

**SARASOTA COUNTY WATER ATLAS
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
NEW COLLEGE OF FLORIDA — FALL 2013**



Interviewee: Waldo Proffitt Jr.
Interviewer: Julianne Ohanian

Waldo Proffitt became the editor-in-chief of the Sarasota Herald-Tribune in 1961. Under the guidance of the Lindsay family, Proffitt took notice of the environmental toll of development in Sarasota and surrounding counties. Waldo Proffitt jr. was an essential figure in the regulation of the phosphate mining industry in Florida, the primary supplier of phosphate in the United States.

INTERVIEW 1 – October 10, 2013

Ohanian: Okay, umm.... so you said elementary school to—

Proffitt: Pardon?

Ohanian: You said elementary school to fourteen or so? That's how old the—

Proffitt: Yeah.

Ohanian: Cool.

Ohanian: Um, so, I guess today I was thinking we would start at the beginning, basically. So, I guess maybe tell me about where you grew up.

Proffitt: Where did I grow up?

Ohanian: Yeah, where you were born?

Proffitt: I was born in Plainview, Texas, and my father was a high school biology teacher and my mother was a high school English teacher and very shortly after I was born, he went to graduate school at Vanderbilt in Nashville, and I have absolutely no memory of that. My first memory is of a... room in a rented home in Chickasha, Oklahoma, which is where I lived for seventeen years and went to high school and graduated and won a scholarship to Harvard college where I went in 1942, as a member of the class of '46, although because of the war, I did not graduate until '48. Okay? And, um..

Ohanian: Did they uh... Why did it take so long to graduate? Did they stop offering classes at some point or were you enlisted?

Proffitt: I went off to war.

Ohanian: Oh, wow.

Proffitt: After my freshman year I was drafted and went into the U.S. Army Air Force, where I spent the next three years. And then I didn't come back until after three years when I once again entered college and graduated.

Ohanian: Wow, so— and what were you doing in the Air Force?

Proffitt: I was an electronic counter-measures officer.

Ohanian: Hm. So what did you do?

Proffitt: I— very little, actually, but what I was trained to do was to operate complicated receivers and transmitters on an airplane where I could jam the German radar.

Ohanian: Oh, okay.

Proffitt: And actually, when I was sent off to Italy in early 1945, I went to a medium [unclear] bomber's squadron where they had absolutely no use for an ACL officer, so I was just a communications officer in an Air Force group that was on the northeastern shore of Italy and flying buying (unclear) missions, mainly over Austria.

Ohanian: So you were, you were in the planes as the communications um, like point?

Proffitt: Uhh, yes.

Ohanian: Oh, okay. Were they big planes, were they small planes?

Proffitt: B-25s

Ohanian: Okay

Proffitt: Which is a two-engine airplane.

Ohanian: Okay, yeah. So, pretty big.

Proffitt: Pardon?

Ohanian: Pretty big... Pretty big.... They were pretty big the B-25s? Two engines...

Proffitt: Yeah.

Ohanian: When you were jamming the Germans' receptors, did you ever use codes or pick up codes—was there any code-breaking involved?

Proffitt: No, no.

Ohanian: Not like in the movies?

Proffitt: No, I was only interested in the transmission frequency of the German radar, which we could intercept and I could jam it with my transmitter, which didn't always work very well.

Ohanian: Yeah... wow.

Proffitt: But that's the way it goes.

Ohanian: Yeah... So as a communications officer in Italy, what kinds of things were you doing there?

Proffitt: What are the things? (*didn't hear*)

Ohanian: As a— After you got to Italy and you were doing the communications, you were the communications officer, what kinds of things did you do?

Proffitt: I took care of transmitting, receiving and transmitting signals from other air bases and from airplanes, and from whoever wanted to get in touch with us, and I was there, in Italy, until mid-summer of 1945. I was there in Germany when the war ended in May of '45 and since I didn't have much— have much time overseas, I was amongst the last to leave and come home in the summer of '45, which I did, and then I went back to Harvard, and finished up my education for my bachelor's degree, which I got in early 1948.

Ohanian: So when you were in Italy and in Germany, you were not on the ground?

Proffitt: Was I what? (*didn't hear*)

Ohanian: You were not on the ground in Italy and Germany, or you were?

Proffitt: I was based on the ground at an airbase in northern Italy.

Ohanian: Okay, and from there you were...?

Proffitt: Doing missions in Austria, basically.

Ohanian: Okay.

Proffitt: But this time the German Air Force had been pretty well wiped out and so it was really—I was really at no great risk, which is fine with me.

Ohanian: What was that like, being in the skies, rather than on the ground?

Proffitt: Say that again.

Ohanian: What do you think— How— What was that like in the sky? Seeing everything from the sky?

Proffitt: Fun!

Ohanian: Okay, cool. I would imagine.

Proffitt: Yeah.

Ohanian: I think I would prefer it to being on the ground. Um, okay, it's interesting that you were the communications officer in the Army and then later, you pursued communications, but in a totally different way.

Proffitt: Right, that's true.

Ohanian: How— I mean, do you want to talk about how different they actually were? Sounds like—

Proffitt: Oh, there was no comparison. You know, in the Army, you're just interested in communicating with other military people, mainly your fellow flyers. And uh, yeah there was no connection. That was— that training was of no help to my civilian occupation. When I graduated from Harvard in 1948... oh, when I went back to Harvard in forty...— actually it was early '46, before I got back, I was on *The Harvard Crimson*, which is the student newspaper, of which I became the editorial director and spent a lot of time at the *Crimson*, which is what got me interested in journalism...

Ohanian: Right, okay.

Proffitt: So that by the time I graduated, I had decided I wanted to be in journalism, and I got a job at a daily newspaper in Bangor, Maine, which was the *Bangor Commercial*, where I started as a cub reporter.

Ohanian: What does that mean, a cub reporter?

Proffitt: Pardon?

Ohanian: A cub reporter, what does that mean?

Proffitt: A cub, just... a beginner, a cub.

Ohanian: Yeah.

Proffitt: An infant.

Ohanian: Okay, a rookie.

Proffitt: What?

Ohanian: A rookie.

Proffitt: Right.

Ohanian: What kinds of things did you do as a cub reporter?

Proffitt: I covered everything that I was told to cover: police, fire, the city commission, the county commission... um, anything that came up.

Ohanian: How did you like doing that kind of work?

Proffitt: I loved it. And by the time I left there, I was the city editor and I left because I was offered a job at Harvard, in the news office, which I accepted and three months after I got there I was called back to active duty in what was then the U.S. Air Force as an electronic counter-measures officer.

Ohanian: So you went back to the war and did the same job you had before?

Proffitt: Right.

Ohanian: What was that like, going back?

Proffitt: Fine.

Ohanian: Yeah? And at that time, it was no longer a draft, it was voluntary?

Proffitt: Say again?

Ohanian: At that point it was no longer a draft, it was voluntary?

Proffitt: I had been on— in active duty as a commissioned officer, so all they had to do was send me a letter saying “We are calling you back to work”, which they did. And I went down to Fort Worth, Texas, and joined a B-29 group, practicing missions flying all over North America and the North Pole, for several months until the— what was then the U.S. Air Force, rather than the U.S. Army, gave me a physical and took— and tested my eyesight and told me that I couldn’t

fly anymore and so they had to find something else to do with me, and they sent me— because of my vast experience in the newspaper business— they sent me to the Pentagon to be the communications officer in the department of research and development, which I was, for nearly two years and which actually was quite interesting because I was in the office of the chief scientist of the Air Force, who was Ivan Getting, a professor at MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology], who had wanted— who had gotten me because he wanted to put out a publication for distribution to commanding officers of units overseas, telling them what was coming up in the way of new equipment, which I did, for some months, which actually, I enjoyed very much because in this office I was associated with some of the smartest men I have ever met anywhere who were working as supervisors of research that was being done in colleges and universities around the country and they were a very interesting group of people. So that actually, I think I benefitted in being recalled into the Air Force and getting a chance to meet these people who had a wide variety of experience. And then, after maybe a year and a half there, I was excused to go back to my job at Harvard, which I did, where I stayed for about two years more.

Ohanian: What, um...

(fiddling and testing microphone and recorder)

Proffitt: Where were we? Back at Harvard, working in the news office...

Ohanian: Yeah, I wanted to backtrack a little bit... What was it like coming back, at first, after the war? Um, after the war had ended in 1945? What was that like, being a soldier, in the Army, to... being a civilian again?

Proffitt: No problem.

Ohanian: Okay.

Proffitt: I was always a civilian at heart.

Ohanian: Yeah, okay. So you never— you never felt that boot camp mentally where you—

Proffitt: No, no I did not. Okay? So I'm back at Harvard now...

Ohanian: Sure, yeah.

Proffitt: Where I stayed in the... public relations office for two and a half years or so until I got a thorough understanding of the fact that if you are to be employed by a university, and you want to get ahead, you had better be employed as an educator— not a public relations person. Although I enjoyed the job, I was anxious to get back to newspapers and fortunately, the Charlotte, North Carolina, news was looking for a reporter and I got the job and before too long, I became the city editor of *The Charlotte News*, which was the afternoon newspaper in North Carolina, and

circulated throughout the Southeast, and I became the city editor there, which is a job that I enjoyed, and I decided that my future was not in writing, but in editing. And so I kept on doing that and supervising a staff of reporters which included Charles Kuralt, whom you might remember as a television reporter for CBS.

Ohanian: Um, okay, so you came into contact with him?

Proffitt: Hm?

Ohanian: You came into contact with him?

...

Ohanian: And what was um... Why did you like editing better than writing? Better than being a reporter?

Proffitt: It— all in all, it was more fun... I thought. And still do... and uh... so I stayed in Charlotte.

Ohanian: And, uh, why did you think it was more fun? What made it more fun?

Proffitt: You just get [unclear]... You got more authority and you got to do more things that you wanted to do and you got to get a lot of people to do the things that you wanted them to and besides which, it paid better.

Ohanian: Mmkay.

Proffitt: Okay, so I stayed there until I got an offer from Lorain, Ohio.

Ohanian: And how old were you at this point?

Proffitt: Pardon?

Ohanian: How old were you at this point?

Proffitt: I don't know. Probably not yet 30.

Ohanian: Okay.

Proffitt: And the reason I got the offer is because... that a professor of journalism at the University of Maine that I had met when I was in Bangor and he was then in Ohio had found me and wanted me to come and work with him which I did for about three years and became the managing editor of that newspaper.

Ohanian: Was he just starting— did he just start up a paper? Is that what happened? And he was

trying to get you—

Proffitt: No, no, no, he joined an already established paper.

Ohanian: Oh, okay. So did you feel like editor, being an editor suited your talents better than being a reporter or a journalist did?

Proffitt: Yes.

Ohanian: In what ways?

Proffitt: Well I figure I had a talent for managing and I had a broader field of interest. Besides which, in the newspaper business, generally, if you want to get ahead, you've got to move and take a position in another newspaper because most newspaper people like what they are doing and you would not find many vacancies on your newspaper to which you can move.

Ohanian: As a journalist?

Proffitt: As a journalist. That is true, right. Okay, so I stayed in L—

Ohanian: I just had one more question... Did you— did you ever miss writing stories, finding stories, researching, things like that?

Proffitt: Oh, no, I still wrote stories.

Ohanian: Oh, okay.

Proffitt: I could assign myself to do a story. Which I did.

Ohanian: So you could kind of have the best of both worlds?

Proffitt: Pardon?

Ohanian: You could kind of have the best of both worlds?

Proffitt: Right, absolutely. So, okay, I stayed... where am I now? I'm in...

Ohanian: Bang— sorry, Lorain, Ohio.

Proffitt: Lorain, Ohio. And I stayed there until I got an offer from Saras— well I became editor of that paper and I got an offer from Sarasota, Florida to move down here and I took a visit down here to see the paper and the area and I decided that this was a much better place to live than in being in northern Ohio.

Ohanian: What made you—

Proffitt: Which hundreds of thousands of people have made the same decision before me. I was able to move and get a promotion to managing editor of a larger paper and greater pay than I was making in Ohio and so I came here, which I did in 1961. Yeah...

Ohanian: Okay, and at this point how old were you?

Proffitt: Well, I was born in '24, so do the arithmetic and I think you'll come out somewhere close to 37 or 38...

Ohanian: Okay... 36. No... 37.

Proffitt: Okay? So here I was and here I am and I came down here as managing editor with the responsibility for running the news operation and the longer I stayed, the more my responsibilities grew, so before too long I was editor, in charge of the newsroom as well as the editorial page so I was running the entire newsroom operation, where I stayed until I retired in 1998, at which time I kept writing columns for another 15 years. Okay, now... on any newspaper, the publisher can be anything he wants to be. And when I got here David Lindsay, L-I-N-D-S-A-Y, was the senior member of the family which owned the newspaper and, perhaps fortunately, he was more interested in airplanes than he was in newspapers, so that he spent much of his time and energy in flying and building and selling P-51s, which was the fighter airplane which was the backbone of the Air Force in World War II and continued to be until it was replaced by jet fighters, so that while he had authority to be anything that he wanted to be at the newspaper, he let me be pretty free to do what I thought was best to do. But one of the things that he was really interested in was air pollution because it affected him, he was very sensitive, and because he was flying a lot, he could see where it was coming from and it was coming from Polk County, with all of its manufacturing plants.

(fumbling for phone)

Ohanian: Okay, alright...

Proffitt: And he took a great interest in reducing air pollution which he passed along to me, so that I had to do a lot of learning about the environment and air pollution and how hazardous it is and how it can be combated, which I did, which is how it happened that the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* became just about the outstanding organ of information about air pollution in Florida and we took a great interest in this subject and wrote a great deal about it and I hired an environmental reporter which I believed at that time was the only environmental specialist in Florida who spent all of his time reporting on air pollution— and water pollution— problems throughout the state. And that is how I became so deeply involved in the coverage of the environment, an interest which I have maintained until this day, and here we are. So what more can I tell you?

Ohanian: Okay, so... how— I had a question, how did you find out that air pollution can be

combated?

Proffitt: Say again?

Ohanian: How did you— or... in what ways air pollution can be combated? You said you learned a lot...

Proffitt: I don't understand you...

Ohanian: You were saying you did a lot of research into air pollution... and why it was so horrible and then how— in what ways it can be combated.

Proffitt: Right.

Ohanian: So what did you find out?

Proffitt: Well, just that it requires government action to recognize and measure air pollution and take action to reduce it, which has been done in Florida both at the local and the state level, which is good.

Ohanian: Okay, and so, through that did you— through that did you find yourself getting interested in policy and policy-making?

Proffitt: Oh, yes. You betcha.

Ohanian: Okay, how did um, I guess, your job at the paper affect local policy... and state policy?

Proffitt: Well, it kept me focused on the environment, mainly, but also, it led me to have an interest in how political decisions are made and who makes them and how people can use their influence to see things go the way they would like to see them go.

Ohanian: Can you think of a specific time that there was an especially pressing environmental matter and that things that the *Herald-Tribune* was publishing were affecting policy or had an effect on policy.

Proffitt: Well, it's hard for me to recollect a specific example, but over the course of thirty years or so, there were many opportunities that we had to support or to oppose governmental objectives which affected the quality of air pollution or air pollution control.

Ohanian: And were there— were there some especially controversial pieces that the *Herald-Tribune* decided to publish regarding air pollution or water pollution that you can take time to like kind of think about?

Proffitt: Yeah, I don't think of one off the top of my head but if I do, I'll let you know.

Ohanian: Okay.

Proffitt: All this has been 20 years or more ago...

Ohanian: Absolutely.

Proffitt: And my memory is failing fast! And it's glad that you— it's good that you caught me now rather than a year later. Because at this point, every year counts.

Ohanian: Mhm, absolutely. Regarding phosphate mining, that was something that you guys focused on a lot at the paper.

Proffitt: Right.

Ohanian: What kinds of things would you guys cover about phosphate mining? Were there companies, that, I guess a lot of the mining was being done by?

Proffitt: Was what?

Ohanian: Was there a few companies that came in when you were here?

Proffitt: No, they were already here. It was big business in Polk County, probably the most important business, and still is.

Ohanian: And so phosphate mining, what does that entail?

Proffitt: What?

Ohanian: What does that entail?

Proffitt: Well, it pollutes water, to begin with, and then as it is processed, it pollutes the air. So you need government controls over both mining and processing, and we have, generally now, both at the state and national level and I think it would be fair to say that we played a major part in preparing our readers to support the proper measures that it took to clean up the mess.

Ohanian: Did— did it seem that that was a controversial matter even between readers?

Proffitt: Sure, it's controversial, because it cost money— it cost the companies money to change some of their methods and avoid some of the worst pollution and they were not happy about this and they had been very influential in the legislature in avoiding much supervision and in, certainly in part of our efforts they got quite a bit of supervision, which did not make them happy.

Ohanian: Okay, did the paper ever receive any threats from these companies?

Proffitt: No.

Ohanian: So the paper was doing things that they didn't like but it wasn't necessarily directly creating an enormous expense for them or something that they didn't expect?

Proffitt: Well, there was not much that they could do about it, you know. The *Herald-Tribune* was pretty independent and David Lindsay is pretty independent and I think the owners since him, including *The New York Times*, have not changed much of that emphasis and the people at the *Herald-Tribune*, and I hired most of the influential members of the news staff and they are still reporting on the sins of the phosphate companies and the remedies that should be taken and the paper has maintained its interest, I'm pleased to say, and has a pretty good record of reporting on environmental matters.

Ohanian: Do you think that was more you or do you think that was more David Lindsay? Who had a hand on the lasting effect on the environmental reporting?

Proffitt: Well, David Lindsay was a strong influence on me, because he was my boss and signed my paychecks and I learned a great deal from him so that I agree, pretty much, with what came to be his perception on the phosphate industry and I think that perception has remained with many of the people who are still editing the *Herald-Tribune*, even as we speak.

Ohanian: Do you think he *Herald-Tribune* has been very key in creating some resistance to these phosphate industries?

Proffitt: Yes.

Ohanian: And how— how has it done that?

Proffitt: Well, by criticizing them when they're wrong and by endorsing candidates who would agree that some change should be made in the processes of the phosphate industry or in related measures.

Ohanian: And what are some of the changes that the phosphate industry has had on Florida?

Proffitt: Well they've cleaned up their practices and, pretty generally, have protected surrounding waters from pollution by phosphate mining and have done a pretty good job of it for which I think the *Herald-Tribune* deserves a great amount of credit as well as David Lindsay— have you ever talked about him? Well he is now dead but he was about the only member of this family who had this concern to such a high degree so that now there is nobody around at the newspaper, including him or me, who is keeping up this intense pressure but it has influenced the hiring of many, many of the people who are there, and it continues to. I think that it has been a lasting influence.

Ohanian: Okay, and did you— did you know some of the people, locally, who were making the big bucks off of the phosphate mining industry?

Proffitt: Well it was the phosphate companies, and their stockholders. It's a very direct affiliation.

Ohanian: Okay, yeah, so I guess at the paper, did a lot of people write letters to the editor that were very critical of the way that you were critical of the phosphate mining industry?

Proffitt: No, most of them agreed with us, because we kept feeding them a steady diet.

Ohanian: And also, they are your supporters.

Proffitt: I do not contend that this was balanced reporting. We went out of our way to report what we thought was important and I would suppose quite a few people would disagree with us.

Ohanian: Yeah, so were you— before you came to Florida and were working with David Lindsay, were environmental issues important to you?

Proffitt: Important, yes, but not as important as they got to be down here. Actually, Florida is one state where the environmental issues are very clear and can be discerned and you can separate the good guys from the bad guys. And I think that the *Herald-Tribune* had a great deal of influence on other newspapers, and got them interested in the same subject.

Ohanian: Why do you think it was so clear in Florida especially?

Proffitt: Pardon?

Ohanian: Why was it so clear in Florida especially?

Proffitt: Just because of the geographics and the physics of it. With the phosphate industry, you can pretty clearly differentiate the good guys from the bad guys.

Ohanian: Okay, and do you mean to say that the environmental degradation in Florida is easier to witness than—

Proffitt: Easier to what?

Ohanian: Easier to witness, easier to see the environmental effects in Florida than maybe in other places that you had lived?

Proffitt: Yes, I do.

Ohanian: Okay, in what ways?

Proffitt: Well, you can directly see the air pollution and you can directly test the water pollution.

Ohanian: So... and it was more easy—it was— sorry it was easier to observe those things in Florida?

Proffitt: Yep.

Ohanian: Is that because we are so close to these ecosystems?

Proffitt: Yes.

Ohanian: Okay, and what were some of the— what was some of the waterways and the bay and the oceans, what were they like, what kind of state were they in when you got here in 1961?

Proffitt: They were in a pretty good state. And the big problem was to try to keep them that way, so that we opposed a lot of ditching and building new land by dredging up the bottom of the bays, which had been a widespread practice for many, many years, including here and including Bird Key, which destroyed a large portion of the bottom of Sarasota Bay by being dredged-up, to make Bird Key where nothing used to be.

Ohanian: So Bird Key is an entirely dredged island? It's entirely new land?

Proffitt: Almost, there was— there was some over here, but most of it is dredged.

Ohanian: And what kinds of effects does that have— dredging up the bottom of the bay?

Proffitt: Well it tears it up the bottom, destroys marine life.

Ohanian: Okay, and then from 1961 onward, how did the waters change?

Proffitt: They got better.

Ohanian: From 1961 on?

Proffitt: Yep.

Ohanian: Oh, okay, that's a story I didn't expect.

Proffitt: We cleaned up a lot of pollution.

Ohanian: And what kind of measures did the *Herald-Tribune*— did they promote to clean up the previous pollution?

Proffitt: Well it's pretty hard to clean up the previous pollution, you've just got to stop doing it anymore. I want to ask you a question.

Ohanian: Sure.

Proffitt: Have you come across the name Jim Neville?

Ohanian: Um, I think so... I think he was on the list of people to be interviewed.

Proffitt: Well, he's dead now so you can't interview him.

Ohanian: Oh, man.

Proffitt: But he was an extremely influential individual who was a county commissioner, I think for about at least two terms, and he was a troublemaker, but he made trouble for the right people. He was a very forceful personality and at some point, he deserves more mention than he has gotten so far, in my opinion. He was one of the most important figures in a movement to clean up the environment.

Ohanian: And in what kinds of ways did the *Herald-Tribune* make trouble for the right kinds of people?

Proffitt: Well just by promoting measures which would be helpful in opposing measures such as increased dredge-and-fill which would create more artificial islands in the bay.

Ohanian: Okay, so, so the phosphate mining industry... and the phosphate mining, that was—that would affect the waterways further inland or directly it affected the bay?

Proffitt: No, further inland. Streams that flow through Polk County, particularly.

Ohanian: And then the streams would dump out...

Proffitt: Into Sarasota Bay or some other nearby bay.

Ohanian: And did the phosphate... what effect did that have on the bay?

Proffitt: Well, it just polluted the water with phosphate residue.

Ohanian: Was that— did that act as— 'cause phosphate is a fertilizer?

Proffitt: Yes.

Ohanian: Did that just increase— it caused a lot of algae growth? Or did it have other negative effects, like did it kill the fish? Of course, one leads to the other...

Proffitt: Well, I'm not sure how far I'm qualified to go in explaining that. But it was not good for the environment.

Ohanian: So do you think that a bigger focus for the *Herald-Tribune*, was water or air?

Proffitt: Say again.

Ohanian: Was a bigger focus for the *Herald-Tribune* water or air pollution?

Proffitt: Probably air.

Ohanian: And the people that were here, the citizens of Sarasota, did they— was that an issue that they were very aware of in 1961?

Proffitt: No, but we made them aware. By 1971, they were aware. And I think we were pretty much behind the proper measures to help clean things up and we supported political candidates who would do that, which is one thing I don't know whether you want to get into or not: the present owners of the *Herald-Tribune* do not endorse candidates, which I find very strange. And perhaps sometime, you would like to have them explain to you why they don't do that.

Ohanian: What do you think they would say?

Proffitt: I don't know, I've never heard them make the case.

Ohanian: Hm, do you think they're just avoiding being political, being politically charged.

Proffitt: No, I think it probably goes farther than that. I think they probably think a newspaper should not use its influence to influence elections but I don't know just how far they go in that direction.

Ohanian: I'm guessing you don't agree— you don't share that same sentiment?

Proffitt: I don't what?

Ohanian: You don't share that same sentiment?

Proffitt: I do not. You got it.

Ohanian: So how do you think newspapers should use their influence?

Proffitt: How do I what?

Ohanian: How should newspapers use their influence?

Proffitt: For the good.

Ohanian: Okay.

Proffitt: And there are thousands and thousands of people out there who, at election time, crave for intelligent guidance, which the newspaper can provide, as long as it's careful to separate...
[remainder of recording lost]

INTERVIEW II – October 16th, 2013

Ohanian: Okay, yeah, so I guess, like I was saying, I wanted to talk about personal experiences in Sarasota. So I guess maybe... start by thinking about what you expected Florida to be like, versus what you found it to be like after you got here.

Proffitt: Well, I was in Florida during the war for a few months so I was not too surprised.

Ohanian: Yeah.

Proffitt: But um, after I graduated from college I went to work at a newspaper in Bangor, Maine. My first job as a reporter. And... then I went back to Harvard on the staff of the— in the public relations office.

Ohanian: Mhm, you were saying...

Proffitt: And I was there for just a few months when the Korean War broke and I was recalled to active duty and I spent the next two years in the U.S. Air Force, most of the time in the Pentagon in Washington and where I was really surprised because I was— I was in the office of the chief scientist of the Air Force, Ivan Getting, who was a math professor at MIT and he had— his office as doing oversight on most of the research and development that was being done in the Air Force around the country and I was, at the time, a first lieutenant and all of my associates in the office were either full colonels or lieutenant colonels and they were by far the smartest men that I have ever met. They were all supervising research being done in colleges and universities and they were going around the country keeping track of what was being done in various research projects, and I was tremendously surprised by the general quality— the high quality of officers I met there. So that while I was not very happy about being recalled to active duty, when I look back on it, all and all I'm glad I had this experience because I got to know a very fine group of people. So, having said that, at the end of the Korean War, I went back to Harvard in the news office and then I went— have I gotten to Bangor, Maine yet?

Ohanian: Yeah, we... last time we met we talked about the different— you know being in the war for the first time, being at Harvard, coming back, being in Bangor, Maine, we talked about being in Lorain and various places throughout the country, different papers you had worked at... things like that..

Proffitt: Yeah, okay.

Ohanian: We had gotten to the uh... we had pretty much gotten to Florida, and then how you got

your position at the *Herald-Tribune*. So I guess I wanted to focus about— focus in on what moving to Florida was like. And maybe— you said you had been here before— but maybe your idea of Florida based on vacations and things that you had had here and how that was different from moving here and then living here for some time. How that idea of Florida was different from actual Florida.

Proffitt: Well, I have to say I don't remember what I was expecting when I got here but I got here in 1961, when the circulation of the *Herald-Tribune* was about maybe 40,000 and I retired in 1948 when the circulation was, I'm guessing, about 88- or 90,000 and I kept writing a column for about 15 years.

Ohanian: Right.

Proffitt: Have I already been through that?

Ohanian: Yes, but briefly, briefly. I guess, if you'd like, you could talk about... maybe some of the things— some of the topics or stories or some of the ideas that you talked about in your columns. What were some continuing topics maybe?

Proffitt: Well, my main concern throughout most of these years has been politics and government. I am, now and have been, thoroughly convinced that a free press is an essential factor in democratic government and the most important role of the press is to keep its readers informed about what is going on in government. So, I have always felt that I should put most of my emphasis on government and on making sure we had coverage from the Sarasota county courthouse, through Tallahassee, to Washington and that we have followed all of these different levels of government so that our readers would have the information they needed to be good citizens and I think I was fairly successful in that, as a matter of fact, so that we carefully monitored all of the city commission and county commission meetings and the assorted state and federal offices that affected our readers and, beyond that, you've also got to entertain your readers and you've got to make them want to read your newspaper rather than read, let us say, *The Wall Street Journal*, which I think was probably our major competitor. When I got here, the *St. Petersburg Times* and *The Tampa Tribune* both had very substantial home delivery numbers and when I left, they had practically none. So I feel that I was successful in running out the competition and, in the process, we established an afternoon newspaper, the *Journal*, which was quite competitive on the newsstands. And so then when I retired in '98, I kept writing a column, which could be on any subject I wanted, whatever I was thinking about in the shower, I could write about, which I did and I had a wide, wide variety of topics but I kept coming back to government on the local, state and national levels and, uh, had a lot of fun. And... Hello there, Holly, how're you? [to dog].

(putting dogs outside)

Ohanian: I very much agree, I think that that is the duty of journalism to provide that check, be-

cause if no one is watching, people can do a lot of stuff, you know, there's no oversight.

Proffitt: That's right.

Ohanian: Do you think that the press in the United States right now—

Proffitt: Do I think that what?

Ohanian: Do you think that the press in the United States right now, whether it's like local or, you know, cities like the *New York Times*, that covers nationwide topics and things like that— although I guess a lot of papers do cover nationwide topics— do you see the press in America right now as being free?

Proffitt: Yes.

Ohanian: Okay.

Proffitt: I do. Uh, it's not always right, but it makes its own mistakes, like everybody else, and I think that, uh, I think that, by and large, over the past 250 years, the press has been a very important influence for democracy and is an essential factor if democracy is going to work and you can see this at the local level because there are, frankly, good newspapers and bad newspapers and you can see what happens with bad newspapers who do not pay enough attention to their local coverage and they therefore have fairly inefficient or corrupt local government, which I do not think we have in Sarasota.

Ohanian: I'm sure the county and the city government will be glad to hear that, when they see this.

Proffitt: Okay, I have a high degree of... of... admiration for people who go into public service for the right reason, which is they want to serve the public, and I think we've been fairly fortunate in the people we've elected here and I think the *Herald-Tribune* has played a major role in that and, I don't know if I mentioned this before, but I'm disappointed in the newspaper right now because it does not make recommendations on candidates, which I think it should. Did I mention that?

Ohanian: Yeah, we talked a little bit about that.

Proffitt: Okay, I'm sorry to repeat myself.

Ohanian: No, not at all...

Proffitt: And did I say the same thing I'm saying now?

Ohanian: No, I mean we're just getting at another part of that... things always come back to

these continuing topics. What do you think about— I forget his name, but the man just purchased a bunch of like big newspapers around the country, I think there was two recently...

Proffitt: Say again. The man who what?

Ohanian: There was a man— wealthy man— who just recently bought, I think, two very large papers in the United States and he has monied interests in certain companies or certain lobbying foundations, things like that. What do you— what do you think about the idea of papers being bought up by people with specific interests and maybe how that affects the kinds of things— the restraints that the paper is put under?

Proffitt: I think this is something that you have to expect to happen and you just hope that you have enough competition in the newspaper market that it can kind of police itself, which I think it does.

Ohanian: So the newspaper providing checks on government and then newspapers providing checks on other newspapers?

Proffitt: That's right, that's right.

Ohanian: Alright, and I guess we had talked about his last time. Were you able to— did anything come to mind when we spoke about stories, controversial stories, that the the *Herald-Tribune* broke while you were editor there? Do any stories come to mind now?

Proffitt: Not really.

Ohanian: Okay, it's a long time.

Proffitt: The um— the major story in Sarasota for the last 50 years has been growth. It's been an important role for the newspaper to be careful how it reports it and the advice that it offers with respect to growth and I think the *Herald-Tribune* has done a good job in that respect. As indeed, I think most of the newspapers in the Tampa bay area have done. I think that Florida as a whole is quite fortunate in the number of good newspapers that it has in Miami, in Tallahassee, and Tampa and St. Petersburg, in Daytona and other major cities.

Ohanian: Okay, and in what ways do newspapers have to be sensitive when talking about and reporting on issues like growth?

Proffitt: Have to be sensitive?

Ohanian: Yeah.

Proffitt: Well I think newspapers have to be sensitive about everything that they report on and I think they need to under— the... newspaper editors need to understand what the hell is going on,

both on and under the surface and things that get reported and things that don't and I think, by and large, Florida newspapers are doing a pretty good job of that. And with a little luck, we'll be able to keep on doing it.

Ohanian: And, I guess speaking of growth, can you describe what the Florida of 1961, when you first came here, can you describe what it was like?

Proffitt: Well, it was a lot smaller and the average citizen lived a lot closer to their government than they do now because with the greater population you have more and more people voting for more and more elected officials and it's easy to lose touch with them but the same principles still work. You've got to— The newspaper needs to encourage its readers to participate in politics and I don't think that politics is a bad word, I think it is one of the most visible and probably useful manifestations of our freedoms.

Ohanian: So, you think— you believe that newspapers and politics are and should be very closely tied?

Proffitt: Yes.

Ohanian: Alright. I guess just going back to Sarasota at that time, 1961, was there much of a downtown?

Proffitt: Was there what?

Ohanian: Much of a downtown area?

Proffitt: Oh yeah, quite so. I don't think the downtown has grown up more than it's grown out.

Ohanian: And what about the bay, what was the bay like at that time, at the time when you first moved here?

Proffitt: Very much like it is now, I think that Sarasota city and county governments, over the last 50 years, have really done very well about protecting the bay, and I thoroughly appreciate it, it could be a lot worse. I think that our bay is really in pretty fair shape, fortunately.

Ohanian: Yeah, it's interesting too, I guess cause, you know, thinking about how things could've been or how things could've ended up, in relation to the measures that you and others worked towards to try to implement to stop some of the continued degradation that has been happening around here, especially in the water. But you know, a lot of the stories that I'm hearing, you know, I've only been here, this is my third year here, you know, being at school and I guess I hear a lot, a lot more, about the problems that the bay has and the imbalances in the ecosystem and things like that. What, like not having a mangrove-filled coastline— things like that. What kind of impacts and on the seagrass and stuff like that... I hear more about the problems.

But I haven't heard that much about, you know, how things were back then, and in comparison with how they are now. So... I know that last time you were talking about how it was much worse at that time, the health of the bay and the health of the water and the air, than it is now.

Proffitt: Yeah, I think that's true, I think we've done quite a bit and I think that the *Herald-Tribune* over the years has contributed a lot to allowing the citizens to pick the type of leaders that they need to have to preserve the quality of life in the area.

Ohanian: Yeah, so the bay— I guess in 1961, over the course of the development of Sarasota, it was closer to what it looks like now, Sarasota in general in 1961 and through the decades since, than it was maybe 20 years before that, you know, in the 1940s—

Proffitt: Yeah, that's very true, yeah.

Ohanian: It seems like a lot of development had happened—

Proffitt: Yeah, that's very true.

Ohanian: Okay, so do you want to maybe speak to the kinds of industry and things like that that helped Sarasota to look the way it looks now?

Proffitt: Well, the fact is that Sarasota does not have any heavy industry and it does not have many sources of industrial pollution, and that is not accidental.

Ohanian: Okay, yeah, so people have consciously been working to prevent those things from really shaping the area?

Proffitt: Yep. Right.

Ohanian: So, has Sarasota been shaped more, then, by the tourism industry, by and large?

Proffitt: Say that again?

Ohanian: Would you say— it seems like to me that Sarasota has been shaped by the tourism industry than anything else.

Proffitt: By the what?

Ohanian: Tourism—

Proffitt: Oh, I think so, I think you're right.

Ohanian: Yeah. So in 1961 it was— it had been developed for that purpose.

Proffitt: Yeah, I think so. Tourism, by and large, has been a pretty good influence and it's been

that way because of regulations that governments have established, more so in Sarasota than in most places in Florida.

Ohanian: How is Sarasota different?

Proffitt: Well, it's been more strictly regulated, the things that industries can do, and the effluence they can discharge.

Ohanian: So, like, tourism has been kind of a preserving— has had a preserving effect?

Proffitt: Yeah, correctly regulated it has been. What is good for tourism, is probably good for the community.

Ohanian: And why is that?

Proffitt: Hmm?

Ohanian: Why is that?

Proffitt: Well, that's because what's good for tourism, by and large, makes the community a better place to live, and if you do that, you improve things not just for the tourists, but for the whole community. You have to be careful not to let tourism loosen up environmental controls in the interest of bringing in more tourists.

Ohanian: So, what were we saying, you were talking about tourism having a positive effect on the community...

Proffitt: Mhm. Yep.

Ohanian: Umm, okay and I guess tourism brings along development, and I guess a lot of the development took place before you got here but do you think that the development has had negative effects on the native ecosystem here?

Proffitt: Do I think that what?

Ohanian: Do you think that— Well, tourism has increased development, brought along development, stimulated development... and has development had negative influences on the native ecosystem and habitat here?

Proffitt: I don't quite understand the question.

Ohanian: Okay, I'll rephrase it... So, tourism has stimulated development—

Proffitt: Yes.

Ohanian: Yeah, very much so and, um—

Proffitt: Just as much in that it exposes more and more people to Sarasota who decide that maybe they should spend more time here.

Ohanian: Right, and they decide that maybe they want to move here?

Proffitt: Yeah.

Ohanian: Where they vacation, this is where they can live. And has the development that has happened because of that and the growth... have you seen that it's had negative impacts on the native habitat and, like, ecosystem, here?

Proffitt: Well I think you've got to realize that not all growth is good, but in one sense growth is good because it gives you more people and resources to work with but the growth has got to be of the right kind that doesn't put a greater strain on the air and water resources. So you've got to watch it carefully and you've got to have elected public officials who will keep that in mind and I think that, with some exceptions, Sarasota city and county have done a great job with that in mind. I'm not sure that— I don't think that the kind of population growth that we have had has had a negative impact on the community except for the traffic... which I don't quite know how you avoid and I think that we have to keep in mind that cities are built for people not automobiles and I think that we have been moderately successful in applying that and growth is not necessarily good, it's only the right kind of growth that will help the community remain a good place for people to live and that is what— that is the product that Sarasota has to sell: that this is a good place to live. And I believe that that idea has become fairly widely circulated, I certainly hope so.

Ohanian: And how do you think— how do you think the people who come in, you know, for vacation they come and think that Sarasota is an awesome location and want to move, want to live here, and so they move here, what kind of effect do you think that has had on the people who have been here, who have lived here in Sarasota who have been here for generations before it was a vacation spot?

Proffitt: Well, the fact of population growth, cannot be overlooked and the more you grow, the more you have to be choosy about where you grow, and think we've been fairly successful at that. Overall, I am not pessimistic about what I see for the future. If we just keep on keepin on.

Ohanian: And what ways that Sarasota has been choosy about where and how they grow have been most helpful to— to, I don't know, preventing negative consequences?

Proffitt: Well, don't let yourself get overwhelmed by density. I mean that's not easy to do, because the more people you can pack into a given area, the more money you can make.

Ohanian: Yeah so being able to balance a small amount of space and a large amount of people.

Proffitt: That's right.

Ohanian: Okay, so Sarasota you think has been fairly successful in its urban planning and, you know, the layout of the city?

Proffitt: Fairly successful, yes. Not entirely, but fairly successful. Fortunately.

Ohanian: And this house, how long have you lived in this house for— or when did you move into this house?

Proffitt: We've been in this house for about... a number of years that would fall into the late— into the high 40s, more than 45.

Ohanian: So about 10 years or so after you moved into Sarasota?

Proffitt: Yes.

Ohanian: Where did you live before that?

Proffitt: In Sarasota?

Ohanian: Mhm. Before this house?

Proffitt: We lived on Siesta Key, and we lived in... the Eastern part of the city of Sarasota, before we moved here.

Ohanian: What was it like living on Siesta key?

Proffitt: There was a lot less traffic then than there is now.

Ohanian: And all the things that traffic brings with it, right?

Proffitt: That's right... And I'm — I'm very fond of Siesta Key but the fact is that now it is getting overpopulated and unless we are very careful about what we allow to be built in there, it can have an negative impact on the quality of life, and that is, I think, a statement that I think could be applied to almost any waterfront community— they are very sensitive to density.

Ohanian: What makes them so sensitive? Do you think?

Proffitt: Well, the fact that so many people want to live there that they'll just overcrowd it if you let them.

Ohanian: So when you first moved onto Siesta, there was less people than there is now?

Proffitt: In a way, yes, it was much less crowded.

Ohanian: What was it like out there, in 1961?

Proffitt: Generally, very pleasant.

Ohanian: Can you tell me about it?

Proffitt: Pardon?

Ohanian: Can you tell me about it?

Proffitt: Well, it was, it was a nice place to live. And we did not live on the water but we lived fairly close to it, so that we spent quite a bit of time at the beach and at that time, we had four children all of whom were under the age of 16 and they really enjoyed the beaches. So that was good for them, but driving into Siesta Key has never been a pleasant experience— then or now.

Ohanian: So the kids spent a lot of time at the beach when you guys lived there?

Proffitt: Pardon?

Ohanian: The kids spent a lot of time at the beach when you guys lived there?

Proffitt: Yeah.

Ohanian: Would they go there every day?

Proffitt: No, not every day but quite frequently, I'd say several times a week.

Ohanian: Did you and your wife go there as often— or did you go there pretty often, to the beach?

Proffitt: She went more often than I did, because she was there during the day and I couldn't, I'd just go out on weekends, by and large.

Ohanian: And how were the beaches different—

Proffitt: Pardon?

Ohanian: How long has it been since you've been to Siesta Key?

Proffitt: The last time I've been to Siesta key?

Ohanian: Yeah.

Proffitt: Well, probably three or four days ago...

Ohanian: Really?

Proffitt: I just, you know, I just drove through there on the way someplace.

Ohanian: Okay, have the beaches changed very much si—

Proffitt: Pardon?

Ohanian: Have the beaches changed very much down in Siesta?

Proffitt: No, they have not actually, we've added more beach space out there and I think that the population per square... or population per acre of beach has gone up but not as sharply as it might because we have added more beaches.

Ohanian: I know when I first got to Sarasota they told me that Siesta Key was like one of the best— it was like the second-best beach in the nation or something like that— or in the world? I don't know, I think it was just in the nation, in America, the second-best beach in America... Do you think that that's true?

Proffitt: Oh, yeah, I think that's true. I think it's one of the best beaches in the world. Some years we make number one, depending on who's doing the counting, but I think the Siesta Key beaches are just about as good as they get.

Ohanian: What kinds of— how would the kids spend their time when they were at the beaches and you with your kids and you with your family, stuff like that?

Proffitt: Digging sand.

Ohanian: Towards any purpose or just to dig sand?

Proffitt: Oh, you know they were making their little castles and all of that. And swimming.

Ohanian: Did you guys ever go fishing down there? Or would people boogie board and stuff like that?

Proffitt: No, I don't particularly care for fishing... I can tell you.

Ohanian: Why is that?

Proffitt: I just don't.

Ohanian: Oh, okay... some people think it's boring.

Proffitt: It's basically a waste of time. If you want to eat fish, we have plenty of fish markets.

Ohanian: Yeah, do you remember— do you remember any hurricanes coming through, any big storms, while you were living close to the beach?

Proffitt: No, I have not. There has not been a hurricane come through Sarasota since I have been here. Now I have been in my lifetime through three hurricanes, but this was in Miami and North Carolina.

Ohanian: Yeah, was there any times that you were worried about— you know even when there aren't hurricanes there are storms— were ever worried about any flooding? Being so close to the water...

Proffitt: Oh, sure.

Ohanian: Did anything ever happen with flooding?

Proffitt: Nope.

Ohanian: That's good.

Proffitt: We might get flooded here. This— this house is 13.5 feet above sea level, and in a really big hurricane, we would have water blown into this inlet and over to the house— but that's a risk you run.

Ohanian: I bet that's— that's way different, you know, living so close to the water, you know, living in Texas and living in Maine and living in Ohio. Yeah... I guess do you prefer that?

Proffitt: Pardon?

Ohanian: Do you prefer that? Do you prefer living so close to the water? Was that a big draw coming here from— you know, a lot of different places, and settling here?

Proffitt: No, that was not a big draw for me. I came here because I wanted to get back closer to the South and on a fairly decent newspaper, which I did. In the newspaper business, if you're going to get promoted, it's usually by virtue of moving to another newspaper, you know, instead of sitting here and being promoted from city editor to managing editor and so forth. Usually the most common thing is to change newspapers, and that's what I did for the first few years of my newspaper career so that I did not necessarily expect to live here for so many years but I stayed here because of my children.

Ohanian: That was the main thing that kept you here?

Proffitt: Pardon?

Ohanian: That was the main thing that kept you here?

Proffitt: Yes.

Ohanian: And how has Sarasota been to raise a family?

Proffitt: Great.

Ohanian: How does it compare with other places that you lived before?

Proffitt: Well, it's about the same, I think raising a family is about the same wherever you live, you've got the pay attention to the kids. And it's harder on the wife than it is on the husband because she's there, day in and day out.

Ohanian: Did your wife stay at home?

Proffitt: Pardon?

Ohanian: Did your wife stay at home?

Proffitt: Sometimes she worked. And I got divorced, a few years after we moved here, which is another— you know that meant that the kids were going to be here, and If I went elsewhere, I wouldn't' have access to them. So that was a strong factor there.

Ohanian: Mhm. And she was planning on staying here.

Proffitt: Pardon?

Ohanian: Your wife— well I guess your ex-wife— she was planning on staying here?

Proffitt: Oh yes, oh yes. That was many, many years ago.

Ohanian: Did that mean that she had to start working then?

Proffitt: Yes.

Ohanian: Because she was going to be the provider for the kids?

Proffitt: Yes... I paid her a substantial monthly sum, but she still had to work... Which is fine, she's a very good stenographer.

Ohanian: And so you still got to see plenty of your children after that.

Proffitt: Pardon?

Ohanian: You still got to see plenty of your children after that?

Proffitt: Pardon?

Ohanian: You still got to see plenty of your children after that?

Proffitt: Oh yes, yes indeed.

Ohanian: So, were you remarried after that at some point?

Proffitt: Was I remarried?

Ohanian: Mhm.

Proffitt: Yes, I was.

Ohanian: How soon after?

Proffitt: Four or five years. And my second wife died earlier this year so that I am now loose and single.

Ohanian: Ready to mingle?

Proffitt: At 89. When you cannot do a hell of a lot.

Ohanian: Do you think there will be a third wife?

Proffitt: No.

Ohanian: Did you have any children with your second wife?

Proffitt: Did I what?

Ohanian: Have any children with your second wife?

Proffitt: Have any what?

Ohanian: Children, with your second wife?

Proffitt: One more.

Ohanian: One more? Okay. And who was that?

Proffitt: Had four with my first wife and one by my second wife.

Ohanian: And what were all of the kids' names?

Proffitt: Pardon?

Ohanian: What were all of the kids' names, the four and then the one?

Proffitt: Well there was Anne, and there was...

Ohanian: Scott.

Proffitt: Scott and Jeff... and Bo... and another girl whose name escapes me right this minute.

Ohanian: Okay.

Proffitt: A total of five.

Ohanian: Mhm. And who was the one? With the second wife.

Proffitt: Who was the one?

Ohanian: Mhm.

Proffitt: His name was Bo and he lives in St. Louis and has three children.

Ohanian: Yeah, and what does he do, Bo?

Proffitt: He works for a company that manufactures and sells all sorts of stuff to other businesses.

Ohanian: Mhm, okay. Cool. And also— one thing I wanted to ask you about was— I was talking with Scott earlier, and he was saying that he had done work in journalism and so— yeah, what was that like, seeing him be interested in journalism and wanting to pursue that for a career.

Proffitt: Fine. He may have misled you a little bit. His journalistic career is fairly limited. He is basically a business man. He is the only one of my children who has ever owned and run a business and he has done it quite successfully. He... he spent 12 years going to college in Gainesville, and having a grand time. And the time came when he said it was time to get a diploma and he went down to the registrar's office and asked him what he needed to do to get a diploma and the registrar looked up his record and says, you have met all of the requirements, you have the required number of courses and you have taken all of the necessary courses and you can get a degree anytime you wish to pay the 35 dollars and get the diploma. Which he did! And then he came back to Sarasota. He got a degree in chemistry of all things and he came back to Sarasota and he went to work for Mote Marine and after a couple of years there, he got a part-time job at a bookstore and a few years after that, he bought the bookstore, and he ran that for several years, and fortunately, they had a big flood. A pipe broke on the third floor and flooded the whole damn store, so he collected a small fortune in insurance and got out of the business, and reinvested his

money in downtown real estate and is doing very well, thank you.

Ohanian: What do you think drew him to doing some work in journalism?

Proffitt: Say again?

Ohanian: What do you think drew him to do some work in journalism?

Proffitt: Oh, that's fine. He wrote for the... I guess, the *Siesta Key Pelican*, and was pretty good at it, but, they didn't pay much.

Ohanian: Did you — did you like that fact that— I don't know parents often—

Proffitt: Yeah, he liked it.

Ohanian: I think that parents— well, I don't know, I think parents tend to want to pursue or be interested in something that they're interested in. So was that something that you especially liked to see him do?

Proffitt: Nah.

Ohanian: Okay.

Proffitt: I didn't worry about it. He's a bright kid. He'll never go hungry.

Ohanian: Okay. Let's see if there's anything— Oh yeah, you were saying that... David Harvey... is that his name: David Harvey?

Proffitt: Pardon?

Ohanian: Is that the owner of the paper? Is that his name?

Proffitt: No— David Lindsay.

Ohanian: David Lindsay!

Proffitt: That was the publisher of the paper.

Ohanian: Right.

Proffitt: Until the family sold it.

Ohanian: When did they sell it?

Proffitt: 1982

Ohanian: Okay, so, soon after that you retired?

Proffitt: Well, I didn't retire until '98.

Ohanian: Okay, yeah

Proffitt: The paper was owned by *The New York Times* until after I retired.

Ohanian: Oh, really?

Proffitt: Yeah, *The New York Times* bought it from the Lindsay family, and they ran it for many, many years. So my pension check comes from *The New York Times*.

Ohanian: How did things change when that ownership changed? What— what changed at the paper?

Proffitt: Very little, as far as I was concerned. I stayed on. By that time by '82 I was editor. In fact, I was ed— I was in charge of both the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* and the *Sarasota Journal* which was an afternoon newspaper which the *Herald-Tribune* founded to compete with the local afternoon newspaper, which had been established by the heirs of the *Buffalo Evening News*, and so I was in charge of both the morning and the afternoon papers— of the newsroom — not the entire paper.

Ohanian: What is the difference between the newsroom and the entire paper?

Proffitt: Pardon?

Ohanian: What is the difference between the newsroom and the entire paper?

Proffitt: Oh well, in a newspaper you've got the newsroom, you've got the advertising department, which is a big department and brings in a lot of revenue— thank heaven, and you've got the circulation department, which is also a pretty good size, so that, I suspect, by the time I retired, the *Herald-Tribune*, probably had about 500 employees of whom probably 50 were in the newsroom and its bureaus, and we— we had and still have— offices in Tallahassee and Washington.

Ohanian: And is that to just catch the state news, and the nationwide news?

Proffitt: Yes, especially as they apply in our circulation area. We don't try to cover the nation, we just want to cover the activities of government which affect us, here.

Ohanian: So, under *The New York Times*, you still had a similar amount of freedom?

Proffitt: Yes, It was a lot of fun working for them.

Ohanian: What parts did you particularly enjoy?

Proffitt: Pardon?

Ohanian: What parts did you particularly enjoy?

Proffitt: Well, I enjoyed... writing editorials, and fashioning the editorial pages, every day. I have been lucky to be able to [yawns]— pardon me— I have been lucky to be able to make a living doing something that I think is fun, which not everybody can do.

Ohanian: Why do you think *The New York Times* was interested enough to buy up the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*?

Proffitt: It was— they were just looking for diversity. They owned, at one point, almost 40 newspapers, scattered throughout the United States, of which *The Herald-Tribune* was one, they also owned papers in Lakeland and Ocala— which they have now sold, by the way— so that I do not know what happened at *The New York Times* to get them out of this business, but last year, they sold all of their other newspapers except for *The Boston Globe* and *The Paris Herald-Tribune*.

Ohanian: The Paris...?

Proffitt: Paris... *Herald-Tribune*.

Ohanian: Where is that?

Proffitt: It's located in Paris and it covers Europe.

Ohanian: Oh! Oh, okay, I was wondering whether there was a city in the United States called Paris or something like that.

Proffitt: No, this is the French Paris.

Ohanian: Wow, that is interesting. So, probably— so when did they sell off the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*? Do you know?

Proffitt: I forget the exact date, but it was probably three or four years ago.

Ohanian: So it seems like they were consolidating.

Proffitt: Well they were, for some reason or other, they wanted to concentrate their attention on *The New York Times*. I think that that's what happened, I have no inside information, but clearly they wanted to get rid of the distraction of trying to keep up with what was going on in thirty different newspapers scattered around the country.

Ohanian: Yeah, that sounds crazy. I can understand why they wanted to simplify things. Yeah, I guess, a big question is What do you think is the future of print journalism and newspapers?

Proffitt: I think it's pretty good. I think... I think good newspapers will have a good future, because they're an easy way to get your news and to have it available for reference. I think newspapers will continue to be vital organizations despite the fact that they're going to be competing with television.

Ohanian: And online news.

Proffitt: And what?

Ohanian: And online news.

Proffitt: Yes, and online news. But— right now, nobody is really covering the world— except newspapers. The television and radio pick nearly all of their stories from newspapers, they have very small staffs.

Ohanian: Yeah, you know the way we were talking about newspapers being a check on government and what is happening, it's a scary thought to think that, you know— there's been a lot of talk about newspapers having a bleak future because things are— well print journalism, at least, because things are so often— you know, it's expensive to have such a large staff and it's cheaper to have a small one as your base, you know? Do you think that the internet could serve that same sort of check on government as print journalism could?

Proffitt: I'm not sure that it could.

Ohanian: Why is that?

Proffitt: Well, someone has got to gather the news that goes on the internet. It's expensive. I don't think that you can— I don't think that you can find really good news coverage except for the homepage of a news website such as *The New York Times* or the *Herald-Tribune* or any of a dozen other newspapers that I could name, where you can get really coverage if you want to get your news that way.

Ohanian: So, you don't think that online news resources can be as effective of a check on government and, you know... shady dealings?

Proffitt: Say that again?

Ohanian: You don't think that online resources— news resources— can be as effective of a check on government?

Proffitt: No, I do not.

Ohanian: What about the accessibility of internet news versus print journalism?

Proffitt: Well, I'm prejudiced, but I think that most people will find it more convenient to pick up a newspaper when they're ready to read it rather than tune into the evening news at a particular time. At least I hope that's the way it's going to work.

Ohanian: And one thing I was wondering about, hearing about working— or hearing about being in the Air Force and you were telling me about David Lindsay, too, and about how he owned planes and flew planes around here, and so I was wondering if you had ever seen Sarasota and this area from a bird's eye view?

Proffitt: Have I ever seen it? Oh, yeah, many times.

Ohanian: Would he take you flying?

Proffitt: Oh, yes.

Ohanian: What is Sarasota like from up there?

Proffitt: Well, it's very nice, it's all very logical.

Ohanian: In what way?

Proffitt: Oh, just the layout, you know, it's— I think we've done a pretty good job of zoning and keeping the residential areas, residential.

Ohanian: As opposed to what?

Proffitt: As opposed to having residential areas infiltrated by industry.

Ohanian: And what about the water and the waterways? What is that like from the sky, because I've never seen it.

Proffitt: Well, it's very lovely, you oughta see it.

Ohanian: You were talking about David Lindsay being able to see pollution better from up in the sky, air pollution and water pollution, do you think over time that was less visible? Or wasn't around as much—?

Proffitt: Oh, I think that— particularly air pollution, was cleaned up a lot. Not just here, but around the country.

Ohanian: And what do you think prompted that?

Proffitt: Public pressure.

Ohanian: It had to get to a certain point before—

Proffitt: Say again.

Ohanian: It had to get to a certain point before people wanted to act?

Proffitt: Right, that is correct.

Ohanian: Yeah, so I think we got a lot of good stuff today. I think there's a lot there.

(End interview)