Oral History
Interview with John Seigenthaler
By Mary Morin

MORIN: Interviewing John Seigenthaler for the Civil Rights and the Press Symposium.
First question: Why do you think the Civil Rights Movement story became a story when it did?

SEIGENTHALER: Well, I think in my view, the movement should trace it roots to the Emmett Till murder in 1954. You have to say Brown vs. Board of Education set the stage in one sense because it sent a message that separate but equal was unconstitutional but the Emmett Till murder was so shocking. The brutal murder of a thirteen-year old. The funeral in Chicago, the open casket, the decision to leave that casket open made by his mother, the whole world was shocked by that and then shocked again when an all-white jury freed two guilty murders and shocked again when those two murders for a thousand dollars each knowing that they'd been acquitted and could not be tried again. Confessed to a journalist named William Bradford Huey who published it in a national magazine, published their confessions. The story of the murder. Detailed story of the brutalization of that child. I think it shocked the conscience of the country and it was a major news story largely because Mamie Till Mobley, Emmett's mother, had the good sense in her pain to let that funeral become a national, really an international, event. And so I think that the movement started there. Obviously Brown v. Board of Education revolutionized the law which had been separate but equal since Plessy v. Ferguson. So first of all the Supreme Court's action was front page news, streamer news. Emmett Till's murder was front page news, shocking. And then the resistance in the Southern states became a big part of the story. The court said with "all deliberate speed" and that meant sometime in the future and Southern politicians sought to make it as far into the future as they possibly could. So I think they made it a story for a while and then the violence that was visited on a non-violent movement. If you just take the series of events,

the ’54 decision, the murder and acquittal of the killers in the Emmett Till case, then the bus boycott of 1956. Martin Luther King emerges as the leader of the boycott. Rosa Parks, courageous woman, as they said in the song “when mama sat down, the whole world stood up.” So you take those three events, all big news, all national news and the opposition and violence visited on the demonstrators, non-violent demonstrators it had to be a story because it was a revolution and revolutions are news stories. In the best and worse sense of the word it was a revolution. And so while there were, as someone said today, newspapers in the South, they thought it would go away if they didn’t cover it at all. And while most newspapers covered it in the South covered it negatively, the rest of the press and particularly the television press put the spotlight on the violence that was a part of this war. And so it became history in the making in the truer sense of the word.

MORIN: You answered several of my questions there. You left journalism to serve in the US Justice Department. How did you come to that decision?

SEIGENTHALER: I had been hired by a great editor. A man named Coleman Arwell. Little known in the annals of American journalism but he was a great editor and he hired a great staff. On our staff, when I went into the newsroom were some great journalists. And some came while I was there. And before 1958 that staff included Creed Black, who later became a publisher in Lexington and head of the Knight Foundation, the position Hodding succeeded to after Creed retired. It included Richard Harwood, who later went to The Washington Post and was ombudsman to The Washington Post after the Janet Cooke scandal hit The Post. It included David Halberstam and Tom Wicker, both of whom distinguished themselves in The New York Times. Albert Stanley, I think the premiere journalist in the country today. It included Wallace Westfeld who became NBC executive producer for Huntley, Brinkley, and later John Chancellor. It included me. [Laughs] It included Fred Graham who later went on to cover the Supreme Court for The New York Times and CBS. It was a great

staff. 1959 I came back in the spring from a Nieman Fellowship took over as night city editor and David Halberstam and Wallace Westfeld were on the street covering the sit-in movement. There were at the time students at Fisk, Tennessee State, American Baptist College and Meharry Medical School who decided that there was something wrong. What they were reading in their history books and their civic books had nothing to do with life in Nashville, which was segregated and made no pretense to adhere to the idea that everyone was equal. So they decided to change it. And they started the sit-in movement and later it turned into the economic boycott in the spring of 1960. There were a couple of dynamitings in town. The most horrible, the bombing of a black lawyer's home. Distinguished civil rights lawyer who was representing all those kids who were arrested during the sit-in movement. The boycott worked. The bombing brought the mayor into a confrontation with the students. And he declared he did not think it was morally right to sell African Americans clothing and furnishing and shoes and television sets and radios and not let them buy a hamburger. And after Mr. Luby's, Zelig Dan Luby was the name of the lawyer, after his home was bombed the students marched on city hall and the mayor in the confrontation said I agree with you, it's not morally right. And the city began to change. The boycott had occurred during Easter and it had dried up black purchasing downtown and by that time the stores were looking for an excuse to capitulate and the mayor gave them that excuse. Took some guts for the mayor to do that but at any rate that's what happened. And so Nashville began to desegregate at that point. And so the members of our staff covered all of that. Then the editor was fired. Another editor was brought in. Changed the policy. And said no more coverage of Little Rock, or Birmingham, or Montgomery, or Jackson, or McComb, Mississippi. He said you are being manipulated by these students and he changed the policy. And Black and Harwood had already left. Wicker left first, went to The New York Times. I quit to go to work in the Kennedy campaign because I wanted to get away. After Jack Kennedy was elected, Halberstam went to The New York Times. Westfeld first of all came to work with me in the government and wrote the Civil Rights Commission report for that year

and then went to NBC where I said was producer for Huntley, Brinkley, and …Well that's why I left and went to work for the Kennedy Administration. I just was not going to work. I was not comfortable working for a newspaper. We had one racist newspaper in town. That's what ours was going to become. Or if we were not going to cover the news, I didn't want to work there. And so I worked in the Kennedy Administration, first in the campaign then in the Kennedy Administration and in March of 1962 a new publisher called me and said I'd like you to come back and be the editor. He fired that editor and I went back and took over. And my first act was to call a staff meeting and say we will cover civil rights here and wherever it needs covering. And we did.

MORIN: What was the response from other journalists when you decided to go from journalism to the government and back to journalism?

SEIGENTHALER: Well, I knew that I wanted to be in journalism. And I told both the president and the attorney general when I went to work in the Justice Department after the campaign that I wanted to go back. I didn't imagine that I would have an opportunity that soon. As a matter of fact I had agreed and it was announced in the press that I was going to go from the Justice Department to the Democratic National Committee to direct the effort to try to increase the Democratic majority in the House that year. So that had been announced and been in the newspapers. The new publisher had read that and called me and said "Is there anyway you can get out of that? I'd love to have you come back." So I had to go, having been to the White House, and told both the president and the attorney general I would go to the Democratic National Committee to do that I then had to go back to them and tell them that I had this offer I couldn't refuse. And I think that they were, I'd like to think they were disappointed, but they understood fully. Particularly the attorney general understood fully. Before I went to work with him I had taken a leave of absence to write a book called "The Enemy Within" and that book did very well. So he and I, Robert Kennedy, were very close friends. And we were close friends before I went to work in the

campaign and before I went to work in the Justice Department. I think the fact that I was into Montgomery during the Freedom Rides which precipitated the sending of U.S. marshals. I think that welded the friendship a good deal. So the reason I went to the administration was because I was dissatisfied and thought there was poetic justice in the fact that having left under those circumstances I was invited back in. I think I was not gone, I was out for 18 months. During that time I was in constant contact with people who were in the media. Although I was not press secretary I was the administrative assistant. Scotty Reston called me at the same time he talked to David. This was before I was at the Justice Department but I had committed to go to the Justice Department. So Reston, at same time he offered David a job, wanted to know if I was interested in coming at the time, but I had committed to going government. I thought it was going to be great experience to work in government at the highest level and at the very high level, the attorney general, the brother of the president, was heady wine, and I drank deep from the cup while I was there. And I really believed that I was a better journalist because I was in government. Now I have to say there were aspects of government service that I loved. I loved the president, I loved the attorney general. I loved working in the administration. But there were also aspects that made me very uncomfortable. Just one anecdote, there came I time when there leaks from the Defense Department that embarrassed the administration and the president conducted, ordered the FBI to conduct an investigation and they jerked reporters and people in the Defense Department and they jerked people out of bed in the night and I didn't like that. I was not comfortable with that. So I knew there was sort of a siege mentality in every administration. Jack Kennedy was great with the press. Robert Kennedy was great with the press. But that said, there is still was an adversarial relationship and I think when that raid on the administration took place I knew I was on the side where I was uncomfortable and I was happy to get back. I think that would have been difficult to go back as a working reporter. I think the fact that I went back as editor helped a lot. Now I took some baggage back. I mean I had been in the government and I had been a part of the Kennedy Administration. And so I

was working for a newspaper whose circulation was 80-85% Democratic, it's quite different now. So there was not that much of a problem and I was very careful about how we covered the administration. But still and all I took baggage back and I had to deal with it and I thought the best way to deal with it was to not to hide it, to be candid about it. If I wrote a column about the administration, I'd always include in that column that I'd worked in the administration. So while there was baggage there, somehow I lasted for 30 years as editor and publisher. And so I would have been…I think that it was not that difficult, having given you a long answer to a short question, I think it was not that difficult because I did go back as editor. I think if I had gone back as a working journalist it would have been much tougher to cover Washington with the Kennedy Administration there having worked as part…

MORIN: What do you think, you said there were positive aspects of working in government that improved your journalism. What do you think improved your journalism?

SEIGENTHALER: Well, I think knowing how it works is helpful. Knowing that they, for example, that before a press conference the president would call every department of government and say what are the biggest issues simmering in your department. What might I get asked about? And to be able to sit on the prepping of the president or the attorney general or a press conference gave me insights that I would never have had. Jack Kennedy loved meeting the press. Met with them every two weeks and it was an intellectual wrestling match. And if you watched the films of those press conferences, I mean it was great joy for him to do that for him to engage the press and for the press to engage him. And he had a great sense of humor. Self-effacing sense of humor and could laugh at himself. So that is one aspect of it that I benefited from. The other part of it was that because the attorney general moved so widely in circles of government because I was his administrative assistant and sometimes had to sit in for him in meetings when he couldn't attend. I came to understand, I think, better, how

government works. And serving as an occasional speech writer gave me an additional level of experience that was helpful. He came to know that speech writers occasionally put words into the mouths of the president and the attorney general and to see how they handled those sorts of things. And to see how they handled the press also helped me understand my role as a editor and a journalist better.

MORIN: Fascinating. You had mentioned that you were injured. Was most of the time you were covering the civil right movement very frightening to you? Did you feel like at some point you were going to be injured?

SEIGENTHALER: At some point I was going to be…

MORIN: That you were going to be injured? Were you kind of living in fear that that would happen or was that shocking to you?

SEIGENTHALER: When I covered the civil rights movement, the sit-ins began in Nashville in 1959. I had covered only peripheral incidents. Wallace Westfeld was the person we had most on the scene in Little Rock, for example, when the violence started there, but I went over and covered for him when he could be there. The sit-in movement sort of took us by surprise. We had no idea that these children, as David Halberstam called them in his book about those days, were conducting workshops to prepare themselves for non-violent confrontations. That was part of the story. The other part of the story was that their guru, so to speak, was a man named Jim Lawson. And Jim Lawson was a ministerial student at Vanderbilt. Because he was the architect of those sit-ins, he was expelled from Vanderbilt. Wallace Westfeld covered that aspect of it. Halberstam covered the sit-in movement primarily. Westfeld covered the Vanderbilt aspect of it. I was mostly working on the night city desk, but occasionally I would fill in for one or both or I would just volunteer to help them. But I never had any fear for myself but always I was frightened for them. You can look back now and see the

films, John Lewis and his classmates, fellow students, being literally mauled, beaten. Cigarette put out in their heads. Seeing them thrown over lunch counters. See them slugged. See the police come in and arrest them other than those who had attacked them. I mean the injustice of that really gets under your skin. And some of that was reflected in what David wrote and Westfeld wrote and what I wrote. And what others wrote. The other paper in town was, I thought, a racist paper. You read their accounts and our accounts today. We'd have our play on page one, they'd bury it; our accounts would talk about the beatings, theirs would talk about the arrest. We were emotionally involved. We were partisan.

[pauses, and then briefly speaks to someone out of range about having lunch]

Is that an answer? Did I finish that answer?

MORIN: Yeah [laughs] you did. I won't keep you too much longer. I'm sure you want to eat.
What do you think the legacy of this story was for the country?

SEIGENTHALER: Well, I think the legacy (rest of tape inaudible)