

James C. “Jim” Baccus
Narrator

Frances Akeley Lontz
Interviewer

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FL: I’m Frances Akeley Lontz and I’m talking today with James Baccus. Jim, I’ve known you for a long time, and it seems to me I always remember associating you with writing of some sort.

JB: Well...[chuckles] I’ve been...I guess I’ve been guilty of that. I’ve been tied pretty much to a typewriter or to a computer in later days through the years.

FL: Well, I first think of you as having written one of the *Bison Brevities* and then also with the community theater *West is the Land*. But I think that those subjects have been covered in previous interviews with you. Am I right?

JB: I think so.

FL: So today we will concern ourselves particularly in regards with your journalistic career. How did you develop this interest in writings?

JB: I got started very early, Fran. My folks came to North Dakota in the early 1920s to...my father was an auctioneer and he had hopes that there would be business in North Dakota with farmers and it turned out that there was, I guess. And I would hang around the back door of the *Jamestown Sun*. I would be fourteen or fifteen years old. And the *Sun* recently sold, that is last year in 1988 it was recently sold. But the publishers, the Hanson brothers, were willing to let me write something once a week in the *Blue Jay News*, which was a small corner of the paper once a week, and that involved just the campus events in the high school. And I first found interest that way and found an excitement about it. And there were people, very few, but there were people on the *Sun* who would talk to me about the profession and about ways of getting into it.

FL: What was your formal education?

JB: I was a graduate of the Jamestown High School and decided to come down to NDSU [North Dakota State University], which was once the [North Dakota] Agricultural College. It had been...some of us had been recruited, if you please, by Dr. Clarence Putnam who was director of the Gold Star [Marching] Band in Fargo. And I was...had been in the Jamestown High School band, and so it was natural that I would think about it and would come down. And I did come down and enroll in school.

FL: And then as soon as you got into school I suppose you got into the college newspaper?

JB: I was interested in joining the *Spectrum*. I was a member of the band and I had other interests including some of the musical interests that you mentioned, the *Bison Brevities*, which was a campus production each year. But I had very much wanted to...I always thought that I would like to be a columnist. As it turned out, eventually in the Air Force and at the *Forum*, which is in Fargo, I did have that opportunity. But I had really visions of being a columnist and being in a newspaper.

FL: Oh, as I recall those years, they were rather tumultuous years, you must...you *really* cut your eye teeth on a column then.

JB: Well, it was very interesting to be, I think, on the campus during those years. I'm saying between 1932 and 1937. And you yourself remember the school had about twelve hundred students perhaps. Today it may have nine or ten thousand. It had two hundred graduates in my class of 1937. And I think there were people both in journalism and in English who were extraordinary professors. I think the campus...the faculty at that time had some people who had been there for thirty, forty years [chuckles] who had been there as the school almost got started. They were researchers of national reputation, people that come to mind and will probably be found with...on tapes like this one.

But I think there was a lot of activity. The *Spectrum* came out once each week on Friday. And I did newspaper...just reportage, straight reportage. And then I had the opportunity to run once a week a kind of a double column of trivia and the things about people...I was kind of tuning up for what I would be doing, I suppose, later in the Air Force. [Chuckles]

But of course it came a cropper on my senior year when the college had found itself under attack, really, by political forces in the state. Governor Langer and the business manager in Bismarck, they had attempted, I think, to take more control of the faculty and perhaps the budget, perhaps the extension's and the experiment station's budgets; to take more control than was probably good for the state and for the school. Along in the winter term leading up to...which would be 1937, they asked for the retirement of four leading people of four different schools. These deans plus the man who was...who enrolled us. The...ah...

FL: Mr. Parrott.

JB: Mr. Parrott. Robert...

FL: Registrar.

JB: Not Robert Parrott. But Robert Parrott, I think, was his son.

FL: Was his...was his son. Wasn't his name Alfred?

JB: But Mr. Parrott...like...Alfred. Alfred Parrott. [Transcriber's note: name verified as Alfred H. Parrott, Registrar at North Dakota Agricultural College.]

FL: Yes.

JB: He was liked by everyone. Of those five, there was a dean of women, I think. They were just summarily discharged. And of course that caused a furor very quickly. The school was announced...was told that it might lose its accreditation. We had to write about this of course in the *Spectrum*, although we were told not to. The editor, Mr. Orville Goplen, who now lives in Florida and has done a very fine journalistic job for the State Department, he was told and I was certainly ordered not to do *anything* about this great story. Ah, one of the most important stories [chuckles] perhaps of the twentieth century for the college! We did publish it. It came out on Friday noon and by four o'clock that afternoon we were...we were fired. We were summarily discharged.

FL: [Sighs] That...well, hmmm...it was your brush with political reporting! Did you also have...in respect to your work with the Little Country Theatre, did you have some experiences with Mr. Arvold?

JB: I was very impressed by Alfred Arvold. And I suppose other people will be talking about him for...you know, for posterity's sake like this one...hmmm, we hope, at some time. But I thought Mr. Arvold was...had enough knowledge about show business, had enough acquaintanceship at the highest level. He was shortly to become one of the top people in the Shrine. He could lift the phone and call an impresario in New York and get scheduled the appearance of some wonderful people in the 1930s. They would be from the Metropolitan Opera, they would be from overseas, they would be extraordinary people with great talent. And I thought as an undergraduate that here was someone who was contributing considerable...

I also took courses, as most everyone did, with the idea...He had an idea that everyone should have the ability to express himself, to find a way of expressing what he thought, and to do it in a fairly decent way. And so we all took various courses from him and from his assistants. And I thought that he had contributed...and has contributed, with the Little Country Theatre, and with his idea of bringing the theater and the meaning of theater to the grass roots is an extraordinary thing that maybe he hasn't been given...hasn't received all of the credit that history may give him. I enjoyed very much with visiting and working with him in some of the productions. I was in one or two of the productions that were offered to the city. Hmmm...he, I suppose, was acquainted, Mr. Arvold was with Maxwell Anderson who was a North Dakotan in North Dakota history. And I remember that two or three of Maxwell Anderson's verse dramas were produced by the college.

And then I had the opportunity to produce...or to write and to help produce one of the Blue Key productions of the show, annual show that you mentioned. And I...I can't recall, really, the name of the original production [chuckles] that I was involved in! But I do know that *Good News*, which was...had been a success on Broadway...

FL: Mmmm-hmmm. Yeah.

JB: ...was done. And I think I was enmeshed in that. I think I was one of the supporting players, if you please, of *Good News*. [Chuckles] But they were great times and I enjoyed very much, I got acquainted with Dr. Clarence Putnam who ran their Gold Star Band. I was a Gold Star Band member for four years. And I had a lot of respect for that little gentleman who had a *great...a* great enthusiasm for the school and for the athletic events. He would stand in front of the band when we were maybe ten points behind, behind the university's Sioux basketball team. And he would shout...he was from New England and he would shout, [imitating Putnam's New England accent] "A team that won't be beat, can't be beat!" [Laughs]

FL: [Laughs] Wonderful!

JB: He would shout this at the top of his lungs. And he was very glad when the Bison finally did manage to win. But then in 1937 having been suddenly discharged...[Chuckles]

FL: [Chuckles]

JB: ...I decided to go to California. I had a prospects of a job in California with the *Los Angeles Examiner*, which is one of the many newspapers that...owned by William Randolph Hearst. I never saw Mr. Hearst. [Chuckles] He never came to Los Angeles as far as I know. But I have in the...remember that...that I once worked very briefly for Patty Hearst's grandfather! [Chuckles]

FL: That is a distinction of sorts. Well, following...following...what was your wartime experience?

JB: I enlisted right after Pearl Harbor early in 1942 and decided to go into the Air Force. My brother had...was being trained in Texas at the time and became a member of the Eighth Air Force and they had seventy-five missions in England, out of England over Europe. And emerged safely and became a full colonel in the Air Force and retired after thirty years.

I went in as a recruit and was assigned to the special services, which covered a multitude of opportunities and things. We published camp newspapers; we ran USO events for the troops. We had...it was possible for the troops to get high school degrees through the special services. I wrote hero stories which...which if a man came back and had a remarkable career overseas in one branch or another, I would write about it and I would send a picture to the local newspaper. And they were so-called hero stories. And I was...I served not overseas but in a number of places, largely with special service events, running films, all kinds of films, and running war rooms, trying to tell the people why we fight. And I was in Los Angeles, I was in Las Vegas, I was in Detroit, I was in New York, I was in Patterson Field, and Lexington, Virginia. And I was discharged late in 1946 as staff sergeant. And I'd have to say that I enjoyed the four and a half years. [Chuckles]

FL: Well, you certainly did have varied experiences. Did you then...immediately after your discharge, did you come back to Fargo or [unclear]?

JB: I decided to come back to Fargo. I liked Fargo and I thought that if I got married and had a family that it would be a good place to raise children. It would...it's a good place for a middle class, white collar worker. I think it's possible...the lakes are close at hand. And I have no reason to change my ideas, I think it's a great place to live and work. And I went to WDAY. Immediately I arrived in Fargo and was immediately employed, largely because WDAY had lost most of its people through the draft, and they were very glad to get people with some newspaper experience. And I wrote the newscasts and did many other things for WDAY and the people. I enjoyed the Ken Kennedy's and the Jack Dunn's and the other names, Ann Hildegard [sp?] and the other names that come to mind when people talk about radio in Fargo.

FL: Then what year did you go to the *Forum* and what were the circumstances of that?

JB: I had worked at a number of things. I was a news editor for the North Dakota Farm Bureau, which is located in Fargo. And also I had a number of accounts. I had...I was doing work of a journalistic nature or an editorial nature for the North Dakota Chamber of Commerce, really it's...

FL: Greater North Dakota Association.

JB: ...the Greater North Dakota Association. And I edited a small newsletter for them. I worked for the Aberdeen Angus Association as a press representative, if you please, and editor. They also had a publication, as the Farm Bureau had a monthly publication and a weekly newsletter for its people. And I kept *very* busy. And I found opportunity to work with the North Dakota Children's Home, known as Children's Village. They had acquired a new place, a new plant, and they very much needed to tell the area that they had changed their name. And they needed people. I wrote and shot a film which told about the Village, the Children's Village. And it needed that kind of work that I could do.

And then as a result of working with the Children's Village, I became a news...I think they called it director...for the United Way in Fargo. It is now the United Way of Cass-Clay, it has grown to four areas, but at that time it was the United Way of Fargo. And I think the first...the first director of the campaign for my first year was Colonel Clapp, Colonel Edward Clapp, I think, who was a well-known Fargo citizen. And after that I thought that I would like to finish my career as it was at in active newspaper work, so I talked to the *Forum* and to the Editor at the time, Mr. John Paulson. And so I was able to work for almost fourteen years, retiring in 1984 after a time of doing farm stories, doing Sunday features. I wrote about twelve hundred columns called "The Spectator."

FL: I remember those.

JB: Ah...two or three times a week. It was the sort of thing...maybe the sort of thing that I had done in the Army, in the Air Force, and in college. [Chuckles] It was human stuff. And I usually got eight or ten letters a day which helped, you know, in writing a column. That helps if you get good mail. And I did get good mail from readers. And I decided in 1984 to...since I was then

seventy, to retire and to do some traveling. I made an agreement with the editor at the time to send some travel stories. And my wife and I did do about ten travel stories in the four years since. And I enjoyed it a great deal. And it...it seemed to bring my career into full circle. [Chuckles] Starting at the *Jamestown Sun* a long time ago.

FL: Well, I'm sure you're going to continue with your traveling, but in that line, what is your favorite area of journalism?

JB: I think...I think profiles. I think the thing that I enjoyed most was doing a profile about a person, well-known or not, visiting with them for a number of...of moments of times, perhaps several times, getting acquainted and listening. I found that it helps to be a good listener if you do journalism. And in listening to people I was able then to do...that...a story that would reflect maybe their personality and their character. And I think that when I was successful in doing *that* I think I really got great joy out of it.

FL: Were they mostly local personalities? Is there someone who stands out in your mind particularly?

JB: I remember...and I can't even remember his name. Perhaps it...that's...perhaps it's just as well. This man operated a ranch in northern North Dakota and had developed what he called Indian ponies. They were small but tireless little ponies. And he was one of the most colorful people I think I ever met. He had his...almost every remark was quotable. He was somewhat profane maybe, but he was...but it was one of the most unforgettable characters I have ever met. And I was able to get him down on paper, which is not easy always.

FL: That's good. Well, Jim Baccus, we are very fortunate that you and your wife Betty decided that this was a good place to live and that you're continuing to live here. I'm sure that you are doing something at the present that's keeping your very active mind going. Do you have a special project going now?

JB: Yes, I...it's very difficult to stop writing, you know, if you've written for fifty-five years, which was about my time. [Chuckles] And I was fortunate to be able to do that during the four years that I was in the Air Force. So I...since the *Forum* had converted to computers, I bought a computer and wrote...I have written two novels, one a kind of a costume drama, historical drama, fiction; and then another based generally on a North Dakota community. These scripts are circulating around the country. I have an agent who is at least passing interested. I wrote a two act play as part of the competition for the Centennial. They sought a script, which I think is going to be used next year around the state as part of...in connection with its Centennial Band and other things on the programs. I wrote this and did not win. And the winner, I think, is a faculty member at University of North Dakota. And I hope that he does see...does see the light. And that he does actually see it on the boards. I guess that I will continue to do *something*, you know, to...end that itch. Most people with a long history [chuckles] are in the habit, you know, of putting the seat of the pants on the seat of the chair. And I'm going to do it even though nothing much will emerge.

FL: Well, thank you *very* much Jim for sharing your varied experiences in journalism with us.

JB: You're very welcome. It's been a joy.

[End of interview]

Transcription by Marilyn Olson-Treml
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