and go to work.

JF: [Laughs]

JB: And pray that it wasn't a football day where I'm going to get my ass kicked.

JF: [Laughs] You'll be (in the weeds) with no sleep.

JB: But it took a while to get—a lot of Bob's friends were literary types.

Deadlines weren't things they were used to.

JF: [Laughs]

JB: He'd say, "Look, I've got to have it next Wednesday," you know, and maybe it'd come Thursday or Friday. So, then you have to anticipate, "Okay, well, if we don't have it next week, we'll just put it in the week after." But meanwhile, we've got this hole here for next week. And then, things would happen. The council or the school board or somebody would do something outrageous. So, you'd say, "Well, we'll just hold this story and plug in this new story."

You know, like, a newspaper changes; it doesn't stay the same. But it was hard to plan until we got more writers, and they understood that, you know, if I said five hundred words, I can't deal with a thousand or eight hundred, or whatever. Because my way of dealing with it is whack it from the end.

JF: Can I ask, if some of your writers who were more literary types were sometimes difficult to deal with, at least keeping them to deadlines or word limits, why did you have them as your writers?

JB: Well, see, they were the only people that Bob knew when we started, because they had written for his magazine or had talked to him about some story they wanted to do.

JF: Um-hmm.

JB: And the stories were usually wonderful. They weren't necessarily timely or relevant to what we were doing, but they were like a bonus. Okay, we've got this city stuff or school stuff. We had a woman who did [0:20:00] a lot of civil rights stuff from eastern North Carolina. She had a lot of contacts. People would call her up, and she'd go down to Tarboro or Edenton.

JF: Um-hmm.

JB: And, you know, until she got back, we'd have no idea what—is this a story? Is this a two-part thing? Is it a one-part thing? Is it something that'll take a lot of research? So, you had to kind of be pretty nimble to—.

JF: Nobody is emailing a story back then. [Laughs]

JB: Yeah, but that was okay. I mean, that's just the way you grow (and learn 0:20:41) and stuff. And as we—the more papers we did, people would call and say,

“Well, I’m a scientist. I’d like to write something about such-and-such.” And they’d come in, and we’d narrow it down so it could be feasible or that it would even belong in a newspaper, whether it was an advocacy piece or a story about what the environmental management board did on the coast or something. I mean, it was a pretty talented audience we were reaching. And they had a lot of interests, some of which we could deal with, some of which we just couldn’t.

JF: I would say, looking over some of the issues, and I was looking through Bob Brown’s archive, you covered so many different kinds of issues and blended arts and entertainment with politics and advocacy.

JB: Yeah, and every now and then, we lucked into a really interesting story. Leon Rooke did a story with the first real interview with Charlie Scott, Carolina’s first black basketball player, about what was it like to be booed at his first two home games in Chapel Hill. And Dean Smith’s people, first of all, they didn’t want—they wanted to control the interview and be present and all that. But Leon wasn’t a newspaper writer. He was novelist. He had written books and short stories. And somehow he ran into Charlie somewhere, and they sat down and talked, from which came this really nice story. [Sound of door closing, and background conversation ends]

And, of course, Charlie helped his own cause by, like in game three, I think, he scored the winning basket and never got booed again—here. He got booed everywhere else he went, especially when South Carolina was still in the league. But that would—you know, that’s kind of the way journalism is. You go out to do a story on A, and you end up with B and C, and they may be better than A. You just luck out.

But it was—you know, it was a lot of work. We were printing the bus schedules for the Town of Chapel Hill, and we're exhausted and we're screwing up, printing the front of A on the back of C, instead of B, or whatever. And then, you have to redo them.

JF: And so, your funding came from the printing operation, right? It didn't seem, from what I understood—?

JB: Yeah, Bob and I had a little bit of money, but—.

JF: And you didn't sell ads, did you?

JB: Yeah, we sold a few but, you know, who's going to buy an ad in a lefty paper? The Intimate Bookshop and maybe the Bulls Head would buy an ad once in a while. The Rialto Theater would buy an ad. But ads were not a significant revenue source, except at election time. But generally, the ads were just—they were helpful, but they weren't going to pay the (freight 0:24:26). The printing company had to, and it had its own issues. I mean, okay, we loved doing business with the Town of Chapel Hill because you could hand them a bill and you'll get paid in two weeks.

We were printing all the flyers for the AFL-CIO and shipping them on buses to Greensboro and Asheville and stuff, and when we got paid was anybody's guess. If it was some political thing, and the guy won the election, [0:25:00] then we'd probably get paid. But if the guy lost the election—. I mean, how are—you know, they're calling us from the Raleigh AFL-CIO office, saying, "We need a flyer. We need five thousand flyers for Joe Schmoe running for the city council in, I don't know, Rockingham or something. Here's what we want to say. Can you put them on a bus to such-and-such, care of so-and-so?" And we'd say, "Yeah. Who do we send the bill to?" "Oh, send it over here." Yeah,

well. That's like the bottomless pit of the AFL-CIO. They had about as much money as we did, which wasn't too much.

JF: [Laughs]

JB: But they had a political action committee and, you know, in election years they sometimes had money. So, money was always a struggle.

Then, we had accounts, like we did the first catalogues for Southern Season, but he was hard to deal with. He'd come in and he'd hand you the copy, and then he'd come back tomorrow and change the prices. You spent all night typesetting whatever it was, and he'd come and say, "No, that's too high or too low." Or, "I don't want to put candy in. I want to put this in." But, of course, he still wants the job done at the same timeframe, except that it can't be, because you've got to go back and redo this stuff, or change it, or start over, or whatever. And then, you know, he was new at it, too. He had never done a catalogue. But, you know, we muddled along as best we could.

JF: So, you mentioned a little bit about relationships with the University when you talked about Leon Rooke doing the interview with Charlie Scott, the basketball player. Could you tell me a little bit more about what kind of relationships the *Anvil* and its writers had with local politicians, local police, university types? Did people want to talk to you, not want to talk to you?

JB: I think it depended on the story. Like, the people at Duke would be helpful. But when the students took over Allen Building, and we did an entire issue on it, since we were there, after that, some were helpful, but some of the bigger muckety-mucks, you know, they wouldn't return your call, or they'd wait until, you know, five after five and call you back and hope that you'd be gone. But, of course, we were always there.

JF: Um-hmm. [Laughs] Did they know your paper? Did they know that it had this sort of intentionally—reporting on things that others weren't reporting on, or with a different slant?

JB: I think it depended on whose ox was getting gored.

JF: [Laughs]

JB: I mean, they liked the idea that we would review plays or books or whatever, you know, if those things interested them. But if they were in science, or whatever, you know, they didn't care. They generally only worried about stuff—I mean, we weren't like “60 Minutes” showing up on your door, and people want to take the week off, or whatever. Everything kind of ebbed and flowed.

We'd go to all the council meetings, and some council members were friendlier than others, but that's always been the case. You know, if someone was a big advocate of the buses—you know, that was the big deal when Howard Lee got elected, the public transit system. Well, as you can imagine, not everybody felt that way: gonna cost money, they make noise, whatever. You know, the community was divided. [0:30:00]

And for years, Chapel Hill had been dominated by the rural people in Hillsborough. You know, they might have been Democrats, but they sure weren't liberal Democrats. Like, we had trouble registering students. The board of elections controlled where registration was, when it was. And as they found out during the McCarthy campaign, you need to control these things. They don't happen on their own. And so, we wrote stories and stuff, and then eventually the progressives, the Chapel Hill progressives took over the county commissioners. So, they had a majority. Then the board of elections had new members, who had a different view of who should vote and how easy it should

be or could be or might be. I mean, there were always issues with Raleigh and stuff, but you do what you can. I mean, Chapel Hill had most of the money in the county, had most of the students in the public schools, but the county, when the conservatives ran it, they ran it the reverse, you know. They got all the new programs up there, paid for the people down here, who got nothing. Well, we helped to change that.

Some issues were tougher to deal with, like the retiring sheriff now, Lindy Pendergrass, we helped get him elected, even though we knew him in his previous life as narcotics investigator for the Chapel Hill cops, who had done some questionable things. He later made amends, you know, and promised to treat everybody fairly, whether they were hippies or blacks or older people or what. Because—I mean, the paper could have influence because we could endorse candidates at election time. The Chapel Hill paper didn't. The *Tar Heel* wavered. They do so now, but they didn't back then much and they didn't really care about politics. They cared about the campus and students, and they didn't see it as important as other people did.

JF: So, the *Anvil* was unique in the area for endorsing candidates, sort of taking a stand on some issues with the intention of influencing readers?

JB: Yeah. I mean, we used to try to do things to blow our own horn. Like, I'd try and get invited on those CHL at those meet-the-candidate programs. I'd get on there and ask tougher questions than the radio station. And remember, at the time, or part of the time, the radio station was owned by the mayor, Sandy McClamroch. So, they weren't going to rock the boat at all.

JF: Um-hmm. [Laughs]

JB: But, yeah, I was kind of like their token radical. I'd ask questions, you know, and they would equate it, you know, "Do you still beat your wife" kind of questions. But I'd ask—they had some people running for the town council that owned slum property. A couple of them hadn't paid their taxes; they were a couple of years behind. You know, public record stuff. Made them squirm a lot.

And generally, the bad guys lost, but not always. We lost a lot of elections. But we started to win some. I mean, I guess the election of Howard Lee was the start of [0:35:00] a political awakening in southern Orange. You know, there had never been a woman county commissioner. There had never been a woman county commission chairman. So, (they were 0:35:22) some pretty good people, and they did a lot of work, and it's still in evidence today.

The town, on the other hand, I don't know. I don't think it really has ever been very progressive, and it certainly hasn't been recently. They talk a lot of stuff. But, I don't know, I think the town is not a good employer. The people at the bottom of the pay scale are not treated well, and there are all kinds of lawsuits pending. The town wins some, loses some, but then they appeal. And so, you can't really say, "Well, this is trending one way or the other." But a lot of people don't care. I mean.

JF: That was a question I was just about to ask is do you—comparing sort of your intended audience in the late sixties and seventies of the *Anvil*, versus now, is there an audience now like there was then? Why do you think there was an audience then for what you were trying to do with the *Anvil*?

JB: Well, people here care about a lot of different things. And one of the ways they care is they send—this is the greatest place to raise money in the state, I'm sure. I'm

sure Kay Hagan raised more money here than, per capita, than anywhere in the state. But that's easy. Anybody can write a check if you have the money.

It's the work. And we had a chance to elect a black sheriff in the summer runoff. I didn't see much effort there. I didn't see much money there. I'm sure a lot of the money went to Hagan and the National Democratic Senate Committee, or whoever. I mean, I'm getting these letters, two or three a day. The beg-a-thon is on. You know, opportunities come and go, and it's hard to beat an incumbent sheriff. You've got all those deputy/campaign workers when he runs for re-election.

And the, you know, people used to say, "The *Independent* will help us out." You know, well, I think the *Independent* is fading, or its influence is fading. And certainly in the summer, it's hard. There are fewer people. But even during the regular year, I think the influence of the *Independent* is on a downhill slide, because they are now more of an entertainment paper, they're more focused on Durham and Raleigh. And they do still election stuff. It's superficial.

JF: The *Anvil* seemed to have kind of a balance between politics, policy, news, stuff we could sort of classify as news—.

JB: Yeah, politics and the arts.

JF: And then, some arts. And Bob Brown had a quote, saying he wanted to bridge the "ridiculous gap" between arts and politics. Can you say a little bit about that, about sort of the *Anvil* allocating space in the *Anvil* for different topics, for entertainment and arts and politics?

JB: Bob was more of an idealist than me. But that's because he had been—you know, he founded a literary magazine. He had a different focus than I did. I was more

interested—I mean, I saw the paper as just a means to educate people to *do* something. The arts [0:40:00] was more about thinking and learning from what you saw or what you heard or whatever. I was more in the concrete—.

And we, of course, didn't know how to run a business. And by the time we figured out, you know, we've got two business schools here, we should maybe go talk to somebody, you know, we had already wasted thousands of dollars. But we had a lot of fun. Threw the Klan guy from Durham out of our office in Lakewood.

JF: What happened there?

JB: C.P. Ellis. It's really—it's funny, because he later became a—he wore many hats. He was a union organizer at Duke for the low engineering type, mechanical people. But he was also the—I don't know if he was the Grand Dragon—some muckety-muck in the Klan. And, of course, he didn't like what we were doing. But eventually he hooked up with this black lady in Durham. They finally figured out that poor people were getting screwed by the school system. They weren't prepared to get a job when they got out of high school. They couldn't read well enough or do math well enough, and it didn't matter whether you were white or black. So, they co-chaired this education committee in Durham—about which there was a movie made, I think, or a TV movie anyway—which was kind of fascinating, because he saw that without education people at the bottom of the ladder were going to stay there forever. But I had never seen one of those idiots up close.

JF: So, why did he come to the *Anvil* office?

JB: He objected to some story we wrote. I mean, people always objected to stories.

JF: H said he was coming to complain. [Laughs]

JB: Yeah. It didn't matter, though. I mean, we had kind of a unique access to people, [coughs] to black leaders in Durham, because the *Herald* didn't want to talk to them, and they didn't want to talk to the *Herald*, but they'd talk to us. Like, Howard Fuller, who was the principal organizer of—pushing the city to do a better job on education or housing or crime or whatever, he would talk to us and he would explain why he thought this was necessary or not necessary, or whatever, which would lend themselves to nice stories. But they'd also lend themselves to—everybody didn't share Howard's view of the world. [Laughs]

But most of the rednecks didn't see the paper or didn't read the paper. We occasionally caught—we were so poor we had honor racks. The paper cost a quarter. We hoped people put in a quarter. Well, that was ridiculous. I mean, we'd get pennies, slugs, and some quarters. And that's from the liberals.

JF: [Laughs]

JB: We didn't get a whole lot from the conservatives, but we weren't putting the paper, you know, in their favorite restaurant or store or whatever.

JF: So, this guy Ellis came into the Lakewood office to complain, and you threw him out?

JB: Yeah, he got—he was threatening us or something. I don't know. I was just [0:45:00] sitting at my desk. He was talking to Bob. And, you know, he was prone to raising his voice as if it was some kind of union meeting or something, and that would—if you raise your voice, you somehow get more respect or something. That didn't work. [Laughs] Just another day of bizarre—another bizarre day at the *Anvil*.

JF: [Laughs] Did you have people that sort of stuck it through with the *Anvil* for a good amount of time, or did you have more freelance people that came and went?

JB: We had a couple of people that were with us for a while. [Coughs] I mean, they were—you know, they were lefty politico types. A couple of them were maybe in grad school or something, and so they could do a story a week, or a story every other week, or something. And when we had money, you know, we'd try and give them five or ten bucks. And when we didn't, which was most of the time, we'd say thanks.

But, like, we'd stumble into things, like we found a woman who would review dance for us. Well, then the *N&O* wanted to hire her, the *Spectator* wanted to hire her, and sometimes they did because they had money, and we had zippo. Then, along came the *Independent*, and they had lots of money and they stole some of our reviewers, you know, which made it harder. By then, it was—the economics were even harder, in the eighties, the early eighties.

JF: You stuck it through for a while, right? The first issue was in [19]67.

JB: Yeah, I mean, we tried different things to generate money. We did a calendar supplement, which we would mail Thursday so you'd get it Friday, that we could sell some ads for. Because we knew sometimes the paper, which was supposed to be mailed Thursday or Friday—sometimes it wasn't. I mean, I knew the schedule when the trucks left Durham, Raleigh and Chapel Hill, [laughs] and we cut it close a lot. It was—I don't know. It was just—the economics were hard. Everything cost more. The paper company tightened up the credit. We'd have to send them money before they'd send us more paper. And then, finally, you know, it just became impossible.

JF: Do you think your—?

JB: Which is how I got into the—well, I really got into the sports business because of the *Anvil*. Another way we tried to make money—a guy had come to us and said, “What would it cost to print a paper that just dealt with Chapel Hill softball?” We said, “Okay, so much money.” And he disappeared, never came back. Well, we had all this wonderful scrap paper, this 90-pound stuff left over from some printing jobs, really nice, pretty, fancy paper. So, we did a few softball papers, had scores and standings and a picture, sold some ads, which the money went to keep the *Anvil* going.

Well, after the *Anvil* folded, I went back to the guy who had the original idea about the softball paper. I said, “Well, how about—?” I said, “Do you have any money? [Laughs] And if so, would—” he ran a bookstore downtown—I said, “Would you be interested in doing a sports paper? It would have to include more than softball.” And he said, “Sure, let’s give it a try.” So, we did. And now, in its thirty-first year, or whatever it is, I am doing *Community Sports News*. [0:50:00] I mean, in the late seventies and eighties, the technology changed a lot. The costs of doing business were much higher.

JF: Do you think that the audience changed? Did you still have an audience for the kind of reporting you did that seemed to—I mean, you wanted to go a little deeper and challenge people a little more, take a stand, not just report the facts?

JB: Well, when we started in the sixties, as I said, we had the first arts calendar. Well, remember, the *Spectator* came along in the seventies, and Bernie Reeves and those people had money. So, they’d have a calendar, or they’d have reviews. Then, when they stole some of our reviewers—I mean, I don’t know where you find a dance reviewer. The only way I knew how to do it was to put a box in the paper and say, “We’re looking for a dance reviewer. If you’re interested, give us a call.” You know, you can always find film

reviewers or book reviewers, but not necessarily dance or architectural critics or whatever.

JF: What about the reporting on the (global) politics, on sort of issue and advocacy reporting?

JB: Well, one of the things we did is we belonged to this thing called the Underground Press Syndicate. And they did two things: They required you to mail your paper to all of them, and they would mail their paper to you. And they sold ads (in behalf of) some imaginary number of readers, subscribers, whatever. But we got ads for Woodstock and stuff, some of which we even got paid for. You know, and during the early seventies, you know, we got record ads. Say, there was a concert at Duke or Carolina. I remember there was—James Taylor did a concert somewhere. So, his record company sent a big ad, and it was an ad for the concert, which helped a lot.

But those faded. The costs were going up. Paper went up a lot. Just the utilities for the building went up a lot. We had a—by that time, we were in an office on Morgan Street. And there were other issues like Morgan Imports was next to us, and they burned down on a Saturday. I got a call at He's Not Here from the Durham fire department, and the guy said, "Bring all your blankets, Joel. The building next door is on fire," with all the rattan furniture and all that stuff they sell. Well, the fire department did a good job of preventing the fire from spreading, but the water came in through the walls, up through the floor. Well, here we've got all this newsprint—not newsprint, but printing paper, which is like a sponge. It absorbs humidity; paper absorbs everything. So, you know, we spent days just sweeping the floor out the door. We rented those big industrial fans to dry everything as best we could. And, you know, we still got a paper out the next week, but it

was, you know, they don't tell you about that in newspaper school: You're gonna spend—I mean, when I got to South Square I could see the smoke. I went, “Holy shit!”

JF: Uhm.

JB: But they were—it was a brick building, and they did a good job. Now it's a parking lot across from Brightleaf Square on the Morgan Street end of this property, whatever. [0:55:00] And Morgan Imports is around the corner on Peabody Street, I think it is.

JF: Well, you mentioned this Underground Newspaper Syndicate. So, it seems like there were many of these like alternative or independent papers in the seventies, *Protean* [pronounces *pro-te-an*] *Radish* and—.

JB: There weren't many around here.

JF: I was going to ask, as far as the *Anvil*—.

JB: The *Protean* [pronounces *pro-tee-an*] *Radish*.

JF: *Protean* [pronounces *pro-tee-an*] *Radish*. For the *Anvil*, just looking through the archives, there were some really positive comments on the *Anvil* being “the most aggressively progressive publication in the South,” and “an aggressive champion of reform (0:55:54).” And I was really struck by one in the *Nation* that said that the *Anvil* is “one of the few that offers sophisticated political analysis and resists being vulgar.” What do you think of that kind of feedback, especially the “resisting being vulgar”?

JB: Well, if you've seen those underground things, they mostly come from big cities, and like the lead story might just say, “Fuck the Man” and rant about whatever. We didn't see that as a way to get anything done. And they were—the big advantage they had is they were cities, so there were a lot of music ads, a lot of nightclubs, and they, you

know, they could get record ads and stuff more easily than, you know, here we are in Durham, North Carolina.

JF: Um-hmm.

JB: And they would do festival editions, send people whatever. We—you know, that wasn't—I mean, we weren't an underground newspaper, to start with, underground certainly not in the sense the *Berkeley Barb* was, or whatever. And, you know, I don't know if we were an alternative paper. We were certainly an alternative to the local rags.

I mean, I think the paper's influence maybe waned some once the liberals could take over, say, the Durham city council or the Durham county commissioners. You know, maybe they didn't need us as much as they did to get them there. And maybe they went on to other issues, and maybe we did, too. I don't know. But the biggest thing was we had no business expertise and we got—there was a fair amount of harassment.

The North Carolina Department of Revenue went after us pretty hard about sales tax on newspapers. When we started the paper, there was no sales tax on a newspaper, whether a single copy or a subscription. The law got changed along the way. Luckily, they could only go back two or three years. Anyway, they came and audited us and said we owed, I don't know, thirty or forty thousand dollars, which was baloney. They just looked at the number of subscriptions, you know. Out-of-state people, you know, we sold the paper to a lot of libraries and stuff—there was no tax on that. But it took an enormous amount of time to distinguish all that, meeting with—and the guy was a good Christian who would only meet with us before his workday, before his regular workday at nine. So, we'd meet him at eight o'clock in Durham. Sometimes we didn't even go home, so we—you know, we didn't want to be late to meet with him.

JF: Why did he insist on meeting then?

JB: What?

JF: Why did he insist on meeting early in the morning?

JB: Because he was [1:00:00]—he didn't like us.

JF: [Laughs]

JB: He didn't like what we did, what we stood for. And we owed money, which we did. I mean, I can't dispute that.

JF: But not as much as they said.

JB: No. And, of course, we couldn't—we tried to collect it. All the subscribers were on three-by-five cards by zip code. So, we could—the subscription was ten bucks a year. So, if you owed for three years, I don't know, it would be a dollar or something, whatever it was. We'd ask you for ten to make up for the people we couldn't find, who were, you know, somehow university-related that aren't here anymore.

The way that the division of labor was, I was—subscriptions, that was me, and ads. Bob did the printing and the darkroom stuff, and we all helped collate it. So, we put this box on the back of the front page, or on the back of the back page, trying to get people to make donations. You know, and some people would send, you know, a hundred dollars or fifty dollars, which was great. And eventually, we paid them. I don't know, it was about half of what they (collected 1:01:30).

But, again, it took hours and hours. Because, of course, the state guy wouldn't agree with everything we showed him. Sometimes we'd have to appeal and go over his head. But we saw it as just political harassment. He didn't say, "Well, you know, they

told me to do this,” or whatever. I said, “Yeah, well. You know, I look around. The *N&O* isn’t charging sales tax on subscriptions.” And he went, “Oh.” [Laughs] They do now.

I mean, like they made us pay sales—the daily papers don’t have to pay rack sales because they sell the paper to a distributor, and it’s his rack. He rents the racks from them, a dollar a month, or whatever it is, and he gets the money. Well, but the *Anvil* owned the racks; therefore, we owed tax. So, I had to wash out all of the copies sold by bookstores, drugstores, where *they* were responsible for the sales tax, and then I would divide the sales left by the—and figure out how many copies were sold, and then have to pay the tax on that.

And, I mean, we kept reasonable records. We had a pretty good idea. But after—when you had to go back three years—we’d have two, the current year and the previous year, we’d have that pretty solid. But the third year, a lot of that shit got thrown away. There wasn’t any need for us, once these people paid us, like the Intimate or Glen Lennox Pharmacy or whatever, I’d just toss it. What do I need that for? Well, luckily, they had computers and stuff and they could say, “Well, Joel, we wrote checks for such-and-such and such-and-such,” so I could get them in one phone call, in one day, or whatever.

JF: Sounds like the *Anvil* was a labor of love. You put a lot more into it than just a job, just a writer’s job.

JB: Oh, yeah. I mean, but it has to be. It’s the only way you can make it work. You know, if you just worked your forty hours and went home—.

JF: What was your goal, personally, you? What was your goal for the *Anvil*, you know, that motivated you to put these hours in and do this work?

JB: Well, we thought the paper could be an instrument of change. The area was changing, [1:05:00] just like Orange County had changed from the rural control to the urban control. I don't know. My goal was to—I wanted to damn break even, so I could get paid once in a while, you know, whatever.

JF: [Laughs]

JB: So I wouldn't have to work in a bar on weekends.

JF: Um-hmm. [Laughs]

JB: But the bar was—it turned out to be a good resource. People could always find me there and talk to me, especially on Sunday afternoons when it was slow.

JF: Um-hmm. How long did you work there?

JB: I worked there thirty years or whatever.

JF: Wow!

JB: Long after the *Anvil* stopped.

JF: Um-hmm.

JB: But people would come by, and they'd say, "Joel, did you know that this-and-that will happen/might happen/did happen?" So, I'd always bring my Sunday papers and a pad with me, in case somebody came to see me.

JF: [Laughs] That's not something you get often from a newspaperman.

JB: Yeah, and it helped—of course, it helped on the sports paper, too.

JF: Uh-huh.

JB: The sports paper is a lot easier. And it has a different theory. The more names I can get into my paper, the happier I am. Everybody likes to see their name in print when

it's not the police blotter or the obituary page or whatever. And it's fun, and occasionally we can kick somebody's ass.

JF: [Laughs] Do you think of your work for the *Anvil* as a kind of activism, or social activism or political activism?

JB: I think it was a kind of a mix of, I don't know, practical politics, whatever, slash, work. [Pause] But—yeah, I guess that's it: practical politics. But the paper maybe changed along the way, you know, as you would expect it to. But my purpose was still pretty much the same. The issues were different and maybe more subtle or—you know, employment is a lot tougher than segregated restaurants or whatever.

JF: Why is that?

JB: Well, it's pretty easy to—there aren't that many—I mean, well, let me make a comparison. In Durham, they integrated all the restaurants with two days of demonstrations. Chapel Hill, it took the federal law in [19]64 to do it, or we'd still have segregated restaurants, *I* think. But the tougher issues of employment or equity or equal pay or equal opportunity, they're tougher nuts to crack.

JF: Are they tougher to report on?

JB: Pardon me?

JF: The comparison you draw, which I really like, do you mean that they're tougher issues to handle with public policy and politics, or that they're tougher issues to report on?

JB: Well, let me see if I can answer with an example.

JF: Um-hmm.

JB: We wrote a lot about the—how Duke treats its lower-paid employees, and eventually they paid them better and they maybe treated them better. But whether those people had an opportunity to advance or could get [1:10:00] the schooling necessary for a higher-paying job or a better, a supervisory job, was harder to figure out, harder to deal with, harder to mobilize around, harder to comprehend, because there would always be somebody's interpretation of, you know, "These guys don't have the training." "Well, can you give them the training?" "Well, we don't have any money for training." "Can you get some money for training?" It's like that kind of circular motion.

It's much easier to say, "Well, we want to eat at this restaurant over here. How can we accomplish that?" Because once you get to eat there, then you have to—how do you—you have to have money in your pocket to pay for it.

JF: Um-hmm.

JB: Which reminds me of one of my favorite stories. There was a restaurant downtown called the College Café. It was down there near the Varsity Theater. And it was a breakfast-lunch place only. And it was during—it was a civil rights target for a while. And they had this huge black guy was the cook. And his minister talked to him, and one day he went to the boss. I lived above the Varsity Theater and I used to picket there a lot at six o'clock in the morning. The first shift it's harder to get people to get downtown. But the cook went to the boss and said, "I don't think I want to work here anymore. My minister can't eat here where I work, so I quit." They integrated the next day.

JF: Um!

JB: Because there was this game going on. The papers would call up and say, “Well, how is business while you’re being picketed?” “Oh, business is fine!” You know, and I’d stand out there for an hour at prime breakfast time, and only two people—they wouldn’t buy milk. They didn’t need any milk. They had the milk from yesterday. They didn’t sell any milk. You know, it’s a little game. It’s almost like Chicken.

JF: So, you’ve got your eyes on deliveries and customers coming in and out the door, rather than asking the owner so that he has the chance to say, “Business is fine.”

JB: Yeah, some people would—they might sympathize with them. And, you know, maybe some rednecks might go out of their way to have breakfast here rather than there. But some people wouldn’t cross the picket line. [Pause]

But some stuff works better than others. When your cook, who’s probably been there ten, twenty years, and was a huge guy—and the owner was like a little midget guy. [Laughs] “Oh, you want to quit? That would be bad. We’re definitely not going to be open tomorrow. We have no cook.”

JF: [Laughs]

JB: And it was a tiny place, only could seat twenty, maybe.

JF: Twenty people all at once, you need a good cook to handle those orders, though. I can see why he didn’t want to lose him.

JB: Yeah, and the same thing happened with the—I mean, another guy it would be fun to talk to was Jim Shumaker, who was the editor of the Chapel Hill paper. He would be writing editorials about why the movie theater *should* integrate; he’d be writing the press statements for the theater guy why they *weren’t* integrating, or were studying it, or stalling, whatever; and he’d be writing news stories about why they were picketing the

theater, right? If you're the editor of a little rag, [laughs] "Which hat am I wearing at the moment?" [1:15:00] But he used to have great stories.

JF: Well, let me just ask if there's anything that we haven't talked about that you would like to include, or anything I haven't asked you that you think I should have?

JB: I don't know. It was a—I guess, like a lot of things in my life, we were pretty persistent, about [19]67 to about [19]82, [19]81—[19]82, I guess it was. I learned a lot, had a lot of fun, worked a lot of hours, met some great people. You know, chalk it up as a good story, or whatever.

JF: Well, thank you. Thank you very much for sharing these stories, taking the time to talk.

JB: I hope I shed some light on something.

[Recording ends at 1:16:25]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Sally C. Council