

J. MICHAEL BARRY

Interviewed by Mary D. Bobo

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Mary Bobo :

My name is Mary D. Bobo of the University of Louisville Oral History Center. This is one in a series of interviews on the *Courier Journal* and *Louisville Times* newspapers.

Today is July 1, 1981. I'm talking with Jay Michael Barry. His date of birth was August 6, 1909, his place of birth Louisville, Kentucky. His parents were John J. Barry and Winifred Hennessy Barry. He began his employment with the Louisville papers in February of 1967, and continues to the present time. His position is that of *Times* sports columnist. - We're going to be dealing for the first part of this series with his experience with his own newspaper, the *Kentucky Irish-American*. Would you talk about that and address this for a few minutes, Mr. Barry?

J. Michael Barry:

It was a weekly newspaper that started in 1898. My father was not the man who started it. He got into it quite early. I think after a year or two, my father was a printer with Bradley and Gilbert, and then he got into the *Kentucky Irish-American*, which started out as sort of a religious paper to bring church news of all the churches here for the Irish who'd come from the old country and were -- we had Catholic churches and Limerick and then Portland all around town. And the *Irish-American*, I think started the early editions you see a whole lot of church news, what's going on at this parish, what's going on at that parish and a little bit of news from old country. In the early 1900's, my father started writing a political column in the paper, over the years, gradually drifted away from

church news or having any religious affiliation whatsoever, and it was my father writing politics. And, then, the man with whom he was associated, Mr. Hagens, would write all the other small stuff and fill the paper, but it was my father's voice that made the *Kentucky Irish-American*. And then I got into the business--we all did, we helped around the print shop; helped with the printing and helped with the folding of papers and all that sort of thing. And then I started writing a sports column in the late 1920's, and I wrote a sports column, and then, just before World War II, I started helping my father write a few small editorials. Then, when I came back from the war in 1945, I worked at various jobs and helped my father a little on the side, and he became--he was hurt in an auto accident in 1949, and he never got his health back. He died in 1950. And, when he died in 1950, I took over the paper and did everything--wrote the front page with the politics and the back page with the sports. And, so I did-- actually I did the last 20 years of the *Irish-American*. We finally closed it down in 1968. Costs kept going up and I found out I couldn't afford to work for me. I wasn't making any money out of *the Irish-American* -- I was putting in an awful lot of time, and these jobs on the side were considerably more lucrative and we had all these little girls; we raised six daughters and a son, and expenses kept going up at home, and income kept going down at the *Irish-American*. So we closed it down in 1968. Well, there used to be several papers in Louisville. There was the morning *Courier*, and the *Louisville Times* in the afternoon. Of course, both owned by the Bingham's. And then there was the *Herald* and the *Post*. So we had actually three different news (unintelligible) in Louisville. Finally the *Herald-Post* -- times got tough, and the *Herald* and the *Post* merged into the *Herald-Post* going against the *Times* and the *Courier*. But it was not a very good paper--the *Herald-Post* and it finally folded, I

believe, in the early '30's, the 1930's or something of the sort. So for the last 35 years, you might say, the *Kentucky Irish-American*--ours was the only editorial voice around here in opposition to the *Courier-Journal*, not that we were opposed on everything, but we did offer a different slant. And my father found a lot of things to disagree with in the *Courier*, just as I did. But the--we've always had great respect for it, because the Bingham's are people of high principles, and they always did their best to put out a fine paper. I told people so many times, "If you complain about the *Courier-Journal* and the *Times*, you ought to just go around the country and read some other newspapers. You'd learn to appreciate what really fine papers they have." But, back in the papers years ago, my father was interested in--he was a Democrat--interested in the Democratic party and in politics. He never ran for office, never held office, but the *Courier-Journal* was fighting for the merit system. They wanted, instead of the political spoils, to the victor belongs the spoils, the *Courier-Journal* believed in "if you just got civil service in, everything would be wonderful--it would just be utopia." Well, if you've--anyone who's dealt with government bureaucracies and civil service people know that it sounds good, it just doesn't work. Whatever the *Courier-Journal* looked like the universally opposed Democratic candidates all along there, and so my father was against them--was for the Democrats. We had a series of corrupt elections in Louisville. It went on for just years and years. It started off, I remember, my father told me that in 1917, the slogan was always "Right the wrong of 1905." 1905--that was one of the slogans. And in 1905, I think they stole everything that wasn't nailed down. And that continued for years, and the 1917 election was crooked. The 1921 election, I think, was thrown out by the courts. It happened then that whichever was in power in Louisville, had charge--had control of the

police and the firemen. And to be a policeman or a fireman, you had to be a registered Democrat, if the Democrats were in, or a registered Republican, if Republicans were in. And for a brief period around 1927, or something, when one of the crooked elections was thrown out, the Democrats got in power and immediately they took over all the police jobs and all the firemen jobs, and we had a bunch of amateurs, and of course, when the Republicans got back in, they got rid of all the Democrats and put in their own. And the *Courier* fought for a merit system for police, which was fine. And they finally did get a merit system for police, except that they started by just bringing all the Republican police and firemen in under this blanket. They gave them an examination; they gave about 800 firemen and police took the examination and all 800 passed, which is remarkable, because you could ask 800 people who the President of the United States was, or anything of the sort, and not all of them would get the right answer. But, they all managed to get in, so the--once they had the merit system, the *Courier-Journal* and *Times* felt it necessary to defend the police no matter how bad the police were, or the firemen, the *Courier-Journal* and *Times* would defend them. And, my father, in his editorial would point out all the things that were wrong around here. And, we had a rather corrupt administration for a long time. And, the police force, to this day, still suffers some of the scars of that, because now that we do have a merit system, we have--some of the officers were brought up under days when the captains were all approachable, let's say. The *Courier* and *Times* would go to ridiculous extremes to defend the police for--when I came back from the war, I was actually shocked to see the situation. On gambling, now, there was always gambling in Louisville, there was the bookmaking and betting on horses, and places, but you had to sneak around a little bit to

do it. When I came back, the place was like Reno or Las Vegas--it was wide open. And the *Courier-Journal* and *Times* just preferred to either ignore it or blame it on politics. They never blamed--police, well, the police were in on the pay. They were all getting paid every week. I've talked to (unintelligible) that's what finally closed them down, they had to go out of business; they couldn't afford all the people they were paying. One guy said, "I've paid everybody but the garbage shippers every week." And, they--I thought the *Courier* and *Times* went to ridiculous extremes to defend the police. They couldn't find anything wrong with the police department. The fire department, I think, got to be pretty good. I don't think there was ever any problem with the fire department. But the police, heavens! I remember one instance in particular--a high-ranking police officer shot a man at 18th and Broadway in broad daylight, when the two got in an argument, they were driving cars, and they bumped cars or they cut each other off or something, and they got out and started to fight. And, the officer took his pistol and shot the man--he was a New Albany business man-- reputable man; good standing. The police officer shot him in the stomach, and the man was in critical condition, and he finally lived, but it was touch-and-go for awhile. And the *Courier-Journal* reaction to that dreadful instance was an editorial saying, "Another result of the Broadway bottleneck. They ought to do something about this bottleneck at 18th and Broadway. It caused all these traffic accidents." There was no sense for a policeman to shoot an unarmed man, and the policeman who shot him was an expert marksman who had all kinds of medals and trophies for his marksmanship, and yet in a fight with an unarmed man, he didn't shoot him in the arm or leg to wound him; he shot him in the stomach and almost killed him. That was just a sample. It was years before the *Courier-Journal* and *Times* would ever

come back to criticizing the police and it was based on this thing of years ago; they wanted to try to keep politics out of it. Strictly merit system. So I found a lot of things to find fault with the *Courier-Journal* over the years. The *Courier-Journal*, I think the paper's got a whole lot better when Norman Isaacs came in. Norman Isaacs was just a terrific newspaper man. He knew all the--he was a very nuts-and-bolts man; let's get this thing done and let's get it right, no fooling around. I thought he did great things for the paper. I'm not sure that hiring me was such a great thing, but that was his idea. And, he was such a forceful man. I remember, he called me and always --late 1966 or early '67, he called me and wanted to have lunch with me. And I think he owed me a dinner on a football bet, or something. So I said, 'All right. I can't do it today, I've got-getting out my own paper.' He said, "Oh, I've got to talk to you, I've got some business." He used to talk to me privately about the -- I was closely associated with the sports department of the *Courier-Journal* and the *Times*. I knew everybody there, and knew all the fellows and knew what was going on. And Norman would sometimes ask me, "What did I think of so-and-so, what did I think of that?" He just wanted to get an outsider's view of the paper, so I thought he wanted to talk about some personnel. So we go over and were having lunch, and he said, "Well, what we're going to do, we're going to merge the *Times* and the *Courier* for a Sunday edition. The Sunday edition will be both the *Courier* and the *Times*. We want Dean Eagle," who was then the sports editor of the *Times*, "we want him to write a column for that Sunday paper. Now Dean is already writing five columns a week, or six, and that would be one too many, so I want you to write a column every Monday, so Dean will have a day off." And I said, "Norman, you're out of your mind!" So I started reading off the list of all the things I was doing at the time. Oh, I had--I think

at the time, I had five different jobs. And, during the summer, it would get up to six jobs when the harness racing track was open. And this was going on, and Norman--so he goes, he was a fellow who would not take "No" for an answer, so finally I said, "Look, Norman, you're going to start the first Sunday paper in February. I will be in Florida the first Sunday in February. I already have my reservations." He said, "You can put the column on the wire.' So I started doing one column a week, and then I did it for about a year and a half, and then in 1968, we decided to close down my own paper, the Irish-American, Norman called me and said, "You've got more time now. You can do two a week." And I said, "That will be great. I can write a column on Friday, and explain it on Monday. Write one on Monday, and explain it on Friday." So, that's--I started doing that, and then in 1970, the *Courier* had one of their organization meetings, and somebody suggested that the sports pages were too bland; they needed somebody with a few opinions to write for it. And they proposed to me that I resign all my jobs, become a full-time employee. So I considered all the options, and I'd actually started for less money than I was making, but the hours were better, and I thought I might last longer if I did. So it's been more or less a happy association. I like it. But Isaacs is the fellow who did that. But Isaacs did so many things around there, and all the good things he did helped the paper. Then, after Isaacs left, they had a--I don't know, I can't remember who--Bob Clark succeeded him, and Clark was a very square, stiff-necked fellow who--I think he ran away enough good men to staff four metropolitan papers. And he was responsible for a lot of the problems that the papers still have. So finally, Clark left to go and nothing in his career became him like the leaving it.

M. B. Let's go back and talk about the Isaacs years a little bit. Let's think of some of the areas other than sports that you saw a real difference in, specifically. Let's talk about the news, the politics, the relationship with local government. Can you think of some of those things?

J. B. Well, I--it's hard to describe the differences. It's like the whole attitude of the paper changed. They were just almost willing to go into any story without regard for what anybody thought, or what their previous position was. I really can't pick out anything specific that he did, but the fellow was such a solid newspaper man, and he would back up anybody on the story. And he would also chew you out if you didn't do the thing the way it ought to be done. And you always knew where you stood with Isaacs.

M. B. I know one of the things that Floyd Edwards mentioned was that he felt he was hired to start the universal copy desk under Mr. Isaacs. And, this was a change, I'm sure that was important for a lot of people.

J. B. Well, the--I know that the *Courier*; Norman got along well with the Bingham. He was a more practical man. Now, Barry Sr., and Barry Jr., share the same thing. They have sort-of a hair-shirt mentality; they thing that they're supposed to suffer, and the paper has to expose all its sins in public and everything. And I think that's fine, but they carry it to extremes. The paper was one of the first to come up with the (unintelligible – ombudsman?) where you can go up there and call and talk about your troubles and what's

wrong with the paper. And, then the paper started this--one of the few in the country to put the "beg your pardon" or the "oops! "--list the mistakes they had made; correct the mistakes. A lot of big papers never do that, and the *Courier* has always done it. Like the little things; years ago when Mark Ethridge was running the papers, Mark was stopped one night in a traffic accident. He was coming from the Pendennis, I think, and he practically insisted on being arrested for drunken driving. And so they put it right out on the front page -- Mark Ethridge arrested for drunk driving--which stopped a lot of phone calls in the future because when a fellow was arrested for drunk driving, he would call up and say, "Can you keep my name out of the paper?" And they would say, "Well, we put Mark Ethridge's name in the paper--we'll put you on the front page with him!" So that stopped. That was one of the things that--the *Courier*, they do; they are a completely honest outfit, they sent a memo around, oh, about four or five years ago, wanted to know how people felt about 'sacred cows". Did any of the writers feel that there were certain things that you should not write about, or certain people that you should always praise, or certain people you should always criticize--did anybody think that the paper had a certain "cow, " any "sacred cows." And very few of the writers could come up with anything--that any subjects were taboo. Now, I have, in my association with the paper, I have several times sent memos down to the editorial department, complaining that there were certain individuals that, it seemed to me, we never mentioned in the paper without saying something derogatory about him. One of the fellows that I thought had done a whole lot for racing in Kentucky was Bill May, William May of Frankfort. He was chairman of the Kentucky State Race Commission. And every time that the *Courier* mentioned Bill May, they would somehow drag in the fact that he had been associated with the track in

Florida, and there was a financial deal down there with Emprise Corporation, which was supposedly linked with organized crime. And they would keep dragging that in--it was simply a business deal that May had no connection--didn't have that big a connection--it was simply a business deal that had nothing to do with it, and they kept overlooking all the good things that May had done for racing in Kentucky. He's been one of the finest racing commissioners in my lifetime, and he's responsible for bringing into Kentucky--bring back to Kentucky--King Dangerfield, who was the senior state steward, and had brought a lot of reforms that were badly needed in Kentucky racing, and is generally regarded as the best state steward in the country--the best racing steward. Bill May is the one man who got him back. But the *Courier-Journal*, it looked like they could never mention Bill May without throwing in some slam about him.

M. B. Did you find that not having anything to say about them being "sacred cows" was a sign that there was a complete openness, or that no one wanted to be known as the person that brought up what "sacred cows" were?

J. B. Oh, no, it was completely open. There were no "sacred cows". Somebody--it just occurred to somebody that "Does anybody think that we shouldn't say this or shouldn't say that?" There are no restrictions. I have--in all the years, I have never been told what I should write and what I shouldn't write, or things like that. Because if you're writing a column, you're allowed to express an opinion, and they haven't censored any of my opinions. See, I wrote for the paper--I started this regular column in '67, but I had written other things for the paper years before. The first piece I ever wrote for the paper

for money, was in 1941 when I was a private in the Air Force out in Arizona, and I went to a quarter horse racing meet one Sunday, and I wrote a long piece about it, and mailed it back, and Earl Ruby ran it in his column about quarter horse racing; how different it was. And he sent me back a note and told me how funny it was; everybody in town was laughing, and that he had sent a note along to the cashier's department to pay me space rates. So this is a big, long double column--ran down the top of the page down to the bottom. They sent me space rates--I got a check for \$6.25. So I could see there was a lot of money in the newspaper business. But then later, I would do--around Derby time--I would do small stories for them. They needed a lot of extra help. I'd do the breeding story on the Derby winner, and then I'd--back in the early '60's, I came in on football and basketball weekends to work on the desk on Saturday and Sunday nights, when they needed extra help. So I had really worked for them; I had done things--sold things--to the paper, and worked for them for 20 years, or so, before I came on full-time. So I do have a good knowledge of the sports department and how they've been working.

M. B. I'd like for you to deal a few minutes chronologically with sports in Louisville during these early days before you joined the crew of the *Journal* and *Louisville Times* on a permanent basis.

J. B. Well, sports, years ago, there were so many more amateur sports around Louisville, than I suppose there are now. Amateur baseball was big, but then, there were 15 baseball diamonds in Shawnee Park alone, and they were--you couldn't get a diamond, and if you had a team, you couldn't get a diamond on Saturday or Sunday. They were all

booked up. We had that many amateur baseball leagues. And then minor league baseball was going good around here. The Louisville Colonels -- people went to Colonels. Baseball was big in Louisville, and with the advent of television, that just killed minor league ball, and baseball went out of fashion, and softball came in, and eventually slow-pitch ball. The--my differences with the sports department used to be the way they covered our major college teams, such as University of Kentucky. We had a couple of-I know the *Courier-Journal* for years covered U of K as though they were really sacred. You never criticized U of K, you always boasted about U of K. They thought they were wonderful, and I think we had a succession of writers we sent up there, the *Courier* sent up there to cover UK, and they were supposed to be objective. And once they got up to UK, and hear this "Go Big Blue" kind of thing, they all fall in love, and then all their stories were called by the fact they become "rooters," and that's something you never--if you're a sports writer, you never become a cheerleader.

You're either a reporter, or you're not, and the *Courier-Journal* for years had a succession of cheerleaders, and they wrote back -during the bad times of the basketball scandals, the U of K, the early stories written about it were just awful. They were defending the players--that was a tragedy, the thing that happened, but the thing is, the players did take money and they never offered to give it back, and their expressions of regret were not that they had done anything wrong, but that their careers were being stopped and they weren't going to make any more money out of pro ball. I objected to--back when Chandler, (unintelligible- Albert?) Chandler, Happy Chandler, was fired as baseball commissioner. Ruby just wept bitter tears over that--what a terrible thing it was to fire--

Chandler to be fired. He collected a bunch of quotes from writers around the country saying what they thought it was a terrible thing, and I just happened to notice that he had picked up only the favorable quotes, and there were some really blasting comments by all writers around--other writers around the country; the majority of them thought it was a great idea to get rid of Chandler. I remember Russ Lince of the *Milwaukee Journal* said that when they put Chandler in to succeed Judge Landis was trying to replace an eagle with a sparrow. A man in the (unintelligible) was this Arthur Daley of the *New York Times* said that they ought to erect a monument in Cooperstown, the baseball Hall of Fame to the man who got rid of Chandler. But, the *Courier*, Ruby and Chandler were friends, and we just supported him all through that. Later on--the new side wasn't all that friendly to Chandler later on, because he became--decided he wanted to be President of the United States, which is preposterous. I remember John Ed Pearce wrote some great stuff on Chandler's performance at the Democratic National Convention. So, but the sports department, I thought, they did well--they did fairly well, pretty good overall job. They were blessed with having good reporters on racing. We had Jerry McNearny, who was a good race writer. The problem of bringing in new people in the sports department, just in recent years, we have so many who are not from Kentucky--not from Louisville, not even from Kentucky--and they don't understand the old rivalries. They don't know about U of K and Western and U of L. They don't know Uncle Ed Diddle, or they don't know the story of Adolph Rupp, and I think we've gotten away from a lot of the local stuff that we ought to be covering.

M. B. Let's deal for just a few minutes with this idea of local coverage as opposed to national coverage. What do you think are some of the strengths and weaknesses of each side of the coin on this?

J. B. Well, the *Times*, in particular, is a terrible offender in that the *Times* is a local paper--the paper, the circulation hardly gets out of Jefferson County. And, yet, the *Times* spends inordinate amount of money and time covering teams in Cincinnati. The papers--both of them--seem to have this obsession with covering professional sports. If it's not a pro sport, it really isn't worth covering. Now, they--we have these lamentations that we don't have any pro franchises here--we don't have a pro football team. We had a pro basketball team, and we lost it. We don't have minor league baseball. We actually put in a lot of time covering the Kentucky Bourbons, which is a softball team, a slow-pitch softball team, simply because they're listed as professionals, which they're really not because most of the fellows, they never make--they don't make a living out of playing with the Bourbons. They have other jobs on the side and they just play the Bourbons games. But, because it's pro--it's pro--if it's pro sport, we're supposed to do it. And we worship the shrine of all pro sports, and the *Times*, in particular, as I say, to cover--we keep covering Cincinnati as though it were a sister city, simply because it's supposed to be the nearest pro town. And, pro sports, they said Louisville ought to have this or have that, well, Louisville has already demonstrated -- the fans of Louisville have demonstrated what they want to watch and what they don't want to watch.

J. B. . . . against the attitude of the writers in both sports department to continually say what a terrible place Louisville is, because we don't have "pro this", we don't have "Pro that". Now, we don't have minor league baseball. A lot of towns don't have minor league baseball because television came in. People stopped going out at night. People started getting major league baseball for free. They're not going to go out and pay to see minor league baseball. And the prices now are not what they were back in the days when the Colonels, the Louisville Colonels, were going big at Parkway Field. You get in for \$1.00 and you could park free, and things were cheap, and it was good, inexpensive entertainment. People loved it. Well, people want to bring back those days. Well, you can't bring them back. You can't bring them back to horse and buggy. People now can't afford to go out at night, and so many people are afraid to go out at night because the streets are not safe. And they have more entertainment at home--just turn on the television. So you're never going to get minor league baseball to succeed in Louisville. They have all these--the problem is we ought to build a stadium, we ought to get a minor league team. We're going to put the community in big debt to build a million dollars--to but a million dollars into a stadium because then we get people for minor league ball. Well, it just wouldn't work. I know when the pro basketball team, the Colonels that John Y. Brown had here, they won a championship one year and everything, but all the years that he had them, they lost money every year. They didn't have the attendance. And yet, our papers keep writing that what a shame it was that we lost that team, and one of them was chewing out Louisville one day because Louisville did not do anything to save the pro basketball franchise. One fellow wrote, "It was

terrible. They called a meeting of fifty prominent business men to come and help save the Colonels, and not one of them showed up, and wasn't that awful?" I wrote and said, "No, it was wonderful. It was nice to know that we have fifty businessmen that have sense to know not to throw money down the drain for something like that. And who wants to go out and contribute to something like this. People have demonstrated that they don't want to do it." And I ended up--the last line I put, "I say pro basketball is garbage, and I say to hell with it!" And I got just a ton of letters from people. And I said, "Louisville is a good town. Louisville has good parks, good schools, it's a nice place to live, it's a friendly town, I've lived here all my life, I'm tired of these carpet-baggers coming in and telling us all these things that are wrong with this town. Because I've lived in other places, and Louisville has its faults, but show me a town that doesn't." I just don't believe in this pro sports thing. And, I think we ought to do more for what we do have around here.

M. B. Let's talk about what are the strengths? What do you see as the strengths here?

J. B. Well, we have a major college basketball team, U of L, we have the Kentucky Derby, we've got a great park system, we've got good golf courses all over the place, we've got a lot of people who play softball around town, we ignore all the people who play softball 'cause there's so many of them, and we devote our time to covering the Kentucky Bourbons simply because they're professional, and we neglect the amateurs. There was a lot of weeping and wailing and lamentations over the fact that we don't have the pro tennis tournament that we used to have every year. Well, that only lasted one

week, four or five days, and all we got out of it, we got to see some tennis, which you can see on television anytime you want to. We got a display of the bad manner by these prima donnas who play on the pro tour. I thought they were setting bad examples for the younger players, but because it was professional, people seem to think that they are--our writers all seem to think that we've got to have it. We're going to die if we don't have it. Louisville is a dead town, we can't get businesses here. I don't believe that any business ever decided to locate in--any industry decided to come to a certain community because they had a pro baseball team, or a pro football team, or a pro basketball team. And some of our columnists have a lot of fun saying the *Courier-Journal*, the Bingham and all, they support the arts--the ballet, the theatre, and all that. Well, I think we need a well-rounded community--you need all of those things. But, I just wish we would quit worshipping at the shrine of professional sports. I don't think it's good.

M. B. Let's deal for a few minutes with objectivity in the paper. I mentioned to you when we had the tape off that I had a quote that you had made that no one sued you because they knew that you didn't have any money. Applying this principle to your publishing of the *Kentucky Irish-American* and later, maybe outspoken columns at the *Courier*, let's talk about the philosophy of mind where you can deal with criticism coming back at you and you dishing it out at the same time, and how you do remain separate, but involved in things.

J. G. Well, I think the *Courier* and *Times* are extremely fair in their news coverage and their stories. You don't get any slanted stories, and one of the reasons for this is the--

well, one, that would be against the principles of the Bingham family--they believe in being fair. But, the *Times* and the *Courier*, they operate in the same building, paid by the same company, use the same equipment, but they really don't like each other. The two staffs are furiously competitive, and some of the best stuff never gets in the paper. It just gets up on the bulletin boards--the snide cracks at each other. And so they serve to keep each other in line. If you'll notice on the letters to the editors, the letters mainly are always criticizing something the paper has said, or something the paper has done, you rarely read a letter in there praising what the *Courier* and *Times* have done. They don't publish letters of self-praise. I used to have a lot of fun with the *Irish-American*, because I said nobody would ever sue me. They knew that I was a horse player and didn't have any money, so they wouldn't get anything out of me but practice. So we'd get these--we got lots of nice letters. The *Irish-American*, one time, we were in forty-three states. And of all--starting out from the little papers went around the Irish neighborhoods, it got to be the "in" thing. In later years, the *Irish-American*, we were around Mockingbird Valley, and it was the "carriage trade." It was the "in" thing to read the *Irish-American*. They would fight over it at the Pendennis Club, and that sort of thing. But when people would send me nice things, I would write them and thank them. But I would never print them. But when they would send an angry letter; and we had some angry letters; they would say, "And you so-and-so-and-so-and-so, and this is not for publication!" Well, that "not for publication" would be on page one the next week in bold type, so nobody could possibly miss it. Unfortunately, I didn't get enough of those--they used to really brighten up the paper when you'd get those things.

M. B. Why don't you just give us a few more things while you're talking about the *Kentucky Irish-American* again, about how things did close out, and what has happened with the papers and this type of thing.

J. B. Well, when we decided to close the paper, I didn't tell anybody, because I didn't want any "save the *Irish-American*" campaigns. And, I told -- one fellow said he wanted to do a story to the paper; Paul Bullett; we were old friends. I told Paul, "All right. You can do the story, but you have to wait and do it this week." So I gave him the whole story and he did it the last week, and he said that--I asked him, "What about the files. They're going--they've been at the U of L once and for the Starkle Library, they're going in the rare book room." And I said, "I thought a rare book was one that paid track odds." And, there would have been some "save the *Irish-American*" campaigns, because just in the last week, my uncle, John Hennessy, who's now the late John Hennessy, he was a friend of Garvice Kincaid, and he said that Kincaid wanted to take over the *Irish-American* and pay me a salary just to keep it going. He would pay all the expenses, he would pay me a salary just to write. And then, someone else, there was this Kentucky--not the Kentucky Press Association, but some conglomerate that published a whole bunch of weekly papers in Louisville--or in, they're published in Shelbyville now. I don't know the name of them. But they suggested that I start writing a political column every week that all of our papers could run. And I said, "That column would last two weeks!" because the weekly papers in Kentucky--we used to exchange papers with all the other weeklies around the state, and it was remarkable that Kentucky would be known far and wide for its politics, never had any political writers on any of the other papers. These papers would never have an

opinion. They wouldn't put an editorial--they didn't have an editorial page. They put nothing in. They wouldn't be against double parking, that would be something remarkable for them. But, the editors, they were all afraid. They only had a few advertisers--they's afraid they might offend some local advertisers, so they never had any opinions, but I think they all liked the *Irish-American*, because they could find some opinions. And when we'd--sometimes we'd cut them off, and we'd get a plane of letters back saying, "Please. We still want your paper. Can you do this for us?" Anyway, they wanted me to write this column and I told the man who suggested it, I think it was Louie Kahn, I'm not sure. I said, "My editorial column would last two weeks. The first week, they wouldn't be able to believe the stuff--what's this man writing? And the second week, that would be it. They would never again put anything in their papers like that." So, besides, as I said I've told people so many times since, when I closed down the *Irish-American*, I had solved all the problems of the city, the county, the state, the United States, and the world. I said, "I left a perfect world, and it's been loused up since. It's not my fault."

M. B. Where do we go from there? That's great. As you did mention, these papers are at the Patterson room at the rare book room at the University of Louisville, and will be in the new Ekstrom Library when they finish moving. Let's move on for a little bit and deal chronologically a little bit more with some things. Let's talk about all these various activities that you were also employed and engaged in, say, during the '60's and the '50's--the track and your recording for the various radio stations and etc., and see how all this fitted in with your writing.

J. B. Well, I had a daily radio program of race results. It would be on at 6:00 every night. And I was the only fellow who ever gave race results in Louisville who was a horse player, who knew what--spoke the language. We'd--ordinarily, we'd have guys--announcers, at the radio station would read the results. They didn't even know what they were reading--didn't know anything about it. And I'd have a lot of fun, and doing the show, of course, I did it my own way, and I've known fellows that wives would say that their husbands would bring their radio to the table at 6:00 while they were having dinner, and they'd say, "Oh, a fellow at the office had a bet. I just wanted to see how he came out." There was always the fellow--it was never the husband himself that had the bet. But I was doing a radio program, I was a secretary of the Kentucky Thoroughbred Breeders Association, which is now merged with the Thoroughbred Breeders of Kentucky.

And we sponsored the Derby Trainers' Dinner every year. And, Derby week, which was a great affair--Brian Field, one of our masters of ceremonies later, and after dear Brian left us, I took it over. We also had a Brood Mare of the Year Award, and we had a ladies' sportsmanship dinner at Churchill Downs, but that got to be a lot of work for not much money--another one of those labors of love. I was the odds maker for all the Kentucky tracks. I worked for the *Louisville Daily Sports News*, and I said when I got out of the service, I didn't want to get any job that I had to get up in the morning, so I ended up being an odds maker--well, I ended up having to get up at 6:00 every morning, and I was doing that. Then, when they started harness racing in Louisville, I became the odds

maker and the public relations man, and then WAVE started doing television--one of the first live television shows they did--harness racing from; Fairground Speedway was (unintelligible), Miles Park, and then Fairway Park. Then the announcer down at the track was having problems, so I became announcer, and that got to be the best job I ever had; announcing trotting races. So then when races were brought back to Louisville in 1966 at Louisville Downs, I became the announcer out there, and the odds maker, and the PR man. So I was, at one time, I was doing the *Kentucky Irish-American* every week, a weekly column for the *Louisville Times*, a daily radio show, an odds maker for all the Kentucky tracks, the Kentucky Thoroughbred Breeders Association job, I was doing all of those. Then, about the last year I was doing all these jobs, I think it was 1970, I went down to Miles Park to see John Bitaglee, who was the manager down there, down on the West End, it was on a Saturday afternoon, and just as I'm going down to see him on business, not for the races--I'm just leaving just after the first race, and they came out and stopped me at the gate and says that Chic Anderson, the announcer, was quite ill. They thought he had a heart attack. It turned out later he did have a heart attack, he died some years later from it, but he was able to come back. But I had to go up and grab the mike and call the races. And, I called the races for the last three and a half weeks at Miles Park at night. Then this was just before I was going to do it for two months at Louisville Downs. But I was calling it--what I had gone to see Bitaglee about, was to make the morning line for a race track in New Jersey, odds for that line. Now Bitaglee was doing it over the phone, but he, when he came down here from his home up in Covington, he wanted me to do it during the week, and he would just do it on weekends. So, that's what I was talking to John about. So I'm doing all those other jobs, and then, I'm making the

morning line for the Jersey track in the morning. Then when I took over the announcing job at night, way down on the West End--I lived on the East End--I'm getting home about 12:30 or 1:00 in the morning, and I'm getting up at 5:30 in the morning, and I've got all these jobs to do all day, which might explain why I was receptive when the *Courier-Journal* and *Times* suggested that I become a full-time employee. I used to sit on the side of the bed when the alarm would go off in the morning and try to remember what it was I was supposed to do first. And, my wife would be concerned, saying, "Oh, you're going to kill yourself!" And, I'd say, "Look, think of the money!" I said, "You don't get much chance to make money like this in a hurry." So we did it. But I survived it, and if you're around active people, I think that makes you be active. That's what I like about the newspaper business--you're associated with intelligent people; active people; people that know what's going on. Somebody said when you're in the newspaper business, you meet so many interesting people. And I said, "Yes you do, and they're all in the newspaper business." I remember my parents. My father loved races, and he and my mother would go, and then they would take us all--we had nine children--we'd all be taken out there from time to time. So I'm sure I was at the race track when I was five or six years old. I was young. But I went on my own--my brother and I--we saw the Derby in 1922 that was (unintelligible). That was fifty-nine years ago; that's in May, and I wasn't going to be thirteen until August. But, when I say I saw the Derby, you got to see horses run. It was much later--it was 1934 before I started getting press credentials from Churchill Downs, which they probably regret to this day. And I learned--I was out there watching--it was some years after that. I suppose it was way after the war before I finally learned how to watch a race. People go out and look at horses running around, but they don't see

what is going on. They don't see the strategy. They don't see what's happening to the horses. They don't know what the jockeys are doing. It requires a lot of years to become a good race-watcher. I'm a pretty good race-watcher but there are a whole lot more that are better--fellows that do it every day. But there are a lot of people who go to the track, been going there for years, and they never see what's going on. It's the most difficult - of all the jobs I've done, I've said the most difficult job in sports is calling races at a running track. Now I've called races at Miles Park, the Latonia, I've called them at Churchill Downs, and there isn't anything to compare with the difficulty of that job. I've done about everything in sports, but that job; you've got roughly eight minutes from the time the horses come out on the track to memorize them. Memorize a dozen horses--different colors. You can't see the numbers, so you have to come up with some sort of association of ideas. As a horse comes out, maybe he's got blue and red colors, and something like southern style, and you think, 'Oh, that's like the Confederate flag. I'll associate with that--I'll remember that.'" You do this and then, as I say, you can't see the numbers, and you have to call these horses; and they're running almost roughly forty m.p.h., and you've got to call them all the way through. The race is over and you've got to make it official. They go back and then ten minutes later, they're bringing out a dozen more. You've got eight minutes to memorize those--forget those you've just done and do it all over. And if you do it everyday, you get to be good at it, and it's not that difficult. But to do it on a part-time basis, just fill in, it requires more concentration than anything I've ever done. And, I've come home from the track exhausted physically from the effort required. But, it was something--if I'd done it earlier and stayed with it every day, but then it wouldn't have been--it would have gotten to be a bore. it can be done.

M. B. I didn't mean to get you off of what you were talking about, but I did want to find out how you became interested in the tracks to begin with. You were getting ready to talk about something that I'd like you to pursue a little bit further when I moved you back for a few minutes. You were talking about the characteristics of newspaper people. I'd like you to elaborate on that a little bit more and talk about specific individuals if you want to name them by name, fine, but the departments, etc., that you have been associated with, and that have made a real impression on you.

J. B. Well, the first sports editor of the *Courier-Journal* that I was friends with was Bruce Dudley. And Bruce wrote nice things about people. He never wrote an unkind thing in his life, and it was a friendly Kentucky homespun style. He was a wonderful guy; a wonderful story-teller. I thought he had a delightful column, and he was succeeded by Earl Ruby, who was a real good football player--quarterback--and knew, Earl knew high school sports, and then he got to be college sports. Earl wrote great stories. But he was in sports so many years, that eventually he was getting bored with sports. What he really liked was hunting and fishing. And so, Earl; his columns in his later years, the only good columns he would write were about hunting and fishing. Finally he retired, and just wrote hunting and fishing. Earl's problem was that he didn't spend much time writing. He spent--it seemed like he spent all of his time taking care of people.

He was a real bleeding heart. He was always trying to find jobs for some coach for some player, or do something for somebody. I've never known anybody as unselfish as Earl Ruby about giving his time to help people--to do things for people. And then the--we've got the--Earl, I said, he never blasted people. He wrote nice things. It's just in recent years that it spread around the country; had these columnists who really attacked people, and who are sharply critical, and a lot of people in sports need to be criticized. I think sports in general is in dreadful condition. Nobody thinks of the fans, nobody thinks of the readers; it's all these spoiled millionaires playing various sports. They really don't care for the fans. It's like nobody speaks for the public. It's bad. It's been one of my lost causes I've battled for years to get a better deal for the racing fan that goes to the track. He doesn't get a fair shake. We have people here in Kentucky--the breeders and the owners and the trainers--they all have their own organizations, they all are represented on the race commission; and, there's no such thing as a horse player's union, or a horse player's organization. The fans just get pushed around, they don't get fair treatment. I don't think, in many instances they are watching honest racing. Nobody speaks for the fans. And, nobody speaks for the baseball fans or the basketball fans, or the football fans. We've got this thing at the top--we've got these millionaire owners and their spoiled players getting million dollar salaries. The sports fan doesn't really get a very good break. I think that's why so many of them have become television sports fans. They can sit at home and turn it off when they want to, or do anything they like and it's all free. The papers have learned--I think *Sports Illustrated* magazine, the success of *Sports Illustrated* after so many years; they found out that people did want to read about what they were watching on television, even though they watched it on television, they did

want to read about it, so *Sports Illustrated* started doing stories that week. The minute something happened, you'd get a big story in *Sports Illustrated*. And the papers around the country have seemed to learn this, that people do want to read about something that they've already seen.

M. B. Are fans really that important to modern sports? Could they exist without them -- you talk about millionaires being the owners of the various clubs . . .

J. B. Well, you have to have fans -- their physical presence, because you need the fans to come and pay the park and pay for a ticket and pay at the concession stands -- that's where you make the money. Now that's especially so at race tracks. Race tracks really couldn't exist with just betting money and their share of the betting money—they're having this OTB; off track betting; they funnel their bets or telephone them, or send them to the track. If you do anything to keep someone from actually going to the track, it's going to cost you because the track gets so little out of the betting, but if you go out and pay; if you go to Churchill Downs, you pay \$1.00 to park, you pay \$3.00 to get in, you buy a program for \$0.50, you buy drinks—I think the cheapest beer is \$1.25, and the cheapest drink was \$2.00; it was figured some years ago in New York that the physical presence of a fan in New York was worth about \$11.00 to the track. And this was, oh, about ten years ago, or so, so it might be double that now. So you do need the fans, yes. And then besides, who would want to sit and watch a studio performance? If you're watching a game; if you're sitting at home, you like to see a crowded stand. It just adds something to the excitement.

M. B. Well, that brings me to what I've noted all my life, the minute the paper comes, at least the male of the species grabs for the sports section. Do you, of course, being a sports writer, obviously are going to feel that sports do sell the paper, maybe more than some others would, but do you see sports as a heavy leader in causing a paper to go or not go?

J. B. Absolutely. That is one of the problems that the people who run newspapers don't appreciate how much the sports department sells that paper. Now when I pick up the morning paper, the first thing I turn to, I look at the letters to the editors, and see what people are complaining about, and then I read "Doonesbury" – I love "Doonesbury" – and then I go and check the sports, and then I go through the whole paper. I'm a compulsive reader of newspapers. When we're on trips, the back of the car is filled up with all the papers. Everywhere we stop, I buy the paper. And I could be perfectly – I keep going through our library down there every day that we get papers from around the country, and pick out sports sections. I have a half-dozen papers. And read them all. And then I pass those along to Earl Cox. He's a compulsive reader. You just like to read papers. I like to read newspapers. And I said, "If you read newspapers – other papers around the country – then you learn to appreciate the quality of the *Courier-Journal* and *Times*."

M. B. That was my next question – we're going to be out of tape in the next couple of minutes, but I'd like for you to address the level of coverage of sports in some of the

other compatible cities to Louisville's size. And if the papers are available to you and you do see them, let's talk about the difference and how Louisville covers sports and maybe some of these other papers do.

J. B. The other papers around the country, if you get a Washington paper, for instance, the Washington paper runs so many stories on the Washington Redskins. I can't believe that they have anybody in Washington that wants to read all those stories. And they read stories about the Bullets, which is really the pro basketball team. The Chicago papers, they don't--very few papers cover racing well around the country. New York papers devote a whole lot of space to racing, but it's most selections and odds and handicaps and tips, and all that sort of thing. Their coverage of racing is not good. I go to California every winter to visit my daughter in San Diego, and the paper there is the *San Diego Union*, and we get it for breakfast and I feel like I'm through with it in five minutes because there's just nothing to read. So I go up to the corner box and buy a Los Angeles paper; you can get L. A. papers in San Diego that are a fairly late edition. And, the L. A. papers, I like to read the L. A. paper, I like to read the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times* is just deadly dull. Baltimore's -- the *Sun* paper is good in Baltimore. *Miami Herald* -- I like to read the *Miami Herald*.

Tape 1981-120, Side 1

M. B. This is Mary Bobo. I'm continuing talking with Mike Barry. We're going to be talking for just a few more minutes, but we're going to deal shortly with the relationship between sports coverage in the various newspapers around the country -- how they relate

to sports locally or nationally, or maybe how they relate to the amount of coverage the *Courier-Journal* gives things. Would you finish up on this, Mr. Barry?

J. B. Well, I think the *Courier-Journal* and *Times* do a good overall job. I said I think it's a shame that we do waste too much space on the pro sports. I'd like to see them cover the local area better, but other papers around the country don't seem to be doing a whole lot. I find very little to admire in the papers that I read around the country. I know when I travel, and you pick up the papers, they look like you've got nothing to read. Now, I do like the L. A. paper. It's a big paper, and they've got so much money, they spend an enormous amount covering stories, and they run it long, and it's fun to read. I think the San Francisco papers are overrated. I do like going to Florida and getting the *Miami Herald*, which is a good paper. They have a lot of good stuff. I like the way it's done. New Orleans's papers are fair. I don't see enough of the Texas papers to know anything. Chicago papers are not much. The *Tribune* has improved over what it was years ago when Colonel McCormick had it. That was a laughing stock then. But newspapers all over have the same problem. People don't read any more. They don't like to read. It's an effort. They want to sit and have the stuff handed to them on television. It's one of the problems of writing a column--to write something that people will read, because reading requires an effort of the mind, and so many of them don't want to read. And you're trying to communicate ideas to someone and this is a form of communication -- writing -- it's the most difficult form. Now if you wanted to tell somebody about something that you had seen, if you had a picture of it, that would be great. You could show them, "Look, this is what happened." Or you could talk to them. You could say, "Now this is what

happened. This was so and so," and you could keep going until finally you got your complete story over to the listener. You can communicate. But when you put words into print, the fellow who reads those might not get the meaning that you put into them. I'm sure that if people pick up a paper sometime and read that Jim Jones was a hero, he stopped a bank robbery, they will -- Jim Jones will be meeting people later on and they'll say, "Weren't you mixed up in a bank robbery?" They just won't read it. And people -- I've known from people who've written me things, "Why did you say this?", and it's the exact opposite of what I had said. Papers, the decline of literacy in this country, if you've been around young people or seen some of the college graduates that we get into the paper who have problems spelling, they have problems with English; I think reading is fast becoming a lost art. That's the problem with newspapers. I know that Barry Bingham, Jr., is very much interested, and so is the paper in this electronic journalism thing. Barry thinks it's just a question of time before you'll just push a button on your set and get the morning paper displayed. I don't know how--if they won't read it in the paper, I don't know that they'll read it on the TV set. People just don't read any more. That is the one thing you have to fight all the time. Write something that people will read.

M. B. Are the individuals who are known as heavyweights of sports writing at this point throughout the country? And who are some of these people?

J. B. Well, the best sports writer I've ever met, or that I know of, is Red Smith. Well, Red is with the *New York Times*, but Red will be 76 in September of this year, and we've

been good friends for many years. He's extremely kind to younger writers. He helped me in so many ways, and I talked to Red for quite awhile this year over at Maryland -- over at the Preakness, and he is showing his age. So I don't know how -- but the *Times* regards him as a treasure and they keep him going, and he can write as long as he wants to. Dave Kindred, who was sports editor of both the *Times* and the *Courier*, is now with the *Washington Post*, he's as good a writer as you can find in the country. He's a good columnist. The *Washington Post* got some gold when they got Thomas Boswell, who is writing baseball -- he's great on baseball. The West Coast, off hand, the *Sports Illustrated* has, I think, the finest writer on the southern--the finest writer I think is Frank DeFord. He is good. The *Courier-Journal* has Billy Reed, who is a top writer. Billy has great sensitivity, he understands people, and he writes things that people will read. The, I'm not sure the *Courier-Journal* realizes how many papers he sells for them, because they might curse him, or they might praise him, but they read him.

M. B. Are there some things you'd like to deal with that I failed to bring up before we close out today?

J. B. I don't think so. I don't know what I have contributed -- if anything, but as I say, I just have a reader's interest in most of the papers. I haven't been -- I haven't had a quarrel with the editorial department in, oh, I guess, over a week now. And I'm still interested in sports. Nobody ever does anything to suit me, so I'm the resident SOB; I'm always complaining about this and about that, but I think any organization needs somebody like that to complain, to keep them on their toes, and . . .

M. B. (unintelligible) under the saddle, right?!

J. B. That's right.

M. B. Well, before we close that, I would at least like for you to mention this remarkable family of girls and young man that are yours, and, for the record.

J. B. We were blessed with six daughters and then a son, and then retired from producing children, and my six daughters have given me a lot of joy. We have one married in St. Louis, Jane is married in St. Louis; Kate is in San Francisco, Winney's in San Diego—see, I scatter them strategically, it makes a good place to visit--and Mary, our fourth daughter is now, she will be going to her second year of med school at U of L med school. She's had a nursing degree for several years, now she's in med school; Julie is a law clerk here in town, and my youngest daughter, Ann, is a teacher, and she's just -- she's now in Europe on her honeymoon. She was married in February, but they postponed their honeymoon. She and her husband are in Europe, and when she comes back, she has accepted a position next year, teaching. I'm going to have to visit this kid. She's going to teach--she's a whiz at Spanish -- she's going to teach Spanish next year at a school at St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, and I think that would be a nice place for her parents to visit her next winter. And my son, Jack, is in advertising here in Louisville. So they've given me a lot of joy, and a lot of fun. And I'm from a family of nine, myself, so I know what it's like to be surrounded by a lot of people. They're a great joy, and I

will say that how my wife kept this house going, and we have a nice house -- we've always lived well, and the house she managed on what little money I brought home, I don't know, but she's just been brilliant on the idea.

M. B. Well, I certainly want to thank you for taking part in this project on behalf of the *Courier-Journal* and *Louisville Times* Company, and the Kentucky Oral History Commission in the University of Louisville, thank you for taking your time.

J. B. You're most welcome.