

A Tale of Two Newspapers

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Abstract

From 1897 until 1991, Arkansas residents had a choice of two daily newspapers: the Arkansas Gazette and the Arkansas Democrat. The two newspapers spent the ninety-four years competing to be the most read news source in the state. In the early 1980's each newspaper acquired an individual who represented the newspaper in the eye of the public. John Robert Starr was the representative for the Arkansas Democrat and John Brummett spoke for the Arkansas Gazette. These two men were the primary sources of information for this research paper. Through the comments of these two, past issues of the two newspapers, and a few other sources, this paper gives a glimpse into the behind the scenes action of the eventual closing of the Arkansas Gazette and the Arkansas Democrat's acquisition of its fallen competitor.

Today, there is only one statewide daily newspaper in Arkansas: the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*. Like many statewide newspapers, the *Democrat-Gazette* was born from humbler beginnings. Before the *Democrat-Gazette*, there were two daily newspapers in the state: the *Arkansas Democrat* and the *Arkansas Gazette*. After ninety-four years of competition, the two newspapers became one in October 1991. Two key players in the war were John Brummett, originally with the *Gazette*, and John Robert Starr, originally with the *Democrat*. These two share a mutual animosity, which has mirrored that of the two newspapers over the years. This animosity has carried over to today's *Democrat-Gazette*, where both Brummett and Starr work as columnists. The *Arkansas Gazette* and the *Arkansas Democrat* fought long and hard to determine which newspaper was Arkansas' best. Today there is no competition, but the memory of the *Arkansas Gazette* still remains to push the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* to be the best newspaper possible.

William E. Woodruff founded the *Arkansas Gazette* in 1819 at the Arkansas Post. He brought the press by way of a flatboat and three rivers to the then young territory that would one day be Arkansas. Seventy-eight years later, in 1897, the *Arkansas Democrat* was founded by Col. J.N. Smithee, a former member of the Confederate Army. With the existence of two newspapers, each with its own political views, a war began. Smithee launched many attacks against the *Gazette*, the biggest being over the repudiation of the state debt. In turn, the *Gazette* accused the owner of the *Democrat* of choosing the newspaper's name to serve as a cover for the Republican Party. There was even a shoot-out in Little Rock at the corner of Markham and Main Streets between Smithee and Maj. John A. Adams, an owner of the *Gazette* (*Arkansas Democrat-Gazette Online*). This gunfight did not set a trend; most of the war was fought with ink and paper, not guns.

From 1924 until his death in 1968, K. August Engel headed the *Democrat*. Under Engel's leadership, the *Democrat* went through a period of great growth, moving the *Democrat* to a new location in downtown Little Rock. Unlike many other newspaper editors, Engel played an active role in the production of the newspaper. The *Democrat* also dabbled in politics by urging reforms in such areas as education, waterworks, and taxes.

In 1984, the *Gazette* filed a federal anti-trust suit accusing the owners of the *Democrat* of trying to put the *Gazette* out of business. According to Starr, former managing editor of the *Democrat* and the *Democrat-Gazette*, this was a major turning point in the war. "People then perceived that the *Gazette* had given up," Starr said. "It surrendered in the war and turned to the courts to try and solve their problems." He felt that the *Gazette* should have taken the money from the lawsuit and used it to improve the newspaper. Brummett, former columnist and supporter of the *Gazette*, believed the lawsuit had merit. According to Brummett, there was plenty of evidence that the *Democrat* was taking advertisers from the *Gazette*. Carrick H. Patterson, the managing editor of the *Gazette*, knew it was illegal to sell a product on the cheap in a competitive market and believed the *Democrat* was doing so. Brummett said that the *Gazette* had obtained evidence of the *Democrat* offering advertisers discounted rates, as long as they pulled their business from the *Gazette*.

October 30, 1986 marks one of the most important dates of the war. On this date, the Heiskell-Patterson family, which owned the *Gazette*, sold the paper to the Gannett Corporation. Gannett launched *USA Today* and is one of the largest newspaper chains in the country (Vivan 87). Brummett said that the *Gazette* employees took the news of the takeover very badly. The *Gazette* was a "close-knit family," and the staff believed Gannett did not share its "courageous Southern attitude." Walker Lundy was the first editor under the Gannett Corporation. Starr felt Lundy was a wonderful editor and that the *Gazette* might have won the war if it had listened to him more. Once again, Brummett disagreed with Starr. Brummett felt that Lundy was a horrible editor, claiming that a more experienced and professional editor could have replaced Lundy easily. Starr said he called Lundy every morning and found out all of the gossip from the *Gazette*. Lundy told Starr that the only reason he continued to work for the *Gazette* was that he knew he could not find a job that would pay him so much for doing so little. Brummett said he doubted if Starr actually called Lundy at all, or that Lundy said any of these things.

As with any kind of war, the object of this one was to out-do the competition. According to Starr, there were a number of exposés published in both papers. Starr said he is not very proud of these sensationalized stories, but he felt that was what the paper had to do to attract the reader's attention. The paper that covered the juicy news first was the one with the readers. Therefore, the two newspapers were always racing to get the top story. One example of the animosity between the two newspapers is recorded in a story about bad dealings at the state capital. According to Starr, the *Gazette* was working on a major story at the capital for a couple of weeks and were planning to expose improper conduct in the next couple of days. On the day he thought the *Gazette* was going to run the article, he told his staff to have something about the scandal in the *Democrat*. He knew that they would not be able to top the *Gazette*'s story, but he wanted something. The funny thing was that the *Gazette* never printed anything on the subject. Apparently, when the editors of the *Gazette* found out that the *Democrat* was covering the story, they backed off. Brummett had no recollection of the capital story and was sure Starr was not

remembering the past correctly. According to Starr, the *Democrat* did not ignore the exposés in the *Gazette*. The *Democrat* just covered the news, no matter who did it first. Starr feels the *Gazette* was not wise in ignoring a story, which would have most likely given them the story of the day. Starr said it was not as if the *Democrat* was trying to steal it, but was just trying to cover the news to the best of its ability.

Another big bomb dropped on the battlefield in May 1989. William Dillard, founder and owner of the Dillard's Department Store chain, pulled his advertising from the *Gazette*. At the time, Dillard's was the largest advertiser for both the *Democrat* and the *Gazette*. According to Brummett, there are two possible scenarios to explain why Dillard pulled his advertising. The first scenario stems from an article the *Gazette* ran about Dillard's a few months before the end of the advertising. Dillard must have found the article to give an unfair representation of his company, and out of anger pulled his advertising from the *Gazette*. The second scenario deals with new advertising policies under Gannett. After Gannett bought the *Gazette*, the paper offered new advertisers lower rates. Pre-existing advertisers had to continue to pay the older, more expensive rates. Dillard's, being a pre-existing advertiser, was paying more than Dillard felt was necessary. Thus, once again, out of anger, Dillard pulled his advertising. "I feel it was a mixture of the two scenarios," said Brummett. Brummett said that after the loss of Dillard's, the *Gazette* lost many of its upscale readers and about every six months lost more and more money.

Brummett felt the *Democrat* had "one thing over the *Gazette*." The one thing was "hustle." He said the employees of the *Democrat* were very pushy and knew how to get what they wanted. They also had only one person, Walter Hussman, to answer to. The *Gazette* had an entire Board of Directors and stockholders from whom they had to obtain approval. Hussman was losing less money than the stockholders at Gannett. Brummett said this made the war's end clearly in sight. Starr said he found out in July that the *Gazette* would be closed, almost three months before the final edition of the *Gazette* was published. Starr also said that many others, including both *Democrat* employees and *Gazette* employees, felt as if the end were approaching. When the time finally arrived to make it public knowledge, the *Gazette* workers took it badly. They could not believe that their hard work had all been for naught.

A group of *Gazette* workers, influenced by Harry Thomason, a local television producer, tried to raise money to buy the newspaper before it had a chance to be bought by an outside company. Among these employees was Max Brantley. Brantley said an *ad hoc* group of employees heard and believed the rumor of Hussman buying the *Gazette*. This group started meeting and hired lawyer Walter Davidson to represent and advise them. Thomason, who hated the *Democrat* editorial policy, offered to assist with the costs. They notified the Justice Department that they wanted to make an attempt to block the sale, using the legal terminology of "anti-trust grounds," so it would not be thought that this was just a petty fight between contemporaries.

In the October 18, 1991, issue of the *Gazette*, Davidson said, "his firm had talked to Hussman representatives at the *Democrat* about the possibility of a joint operating agreement between the *Democrat* and an employee-investor group." Davidson claims Hussman's representatives declined to offer. According to Brantley, lack of time and financing hindered the project. There was also the problem that anyone participating in the lawsuit could have been sued themselves for damages by those who wished to see the sale happen. "After a number of private meetings,

several public rallies, talks with lawyers, potential financiers, etc., we concluded the plan could not be done," Brantley said. "Not even with a vastly restructured *Gazette*. We announced that to employees and the sale went through the next day, if my memory is correct." In a touching farewell column, Brantley shared anecdotes of his time with the *Gazette*. He ends the column with these final words to all the loyal readers and employees of the *Gazette*:

A word of amplification:

The instigators of the unsuccessful employee effort to save the *Gazette*—an effort that at least cheered us in the final days—were Scott Morris, Anne Farris, Scott Van Laningham and Mike Arbanas. Others, including Mark Oswald, Ernest Dumas and Deborah Mathis, quickly joined in. Before it was over, every department and nearly every employee was pitching in. They are all heroes (Brantley 1B).

Brummett said he knew the deal would not happen. He felt that their quest would have been more successful if only they had been able to find a rich benefactor. Still, Brummett called the group's attempt "sweet and desperate." The *Gazette* group went into a fight it knew it could not win and showed the state how it felt about the paper. The *Democrat's* winning was "an economic victory, not journalistic," Brummett said. According to Starr, the employees thought that the *Gazette* would sell for approximately twenty-five million dollars. Starr felt that it was not taken into consideration that a national corporation owned the *Gazette*. Gannett had paid sixty million dollars for the *Gazette* and sold it for the same price to Hussman. Gannett actually lost money in the deal, but it was worth all sixty million to Hussman. This purchase made the existence of one statewide newspaper possible, and gave Hussman much more than the forty-percent control he was looking for.

The day that the *Gazette* workers had to move out of the office, Starr sent photographer Mike Stewart to capture some of the disgruntled employees carrying boxes and personal objects to their cars. Dan Brown, a *Gazette* worker, was upset by Stewart's presence and decided to take the matter into his own hands. According to an article in the final issue of the *Gazette*, "The *Gazette* employee pushed the camera into Stewart's face, then drove off before the police arrived." (Smith 10A). Other *Gazette* employees identified Brown as the attacker. As far as Starr could remember, Stewart did not press charges against Brown.

Fighting all the way, *Gazette* workers admitted defeat and published issue 333 on October 18, 1991. This final issue was a first-rate farewell to a paper that had served its readers for 172 years. The front page had a photograph of *Gazette* founder Woodruff's grave. The grave was adorned with memorabilia from the *Gazette's* past, flowers, and the most recent issue of the *Gazette*. The caption of the photo was part of a letter someone had placed on Woodruff's tombstone: "Mr. W: We loved your newspaper for 172 years... We're just so very sad it was not loved enough today so people in the next 172 years [would] have enjoyed it. —Readers of the *Arkansas Gazette*." One story covered the employees attempting to buy the paper. In this Friday issue, Brantley was quoted as saying that he expected the paper to be sold to Hussman "no later than Monday." There were letters from many loyal readers of the *Gazette*. One man wrote of his disappointment at having to start to drink his morning coffee without being able to simultaneously read the *Gazette*, as he had done for more years than he could remember. This

reader also told of how he learned to read from the pages of the *Gazette*. A woman from Warren expressed her feelings in a letter to the editor as well. "The death of the *Arkansas Gazette* through a sale to Walter E. Hussman and his *Arkansas Democrat* is extremely distasteful to me. It will be the death of an institution. It grieves me greatly." So that was the end of an era.

The *Gazette* workers were not just thrown to the curb. Many found jobs waiting for them at Hussman's place, of course they had to apply for the jobs like anyone else. Some found employment at various newspapers around the state. Brummett and a few others joined Brummett, who had relocated to the *Arkansas Times* a little over a year before the close of the *Gazette*. It was time to make some more changes. Hussman changed the name of his paper to the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, thus paying homage to his former competitors.

The first issue of the *Democrat-Gazette* appeared on the newsstands November 1, 1991. In this issue, Starr wrote a column entitled "There's just no way to please foes." This column was directed towards the critics of the *Democrat* and the *Democrat-Gazette*. Apparently, since the close of the *Gazette*, the *Democrat* had received numerous calls and letters from upset readers demanding that the *Democrat/Democrat-Gazette* be more like the *Gazette* of old. Starr suggested that the critics were just looking for something to complain about. "We could, in fact, publish a newspaper just like the late *Arkansas Gazette*, and they would complain," Starr wrote. He mentioned that the people who often do the most complaining are ones who know the least of the subject in which they find fault. A cartoon accompanying Starr's column depicted a young newspaper boy making a phone call with the caption, "I've been in newspapers a long time and I have some advice...."

A point Starr was sure to mention was a subject often discussed during the war: comics, which many called the *Gazette's* best section. The *Gazette's* daily comics were in full color, while the *Democrat* only had color on Sundays and holidays. Starr mentioned in his column that more than seventy-five percent of the complaints dealt with the comics issue. Former *Gazette* readers wanted not only the color back but also the comic strips they had grown fond of in the *Gazette*. When Hussman's group accommodated the *Gazette* population, *Democrat* readers became upset. They began to request that the comics they preferred be returned to the funny papers.

Brummett eventually went to work as a columnist for the *Democrat-Gazette*, where he and Starr still play cat and mouse. Rarely do the two have contradictory columns in the same issue of the paper, but you can rest assured that they take turns telling their side of the story. During individual interviews, Starr accused Brummett of writing from hearsay and not facts from personal research. Brummett accused Starr of rewriting history in order to make himself a part of it.

For over 100 years, Arkansas residents have been informed and entertained through the state's daily newspapers. It was not unusual for Arkansas to end up with only one daily, statewide newspaper. The consolidation of newspapers all over the nation has "reduced the number of newspapers from about 2,000 in 1900 to some 1,610 in 1992," (Folkerts and Teeter 511). The end of the *Gazette* may have upset many of the loyal readers, but at least they still have a way to read the news. Davidson, the lawyer for the *Gazette* group who wanted to buy out the paper, stated, "We regret to report that due to the current market structure and the inability, short of

expensive and complex litigation, to return the market to a realistic state. Our clients have concluded that these efforts have been in vain" (Smith 10A). This supports Brummett's belief that the *Democrat's* victory was an economic one, and not journalistic. No matter which newspaper had the best journalistic content, the facts show that Arkansas' economy did not and does not have the ability to support two daily statewide newspapers.

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Biographical Sketch

Genevive "Gigi" Jabara is a senior communications major and English minor from north Little Rock. Along with being a member of the Honors College, she is an advertising manager for the *Oracle*, vice-president of Heart and Key, and a member of the *Aret* literary magazine. Jabara is a member of the Gamma Beta Phi and Alpha Chi honor societies. She was the SGA "Student of the Year," and a 1998 Homecoming candidate. After graduation, she plans to pursue a career in public relations or advertising.

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