

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Announcer: James Gray East grew up in Muskogee, Oklahoma and, while attending Oklahoma State University, started an underground newspaper which led to employment with the Daily Oklahoman.

Realizing he was interested in crime reporting, he moved to Binghamton, New York to report on the Mafia for a Gannett-owned newspaper.

Moving back to Oklahoma, Jim worked for his hometown newspaper, The Muskogee Phoenix, and then was hired by the Tulsa Tribune, where he became an editorial writer.

When the Tribune closed in 1992, Jim became Chief of Staff for ten years for Tulsa Mayor Susan Savage. Then he began a career in the car rental business with the Vanguard Car Rental company, later moving on to the Hertz Car rental company, becoming VP of Government Relations.

Jim was deeply involved in the Tulsa community, serving on many boards, including the Metropolitan Tulsa Transit Authority and CAP -- the Community Action Project of Tulsa County.

Jim was 69 when he died on April 16, 2024.

Listen to Jim talk about the threats made by the Mafia, corrupt judges, and lifetime criminals on the oral history website and podcast VoicesOfOklahoma.com.

Chapter 2 – 12:30 Going to Prison

John Erling (JE): Today's date is February 6th, 2024. Jim, would you state your full name, please?

Jim Gray East (JGE): James Gray East.

JE: Can I ask you where Gray comes from?

JGE: So Gray is my mother's mother's maiden name. So they were all Grays. And I think that our parents, when they name us, they're struggling with how to make everybody happy. They didn't really care. I was originally going to be called Sam. Then I have no idea what my middle name would have been, but that would have been after Sam Gray, my great uncle.

JE: Any story to East, the name East?

JGE: No, not really. I mean, they were... They came over from France, France to Ellis Island, and then into the States. My grandfather, who I never met, named Sam East. That was a confusing... I was going to be called Sam, but it was after my great uncle, not after my grandfather. I never met him. And he was a railroad man and worked for, primarily, the Missouri Pacific and then later the Midland -- Midland something or another -- based in Muskogee.

JE: We are recording this interview here in the recording facilities of Voices of Oklahoma. Your birth date?

JGE: August 21st, 1954.

JE: Your present age?

JGE: 69.

JE: Where were you born?

JGE: Muskogee, Oklahoma. Baptist Hospital.

JE: Is that where you grew up?

JGE: Mm-hmm. Spent my first 18 years there before I went off to Oklahoma State University.

JE: Your mother's name and where she was born, where she grew up?

JGE: Marjorie Sugg, S-U-G-G, and she grew up in Ada, Oklahoma, and went to school there, then became a teacher, and eventually landed a job in Muskogee. And met my father, Paul East, who had recently returned from the war and was living in Muskogee with his mother and, I think, two of his siblings. I think one had already left.

JE: About your mother's personality, what kind of a person was she?

JGE: I am a Sugg. And so I've always been told that by both the East side and the Sugg side. So the Suggs were extroverts. My grandfather, from Ada, was in the legislature for about three terms, primarily during the war, since all the younger legislators went off to fight. And my grandmother came from Tennessee.

You know, they are... They were just hard-working people. My grandfather ran a... You know, I'm not really sure how he would describe it, but he did... He helped people. He sold some insurance. He helped a variety of Indians with their trust matters. So he got into a little bit of oil and gas. But he was just kind of a... He would just do things for people.

JE: So your personality of your mother was then, since you're outgoing, she was outgoing and personable and...

JGE: Very much so. So she was, and she had to be, since she was a public school teacher. You know, you had to stand in front of a group of children every day and get them interested. And so she was a Latin and a Spanish teacher, which usually meant, for the first couple of weeks, she's the only one doing the talking. So, yes, she was an extrovert.

JE: Was she... Because of that, she was really watching... Peering over your work when you were elementary and going up the ranks?

JGE: So I'm the youngest of three children. My oldest brother, David, was studious, a good student, and not a rabble rouser. My middle brother, John, who's deceased, he similarly was a pretty good student and was anything but a rabble rouser. And then the third child. And so mother liked

to -- and father both -- liked to explain it this way:

That one day, one of my former teachers -- 6th grade teacher, Mr. Crouch -- came into my father's store. And while they were going back in the warehouse to get whatever he wanted, Mr. Crouch started talking about the boys. And when he got to me, he said, "You know he's going to prison someday, don't you?"

Well, of course, I did go to prison, but not by the courts. I went there to interview killers, murderers, etc., etc. So, yes, that was the big joke in the family.

JE: Yeah. So then your father and where he grew up and what he did for a living?

JGE: He grew up over in Arkansas, a little town called Norman, Arkansas, which is best located by "it's about 10 miles south of Mount Ida," which people around Tulsa may know because they used to drive through it when they were on their way to Hot Springs. So he grew up in that area. The family were all farmers.

And then his father started working for the railroad. That meant that he had to travel. And then eventually he got a good enough position that the whole family would with him. So he, father lived primarily in Pawhuska, maybe one other town, and then Muskogee. He eventually, after he came back from the war, partnered with another man to start a maintenance business to sell everything from toilet paper, to barrels of wax, to solo coffee cups.

And while this was never a proven fact, the reality was that these businesses -- there were three of these businesses -- one in Oklahoma City, one in Arkansas, and then my father's in Muskogee. And they had an agreement that they would not get into either ... each other's property. And so the former mayor of Newark, his parents owned the one in Oklahoma City, I can't remember the person in Arkansas but they split it up.

And so it was a profitable and a good business that father stayed with --

with Mr. Tackett, his partner -- until he sold it shortly before mother passed away and then lived off the proceeds.

JE: You said earlier a store that your mother -- what store?

JGE: My father had a ... you would go by it and it was a very large warehouse, about a football field-size. And then that ... all the product was in the back. And then up front, there was a kind of a retail. So you could actually pick the brush or you could say you wanted this cup and he had all that displayed in there.

JE: So, but -- he primarily sold to ... ?

JGE: Schools, states, corporations, businesses ... very seldom did people come in. People came in that they knew that that was a place that could get a specific item. And so, but no, there wasn't a lot of commercial retail.

JE: So you helped them sometimes in that business?

JGE: All three of us. All three boys were tasked with loading large trucks. And my goal, my responsibility, primarily, was when we went to the rail yard, because a lot of this stuff would come in on in boxcars. And I was the shortest. So I was the only one that could climb up in the top of the boxcar and get those items that were squeezed in there by Fort Howard Paper. Georgia Pacific or whatever and get those out. So, yes, we loaded warehouses on Sundays and the trucks then left on Monday morning. We did a few deliveries during summer, but I didn't do much of that. But it did give me my first glimpse into rural Oklahoma.

JE: Yes, because you went to every small town there was.

JGE: That's correct. In eastern Oklahoma.

JE: Right. That type of business didn't continue, or did it?

JGE: It kind of did for a while, and then it stopped, and then you could buy direct and so school systems would buy direct for barrels of wax, or a load

of toilet paper, or whatever. And then you could also buy a lot of this stuff at Target and stores like that that really didn't exist back when I was a kid.

JE: So ... and the Walmarts, I suppose.

JGE: That's correct. Definitely a Walmart.

JE: Right. So his personality must have been outgoing as well.

JGE: No, it wasn't. He ran the store. Mr. Tackett was the more outside, the salesperson. But he was quiet. Mother was the social. And I remember a time that we were on our way to Norman, Arkansas to see his grandmother who lived until she was 102. And we stopped in Poteau at the Black Angus, which at the time was owned by Bob Kerr.

And we're in a booth or whatever, getting some lunch or something before we finish the trip. And this very large man comes over. And looks at my mother and he goes, "Marjorie Sugg." And she says, "Bob Kerr, nice to see you."

JE: Hmm. Senator Bob Kerr.

JGE: That's correct. That's the only time I ever met him. And I didn't meet him really because he just came over to say hello to my mother.

JE: And why would he have known her?

JGE: Ada. So he grew up in Ada. He knew her. They were about the same age. It was kind of before he started getting into politics. By this time, he was the U.S. senator, but he was at his restaurant doing what he did.

JE: The Black Angus.

JGE: The Black Angus. Yes. In Poteau, Oklahoma.

JE: How about that? He was a restaurateur. Didn't know that.

JGE: Yeah. I'm not sure whether he started or he bought it. He was kind of known for ... when people were in tough times, he'd come in and help them. And then frequently he'd own the thing eventually.

Chapter 3 – 3:45

Introduction to Politics

John Erling (JE): So you were exposed to the world of education, a teacher. You were exposed to business, salesmanship, and all that. And your young mind. I don't know if you were even when you began to think of what I want to do, but maybe you knew what you didn't want to do?

Jim Gray East (JGE): I knew I did not want to go work in the warehouse and load trucks. I was not interested in manual labor. So that was... you're exactly right.

And I think that is a great way to go through life: not just knowing what you want, but also what you don't want. And we use that skill today. You know what we want to eat, what we don't want to eat. But exactly. And as you mentioned, not just those things, but also I was exposed to politics and government very early.

JE: How?

JGE: So, in part, talking to my grandfather. Because by this time he had been out of the legislature, but he still liked to talk about it. And so he would. And when I started into the newspaper business, he was a strong influence on me on a variety of things. And so I'm sure I had discussions with him when I was 10, 11, 12, 13 about government and politics. I don't remember specifics, but I am sure I did -- just knowing him and knowing me at that time.

JE: Tell me about grandfather, Sam.

JGE: His name was Harbord Presnell Sugg. Oh. So most people just called him "HP."

JE: So was he a representative? Was he a senator?

JGE: He was. He was a representative from...

JE: From what?

JGE: 40 to... Yeah, he came in and they stayed during the war. And then in '46, he opted not to run and it was a mid-year redistricting. He was visited by a variety of powerful people from McAlester who came over and said they wanted to run a young man for representative. And they were going to gerrymander the district in Pittsburgh County, McAlester, to include Pontotoc County, which was Ada. They were just being polite by coming over and saying, "You're going to lose your seat." That young man who actually told me the story, later in life, was Gene Stipe.

JE: Oh, wow. Senator Gene Stipe.

JGE: Senator Gene Stipe.

JE: State Senator Gene Stipe.

JGE: Who I would interview periodically over many, many years. And while we didn't have a friendly relationship. We had a very cordial relationship. And at one point we were sitting out of a courtroom waiting for a trial or a jury to come back. I don't think it was his, but one of them. And he told me that story. And then I confirmed it. My mother was still alive at the time.

JE: So the politics side -- was that in your brain? You were curious about it and you were interested at a young age.

Chapter 4 – 6:45 Interrogation

John Erling (JE): So let's take you, your education -- grade school?

Jim Gray East (JGE): Irving Elementary, Muskogee, Oklahoma. No, I did not have to go to prison. And then Alice Robertson Junior High, again in Muskogee. And then I graduated from Muskogee High School, which was the second year that it was totally integrated.

JE: So you went through integration?

JGE: It was interesting.

JE: Okay.

JGE: To say the least.

JE: All right.

JGE: Everyone was worried there was going to be a riot. And so they set up structures, and organizations, and things to respond in case there was a disturbance. And I was right in the middle of it all. And I was on all those boards and commissions and stuff. I was very active, again, going back to my interest in government. I got very interested in student government. And so I participated in all that. And then I rebelled and I started my underground newspaper.

JE: So in high school, you got really involved -- junior, senior probably?

JGE: Junior year.

JE: You got really involved in all that?

JGE: Yep.

JE: Were you supportive of the integration?

JGE: Oh, very much so.

JE: Was there a huge segment of the community that was against it?

JGE: There was a vocal segment of the community that they would say they were more fearful. They weren't against it. And so there were elements that were against it in Muskogee. But it went like clockwork. And I give administrators -- our superintendent at the time -- John Tom Staten, who later became a legislator, did a couple of other things. But he handled it marvelously.

While there were some administrators that I disliked, there were also some that really rose to the occasion and helped guide us through it. Because it was tough. I mean, just explaining to the people in Muskogee why there was going to be a black basketball queen and a white basketball queen was tough. People didn't understand. But we did that co-pairing through everything: high school president, the queens, the king -- all those things that happen in sports -- everything was one black, one white.

JE: What percentage of the population was black?

JGE: Probably about 25%. It was higher than in Oklahoma. You know, Muskogee kind of came out of the Dawes Commission, the allotment of the land to the various tribes. And of course, the main headquarters, the Dawes Commission, is now the Five Civilized Tribes Museum in Muskogee.

So there was this whole issue of "Can't we all just get along together?" And I think a lot of African Americans came to Muskogee because of that. Not because they were freedmen from the Cherokees, but I think that they just all came there because they knew they could live there.

JE: So they lived there peacefully in the community?

JGE: Very much so.

JE: However, to put them all under the same roof for school, that is getting a little close?

JGE: It did. And you know, people -- the original high school was called Central High School -- and everybody wanted to fight over the whole issue of changing the name. And there were those of us in student government

that didn't want to have anything to do with that. We just wanted to go to school.

JE: Changing the name?

JGE: Yeah, they wanted to move it. The school administration wanted to move the name from Central High School to Muskogee High School.

JE: And you were...?

JGE: Very supportive of it. Matter of fact, we had, again, one of these little public events that we were not supposed to do. So a variety of us -- I know that June Edmondson, the daughter of the former congressman and former AG here in Oklahoma, myself...

JE: His name?

JGE: Her name, June Edmondson, she was in school with me.

JE: But you said the daughter of...

JGE: Daughter of Ed Edmondson. Ed was the longtime congressman of Muskogee. And of course, June, Drew, Jim, all are their children. And so she, and I, and a half a dozen other people, there was a big metal sign in front of the school, and it said "Central High School."

And so we went out there with our wrenches and bolt cutters, and we took down the C, the E, the N, the T, the R, and the L, and then took the A and put it in the middle, so the sign said "A High School."

And then because I and a couple of others understood the importance of media, we called the Muskogee Phoenix, the newspaper, and had them come out and take a picture of us in front of the sign, and identifying all of us, and put it in the newspaper.

JE: Okay. First of all: Is there fallout at home over that?

JGE: No. Mother... I mean, my mother was in charge of the children. And as long as I was doing something that was somewhat constructive, she'd let me. And I also, I always gave her the out. I said, you know, by the time I got around, they were just tired. And so they just didn't fight with me on much of anything when I was in high school, and there was a lot that they could have fought with me over, but...

Chapter 5 – 6:36

Underground Newspaper

John Erling (JE): But you referred to an underground newspaper.

Jim Gray East (JGE): So when I was in journalism class in my junior year, we had a teacher, Mrs. Aldridge, who was a fine lady and did an okay job; and she did not like my approach to how I was doing something. I can't remember now what it was. And I called her a bitch. Well, you just don't do that in 1970.

And so I immediately was sent to... the office, the principal's office, and I -- during that hour every day -- I spent it in the office. They finally gave me things to do and stuff. Eventually, I made announcements on the...

JE: Intercom system?

JGE: Intercom system. But I also started the idea of "Why can't I have my own newspaper?" So I figured it out, recruited some other people to join me in this effort, and we published two or three editions in my junior year, and then I published it for about eight editions in my senior year.

JE: Take me through the mechanics. You published it. Who printed it? How did...

JGE: So I found a printer in Muskogee, a job printer, who I... I'm not sure how I found him. I went in and just started telling him what I was doing, and he basically charged me the cost of the ink and the paper. And so I raised enough money, you know, from my friends and others that I could, you

know, pay that. But he didn't charge me the labor or anything else, and he'd print about 200 copies of it.

Yeah. And so he printed it, and then I would stay up late in the night. A couple of the people helped me. There was one man -- one student -- that I particularly was proud of. His name was Ezelmo Stevens. And Ezelmo was from... He was from the south side of Muskogee, which was a tough part of town. And he... He wanted to write a column about his views. And he was kind of a...

He was... You know, this is the 70s, so we're reading about radicals and various... So he was... He was the closest thing to a Black Panther that you would see in Muskogee. And so Ezelmo wanted to write a column.

And so I told him, "That's great. Tell me what you think you're gonna write about." And I said, "Okay, I've got a column title for that.

And he said, "What's that?"

And I said, "Student as a nigger."

He looked at me and he says, "That's perfect."

JE: Wow.

JGE: Well, Ezelmo went to Langston and then to Howard University, got his law degree, changed his name to Opio Toure. And before he passed away, he was the chairman of the State Senate Judiciary Committee, elected out of Oklahoma City.

JE: Wow. Yes, yes, yes, yes. What was the name of your underground paper?

JGE: The Free Press. And of course, my former journalism teacher was livid over the fact that I was even able to distribute it on campus.

JE: But you continued to do that?

JGE: Oh, I did.

JE: Nobody said you couldn't do it?

JGE: No. At the end, we had overstepped our boundaries. And the Muskogee Ministerial Alliance had jumped in and asked the school to shut it down. And there was another teacher there, Mr. Parsons, who was inclined to be nice to me. And he selected, every year, the intern from Muskogee High School that would go to work at The Muskogee Phoenix. So he came to me and he said, "You're going to have to shut down your newspaper. You can fight it, or you can go to work as an intern at The Muskogee Phoenix."

And I saw an opportunity, and it was a pain in the ass to get it done. And so that's what started my real journalism career by The Muskogee Phoenix.

JE: Wow. Do you have any copies of your underground paper?

JGE: I think I may have a piece of one.

JE: Do you remember a particular – you were the editor of it. You wrote, maybe, the lead opinion?

JGE: I did.

JE: Do you remember any angles you took up? Any issues? Because it wasn't all black and white.

JGE: No, no, no, no, no. Ezelmo's column – that was kind of unique. I mean, it was things about things happening at the school and things like that. But we talked about integration. We talked about the school administration. No, it was a very local journalism. There were occasionally a few national topics that we would – I would get to the point where I just needed to fill some of the space, and so I would pick some things up. And, you know, that allowed me to look around for ... at newspapers that now are no longer around, but, you know, The Village Voice in New York City. The – there was a – I think it was the L.A. Free Press, you know. And so I started reading some of those.

JE: You must have had adults and others who admired what you were doing because that was really admirable.

JGE: There were. There were. And I think that, you know, whether it was the printer who gave me a cut deal on it, or whether it was Mr. Parsons who was watching and gave me an exit row so I could go continue to do journalism.

Chapter 6 – 8:03

Writing Obituaries

Jim Gray East (JGE): And the other thing that happened about the same time -- I'm around 16, 17 -- is in 1968, the person that sat in the pew at church with us, a guy named Bill Nigh. Bill was the oldest brother of George, and there were two other brothers, Wade and Sam.

John Erling (JE): Governor George Nigh.

JGE: Governor George Nigh. And so Bill had been the state representative in Muskogee, and he wanted to run for corporation commission. And so he wanted to run a statewide campaign, and he convinced my parents that it would be good experience for me to travel with him. So I got out of my comfort area of eastern Oklahoma, and I went to the far corners of Oklahoma. I went all the way out to Guymon. I went to Altus with Bill, and my job was to take his flyers -- back then we didn't have brochures, we just had flyers -- and stick them under car windshields.

JE: And how old were you then? What grade?

JGE: I was 15, turning 16.

JE: Wow. Did you look back on that? What a wonderful experience for you.

JGE: It was. It was. I got to go to various things. You know, my favorite was the watermelon festival in -- I'm trying to remember where it is. It's down by Chickasha, and it was held forever, and all the politicians would come and

talk: Andy Payne, who walked across America to win some award; of course, you know, Bob Kerr, Charles Nesbitt ... all those people were there, and they were speaking. And Bill got to speak as well.

JE: So that's like in your junior year in high school.

JGE: It was. I'm a junior in high school, and I'm wandering around. It's the first time I met Larry Derryberry, the former Attorney General. Larry was a former state representative -- he was still a state representative from Altus -- and we spent the night at his house. That was how they ran those campaigns. If you were a former legislator, you convinced them all. They didn't have to necessarily support you, but, you know, that they would provide you housing. So we spent the night with Larry and his family. That would have been, yeah, 1970.

JE: So you were exposed to several areas of life. So did politics then begin, you know, "Well, maybe I'd like to run for office?"

JGE: No. Never had. It's really interesting, I have, in particular, as I got more into politics, people would ask, "Why don't you run?"

And I said, "I have no interest. I'm happy to help people get elected, but never had any interest of actually being in office myself."

JE: All right. Let's take you back to writing. When did writing fascinate you?

JGE: Not really sure. I am not a good writer. I am an average writer. I know how to write for a newspaper. I tried a book once, and I just couldn't do it.

JE: A book on?

JGE: Judges.

JE: Okay. You started it?

JGE: I did. I did. I was commissioned to do it. Gary Richardson, former U.S. attorney in Muskogee, and then ran for governor. I think he's still an attorney. He wanted me to write it, and so I started it, and I just -- it just

was not in me. So I was not -- I was a reporter. I love to ask people really difficult questions. That served me very well.

And so if, that's the first element of being in journalism: is if you don't ask good questions or probing questions and get to why -- not just the who, what, when, how. Once you get to why, you've got a story.

JE: So the writing, then, just started in your life, and you're not exactly sure why, but you started writing, and no particular inspiration you had, I guess? You just ... is that what you would say?

JGE: I was pissed off when I got kicked out of journalism class. So probably that initial writing for the news -- for the underground newspaper -- was out of spite. And not a healthy reason, but it's the best that I can do that I can remember why. And then after I did that, I went to The Muskogee Phoenix, and they started me on obituaries. And so I wrote obituaries probably, well, I wrote obituaries for a long time, but just solely obituaries for probably close to a year.

JE: While you're still in high school?

JGE: In high school. And I would go -- I had a couple of odd jobs at the newspaper. This was in a period where the mechanics of the news coming in over the wire was changing. And so it was becoming electronic. And so we, at one point in the middle, we had computer tapes that had the story on it.

And so we had to attach the computer tape to the actual printed copy that came in over the AP or the United Press Wire Service. And so that was one of my jobs. And so I did that on Saturdays and Sundays. And then from 5 to 7, weekdays, I might write obituaries. Or there was a column about, you know, what happened in Muskogee 25, 50, 75, 100 years ago; and I'd write that by going back and looking at the microfilm.

JE: Did you enjoy the obituaries? Writing obituaries?

JGE: I remember how I was told -- what I was told before I started writing obituaries: "It's the last time this person will ever have their name in the

newspaper. Don't screw it up." Phil Harris; he was my -- he was the day editor. And he kind of oversaw me. And Phil was in his 70s by the time I showed up. And was good and sound.

JE: I have a fascination with reading obituaries in the New York Times. I just -- I love to read those stories.

JGE: They're great.

JE: Yeah, yeah, they are.

JGE: And they have the advantage, those really good obituaries, is they're doing them while the person is still alive.

JE: Yeah.

JGE: And that is much like your program. You're capturing people's thoughts. And then the hard part is -- and this is what I was always told about journalism -- the hard part is what are you not going to report? Because you do have to self-edit.

JE: Yeah. So, then you had to interview members of the family?

JGE: Sometimes. When they were prominent, you bet. You know, I did. But, you know, the funeral homes did a damn good job. They would come in with lots of detailed information. You know, I've talked to a lot of funeral home directors over the years. And they -- that's one thing that they miss out of their business: that they really got to know who the person they were putting in the ground. And they did it by interviewing the family.

Chapter 7 – 11:45

Cattle Mutilation

John Erling (JE): You're a senior. You're graduating. What year did you graduate?

Jim Gray East (JGE): '72.

JE: Did the Muskogee paper ever say, "If you go off to college, you can come back here and work?" Or was there ... ?

JGE: Well, my editor, who was kind of notorious, his name was John Lewis Stone. He was related to Willard Stone, the artist. But John Lewis told me, he says -- because I, by that time, I had convinced my parents that I should go to OSU and not to Northeastern. And so I was all getting ready to go off to OSU.

And he told me that I probably would not have a job if I came back in the summer because they will have taught me things that are useless. And he always wanted me just to stay and work at the newspaper.

JE: "They", meaning OSU, would have taught you things that are useless.

JGE: That's correct.

JE: Why was it the Northeastern/OSU thing?

JGE: That was money, and it was also about proximity. So if you lived in Muskogee and you went to Northeastern, you could just drive over for the day and come back. So the big decision for my parents, and they'd already made it for my older brothers, I needed them to pony up. And my father was very blunt.

He said, "You can do it, but every time you make a D or an F, you have to pay me back the tuition for that course."

JE: And? Did that happen?

JGE: It came close, but it didn't.

JE: (Laughing) Why did you want to go to OSU?

JGE: They had a really good journalism school. They had newspaper journalism. OU was more into, at that time, into magazine and they were

starting to develop TV and radio.

OSU had a good radio program that was really kind of based in its news. KOSU and the Daily O'Collegian, the newspaper there, were really kind of tied together. The school supported it. So I could see that the university was happy that the O'Collegian was there. That changed later, but at that time, they really looked at it as a value to the university.

JE: I'm already looking back. You launched your career because you were mad.

JGE: Yep.

JE: That's how it got started.

JGE: Pretty much. Pretty much.

JE: (Laughing) So you're at OSU. They have a newspaper.

JGE: They did.

JE: You obviously worked for that newspaper.

JGE: I did.

JE: And were there some -- was that immediately as a freshman then?

JGE: No. No. It was when I became a sophomore. I went through some courses. I was settling out. I had started, I was thinking, "I really shouldn't limit myself to journalism."

And so I wanted to check out the School of Architecture at OSU, a very fine school. And I had taken some classes in high school in drafting. And so I was interested in that. And then I realized I needed to really have high math skills.

And so I dropped all the architectural schools and went back to journalism. So in my junior -- I'm in my sophomore year -- so I went as a reporter. And then in my junior year, I figured out that I did not want to be the editor of

the newspaper. I wanted to be the chairman of the board of publications over the newspaper so I could pick the editor.

And that was kind of a real early realization of how people have influence over others and other things. And so I became the chairman of the board of publications. And there were other students there. And so we were in charge of the yearbook. We oversaw some things at OSU, KOSU, but also the Daily O'Collegian. And so I remained in that for the next three years. Yes, I did two senior years.

JE: Two senior years.

JGE: Yeah, so I was there, at OSU, for five years. I wasn't paying attention to my classes.

And so I was passing, but I was just always short of the credits that I needed because I was spending all my time practicing what I did.

JE: Was this a tough sell to tell your father, "I need five years to graduate"?

JGE: It probably was. I don't remember a big discussion about it. The other thing is I was starting to make some money. Because I had realized that everything I wrote at the Daily O'Collegian, I could also sell to the Daily Oklahoman.

JE: Okay.

JGE: And that helped me because I was not only the O'Collegian reporter, but I was also the Daily Oklahoman reporter -- the state's largest newspaper.

JE: So that must have been a thrill to see your name, byline in the Daily Oklahoman.

JGE: Yes. And it made my grandfather and Ada very happy because he subscribed to the Oklahoman. And so he could follow my stuff as well.

JE: So there are going to be issues, apparently, wherever you go. There must have been some, as you wrote for the student newspaper at OSU, some topics that you got right in the middle of it, of the whole thing.

JGE: Mm-hmm.

JE: Am I riding down the right path here?

JGE: Yeah, yeah, there were plenty of those.

JE: Let's pick up on a couple of them.

JGE: So the funny one was -- I'm probably a senior at this point -- and there is this phenomenon that's come to the middle part of the country where cattle were found out in the middle of their fields with their throats slit and their blood drained.

And over time, the rumors about how these cattle died just went wild. So from one extreme aliens landing and killing the cattle, to the other extreme, satanic bands of youth out, you know, sacrificing these cattle.

So David Boren, former U.S. Senator, was governor at the time. And so David formed a cattle mutilation task force. And it was run by a guy named Roger Webb, who was later -- at that time he was director of public safety -- and later was the head of NSU, and then Central State at Edmond. And Roger -- both of them were good intentioned -- and so they started looking into it. Of course, we were writing about it. And then my partner in writing about it, Mike Ward also had a similar relationship as I did with the Oklahoman, so his stories appeared, also, in the Tulsa World.

So, in effect, we had statewide coverage of everything we wanted to write about. And so we started writing about the cattle mutilations. And it just was nuts. And finally we had to set a standard before we wrote a story about some other cattle mutilation.

You had to actually -- the sheriff couldn't just say, "The aliens landed, they killed our cattle, and we're shipping all our cattle over to the OSU Diagnostic Center."

I remember taking photographs of a helicopter -- an Oklahoma National Guard helicopter -- airlifting cattle over to Stillwater so they could be autopsied.

It was just, the whole thing got really out of control. So we started saying, "If you can't show us some evidence, like, 'there's big pools of blood that were there' or footprints, or something like that, we're not going to write a story."

So that reduced the number of stories we wrote. A couple people did books about it, and eventually it stopped. And you know, at the end of the day, it was my opinion, it was wolves. It was other predators who would see a sick cow out there, and attack it. And they knew that if they went to the throat, they would -- that was the best way to kill it. So that was a very weird story. It had an OSU connection. Because OSU was very much involved in doing all the autopsies on everything. But it got big statewide publicity for, I mean, this thing may have gone on for a year. It was crazy.

JE: Didn't ranchers or farmers want to hang out at night maybe?

JGE: Yes, they did. And people came out with lights and various things to try and, you know...

But it was, I mean, we find this today. But people kept, you know, hold on to some -- the weirdest ideas of the reason behind something is happening, without any evidence. That was the great, yeah. And eventually, I was able to talk and laugh about it with both Roger Webb and David Boren.

But, because I would continue to write about them in the coming years. And then the other is, whenever I wrote about the university, I invariably would make Dr. Kamm, who was the president of the university, upset. Because, you know, he really did not want... He didn't think the newspaper should be writing anything about, you know, academic standards and things like that, so...

JE: So what kind of story did you do that would upset him?

JGE: I'm trying to think of the best. You know, I don't know. It's been a long time, but I could probably think about it. But he was mad. And of course, then I saw him later when he ran for Senate -- and lost to David Boren.

JE: What was his name?

JGE: Robert Kamm. Bob Kamm.

JE: Okay.

Chapter 8 – 10:34

Daily Oklahoman

John Erling (JE): So you're having fun being a reporter? Writing?

Jim Gray East (JGE): Yep.

JE: And then you graduate from OSU.

JGE: I do.

JE: What year?

JGE: I didn't actually graduate. I went through the process. And then they told me I did not graduate. And at first, we thought it was some sort of conspiracy.

But they said, "See? Here? You missed this one course".

So I did not graduate because I did not get credit for ... I'm trying to remember what it was. It was either economics or a science course. But there was a course. And I always thought about going back and doing it so I could get my degree. But I did not graduate.

JE: All right. (Chuckling). All right.

JGE: My parents were convinced that the university had taken revenge on me. It's possible. But I had such a lively activity schedule of things I was doing. It's clearly possible that I missed a course. And I ran through school counselors like bubble gum. And, you know, it was -- I think I had eight different counselors in five years at OSU.

JE: Counseling you for what?

JGE: So the counselors were supposed to help us -- guide us -- through getting all our required courses taken. And that was one of their primary jobs. And I pissed them off at various times about things. And I just -- I never kept a counselor for more than a year.

JE: People listening to this who know you in the community didn't know. You don't appear to be the rabble-rouser you were way back then.

JGE: I'm not. I'm not. I'm, you know, I ... If I wasn't already in the middle of it, I figured out a way to get into the middle of it.

JE: All right. All right. So what year did you not graduate?

JGE: 1977.

JE: Then was a job offered to you?

JGE: Yes. The Daily Oklahoman had a standing offer. And so I went to work at the Daily Oklahoman. But for the morning paper -- not the afternoon newspaper -- the Oklahoma City Times. And so I went on to the police desk at the Oklahoma City Times and started ... That really started my fascination and an approach to the judicial system and criminals.

JE: Did you get involved -- what would you have gotten involved in then?

JGE: So probably the one that was the most memorable or most notorious was a guy, Ted, and I can't remember his last name. He ate his father. He killed him. He had been at Central State at Norman in the mental institution and convinced his father to let him come home. Kaczynski? Is

that it? Ted Kaczynski? Something like that. He came home with him and he killed him and then he ate him.

And I will always remember it because the police officers -- Midwest City -- they were coming out of the house and immediately vomiting because the smell. It was probably the first time I had seen that level of death. I saw it several times later, but that was one of the first ones. And I remember it all. I remember it very vividly.

JE: So as a reporter, you were...?

JGE: I was there to write about it. It was an early morning. They did early morning discoveries. And so I was having to do bullets. I was having to do updates. The Oklahoma City Times had four editions during the morning. The last one was at 12:30PM right in the afternoon. And so I had to call in updates that entire day. And so that was a journalism skill that I had not really ever developed. And so I now, and did later, I could just dictate a story off my head. And then remember where I'm at, stop, put in a couple of quotes, then remember how I'd done it so that at another hour, if I had new information, I could insert it into that. And so you had four, you know, you were out there for five hours and you had to write basically the same story, but five different versions of it.

JE: So you'd call back to the paper and you were dictating to somebody there.

JGE: That's correct.

JE: So did you -- were you in that house? You as a reporter?

JGE: I did walk into the house.

JE: You did?

JE: Yes. I knew I had to, and I had an editor who -- his name was Covey Bean -- Covey was crazy. And he pushed all of us. And he said, "If you don't go into the house and see what they're talking about, don't come back because you'll be fired." And so I went in and it was horrible.

JE: Because you saw body parts?

JGE: Yeah. He had -- there were pieces of his dad that were still in the skillet.

JE: (Grimacing) Mmm. Did that image linger with you for a long time?

JGE: I can still see it. No. No. I have, you know, none of these -- where I've seen bodies mutilated or whatever -- no. If I think about it, I can remember it. But no.

JE: Didn't keep you up at night?

JGE: No.

JE: But, as you said, it helped you develop the skill to get on the phone and dictate. And you hadn't done that before. But it came naturally to you, apparently, somehow.

JGE: It did. It did. And I used it for a good 20 years there. I'm, you know, I'm ... I remember being down in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania and dictating a story. I'd gone down for a Pennsylvania Crime Commission hearing and I'm in some restaurant, kind of a hamburger joint, dictating it.

JE: So you -- not everybody could do that. You could write an article just by talking through it and, except for a few dashes and dots and here and there, it was right on target and could be published.

JGE: It could. And, but also the people that did rewrite, that you would give dictation, they were really good. And so, they would ... if you were struggling with something, they would stop you and then they'd say, "Well, let's keep on." Because they knew that there was a rhythm, that if you didn't stay in the rhythm -- "Get it done, and then we'll go back to that paragraph and we'll figure it out."

JE: Hmm. Yeah. That's good to be able to work with people like that.

JGE: They were very talented.

JE: All right. So that was a big story. Have another one that you might have read?

JGE: Girl Scout murders was a big deal. Gene Leroy Hart. And when they found the children in the tents, it was 6AM., 7AM., something like that.

And so, my job, I had to be at the desk making calls at 5AM And so, as many of the sheriff and jail deputies would remind me, they'd say, "Thank you for waking me up," because I was their kind of their wake-up call. And then I would say, "Did anything happen overnight?"

And that's when we found out about the Girl Scout murders. And the sheriff's deputy in Jay told me to call back in an hour. So I called back. We were one of the first to write and put it on the press about the fact that they had found these girls.

JE: Did you go to the cell?

JGE: No, I did not. And so, one of my jobs was to immediately call one of the state reporters to get in their car and get their ass over there. And so, I had two choices. And they let me decide. And so, Bob Taylor, who was legendary in field reporting for the Daily Oklahoman. And then a young pup who had... I guess he had worked at the Oklahoman for a little bit. And then he became Bob's number two, named Ed Kelly. And of course, Ed is now the head of the journalism department at OU. And so, Bob and Ed, one of the twos -- and I think I sent Bob -- and Bob went over there and covered it for weeks.

JE: But you were there for the full coverage of all that and the trial of Gene Leroy Hart.

JGE: I think I'd come back. I think I'd come back to Muskogee by that time.

JE: Okay.

JGE: Yeah, the trial. Yeah, it's because, you know, there was a big manhunt once they figured out who they were looking for. And he escaped them for a long time. And then they arrested him. And then the trial in Pryor.

JE: In our collection of oral histories, we have Nancy McDonald. Her story talks about that because she was on the board of directors of the Girl Scouts at the time.

And then Buddy Fallis, who, of course, was in on the trial of Gene Leroy Hart. And at that trial, Gene Leroy Hart was acquitted. But, so, we have those two stories for those of you who want to follow up on this.

Chapter 9 – 7:06

Not Oklahoman Enough

John Erling (JE): Okay, so you said you didn't stay there very long.

Jim Gray East (JGE): No, so about a year and a half in, Deacon New, who was one of the top editors, pulled me aside and said, "Do you have any other place you could go?" And he goes, "No one's questioning your ability, but you're just not Oklahoman material." And that was primarily politics. I was much more liberal then. And the Oklahoman knew that. And they ... there were some people there that just did their job.

And so I was still in that period of still kind of putting to bed all my politics. And so I can't remember what had precipitated, but I realized that Deacon was right. I have great admiration for him. And I'm sure he protected me from various people. Mr. Gaylord was still alive and running the place.

I don't think that Deacon and Jim Standard, who was the managing editor, shed a tear when I didn't come back.

JE: Well, how could you display your liberal bent?

JGE: Oh, I probably made some nasty comment about somebody, you know.

JE: In writing?

JGE: No, just probably verbally.

JE: Oh, so it wasn't what you had ...

JGE: No, no, everything -- what I was writing about was just crime stuff.

JE: Right, right. But it was -- they didn't feel you were an Oklahoman on the staff?

JGE: No, I was not an Oklahoman. And I never was.

JE: But the fact that you were doing a good job in print...

JGE: Right. It didn't, it was not...

JE: You weren't forgiven for that.

JGE: That was good up to a point. And then, yes.

JE: So, "We've got to get this guy out."

JGE: Well, the other thing is that we're not paid much of anything at this point. And so, you know, it doesn't disrupt the organization by letting somebody go.

JE: I don't know why that's funny, but it is.

JGE: Yeah, it's just like, "I can get a dozen more like that."

JE: "Who are more like us."

JGE: Exactly.

JE: And of course, you couldn't be more Oklahoman than anybody.

JGE: So my first call was to Harry Heath. And Harry was the dean of the journalism department at OSU. And I asked him if he had any thoughts.

And he says, "I have one, but let me make a couple of phone calls when I

come back.”

And I said, “All right.”

So he called me back and he said, “Here's the deal. You need to go back to Muskogee. They need someone to write politics for 1980. There's a U.S. Senate race, some guy named Boren, Stipe.” And he says, “They need you to do that.” And he says, “It's got lots of races and lots of other things.”

And I said, “And?”

And he said, “And as soon as that's done, Gannett will make you an offer.”

JE: “Gannett” being?

JGE: Gannett was becoming the world's largest newspaper chain. And their chairman of the board, Paul Miller, was an OSU graduate. Grew up in Okemah, I believe. And then he went to OSU. And then he went to United Press International. Moved around, did a variety of various publications, and then went to Gannett when it was based up in Rochester, New York. And then they, about that time, that's when they started buying newspapers. And they had bought The Muskogee Phoenix from the Bixby family.

JE: But they also went on to USA Today.

JGE: And they did

JE: Right, right.

JGE: And I foolishly turned down an opportunity to go work on USA Today. That would have really changed my direction. Because they were out looking for this experiment. Anyway, so I took it. And so I went back to Muskogee. And I covered the 1980 elections. And, on -- whatever it was -- November 9th or whatever it was, the day after, I wrote to the number two at Gannett, some guy named Al Newharth, and said, “I'm ready to exercise my option.”

And I had three immediate offers. One was very interesting: It was the Virgin Islands.

They had just bought the papers down there. Fort Myers, Florida; and Binghamton, New York. So when I started looking at them and asking them what to do, the Virgin Islands was wide open, totally corrupt. It would have been fascinating, but I'm not even sure where I would have started. Fort Myers: pretty established, high growth area, et cetera. Binghamton: old school, And they wanted me to cover the mob. And I just couldn't walk away from that. So I went to Binghamton, New York.

JE: To cover the mob.

JGE: So the mafia -- La Cosa Nostra -- is kind of ... most is histories. It all begins in a little town right across the border from Binghamton. Binghamton's in New York, just in the Pennsylvania border, called Appalachian. And Appalachian was where one of the bosses had his home. And he had all the bosses throughout the US.

All 28 of 'em come there in 1957. I think that's right. And that's when J. Edgar Hoover had to admit that the La Cosa Nostra was here in America, because they ended up doing a raid and a bunch of them got arrested. The family there was Russell Buffalino in Binghamton, and he was a very strong member of the Mafia. And there were other members of the other families: Bonanno family out of New York and the Corle -- no, what was that other one?

Lucchese's family, out of New York, were active in the area, but Buffalino ran everything. So I went up there and covered the Mafia.

Chapter 10 – 14:57

The Mafia

John Erling (JE): Okay, covered the Mafia.

Jim Gray East (JGE): That is really... I know, everybody goes, "Well, how do you cover the Mafia? They don't have, like, open meetings."

JE: So do you... You figure out, "How do I start this? How do I get myself involved?" How did you do that?

JGE: So I started talking to law enforcement: FBI, local police... I did a lot of reading about who was who. And then, you know, things would happen. And so I'd write stories about them. Typically, most successful criminal organizations, and not just the mafia, but all criminal organizations, don't commit their crimes where they live. Their goal in life is to steal from other people or to sell products or whatever, but to not to do it where it's home.

And so at some point, younger people join -- the children -- and then they start making mistakes, and they start selling drugs, or they start hijacking trucks or doing things in the hometown, and that usually turns out bad.

And then the police are made to look like they're incompetent, and so they get pissed off. And so you're waiting and looking for that battle to occur, and that was just starting to occur in Binghamton.

JE: All right. So let me say, you must have come... You must have come to the attention of the boss or bosses.

JGE: I did.

JE: All right. So then let's back up and find out why. Why did you come to their attention? It was because you wrote stories. What kind of story made them interested in you?

JGE: Well, I think they were interested, but I think they got pissed off when I cost them money. And so I remember when it happened, there was a Frito-Lay plant in Binghamton, and the... It was either the laborers or the Teamsters were trying to organize the plant. And both of those locals, union locals, were pretty much mobbed up. They had members of the family in executive positions. And so I wrote this horrible story, about all these people that were trying to gain control of this Frito-Lay plant and they put it across the top of the front page.

And so Frito-Lay, being no dummies, took that article and put it under everybody's windshield at the plant. And they lost the vote and they were pissed. And it comes to you different ways. Mainly it comes from law enforcement who tell you, "You did not make them happy; just watch yourself."

Or sometime somebody will drive -- by you're walking on the street -- I remember this very vividly: I'm walking downtown and I see someone pull up and they point their hand at me like it's like a gun and they click it a couple of times.

And I know who they were and, so, you know, that was their way of doing it. And so I just didn't respond to all that because I figured if they really wanted to harm me, they would. And if they wanted just to try and intimidate me that's different.

And that's what they were trying to do; they were trying to intimidate me.

JE: It didn't work.

JGE: It didn't work and then something changed at all. I wrote a story about the underboss's --, Tony Guarneri's -- son, and he had been arrested for cocaine possession. It was typical, just in one much of a story. And Tony's son -- he was Peter -- called me at the office and threatened to kill me. And I'm listening to him, and I'm pretty sure he was high when he was screaming at me.

So anyway, it's over, and I put the phone down.

And then the phone rings again; and I pick it up again, and it's the FBI. Well, they had a tap on his phone, and they wanted to know whether I'd press charges against him for threatening to kill me. And I started laughing, and I go, "No," I said, "No. I'm just, I'm just a reporter. Leave me alone."

Well, the one thing I learned later was these were FBI agents out of New York; they were not in Binghamton.

The agents in Binghamton knew me. I doubt they would have called me. But anyways, these guys did, and I said no.

Well, somehow that got back to Mr. Guarneri, and he called me. He just said, "Thank you."

And that's the most he had ever said to me. He had never taken one of my calls or anything. And then later in life, toward the end, I was in that little town in Harrisburg covering the Pennsylvania Crime Commission. Their lawyer, Remo Allio, their consigliere, came over to me and he said, "Would you like to interview Mr. Guarneri and Mr. Buffalino?"

And I said, "Sure."

And he goes, "Just stand here." And they all came in: all the guards, and Mr. Buffalino and Mr. Guarneri.

And we sat at one of those little rickety plastic tables that always feel like they're going to fall apart. I asked him what I could ask him, they said, "Just ask," and we talked about lots of different things, and I wrote a story out of it. And of course, it got me a grand jury subpoena from the feds to come and testify. We squashed it; we didn't have to go.

But yeah, that was my -- I'm fast-forwarding through all my little activities covering the mob, but yeah, it was interesting. Mr. Guarneri is no bigger than me and not intimidating, but of course, later in life, they made a movie out of him - about Hoffa -- and then I guess it's De Niro who plays the lead, not Buffalino. Buffalino's played by ... he's played in a variety of mob movies, but yeah, he was...

JE: What was the name of the movie?

JGE: Shoot. I got to remember it. Anyway, I don't know from the top of my head.

JE: When you said Mr. Guarneri called you and said "Thank you" ...?

JGE: For not prosecuting -- not cooperating with the FBI and putting his son in jail.

JE: Okay.

JGE: Because he knew his son was pretty much out of control on drugs, and he was going to have to deal with it. It was that same period in that time within the La Cosa Nostra where, you know, Luciani, when he came to head the families, he allowed him to get into drugs, and there was still a lot of concern about that -- that was going to create a lot of problems, which it did.

JE: So what was the setting when you interviewed Mr. Guarneri and the other boss? What was his name again?

JGE: Buffalino.

JE: Buffalino. Was that in jail? Was that in prison?

JGE: It is no different than what we're sitting at right now. I'm sitting at a table

JE: In prison?

JGE: In Harrisburg -- no.

JE: I'm sorry.

JGE: In Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. They had just gone to the Pennsylvania Crime Commission and taken the fifth on everything, so they would not testify, and they were the head of the mafia. I had gone across the street to this little restaurant. I mean, it was kind of like a Wendy's; it was like a small restaurant, and I was using the phone, and that's when their lawyer, their consigliere, Remo. Remo came over and said, "Would you like to interview Mr. Guarneri and Mr. Buffalino?"

And I think it was all tied. I said that the fact that I had not taken the bait from the FBI and pressed charges on Mr. Guarneri's son ... It all -- all those things -- over probably a year period kind of transpired to say, "So what are

we going to do with him?" They weren't going to hurt me because they knew that.

And matter of fact, when I had my going-away party in Binghamton, Remo and two very large men with bulges on their waist, came to it.

JE: (Laughing)

JGE: And I remember that because my brother who had come -- my brother John -- had come up to help me drive back to Tulsa. He goes, "Who is that?"

I go, "Well, the guy in the chair is Remo Allio, he's the consigliere for the Buffalino crime family."

And he goes, "Oh, that's why those two guys on either side of him have guns."

And I go, "Yep, they do." I said, "Over here is the FBI and over there is the Endicott police and over there is the [unintelligible]," and we were in a big American Legion hall, so it was fun.

JE: You had the mob influence at your going away party.

JGE: Yep, they were there.

JE: Okay, then. You didn't have time to prepare yourself for this interview.

JGE: (In agreement) Mm-mmm.

JE: I mean, bingo. They're here to sit down; let's do it.

JGE: Right.

JE: So then what did you want -- them to confess to everything they did? Or how did you ... what kind of questions did you ask?

JGE: Oh, I asked them all the same questions that the crime commission asked them. And they, again, said, “No, thank you.”

And then I was struggling; I was trying to figure out -- “What?” And I says, “Alright. We'll change it. What's your favorite Italian restaurant in Binghamton?”

JE: (Laughing)

JGE: And that kind of opened them up. So they started talking about that and then I started saying, “Well, who's your favorite judge?”

And they said, “You can't write it.”

And I said, “Okay.” So they told me who their favorite judges were and that's what got me in trouble because at the end of the story, I put a paragraph -- this was a mistake -- I said “They also talked with me about who their favorite other elected officials were.” And I didn't name -- say any. And so the feds...

JE: And so you named them?

JGE: No, I didn't. And so the feds wanted to get me in front of the grand jury to detail who -- which ones they told me. And so we had to go to court to quash the subpoena.

JE: You didn't have to ... Does this come under the category of “a reporter does not have to divulge...”

JGE: Unless it's a criminal act. So there was no there was no accusation -- because they didn't know who it was -- there was no accusation that anybody that I was writing about in there had committed a criminal act.

JE: Right, and you couldn't prove it; so the judge and others had to be on the take...?

JGE: Correct.

JE: ... from the mob.

JGE: That's correct.

JE: And you knew who they were.

JGE: That's correct. That's what I wanted to know and they – to be honest with you -- the mafia did not -- and I think particularly the upper echelons of the mafia -- they had no respect for those judges. They utilized them, but they had no respect for them.

JE: (Laughing) So even the mafia has their set of ethics.

JGE: They do.

JE: And they didn't respect the judges, even though they got them to do pretty much what they wanted them to do.

JGE: That's correct.

JE: They looked down upon them, as they were using them. Did you ever try to confront any of those people?

JGE: Nope.

JE: Why?

JGE: I didn't have anything to do it because they'd given it to me in confidence. It was just something I would watch for. So if I saw a judge, you know, doing something I would probably pay a little bit more closer attention to the case to find out if they were gonna do something.

And then if I could figure out a way to write about it -- without giving up my sources -- yeah; and I did -- I would do things like that.

JE: But wasn't it great you had a newspaper publisher and an editor and all that supported you through all this? Nobody -- did anybody say, "Hey, you got to be careful. You got to back off." Or "stop" or anything?

JGE: So there'd been a person that had done this before: Dave Mack. And Dave had eventually decided he needed to be paid. And so he went to work for Governor Kerry in Albany, and so the position was open, and nobody else wanted it at the newspaper so that's why they recruited outside of Binghamton for me to come cover the mob.

Yeah. It was it is one of the more ... You know, it's it's probably the most ... It's the area that most people are interested in when they hear my journalism. The other one would be a lot of people like to talk about the white supremacists and I got to write about them.

JE: All right...

JGE: ... Later.

JE: But the subscriptions for the readership to that newspaper had to just been off the charts.

JGE: Well, maybe and maybe not. I mean, you do get a little bit of activity there and some ... But, you know ... this is is an afternoon -- the Binghamton Evening Press -- it was an afternoon newspaper, again.

And, at this point, all the afternoon newspapers are just struggling. And so the Oklahoma City Times was gone. Then I went to work for the Evening Press; it's gone. And then, of course, I went to work for the Tulsa Tribune, eventually. And so I'm kind of like the stalker of death around afternoon newspapers.

JE: (Laughing) Right.

Chapter 11 – 11:40

Tulsa Tribune

John Erling (JE): So then you leave.

Jim Gray East (JGE): I leave. I leave. I've done enough. I've had enough snow for a lifetime. I love Binghamton. They couldn't have been nicer to me. One of the editors came out and said, "There's an opening at your hometown newspaper to be the editor."

And I said, "I'm not an editor."

And he goes, "You ought to try it."

And so I came back to Muskogee, and I was the city editor for the newspaper. So I oversaw all the reporting. Be blunt? It made me sick. It made me physically sick. I remember two different times that I had the shingles.

There was way too much stress in my life trying to get that paper out and control all these young reporters. I wasn't much older, but I was a little bit older. Yeah, it was just too much. And so I did it for about a year and a half. And then I came back to the Tulsa Tribune.

JE: Binghamton, New York... That person who said there's an opening there -- was he being kind?

JGE: Yes.

JE: Did he want you to leave?

JGE: No; his name is Sal DeVivo. And Sal was being kind. He knew I was not going to be a lifer there. There were lots of lifers that had come there, started there, and would always work there. But, yeah.

JE: But you left. You had good support.

JGE: And have some of the most endearing friendships. Those people came here when Kim and I got married. I mean, yes, 40 years after.

JE: But that was an exciting time in your life.

JGE: Oh, it was very exciting. I mean, you know, I remember going into New York City to cover federal trials and then wandering around. I had to write a few other things because, you know, the mob was not like a daily writing. I wrote about all sorts of ... about the beginnings of casino gambling in upstate New York and the Catskills. And yeah, it was fun.

JE: So there are many stories we could get into there. But now you're back in Muskogee. And so then what happens to you?

JGE: Nothing. I'm just, you know, I'm there. I'm trying to kind of help direct the newspaper coverage and stuff. I'm maybe occasionally writing something -- not a lot. I've pretty much, you know, seen everything. Yes. So this is when Mike Turpin and Drew Edmondson kind of come in and take charge.

And so Mike Turpin was an assistant district attorney in Muskogee. He'd got graduated from TU and he came here. And then Drew Edmondson, a congressman's son, had graduated and he came as an assistant. The attorney -- the district attorney -- was Julian Fite, one of the best people that I ever met in all my writing. Julian directed his staff. Didn't matter who; they were to prosecute criminals. And it didn't matter if they had titles in front of their names or whatever.

And so it was pretty wild. We had prosecutions of three different judges. The judges: all three judges in Muskogee County. Lots of different ... lots of gambling cases, lots of other things, because Muskogee had a really strong criminal past. There were still a lot of activities. And so I give a lot of credit to Julian, Drew and Mike.

Over a period of about five or six years, they cleaned up the messes. That was all interesting and important; but I was ready to leave Muskogee. It was again, as I said, you know, the doctor told me, he said, "You have got to get someplace where there's less stress."

JE: But you weren't writing. You weren't a reporter through all of that.

JGE: I was doing a little bit, but not much. And so I was still doing a lot of reporting, but I was not writing about it. So I was out trying to figure out

what was going to happen. You know, because I knew all these players and I had grown up with them. So my hand was still in it.

JE: But did you get pushed back ... Three? You said three judges.

JGE: Yes.

JE: And can you take one of them? Was there a story there? What had the judge done?

JGE: So they were all prosecuted by the Oklahoma Council on Judicial Complaints. They were ... I think eventually Jay Cook may have gone to prison. I think he did. He was the special judge. Maybe bribery, something -- I can't remember exactly, but he did.

Judge Porter was the associate district judge. He was thrown out for erratic behavior as a judge.

And then the granddaddy of them all, Bill Hayworth, was thrown out for oppression and corruption.

Yeah. It was... For a very short period, we had no judges in Muskogee County.

JE: A population of about how many?

JGE: 40,000 people.

JE: Wow. That's amazing, isn't it?

JGE: It was.

JE: So then do you reach out? Do you decide, "I gotta get out of here."?

JGE: So, at some point, my friends at -- my reporter friends at the Tulsa Tribune -- say that the Tribune's interested in hiring me. So I'm working on a story that I know one of the editors is very interested in -- Tribune editor is very interested in it. So, I get it all put together, and we run it in Muskogee. And

it was about a gangster who was kind of getting his feet in place down in Sallisaw around Blue Ribbons Downs because horse racing was coming.

I think he ... my memory is that he had murdered a couple of people. So anyway, he's in play. I write the story. We're out ... my assumption is we're out drinking, we're doing something, talking about it. And we get the crazy idea that once it comes off the press that night, we should take copies of it and take it up to the Tulsa Tribune newsroom elevator and glue it to the wall so that when the editor, Windsor Ridenour, came into the elevator, as he did every morning, he'd see the story that he wanted -- and had his reporters working on -- already published and stuck to the wall.

JE: (Laughing) Okay. Why this kind of action?

JGE: I don't know.

JE: You just wanted to show him that, "We got something you didn't."

JGE: That's correct.

JE: "Our little newspaper down here in Muskogee."

JGE: That's correct.

JE: "...and you're the great Tulsa Tribune."

JGE: That's correct.

JE: "...and we beat you at your game."

JGE: We did, and that's exactly -- maybe that was it. Maybe there was something else going on, but anyway, it was a quick thought. It's two, three, four o'clock in the morning. You're not thinking straight. You probably had a couple of beers, so why not?

JE: So did you get a call from Windsor Ridenour?

JGE: I did. I did.

JE: (Laughing) And what happened?

JGE: Three weeks later, he called me and he said, "You need to come up here; I want to hire you."

And I said, "Maybe."

And so I come and we go to the press club -- maybe one o'clock. And at five o'clock, all the other reporters at the Tulsa Tribune who I know, they all show up, trying to figure out what had happened -- whether Windsor had killed me, or whether I had killed Windsor, or what?

And we were badly drunk by this point, because we'd been drinking for four hours straight. And we were still yelling at each other. And, you know, periodically he would say, "You know, we just, we want you here. This is what I'm going to pay you."

And I would yell at him about it.

And so we had this running, yelling argument. And to be honest with you, if those reporters had not been there, I couldn't have remembered what I had agreed to and what I'd said because we were both very, very inebriated.

JE: But why were you fighting over something?

JGE: Oh, we just didn't like each other.

JE: Oh, from the get-go?

JGE: Oh, from the get-go. I didn't like him lots of different ways. And so I didn't like the way he treated my friends. I didn't like ... Yeah, so we were ... And even when I came, you know, Gene Jones and the family had to spend most of their time just keeping us away from each other. Because Windsor and I just always fought.

JE: So if Windsor didn't like you, why was he trying to hire you?

JGE: He knew I was good. He knew that I could bring a certain talent -- writing about criminals -- to his team. And he really did not have ... he had one person and she had really gotten burned out -- mainly because of Windsor -- writing about crime. And there was still lots of crime going on.

JE: All right, so bring us to what year about? What year are we talking about?

JGE: This is 19... I came in '84. I came to the Tribune in 1984. And so I came ... I remember because I came with the flood.

JE: Okay. So what did you start writing about?

JGE: Murder.

JE: Murder. Alright. The murder of?

JGE: She was a ... You'll remember this. She was a young radio reporter. And she was snatched by a serial killer out of the parking lot in West Tulsa. I try and remember her name. I can see her. Everybody else was out covering the flood. And so they sent me out to the shopping center there in West Tulsa. I covered it all the way to his execution.

JE: Do we have -- I can't remember the names. I know that story too, but I can't remember the names of ... or the killer. Do you remember the killer?

JGE: I remember what he looks like, but I don't remember his name.

JE: Right.

JGE: He had about five deaths on him. So, yeah. He ended up ... the case -- because he dumped her body in Rogers County -- so the case was tried in Claremore.

Chapter 12 – 5:30
Lifetime Criminals

John Erling (JE): Did you ever go to McAlester to interview?

Jim Gray East (JGE): Yes, many times.

JE: Alright. And who and why?

JGE: Well, a variety of people over the years, but the one I always stopped in to see was Rex Brinlee. And so, you know, I had written about Rex many times over the years. You know, he spit on me once when I got too close, and he was being led out of a courthouse in handcuffs. And that was the only thing he could do. But that was his way of saying that he did not appreciate what I had been writing about.

JE: Alright. We need to say who Rex Brinlee was and what did he do?

JGE: Rex Brinlee was a member of the Dixie Mafia. No kin to the La Cosa Nostra, but the Dixie Mafia -- local mafia -- they oversaw all the gambling, liquor, hijacking trucks, et cetera. And there was a grand jury in Tulsa County looking at him and he identified a member of the grand jury. He was giving testimony to the grand jury about some stolen vehicles that Rex was involved with.

And so Rex put a bomb in Mr. Boulding's truck down in Bristow. And his wife, Fern, decided to drive it that day. And she died pretty much an instant death when the bomb destroyed the truck. And they got him for that.

JE: Because she was the wife of?

JGE: The guy that was testifying against Rex. So it was interesting, it was Tom Lester Pugh, it was Albert "Big Al" McDonald. There were all these lifetime criminals from the Tulsa area who were down at either in McAlester or Stringtown. They were very different than what I met in upstate New York. They were cold, hard killers.

JE: So why was Rex so taken with you?

JGE: I ran into him and wrote about him very early on in a cattle rustling case out of federal court in Muskogee. Of course, he was from Tahlequah. And, probably, I became fascinated by him and so I was always trying to interview him. And I was also trying to interview the other two, Tom Lester Pugh and Albert McDonald. I did eventually talk to McDonald and my partner in a lot of this, Mike Ward, did an extensive interview with Tom Lester Pugh.

But they were ... they were the first really hardcore criminals to operate in Tulsa County. And this was in the late '50s, throughout the '60s, and early '70s.

JE: Wasn't there a female, a woman that was involved with these guys? She was kind of friends to them all or somehow. Is that true?

JGE: Yes. Cleo Epps.

JE: Yes.

JGE: So Cleo was found at the bottom of a cistern well, killed by Tom Lester Pugh, and most people believe, Al McDonald.

JE: Did she go to a grand jury -- went in disguised?

JGE: Yep and so Finess is prosecuting here.

JE: Finess, who you mean?

JGE: Finess Smith, who you've interviewed. Finess Smith is prosecuting in here. And so if you testified in that grand jury. You know, it was really hard at that point to conceal people that were testifying. You had to walk into the courthouse, you had to walk down a hallway, and you had to walk into a room, so people did things like disguise and whatever.

Nowadays, they take you in a back door, you know, they don't have that

problem anymore. But yes, there were a lot of people. [unintelligible] was another one that got killed. But yeah, there was a lot of people that died that testified in those grand juries.

JE: And you were writing.

JGE: I didn't write those grand juries. And so I found -- I was later in life when the ... So, the Tribune, at that time, would send a reporter to the Pardon and Parole Board meetings. And so I would go to McAlester and attend those monthly meetings to see who was up for parole and write half a dozen stories or something like that.

But that was later, and that's where I had my interactions with Rex and the others. They were nasty; they were, you know, I just--

JE: Funny they didn't want to go out and try to find hitmen to take you out.

JGE: So they were already in prison.

JE: Yeah.

JGE: And so ... I think that that element, if they'd still been on the outside, they would have, yeah.

Which is kind of where ... and then I ended my reporting career at the Tribune. I went on the editorial page, but, about writing about all the people around Timothy McVeigh and all the white extremists in eastern Oklahoma and western Arkansas.

Chapter 13 – 6:55

White Supremacy

John Erling (JE): So did you ... How close did you come to their compound?

Jim Gray East (JGE): I actually went to it.

JE: And tell us where that was.

JGE: So there are two compounds that I visited. The first one is just inside the Oklahoma border, not too far from Westville, and that was -- it had some fancy name -- but anyway, the person there was Reverend Jim Millar, and he was considered to be kind of the prophet leader of all those white extremists. They go by different nicknames but they're all white extremists.

Reverend Millar let me come on and try and tell his story; and so I went a couple of times out there and then at that point he knew I was not welcome. And so -- because of the stories that I wrote.

But out there, this is where McVeigh is buried after he was executed, after the Oklahoma City bombing. He is buried out there on their land. And another one, I can't remember -- Snell, something Snell -- and he killed two Arkansas troopers; and he was executed in Arkansas for those crimes, and he's buried out there. So it's kind of a revered site within the white extremist movement. So that's the Millar's camp.

The other one that I went to was the one operated by the Covenant Sword and Arm of the Lord. I'll say that one more time because I love the name: The Covenant Sword and the Arm of the Lord.

JE: And where is that?

JGE: So it was barely inside the Missouri border down from Harrison -- no, is it just up from Harrison, Arkansas. This was the first sedition trial that I'd ever ... and these are people who were actively seeking to overthrow the U.S. government. And so they were all barricaded there. And at some point, I was told by a law enforcement source, that I should get my ass up there before all hell broke loose.

And so this is before the Branch Davidians in Waco, which, of course, that's what happened down there. So I take a photographer and another reporter and we go up there. We go under the guise that we want to interview Jim Ellison, the head of the organization. And all we end up talking to is Kerry Noble, who was the spokesman for the group. And we asked him everything, long interview, et cetera.

A couple of very tense moments. My favorite was when my cohort in this, Mike Ward, said, "I've got a stupid question, but..." And Kerry Noble jumps off the car -- he's on the back of the car hood, on the trunk. He jumps off the car, he pulls his AR-15, he points it directly at Mike and says, "White people do not ask stupid questions."

JE: Wow.

JGE: And I said, "Well, let me rephrase. Let me, for Mike's..." Because Mike's sitting there and is just terrified. And I says, "Well, let me rephrase Mike's question..."

We were, and of course, Kerry ... I mean, he knows that in the woods out there, there are all these federal agents ready to come in and try and arrest them. And so it's pretty tense. And so, anyway, we get our interview done; we get off, and of course, the agents all catch us as we leave and want to make sure that there's nobody else in our car.

And we go off. And they knew we were in there. And so this is mainly ATF people -- alcohol, tobacco, and firearms. And so we're in there and we get the interview done. We get moved back and we wait two days -- two or three days -- and then Reverend Millar shows up, my buddy from Oklahoma. And he goes in and tries to talk them into giving themselves up, which they do. And then they're all arrested.

They go in there, it's all barricaded, and there's multiple weapons. There's a 55-gallon barrel of acid that they were accused of going to go dump it in the Harrison, Arkansas water supply. I mean, they were really into chaos and terrorism. And so they all got charged in Fort Smith of sedition.

Asa Hutchinson, most recently a president for U.S -- the presidential on the Republican side -- Asa was the U.S. attorney. He charged them and prosecuted them and lost the case. And they had tried to get them. Eventually they got convicted of other things -- you know, other crimes -- but the big one was sedition because that was life in prison. The jury, the people from Arkansas, did not buy it. And so they all walked.

And I think ... I'm trying to remember... and I remember, I think Jim...

JE: Jim?

JGE: Jim Ellison, who's the head of the Covenant Sword and Arm of the Lord. I think he also is buried out at ... Oh, it's called Elohim City in Adair County, in Oklahoma. There's a bunch of them buried out there.

JE: So all these characters are dead now, or did they go on to do other...?

JGE: Asa Hutchinson is not.

JE: No, but the criminals.

JGE: Matt Millar is. Ellison is. I think Kerry Noble is still alive.

JE: So they got off, but did they live another life of crime? Did they go on to other things?

JGE: No, Kerry actually... You know, it's always interesting to watch these people who suddenly see the error of their ways. And then they become either ministers or somehow talking about it. You've seen that in a couple of places in the white supremacist movement. But they scared me. They were the people that would wait outside your front door to shoot you.

JE: They were the ones who truly scared you. So when you opened that door, you looked around.

JGE: And that's when I decided I was done writing about criminals.

JE: At the Tulsa Tribune?

JGE: Anywhere.

JE: Right.

Chapter 14 – 8:26
Tulsa Tribune

John Erling (JE): So then you were there when the Tulsa Tribune closed.

Jim Gray East (JGE): I was. Last day, you were there too. It was an emotional day. I was, at this point, back in the editorial department writing editorials. Yeah, it was a tough day. Mainly because I didn't know what I was going to do. It was my fourth afternoon newspaper, starting with the Muskogee Times Democrat, which was the afternoon of The Phoenix. The Phoenix was the morning publication, then The Oklahoma City Times, The Binghamton Evening Press, and then The Tulsa Tribune.

JE: Was there a particular editorial you wrote that got the angst or the anger either of the public or of Jenk Jones? Or were you kind of not as willing to stir up the mud maybe as you were at one time? But they weren't afraid of that either, as I recall, the Jones family.

JGE: There are several that I think that I could probably speak to that. There was an angry reaction to it. The newspaper was very supportive. I mean, I remember when Richard Lloyd Jones, Sr., he had written a story about Indian sovereignty, an editorial, decades earlier or something like that.

And he and I would have frequent, spirited discussions about sovereignty and mine with the position that it was legitimate, it was lawful, and it should be respected. And of course, I learned all that by growing up in Muskogee and having regular interactions with the Cherokee Nation and the various chiefs and and to some degree with the Creeks. He disagreed.

JE: But explain that -- sovereignty.

JGE: And so I finally – sovereignty is that Indian tribes, primarily those with reservations, which all do some sort of allotment of land by the U.S. government, that those people can set up their own set of government structures and pass laws, ordinances, and other things.

And if you go all the way back to the original treaties, they have broad

rights to various things, usually land, water, other types of crops, but those clauses in those original treaties have kind of been expanded and through various court actions. And a lot of it was filed there in Muskogee, over the ownership of the Arkansas River, a variety of these things.

Now today we have McGirt, which is over criminal cases and we're having to deal with it, but it is the law of the land. So anyway, I was always talking to Mr. Jones. And so he finally said to me, he said, "OK, you're so damn smart. Let's see what you can write."

And so I wrote the change in policy and noted it that The Tribune was now supportive of the act of sovereignty.

JE: Any fallout from that?

JGE: No.

JE: Readers or anybody?

JGE: The most important one was I got a call from a member of the Oklahoma Supreme Court, Yvonne Kauger, who is a Caddo . And she called, and she'd seen the article. And she said, "First, thank you; but how did this happen?"

JE: (In puzzlement) Hmm.

JGE: So I tend to remember that. I mean, there were editorials where people would call up and say they were going to beat me up and other things.

JE: Even here in Tulsa?

JGE: Yes, yes. Elected officials, yes.

JE: Which you will not name.

JGE: I will not, because they're still alive.

JE: Yes.

JGE: You know, but that was just part of the job. You wrote what you believed. You tried to make a convincing argument to convince others to believe like you did. And if it upset somebody or it made somebody happy, that was just part of the job. So anyway, I did that for the last year and a half at the Tribune, and then it closed.

JE: But that kind of reporting and editorializing that the Tulsa Tribune went away.

JGE: It really did.

JE: It was never replaced.

JGE: My final -- I would occasionally write a column for the editorial page -- and my final column was about who's going to write about judges now. Because I had always written about state judges. Going back to those bad judges in Muskogee, I had always written, I did it for The Tribune. That was my specialty, not just crime, but specifically judges. And call out those that I thought were doing a good job and also those that needed to be removed from the bench.

JE: Was there corruption here in Tulsa, in Tulsa County, that could not be covered or didn't have time to? Or did you feel that was happening?

JGE: Yes, but I didn't cover it. And so there were other reporters that were assigned to do that. And I basically carved out the rest of eastern Oklahoma for me. Yeah, I occasionally would see a story in Tulsa County that I thought was worth a story. And I might mention it to the editors, and they might mention it to a reporter. But 99% of the time is that I spent a lot of time in Creek County. I spent a lot of time in Rogers. I spent a ton of time in Osage County, Okmulgee, I mean, all these surrounding counties. I spent a lot of time. And then, obviously, Muskogee.

JE: When Jenk Jones Sr. spoke to all of you that last day, that had to be a moving scene.

JGE: It was, and it really made me mad. Because... not because of what he said, but he then went back to his office to finish packing. And I forget what

Jan's last name was, but she was providing administrative services to Senior. And she called me and said, "Can you come back here and help us?" And so nobody else, none of the editors -- including family members -- were back there helping him pack up his history.

And so I went back there and helped pack everything up with him. And then carry it out and take it down to the car so they could leave the paper the last day. It was very sad.

JE: Why wouldn't a family member? What about his son, Jenk Jones Jr.? Was he not there to help?

JGE: He was there.

JE: Yeah.

JGE: And Landon was there. And everybody was there. But they were focused on themselves, and that's fine. But, you know, he epitomized, to me, that newspaper.

JE: You have high regard for him.

JGE: Very much so. Very much so. He and Bisser -- that's his sister -- really saved me, because Windsor was gunning for me. And I knew it, and everybody knew it. And I had to escape there. And going to the editorial page made me untouchable.

JE: Did you try to get on with Tulsa World?

JGE: Nope. I did have a conversation. And Ken Neal and Alex told me -- I'd have lunch with them periodically -- and they said, "We really need a woman down here. Julie DelCour had not come to the editorial page. Janet was there. And so they knew that they needed some broadening of opinion. But, no.

JE: So that ended your career as a reporter, as a writer.

Chapter 15 – 8:00
Went to City Hall

Jim Gray East (JGE): And my unemployment didn't last very long. So I went to ... I immediately got a call. It was suggested to me that I go to City Hall and interview the lady that most likely would be elected mayor, and that was Susan Savage. And so after she was elected, I went to work for her and stayed there for 10 years.

John Erling (JE): Which could be a whole other story, I suppose.

JGE: Not as interesting as all the journalism. I mean, it's interesting. There are things that people will find it interesting. But the days of writing about criminals and -- organized criminals -- was much more intriguing.

JE: But then you walked into that world of an elected position, working for Susan Savage as the mayor. You became the target of media and newspapers.

JGE: Right.

JE: ...like you were reporting on these other people.

JGE: That's correct.

JE: So did you, did it dawn on you: "Oh, wait a minute! Now they're coming after me or reporting on me."

JGE: So I wanted ... yes. And so one of the first things I wanted to do was I wanted to know what they wanted to know. And I made it known that, you know, if they were interested, I would leak stories. I would -- I'd do anything as long as it helped the administration. And they needed to know that. And I also made myself very available with my restrictions.

Like, sometimes it was simple things, like, I don't do standups -- standup interviews -- I'm five feet. I'm too short. And so I always, always tell the TV crews, "We're going to sit out here in the lobby and do the interview. And

this is going to make us both look like we're about the same height.”

And they all kind of kicked out of that. And so, you know, but, the sheer fact that -- and you know, this having all your years in radio -- the sheer fact that you know what it takes to do a story: you know, lugging around those cameras, the lighting, the location, that sort of thing.

Giving them short, quick responses so they can – unlike this where you're kind of rambling -- but quick that they could make a tape out of. That's what they wanted. And so you tried to give them that to make their job easier.

JE: But the Tulsa World would be covering you, and so that was a different interview.

JGE: Yeah. But I had never written about ... and that proved to be good because I had not written about the courthouse. I think I wrote one story about the courthouse, all these judges. But I tended to stay. I did not go to city hall. First time I had -- other than to pay my water bill -- to go to city hall was when I went there to interview with Susan.

JE: There'll be those students who are listening to your story.

JGE: Okay.

JE: And journalism. They want to be writers. Lots of opportunities to be writers these days because we have online and newspapers. What kind of advice would you give them?

JGE: Learn everything. Just be a consumer of all information. And don't get tied to one thing. I remember early on someone asked me how many newspapers did I read every day. And I think the lowest, it was maybe five. And I said ... and they'd say, “Well, which ones?”

And it's not just the New York Times and Washington Post. I mean, it's the Atlanta Constitution, it's the Chicago Tribune, it's the Denver Post, it's the LA Times. I mean, to learn what is news in other parts of the country. And I think that more than anything to be a journalist is to be constantly curious

and constantly learning.

Don't get me wrong. 95% of what you're going to read, you're going to forget because it's crap. But there's 5% in there that you're going to really kind of find interesting.

JE: But then too, to read how these writers -- particularly for the New York Times -- how clever, how good they are, they would learn from these great writers of not only that newspaper, but others as well.

JGE: Oh, definitely. I'm, you know, I had an experience when I went to the Democratic Presidential Convention in New York when Carter was -- President Carter -- was nominated.

Unbeknownst to me, there was a man at the Senate press gallery who decided where all the press could sit who had started his career at The Muskogee Phoenix. When he saw my name and the publication I was representing, he sat me next to R.W. Apple, the renowned national correspondent for the New York Times. And the Washington Post and the L.A. Times and everybody else were behind me. I had a front row seat. And I remember Mr. Apple saying, "Now how the hell did you get up here?" We had great conversations with him.

JE: Because you were representing the...

JGE: The littlest, little, itty-bitty newspaper in Muskogee, Oklahoma that the head of the Senate press gallery had started his career at.

JE: But you lived in Washington, D.C. for a while, too, for The Tribune.

JGE: I did. The Tribune sent me up there for a little over a year. I got to cover Iran-Contra, a variety of other things. And Senator Boren was the senator. And Jim Inhofe was the congressman and then later became senator. Don Nickles was the other U.S. senator.

JE: Well, this has been fascinating. We've known each other for many, many, many, many years. And our wives, Margaret and Kim.

JGE: Right.

JE: All of this I did not know about you except smatterings. You're not one to brag about it. You're not one to bring it up. When I was there... I'm probably more braggadocious about what I did, but you didn't. And so I found this extremely fascinating.

JGE: Well, thank you.

JE: And I thank you for doing it because...

JGE: I appreciate it. I remember we were out on your boat down in Florida when you first were telling me about this idea to start doing these interviews. And, of course, our immediate conversation was, "Well, how are we going to pay for this?"

But the concept, the idea is so sound that I started the other day and finished the piece on Scott Momaday. And just, you know, we need to learn from people like that.

JE: Right. And it's good to hear their voices. Alright. Thank you, Jim.

JGE: Thank you.

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