Interview of Charles A. Ferguson by Jack Davis and Justin Nystrom
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Abstract: This interview focuses primarily on the years between 1969 and the mid 1980s and parallels Charles Ferguson's time as an editor at the New Orleans States-Item through the 1980 merger of the States-Item and Times-Picayune, when Ferguson became Editor-in-Chief of the combined papers. Topics of particular interest include the 1969 mayoral election of Maurice "Moon" Landrieu and the role that an independent States-Item played in promoting political and social change in New Orleans. Significant developments in journalism such as the gathering of talent at the States-Item in the 1970s as well as the merger and transformation of the Times-Picayune in the 1980s from a failing morning daily paper to one nationally recognized for excellence. Related are discussions about the emergence of cultural criticism, particularly about the city's restaurant scene, the emergence of the convention business, and the 1984 World's Fair.

Biography: Charles Ferguson was born in New Orleans in 1937 and is a graduate of Fortier High School and received undergraduate and law degrees from Tulane University. He has been involved in journalism nearly his entire life from working as a copy boy at the New Orleans Item, where his father worked, to becoming a reporter in 1961 for the States-Item. After a year as a Neimann Fellow at Harvard University in 1966, he returned to New Orleans to become an Associate Editor with the States-Item in 1967. Ferguson became editor of the Times-Picayune when that paper merged with the States-Item in 1980 and remained in that post until 1900.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zwkWMQH5fXk

Note: subtitles generated from an uncorrected transcript. Timecode will align.

Charles Ferguson 00:17
You just stopped the tape.

Jack Davis 00:
All right, we are here in the home of Charles A Ferguson in New Orleans. I'm Jack Davis, and I probably should disclose that once upon time I was a reporter and an editor under Charles Ferguson. I'm also here with Justin Nystrom, who's running the camera, and we'll be asking some questions. Justin is from the history department of Loyola University, and the originator and manager, director of the Loyola Oral History Project, which right now is focusing on the 1970s. Charlie Ferguson was the – after years as an editor, as a reporter and columnist, primarily at New Orleans newspapers, the States-Item and the Times Picayune – became the editor, Associate Editor, in charge of the editorial page of the of The States-Item and later became the editor of that paper. And later became the editor of that paper in combination with the Times Picayune, when those two papers merged, these newspapers had major impact on how New Orleans saw each other, saw itself, saw its future and saw its problems and solved some of them. So Charlie, since we're focusing on the 1970s it was in the summer of 1969 that you were made an editor of The States-Item, in charge of the editorial page, and that's just perfect timing for this project. You were in a position to observe the changes we're talking about in the 1970s and in position to explain them and help shape the forces at work. What did it did it look like in 1969 that New Orleans was able, was going to be able to have a vibrant next decade? Or did we feel that we were still trapped in some of the problems of the 1960s

Charles Ferguson 02:40
Well, actually, I think it was a time of optimism. And I think the feeling was the city of New Orleans had immense challenges, but the potential for dealing with them was there. And I as far as the States-Item is concerned, we did a series of articles on the problems that were facing the city. I've forgotten what the title of the series was, but it was pointing out the many problems that needed to be addressed in the upcoming mayor's race. And as far as I'm concerned, the mayor's race of I think it was in ‘69 was pivotal, I and it was through the stories that we did the editorials, as well as something called Issues Forum, which was something that was started when I was on the board of the Institute of Politics at Loyola and funded by the Stern Family Fund to have a series of town meetings across the city in an effort to reach people who might not be reached by either The States-Item or the Times-Picayune. So there was a concerted effort to raise questions about the problems that the city was facing. And as a consequence, the candidates not just Moon but Billy Guste and some of the others focused on them. So I would . . my experience is that this was probably the most issues driven campaign that I can recall, either before or since. So to answer your question, I think that the feeling was, at least from my point of view, was that the city had serious problems that needed to be addressed, and now was a good time to begin to do that.

Jack Davis 04:53
What were the key problems, looking back 45 years, what was on the top of the agenda?

Charles Ferguson 05:00
I would say that urban blight, lack of economic development, lack of adequate public financing, and unresolved race issues. And one of the things that presumably we will be talking about is how important this election was in terms of broadening the leadership, excuse me, the leadership of this community, and not just in the public sector, but the private sector as well. But I would say, to reiterate, economic development, or the lack thereof, public finance, race and urban blight, slum housing, inadequate housing.

Jack Davis 05:55
And what made you think that, or what made people think at the time, if looking back at the frame of mind trying to recall what made it seem that those problems were solvable.

Charles Ferguson 06:10
Well, I don't know there was anything in our past to indicate that they were because the this was also a point when I think the leadership structure of the city. There were questions about whether the leadership structure of the city had served the city well, and the notion was that, at least in the minds of some is that this was a time for new leadership, and that, I think that, in itself, created a sense of optimism. And I'm not saying this was widespread. Maybe it was just in my mind and in the mind of a few other people, but nevertheless, we thought the city faced serious problems, but that we had the capacity to deal with them, and one of the ways that we could do that was to elect an effective mayor who had leadership skills, And The States-Item supported very aggressively Moon, who had demonstrated both character and good judgment and courage while he was in the legislature and after and he turned out to be a vehicle for helping to bring about some of these changes.

Jack Davis 07:38
Now, Moon Landrieu was, was the choice of The States-Item editorial board right throughout the campaign. You endorsed him in the election and supported him. TheTimes Picayune supported John Petre. What was it about Moon Landrieu? Besides those features you you just mentioned, what made you think he was going to be the leader for the next most of the next decade?

Charles Ferguson 08:15
Well The States-Item didn't have an editorial board. It was the editorial board, or the editorial staff, or a couple of people, including me and the ...Before this happened, I've forgotten what year it was. Maybe it was in '67. The editorial policies of the two papers had been separated. The two papers had been separated, and Walter Cowan and I had been put in charge of the States-Item, and George Healy and others were in charge of the Times-Picayune. The establishment – and I sort of made an oblique reference to the establishment earlier, sort of the social economic establishment, mainly older white men, were in the main supporting Petre[1], and

[1] From the Louisiana Division of the New Orleans Public Library: John J. Petre, Jr. (1914-2008) served as the District D representative on the New Orleans City Council from 1962-1970. He was first appointed to fill the unexpired term of Fred Cassibry, who resigned upon his election as Civil District Court judge. Petre was elected in his own right in 1962, and then as Councilmember At-Large in 1966.

they were represented on the board of the Times-Picayune and the advisory board of the Times-Picayune and they came out for Petre for reasons that never been very clear to me.

Jack Davis 09:19
The States-Item didn't have an advisory board.

Charles Ferguson 09:21
No, the State's Item did not have a advisory board. And it I would

Jack Davis 09:26
It did not have one.

Charles Ferguson 09:27
No, it did not. And I would say, in my mind, through this whole process leading up to our taking a very aggressive and strong position for Moon, endorsing him on page one, not only in the first primary once, but maybe even two, at least two, and perhaps three times. The only other person that I had given any thought to at all was Billy Guste. And I don't know what Billy Guste was doing at the time, he later became Attorney General, but he seemed like an attractive alternative, but Moon, at least to me, appealed because of his demonstrated courage in the legislature during the fight over closing the New Orleans public schools rather than integrating them, and when he was one of two votes in the House who voted to keep the schools open. And although I didn't, when I was covering the legislature, I didn't know Moon as well as I knew some of the rogues like Mike O'Keefe and Edward Edwards. Nevertheless, he always stood out to me as someone who was smart, had good judgment and integrity and had a command of the issues. I thought that when the time came to discuss issues, he was by far the most impressive in demonstrating a command of what the issues were as far as the city was concerned, and that included, as I recall, Jimmy Fitzmorris, Dave Gertler, John Petre, Billy Guste and Moon Landrieu. And incidentally, as a sidebar, the other day, we maybe two weekends ago, we went out to have dinner with the Landrieus at the Blue Crab, which is one of the new places along the old New Basin Canal. And as we walked in, Jimmy Fitzmorris was sitting at the next table. And you know, I told the owner that this is quite a significant occasion, because you had that one of the most important elections the city ever had was in 1969 and these were the two main candidates,

Jack Davis 11:48
and you wrote these editorials

Charles Ferguson 11:51
I did

Jack Davis 11:51
that were on the front page. And at that time, did you know Moon Landrieu personally, or we just . . .

Charles Ferguson 11:59
No, I did know him personally, but not not well, because Moon was he's not a really, and this is one of the most interesting things about him. As far as I'm concerned, he's not a real political type. I worked closely with Edwin Edwards and Michael O'Keefe, who were in the Senate, and they were in leadership positions under Governor McKeithen, and so I had to get all this information about what was going on. So I worked with them. I knew them during this period, which would have been in the early ‘60s, much better than I knew Moon at the time. Moon was sort of aloof and not that friendly. I got to know him much better when both of us sort of returned to New Orleans, and I had then, and I still have an enormous admiration for him as a person. So when I wrote these editorials, including some that were slightly demagogic, but I don't apologize.

Jack Davis 13:07
What do you mean demagogic?

Charles Ferguson 13:08
Well, Dave Kleck, who was the greatest PR guy we ever had in this town, came up with a theme for the Landrieu campaign. He later left the campaign in a huff over some trivial issue, but his slogan was, “can a man who tells the truth win?” And I thought it was good, because Moon was talking about the issues, very candidly about race, and this came out in at least one of the debates about race and about the inevitable need to raise taxes, which both subjects taboo historically. So the first editorial I did was on page one of The States-Item above the fold, stripped across the top, and the headline said, Can truth win? And it went into, you know, aspects of what Moon had been saying during the campaign and, and I haven't seen the editorials, you know, in all these years, but I was, I have no regrets about being

Jack Davis 14:21
where did you think the demagoguery was then?

Charles Ferguson 14:24
The demagoguery was, on my part, saying, Can truth triumph over all these other people who were waffling on the issues? I mean, Jimmy Fitzmorris, I mean, one of the debates was, which changed nothing, according to the polling at the time, but Moon was asked whether he would appoint any blacks, which is what they were then called in his administration, and other than mop and broom positions and. And he said, unequivocally, YES. Jimmy Fitzmorris, who is a sweetheart of a guy, and still at age 92 a remarkable person, said, Well, if there are any qualified blacks, I will consider them, which was the way saying. So, you know, it took some some guts, because bear in mind that the black vote, from a purely political point of view, the black vote was relatively insignificant. It grew in time. But I may be wrong about this, but I think in ‘69 maybe it was 25 or 30% and but it anyway that, I think that helped galvanize the black vote that ultimately fell in line behind Moon, certainly in the runoff against Jimmy Fitzmorris.

Jack Davis 15:52
Now, in this, in this editorial, can truth win? Was that an endorsement editorial?

Charles Ferguson 15:56
Yes, it was.

Jack Davis 15:56
You

Charles Ferguson 15:57
it was an endorsement. It was an endorsement. I'd have to go back and look at it and see exactly what I said. But it was, it was a strong piece of advocacy.

Jack Davis 16:11
Do you think was that in the first primary

Charles Ferguson 16:13
or there was no I think it was in the first. I think it was in the first. And I all these editorials I did. I think the total number may have been three, and I wish I would have kept them in a scrapbook someplace, but in any event, they were all very strong. And I think obviously Moon's challenge as a candidate, Jimmy Fitzmorris, was going to be in the runoff. There was no doubt about it, he was the most popular person. And then it was known by, you know, 95% of the people, Moon and Billy Guste, Dave Gertler and John Petre were in, Gertler, not so much, but were vying to see who was going to make it into the runoff. And there was a feeling that whoever got into the runoff had a good chance of beating Jimmy Fitzmorris. So I think there's very little doubt that those editorials gave Moon an edge, not only as far as the general public was concerned, but I know for a fact it enabled him to raise some money because he had a powerful advocate from one of the lesser of the papers. But the Picayune just did their typical pro forma endorsement of John Petre, and it had no

Jack Davis 17:32
and that was probably not on page one.

Charles Ferguson 17:34
No, it wasn't on page one. It was strictly editorial page thing. You know, I've even forgotten what it was, but it was not memorable. But the certainly having page one editorials was was an important part of getting Moon into the runoff and ultimately elected and it impressed the Newhouses as well, the owners of .the newspaper

Jack Davis 17:58
in that kind you had just been put in this position as an editor of this paper. Not only that, but it was also just sent off to be independent.

Charles Ferguson 18:09
That's right.

Jack Davis 18:10

In the summer of 1969 Ashton Phelps Sr asked you and Walter Cowan to take The States-Item in a direction independent of the Times- Picayune So, and you were 32 year old editorial writer, and you, you had this immediate impact. Well, did that feel at the time,

Charles Ferguson 18:34
well, I felt that it was important, and we were doing something significant. That's because I thought we were in the process. You're talking about pivotal moments. And I think as far as the '70s are concerned, this was a pivotal moment. But let me tell you why the situation existed, and that's because when Martin Luther King, when the papers were under one editor, and George Healy was the editor of both papers. When Martin Luther King was assassinated, I did an editorial for the States-Item. You know, high-pitched, typical the kind of editorials I was just doing at the time. But anyway, bemoaning the fact and etc, etc. And so Russ Kinsley, who was then the editorial page editor of The States Item under George Healy, said, Well, we have to take this into George. And shortly, so we took this editorial, which was on a piece of copy paper, into Mr Healy. Read it, crumples it up and throws it in the trash can. So I said, and I've forgotten when it was, but this was like on a Thursday or Friday when he was assassinated, and I went back and said, Well, I'm going to quit. So Pie Dufour, who was a columnist of the paper, said, No, that would be reckless. And so on so on. Sunday, the Times Picayune had an editorial that was nothing like the one I had written, but nevertheless was significant, because the Times Picayune took note of the assassination of Martin Luther King and said it was a bad thing. So on Monday, I went to see Ashton senior, and I said,

Jack Davis 20:21
who was the publisher of both papers?

Charles Ferguson 20:22
publisher of both papers. And I said, Ashton, you know, I think I may have to quit, because I did an editorial and for the State's Item. And he said, Well, why didn't it appear? And I said, Well, we went to see Mr Healy, and he crumpled it up and threw it in the trash can. He said it will never happen again. And within a week, the papers were split, and Walter and I were put in charge of The States-Item George Healy went back to being in charge of the Picayune. Now, I later found out that I think that they not only wanted to keep me and Walter happy and that the situation under Healy was intolerable from a human management point of view, but they also thought that The States-Item had a better chance of surviving if it were an independent voice. That is, there was some potential tangible benefits to splitting these papers apart. But anyway, I grabbed the bit and ran with it. And you know, I would say that the first big manifestation of that was the '69 mayor's race.

Jack Davis 21:35
Do you ever think about what would have happened to New Orleans in race relations if Moon Landrieu hadn't been mayor,

Charles Ferguson 21:43

you know, the if, let's say it had been Fitzmorris, I don't think much would have happened. I mean, the historical . . much would have happened. No, given the historical determinism, what was going on nationally. But you know, Lyndon Johnson voting rights, there was a surge that was beginning. But if Fitzmorris had been representing the old political organizations, basically white political establishment, the process would have gone more slowly, Moon acted more aggressively and proactively, and people think when he started to make these appointments to involving people from the political organizations like SOUL and COUP, that these were payoffs. The truth of the matter is that SOUL and COUP were nothing. They were paper organizations. Moon made those organizations. He got the black vote not because he had the support of Sherman Copelin and. . . of SOUL, and Nils Douglas of SOUL and Bobby Collins of COUP. He got it because in a choice between Moon and the other candidates, it was clear, you know intuitively, who is going to represent your interests best. So then when time came to follow through on his campaign promise to appoint some people to significant or given some patronage. Well, he did appoint some people who were with these organizations, but they were the beneficiaries of Moon's election, far more than they were responsible for his election. But that that in on the race question, I think, without a doubt, Moon's election hastened the participation of blacks, and not just in the public realm, but in the you know, the the overall realm of leadership in the city,

Jack Davis 23:56
did The States-Item remain consciously, actively supportive of that effort once he was administering,

Charles Ferguson 24:02
yeah, I think that actually a couple of things we did for Moon, I think we helped elect him, and I'll always be proud about that fact. But we supported these things and supported them aggressively, whereas the Picayune, you know, sort of did so hesitatingly, I would say, but we aggressively supported, and I can't remember all the details. All you know, we had a housing thing. We weren't going to get the first Super Bowl if we didn't. I had a some kind of housing bill. We aggressively supported that. And so we had Moon's back when he was doing these things that he had indicated during the campaign he was going to do.

Jack Davis 24:47
Were there other media of consequence, other than the two newspapers that were commenting or writing about this?

Charles Ferguson 24:56
Of consequence, I would say would be the key role. I mean, later on we in, when you came down here and were part of Figaro and so on, it did, but you could never, and this showed up in the polling Figaro and the Vieux Carre Courier and so on. Was sort of elite publications that did not have, not only didn't have broad appeal, but they were not feared by the politicians the way we were writing editorials in The States-Item, people not only wanted our support, but they didn't want to be attacked by us. So there was a certain fear element there, and I don't think any other publication or, for that matter, I think Phil Johnson was doing TV editorials had had that kind of

impact. I think it was all it's changed so dramatically as we speak. But going back to the ‘60s and ‘70s, the two newspapers were, you know, by and large, the only game in town.

Jack Davis 26:02
And when, besides integrating government, Mayor Landrieu tried to influence the business community and tried to interview, introduce the cultural community, to integrate and Mardi Gras. He did. Did that also get coverage in The States-Item? Or was that behind the scenes?

Charles Ferguson 26:24
I think that was behind the scenes. And in truth, some of this was unknown to me and a lot of other people at the time it was going on, but Moon was in from a political standpoint, there was no upside. There was only downside to doing this. But he tried to integrate the Rex organization, which is, I guess, the most public of the elite organizations, given the fact that its motto is pro bono publico. So he Leon Irwin[2] was one of his important supporters, one of his very most important supporters, and certainly in this regard.

Jack Davis 27:12
And Leon was influential within Rex circles?

Charles Ferguson 27:15
Well, he was, he was in not a great influence. But the, I think, at the time, either the President or the captain of Rex was Darwin Fenner, who was a very important part of the old white leadership of and on the on the race question, certainly at the time of the desegregation of the schools, was comparatively liberal compared to some others. But in any event, let me see if I can recall how this went down. Leon's position in Rex was jeopardized by making this move. And as a consequence, Moon called Darwin Fenner, who was probably came as close as anybody, after the death of Joe Jones[3], to being the king of New Orleans. And Moon called Darwin Fenner, and said, Darwin, you can't let Leon Irwin hang out here on on this. He said, Darwin, you once told me that the person in this community you admired the most was Albert Dent, who was then the president of Dillard. And you know, on a plane with Benjamin Mays, who was the president of Morehouse in Atlanta, and he said, Are you telling me that Dr Dent is not good enough to attend the Rex ball?

Jack Davis 29:00
And this. And the question at this time was about getting African Americans invited to come to the ball, not to be members of the organization.

Charles Ferguson 29:09
Well, it started off Moon in many ways. You know, not being part of the social establishment of New Orleans had no concept of what he was dealing with here, but his intentions were pure. But he was told that getting black membership, which later occurred, was not a possibility, but that

[2] Leon Irwin, III (1939-2006)
[3] Joseph Merrick Jones (1902-1963) Attorney and president of Tulane’s board of Trustees. Served as Rex in 1958. One of the founders of Jones Walker law firm.

having blacks invited to the ball set up in the gallery, so on with everybody else might be. So the bottom line was, the Darwin Fenner said You're right. So Albert Dent and, you know, I can't[4] remember who else... So I think Norman Francis was not leader. Yeah, Norman Francis was later, and he was invited to, along with Dr Braden, were invited to be members, and both declined, no Dr Braden accepted, and then promptly died. Norman Francis declined, and Charlie Teamer who then was at Dillard, where he was the CFO accepted, and as far as I know, is still a member. But anyway, you raised the question of whether Moon had done anything in the sort of the social carnival realm, and he did this. And in this case, Darwin Fenner responded. But you have to the context of the time this, this is a fairly major deal in, you know, early 70s, 1970s 71

Jack Davis 30:55
was there, and this didn't this, this pressure on on Rex, or the request of Rex to open up with this didn't make the media.

Charles Ferguson 31:04
It didn't make the media because, as I said, I didn't know anything about it until later that all this was going on. So, I mean, I wasn't even in Rex at the time, and so I didn't know it was going on. It would have been it, there may have been some references to it, but there, I know, there was no big coverage of this. And I you know how big it deserved to be covered, you know?

Jack Davis 31:43
So it was happening behind the scenes . . One version I've heard of this is that Mayor Landrieu told Rex, I don't know whether it was through Mr Fenner or not, that there wouldn't be anybody at the City Hall reviewing stand when the Rex King came to be toasted.

Charles Ferguson 32:04
He did say that. that's true.

Jack Davis 32:07
And do you think that had an impact?

Charles Ferguson 32:09
I. It may have had some impact. I think my own opinion, and I knew Darwin Fenner, and as a matter of fact, when I briefly considered about running for mayor back in '77 he was most enthusiastic, and I think he gave me $5,000[5] just like that when I went by to see him. But I think he was a fundamentally decent guy, and he alone had the power in Rex and the stature and the social ex-king of Carnival and so on, to say, we're going to do this and make it stick

Jack Davis 32:48

[4] Davis: This may not be properly recollected: Dr. Braden, Henry Braden III, died in 1994, according to several obits.

[5] After reading this transcript, Ferguson corrected this and said it was much more likely $500 instead of $5,000.

in the Landrieu's living room. There's a painting by George Schmidt,

Charles Ferguson 32:54
I was present, which I think is called

Jack Davis 32:56
Moon at Momus.

Charles Ferguson 32:57
Yeah, with the title which

Jack Davis 32:59
you were there,

Charles Ferguson 32:59
I was absolutely

Jack Davis 33:01
the story behind that painting. This was not as happy an ending as Rex opening itself up.

Charles Ferguson 33:07
Well, no, this was a moon at Momus. And I've always said Moon cares, you know, not about things like that. And I said, Moon, if you ever want to give me something, I want that. It was at Momus. So Leon was very much involved in Momus, so we went the Landrieus and the Fergusons went to Momus, and we were while Jane and Verna, I guess, were twiddling their thumbs Moon and I went to have behind the scenes have a drink with the captain of the organization, who I don't know whether it was Sonny Westfeldt or not, but anyway, we went back there to have have a drink. And in the process, Sonny Westfeldt, who was three sheets to the wind, launched an attack on Moon, calling him a hack, and all this patronage stuff going on. And Moon, it almost came to sort of fisticuffs, at least on Sonny Westfeldt's part. And I was standing there, and Jane has a story on this as well. So Sonny Westfeldt is restrained, and he was criticizing, I remember Moon for all these people who he was appointing to various positions, and

Jack Davis 34:40
these were mostly racially the process of racial integration of city government.

Charles Ferguson 34:45
Well, it was, I don't know was that specific, but Moon's reply was the only person that he had appointed so far to a political position was Westfeldt's daughter, who got a job at the. Superdome at the request of Dave Dixon. So anyway, that was, this was a huge deal, and the story got out that Moon Landrieu barged in behind the scenes, brought a reporter from the Times Picayune, and me was, I was there by invitation and so and so. Now, to his credit, Sonny Westfeldt when he sobered up the next morning, because this was a Thursday night, went over

and abjectly apologized to Moon, and I think he was urged to do so by his confreres in the organization. But that painting, which shows Charlie, I think it's a devastating picture of this young, naive Moon, Landrieu and all these little, I think it's, to me, the best thing that George Schmidt ever did. And I would love to have that painting. And, you know, it just stuck up on the wall there. And Moon, he changed it, Leon, it was on display at the circle Gallery, and it,

Jack Davis 35:59
remember which Mardi Gras this was? Was it one year into the Landrieu term or two?

Charles Ferguson 36:05
I think it was one or two. It was in the 70s. For sure. It was, it would have been fairly early on. But just that

Jack Davis 36:15
the painting was at the Circle Gallery.

Charles Ferguson 36:17
The painting was at the Circle Gallery, and I've forgotten who owned the circle gallery at the time, begins with the W. Leon. This was the cause celebre Leon got George Schmidt to change it to Moon at Comus, because he didn't. It was hitting too close to home to call Moon at Momus, because this was based on an actual historic event that I was a witness to.

Jack Davis 36:43
Now, did that event have any impact on relationship between the social establishment and the Landrieu administration?

Charles Ferguson 36:49
No, I don't. I think the social establishment gained a grudging respect for Moon, because they knew that what he was doing was good for the city. On the race question, he was dealing with the race question, which the Enlightened members of the establishment knew was something that had to be done for practical reasons. We weren't going to get Super Bowls. We weren't going to get all this stuff if we didn't deal with that. Second he was trying to deal with our economic problems. You know, he bankrolled this. This was Kabby, (Lester Kabacoff)[6] but the tourist commission was had $100,000 year budget. Was part of the Chamber of Commerce because Kabby, he was going into the tourism convention business, building all these hotels, something had to be done. So Moon played a key role, not only in redoing the tourist and convention we're really in the convention business where the money is, but got John McKeithen to support it, and all of a sudden the budget was, like a million dollars. I mean, it that, and that was, you know, a small part. It happens to be about the biggest thing going on in our community now, 30 or 40 years later, is the convention business. But that it was Kabby's initial leadership, but Moon's active support that turned it from nothing into something very important. And I know I was on the not only the tour I probably shouldn't have been as a newspaper editor, but I was actually on the executive committee while all this was going on, and we went out and hired the

[6] Lester Elliott Kabacoff (1913-1994)

guy, top convention guy in the country, a guy by the name of Jimmy D. Fore[7] from Houston to run this operation.

Jack Davis 38:54
Was The States-Item behind the Superdome project? Or did you have reservations about it?

Charles Ferguson 39:02
We actually had reservations about it, and this, this the Superdome. I was not really involved in editorial policy when all this was going on, so I can't claim any credit or accept any blame.

Jack Davis 39:20

Now you're talking
about the period in the period in the late 60s.

Charles Ferguson 39:24
Well, the Superdome actually began earlier than that. I think the constitutional amendment may have been in 1965 you'd have to check me on these facts. But we, I mean, we were, ultimately, my recollection is that we were for the constitutional amendment, and we were certainly John Schwegmann was adamantly opposed to it, and we didn't agree with the position he was taking. But as matters went along, I think we had specific questions about how it was being done, because, you know, the cost zoomed. I think the original estimate was 65 million, and it ended up costing 125 million, which, in retrospect, even when it was completed, looked like a bargain. But I would say that we were mildly supportive of I think that's one thing, that Moon felt that we were not supportive enough. But I think it had mainly to do with the details. I think that we thought it was a good urban renewal project. We thought it was important to, you know, keeping the Saints and all of that, and on balance, was a good thing.

Jack Davis 40:50
And on the details, does that include? I remember, after I got to The States-Item in 1973 or so, there were the stories about Superdome Services Incorporated, which was the sort of

Charles Ferguson 41:05
Sherman Copelin janitorial and

Jack Davis 41:09
security company that was run by Sherman Copelin and Don Hubbard, right? Was that something that you deviated from Landrieu on?

Charles Ferguson 41:19

[7] James D. Fore (1938-2011) Had experience as manager of Chicago's McCormick Place and the Houston Astrodome before coming to New Orleans to take over the Greater New Orleans Tourist and Convention Commission in New Orleans in 1971 (today the New Orleans Metropolitan Convention and Visitors Bureau.)

yeah, we did. We had questions about it, and I tell you, because we did have questions about it, but based on performance, and Moon's response was that when you're starting off, you don't have you're doing affirmative action, you're not going to have somebody like Rudolph Ramelli who's been in the business for 50 years. You're going to have somebody who's making a lot of mistakes and essentially doesn't know what he's doing, and that, you know that had some currency. You know, if you're going to do this, you're not people who have no experience whatsoever, nothing in their background to prepare them for this. Nevertheless, you're dealing with a major public thing, and it has to be done properly, and if it's not, you're going to suffer the consequences politically. So we consistently raised questions about not just Superdome Services Inc, but about some other deals as well. And I think Moon's by and large, I just remember that having this discussion with him, and he said that, you know, yeah, but and

Jack Davis 42:34
so he had to weather these accusations of patronage and right political payback, giving a contract to black supporters with no experience, right?

Charles Ferguson 42:45
He did, and he, you know, he weathered it, he's but he knew what he was, he knew what he was getting into. And it wasn't a pleasant situation for him, because this was an instance in which we weren't standing on the sidelines cheering. We had been raising some questions ourselves about the performance, even though we were, you know, realized that he had said he was going to do this and not this specific thing, but he was going to give meaningful jobs to blacks

Jack Davis 43:22
while we're on some subject of race, and in the State's Item, you added a pair of freelance columnists, Henry “Hank” Braden IV and Paul Beaulieu to write a was and I think that was the first time there'd ever been a black columnist in New Orleans,

Charles Ferguson 43:43
Braden, Beaulieu,

Jack Davis 43:46
how did that come about? And did it? Did it help?

Charles Ferguson 43:53
It came about because I thought that there was a need. And I knew Hank Braden through the Institute of Politics, because I was on the board of the Institute of the Institute of Politics at Loyola, and I think the germ was a combination of, I'm trying to harken back. I don't know whether I brought up the subject with Hank or he brought it up. But anyway, I said, Okay, right, you know, give me some samples. And he is the one who brought Paul Beaulieu, who later, I think, was hired as a reporter on the Picayune.

Jack Davis 44:34

That was his [brother]. That was Lovell [Beaulieu].

Charles Ferguson 44:36
Lovell, okay. I mean, okay, Paul, okay. But anyway, so it looked good. And I said that, you know what we want. We don't want this to be a political vehicle, but you will have the freedom, but you edited like anybody else. So and I think that it was good not only. The not not so much because it had an impact in the community at large, but because it was the first time that in the white establishment media, there was a fairly significant black voice, at least on a weekly basis.

Jack Davis 45:19
Did that help The States-Item too?

Charles Ferguson 45:21
I don't, not in any tangible way. I mean, I've kind of felt good about it, as small as it was, but it was a small step in a positive direction, but terms of tangible results. I mean, even as of the time I've retired from the merged paper in 1990 there's no significant black readership participation. But this was the right thing to do, and we we did it, and then, you know, we started to hire reporters, etc,

Jack Davis 45:57
As maybe a reflection on that time I have let me make this observation. I happened to read those Braden Beaulieu columns, and it was interesting that they were so cautious. They were in the beginning, they were as if they were they were treading on eggshells and didn't want to ruffle too many feathers in the beginning,

Charles Ferguson 46:22
that's right.

Jack Davis 46:23
And then they got a little more relaxed, right? And found a voice, right?

Charles Ferguson 46:26
That's exactly how it evolved. And

Jack Davis 46:28
And, they, I think it lasted perhaps a year, year and a half, before Hank Braden found other Yeah, the government,

Charles Ferguson 46:38
yeah. I told him that he could, you know, if he got directly involved, that would be it? No, that's exactly how it evolved. It was never an issue, never a problem.

Jack Davis 46:48

And then you mentioned finding black reporters and other staffers at the newspaper. That was not easy.

Charles Ferguson 46:57
It was not easy at all. Of course, the most spectacular example is Dean Baquet, whom we both know well, who is the editor in waiting of The New York Times, but the first people, naturally, I went to Xavier, and I was teaching course at Dillard where I was a board member in sort of journalism, 101, reporting and writing. And I think that the first hire was a very I think we hired him as a summer intern. His name was Ricky Johnson, and he was a very intelligent he was good. I don't know whether became of him. He didn't evolve into anything significant when he was on, was hired full time, but he was one of the very first people we hired. Philip Brooks, I think was who was a top student at Xavier. That's not his name. Phillip Stelly was his name, and he was okay. And I think he's still around town in some capacity.

Jack Davis 48:17
He's the spokesman for the sheriff.

Charles Ferguson 48:22
Okay, so Phil Stelly. Then there was this bright guy, but somewhat erratic guy, James Borders, and he was hired, and that didn't work out very well. His brother Van Borders was hired as a copy editor on the copy desk. And then, I mean, we hired a lot of Rhonda McKendall, we hired Gwen Tompkins, who's NPR. You know hired more and some I would regard as very significant hires.

Jack Davis 48:59
And it was, why was it difficult to bring black reporters into a mainstream newspaper? I mean, this was, this was something that editors all over the country at that time were struggling with. Was it? Was it because they were better opportunities in law and business, medicine, or

Charles Ferguson 49:23
I don't think so. It was hard. It was not a question of hiring blacks. It was a question of finding people to hire, and it required a fair amount of time. It's because there was no background. It sort of harkens back to the Superdome and janitorial services. You don't have any background, you don't have any interest. I mean, it never occurs to you that maybe you could be a reporter or an editor or a TV broadcaster. So there's no preparation. So you're really starting from square one, which is, and I think we and I'm now. Speaking about the newspaper industry, recognized that the burden was on us to find people who didn't have the kind of background that we expected in a normal hire, and that the burden was on us to provide whatever training was necessary to bring them up to speed.

Jack Davis 50:16
Was there any pressure from local Black groups? Did you ever get any credit for the efforts?

Charles Ferguson 50:26

Not, not locally, no, no criticism, no credit. Actually, our figures, when I used to go to ASNE [the American Society of Newspaper Editors], our figures, you know, I'd have to send in these things. And we did better than the newspaper norm for major metro dailies, like maybe 10 or 12% of our news staff was in. The national average was six. So that was taken note of it sort of professional meetings. No, the only time What, no, we didn't get credit or criticism.

Jack Davis 51:13
Let me shift a little bit from from politics and and race, which are so important, into sort of the broader kind of cultural changes that you know looking back, we see the 1970s as a time when New Orleans developed its sense of its own art, architecture, its food, Its its neighborhoods, its music. Could you see that starting to take shape as the, you know, a newly appointed editor at a newspaper that had a chance to cover all these things,

Charles Ferguson 51:52
actually, I did, and we participated in that. And you we, you know, when you started off, you were writing about architecture, and that was something that had not been hitherto done. And you had, you know, good sources, Monroe Labouisse[8] and things like that. And you were writing about things that were important. In the in the food area, I would say that Dick Collin, Dick and Rima Collin, and began what has turned out to be a total transformation in eating out in his community. When he did “The Underground Gourmet” [1970], and Jane, my wife, who is a real foodie, said, You need to hire this guy. So we did.

Jack Davis 52:39
This was circa 1971?

Charles Ferguson 52:41
Yeah, that's exactly when it was, and it was the first time that criticism had ever been brought to the scene. And moreover, from a sort of cultural development point of view, he would, you know, eating out in New Orleans was considered synonymous with eating at Antoine's or Galatoire's or Commander's. And what he did was say no, eating out New Orleans may be that, but it's also eating paella at whatever Espana, which was under the Broad Street overpass, which he thought was the prototypical underground restaurant. And I think that that was, I really do believe that he was very important in the development of the food culture that that we witness today. And I think you in the architectural realm, I think that were the first to do it, and I think that that brought a consciousness to that area.

Jack Davis 53:45
And let me ask you a little bit more about Richard Collin and the *Underground Gourmet*. He was a professor at the University of New Orleans, but wrote a weekly column for The States-Item’s Lagniappe section, and he was the first food critic in New Orleans,

Charles Ferguson 54:05

[8] F. Monroe Labouisse (1939 - 1986), noted preservation architect responsible for restoration of Madame John’s Legacy.

yeah,

Jack Davis 54:06
and then food consciousness took off after that. What kind of reaction did you, did the editor hear about Richard Collin?

Charles Ferguson 54:17
Well, he was controversial in some respects, and I've told these stories before. I don't know what you want to tell. My agreement with Dick Collin was that he'd write a weekly column, and this was before, since he was a professor of history at UNO, he wasn't on the payroll. And so my recollection is that we said we'd pay him $250 a week and for his product, and that he would be confined to bonafide restaurants in our circulation area. So a couple of things happened. One was that he went to a. . . I don't know whether these things are relevant to this story or not, but any the bottom line is that one thing is relevant. He reviewed a restaurant that was outside of our circulation area, meaning The States-Item, Mashburns in Hammond, and he described describes some dish as like green slime. So I blame that on the editor who, you know, it just was excessive. So we got a lawsuit out of that which went all the way to the Louisiana Supreme Court and made some good law, but it cost the paper about $200,000 to fight this thing all the way to the Supreme Court. But anyway,

Jack Davis 55:50
people were reading him.

Charles Ferguson 55:51
He was what well

Jack Davis 55:53
did that his impact on the food the upsurge in food consciousness.

Charles Ferguson 55:59
It had an impact, and the best evidence of that was that he was and Lagniappe was then on Saturday. It's long since become on Friday. Saturday circulation didn't count in audit figures, but our Saturday circulation, contra the industry experience, was going up, and when, before we merged the papers, Dick Collin came to me and said, Charlie, I'm a year and a half behind a book on Teddy Roosevelt. Edmund Morris had already written the first volume of his biography of Roosevelt, and I've got to I've got to finish this, or I'm going to have to return the advance. And he said, you know, the second thing is, you had told me that for a good review he would only have to eat there twice. For a bad review, he'd have to eat three times. He said, those bad restaurants are killing me and Rima. But anyway, so six weeks before the papers were merged and his column disappeared, six weeks before the termination of Lagniappe on Saturday, the circulation of the Saturday paper dropped about 10,000 that was real power. And he had the power to, you know, he criticized Antoine's. You know, he had the power to, he had the power to make or break. He couldn't break an Antoine's, but he, I think he put some smaller places out of business. He was read avidly by people who were interested in eating out. And I think the book

that he and Rima did on New Orleans food and recipes, the New Orleans Cookbook, published by Knopf, is still considered the best, I think, you know, although they're both dead, it's probably hopelessly outdated.

Jack Davis 58:06
And we've had restaurant critics ever since New Orleans newspapers

Charles Ferguson 58:10
and Tom Fitzmorris, and. So yeah. Then it became a full time position, and I think the next batter up was Gene Bourg, I could be, yeah, and he was a member of the staff, and he did it and staff of The States-Item, and at times speaking, yeah. So yeah, it's always, since then, been a full time position.

Jack Davis 58:35
Another thing that happened in the year that Mayor Landrieu was inaugurated. Was this first Jazz Fest took place, and there was a consciousness, emerging consciousness, that the music was important to people outside New Orleans.

Charles Ferguson 58:53
Absolutely.

Jack Davis 58:54
Was that something the state's item consciously covered? Could you see that starting up as a phenomenon.

Charles Ferguson 59:02
I can't say that we could foresee that it would become such a huge, all encompassing thing. I think that we saw it as an outgrowth of our music culture. It was fun, it was sort of like the World's Fair. Would you know whose failure was blamed on it? We covered the World's Fair with the, you know, the fun part of it, with great enthusiasm. We questioned some of the under financial girding. And I think this from the inception. The same was true about the Jazz Fest. And but I don't know that we consciously were thinking about, you know, reaching out to the rest of the world. And this is a worldwide event, but it's certainly single most important musical cultural event that's occurred in my lifetime.

Charles Ferguson 1:00:03
And aside from the institution of the Jazz Fest, I have this recollection that The States-Item was constantly trying to reach out to new audiences that were interested in food and music and architecture,

Charles Ferguson 1:00:19
well, in the music realm. And this was when Jeanette Hardy was editor of Lagniappe. She found this guy, Coril Joseph, who opened up a whole new avenue, as far as I was concerned about music in New Orleans.

Jack Davis 1:00:35
And he was a black jazz musician to boot.

Charles Ferguson 1:00:38
He was a black jazz musician and very knowledgeable. He was not the greatest writer in the world, but he was just starting off. But the main thing was he was very knowledgeable, and he opened up a whole new musical vista for the readers of The States-Item and later, the Times Picayune

Jack Davis 1:00:59
you mentioned me writing about urban planning and architecture, I have this recollection of the editors on the city desk of The States-Item actually being somewhat outraged that people were tearing down buildings and that they encouraged, or they allowed me, to cover the demolition of historic buildings in the Central Business District as if these were street crimes. And I think we sometimes put those on the front page of The States-Item
as a consciousness raising effort. Do you recall that?

Charles Ferguson 1:01:47
Well, you know, I That's nice. I, you know, I don't, I give you full credit for elevating the consciousness about the importance of many of the buildings that were being demolished. I can't say that that was something that I was, you know, I thought it was important, and it went along with it, but I didn't. I was not probably the biggest advocate of it, but I know that you were the first person to make this a high priority.

Jack Davis 1:02:20
And The States-Item was helping shape consciousness about the overall urban landscape that was under such dramatic change in New Orleans. I mean, the the Poydras Street, embodiment of new investment, driven largely by oil companies
and Poydras Street as the new Houston version of New Orleans. That's simultaneous with the historic districts being created within the Landrieu administration.

Charles Ferguson 1:02:57
that's right. I'd forgotten about historic districts and Jane was on the first historic districts commission. You know that the very important point in this regard was the creation of this, our historic district commission,

Jack Davis 1:03:10
and that in The States-Item, had a supportive role in that, yeah,

Charles Ferguson 1:03:14
absolutely supported that.

Jack Davis 1:03:18

New Orleans. All this kind of added up as I recall – and correct me on this, because you remember better than I do – to a reflection of a lot of optimism as we entered the got into further into the 1970s that New Orleans was actually a place with an economic future that could support all of these other developments we're talking about. Do you recall it that way?

Charles Ferguson 1:03:44
You know, I think that's absolutely true. I don't think that. I think that there was a sense of optimism. I mean, I don't think we were walking around wearing it on our sleeves, but, yeah, I think that it was the 70s, we still had all of our illusions pretty much intact. Nothing really bad had happened during that time. And you know, all systems pretty much were going all the fronts that we've been discussing, maybe some of the underlying things had not been fully addressed. But no, I think that '70s were a time of optimism. You know, when you go into the '80s, '85 the collapse of the oil, you know, the sort of the underlying pillars of our economy began to fail. But we didn't know that, or I didn't know that, in the '70s, and I felt good about the' 70s, you know, just based on the experience that we were having,

Jack Davis 1:04:56
should we have known – you raised that question – should we have seen things happening with the oil industry or the Port of New Orleans?

Charles Ferguson 1:05:06
Well, we should have and the when I was a reporter covering politics in Baton Rouge, I did a series of articles based on the fact that Louisiana was the second largest, largest natural gas producing state, I think, but the second largest oil producing state, but that we couldn't continue to live off of this severance tax forever. And of course, this has proved to be the situation here. That was not so much. It was important to New Orleans in terms of pretending that we could have all of the office complexes that Houston has, but so the oil industry, one of the things that we did do was to warn that the we couldn't be as reliant – now, speaking about Louisiana, but also about the city – on the oil industry as we had become, the Port of New Orleans, we always thought was too reliant on bulk, but that was partly a factor of geography. And this thing that goes by our apartment here

Jack Davis 1:06:19
bulk being bulk grain and oil

Charles Ferguson 1:06:23
grain go export to, you know, Japan and so on through the Panama Canal out, but, and we were always sort of late to the party in terms of technological innovation and this, this came later, but not in the '70s, but we finally got around to doing the definitive series on the Port of New Orleans. Chris Drew,

Jack Davis 1:06:47

Chris Drew, who was a Wall Street Journal reporter who was attracted to The States-Item because he thought there was a lot going on at the paper and in the city. And then went on to the New York Times, right?

Charles Ferguson 1:06:59
And he did the it took about a year or a year and a half to do it, but he did sort of the definitive takeout on on the port this, this, unfortunately, was not done in the 70s, but in the 80s. But I think that there

Jack Davis 1:07:09
was a sort of after the fact.

Charles Ferguson 1:07:13
It was after the fact

Jack Davis 1:07:15
why the port fell on hard times.

Charles Ferguson 1:07:17
But it was, I think, the fact that the facts were known. The Port had been run by a series of guys, including Jim Amoss's[9] grandfather, and then a guy named Ned Reed[10], and it was sort of an extension of the, you know, the New Orleans civic and social structure at the time. In short, it was not aggressively run, and we sort of took what came down the river to us and whether we ever had the potential. I mean, it's still an important thing, but, and I guess it was destined, given the fact that we no longer load and unload manually. At one time, I think we had 10,000 longshoremen here. That number may be off, give or take; it's all the cranes and the containers. Maybe this is the way it was inevitably going to be, I don't know, but yeah, it was always thought that the port was underperforming. One and two, we were too reliant on the oil industry in Louisiana.

Jack Davis 1:08:31
And when, then in the early ‘80s, those things became painfully evident, and the economy suffered, and the World's Fair, which was based on the optimism, is this correct way to say it the optimism of the 1970s ended up reflecting the problems of the 1980s

Charles Ferguson 1:08:52
Well, the World's Fair, was not sort of a spontaneous happening. The World's Fair occurred because it was conceived of as a means of getting a convention center for the city of New Orleans. and Kabby, (Lester Kabacoff) who I think is one of the most underrated people in the city's history, especially given the fact that it's about the only thing we have going for is now and is the convention business, saw the World's Fair as a means of getting a convention center for the city, and in fact, we got the first phase. Dave Treen [the Republican governor] committed to

[9] Amoss was at the time of this interview the editor of the Times-Picayune.
[10] Edward Santry “Ned” Reed (1926-2010)

Kabby that the state would contribute the first phase of this, which is, you know, probably the most important structure in the city now and has been expanded many times. But it was not as if a bunch of people got together and said, let's have a World's Fair. It was an incredibly complex device conceived of by Kabby as a means of getting this Convention Center, which he thought and Barron Hilton thought, was very important to the development of the business that they're in. So that's what happened. And, you know, there's so many reasons why it, you know, was a financial disaster. I think it's, it's accurate to say, for people who had invested in it, but I do think it, it did accelerate the development of the warehouse district, which had been dormant during all the time I grew up. That whole zone, from Camp street to the river, was deadwood. I mean, it was, it was dead. And I think that this, you know this, if you're looking for a byproduct, it was positive. I would say the accelerated development of this area, and that has occurred, was, was an important byproduct, but it was, it was a black eye for the city. But anyway, the biggest byproduct was the beginning the first phase of the convention center, and that's that's about all we have going for us right now. As far as I can tell,

Jack Davis 1:11:34
the tourism and convention is,

Charles Ferguson 1:11:35
Well, tourism is a small thing. When, when I was on the tourist... I learned that tourism is what you have at Orlando or Disneyland and essentially family entertainment. That was never really going to be in the cards because the French Quarter, which is the largest single draw, is not a family oriented vacation attraction. And the whole notion here building these big hotels of Hilton, of course, Sheraton, etc. That's convention business. That's the business that was envisaged, and that's the business that we're in. Now the downside is that it's mainly minimum... downside, but it's also right. These are mainly minimum wage jobs. You got a few big executives and managers and so on and making nice salaries, but it's basically maids, etc, and even they had to be trained because they were not qualified to make up a bed. But it sort of fits in with a large part of our population at this point is only qualified to do those kinds of jobs. But I remember Joe Frederick, who was the first manager of the Hilton, and later went on to manage the flagship Hilton in Chicago, said that, I've forgotten what the figure it was, but they had to hire, I think this is right, hire eight people. Hired eight people to get one person who could be trained to do the job and to do the job reliably.

Jack Davis 1:13:15
So you think our economic optimism of the 70s was sort of on a shaky foundation.

Charles Ferguson

Yes, it was

Jack Davis
This was the case, wasn't it, with the Michoud Assembly Plant for the space program, they, they, they came here with jobs, but couldn't find employees

Charles Ferguson 1:13:32
that's exactly what happened, because most of the you know, the janitorial again, we could take care of that. My recollection is, and again, I could be wrong on this. It peak was like 22,000 and a lot of those were high paying jobs. When I say high paying, I'm saying $75,000 a year. Going back to when this was those were big jobs. However, they were for engineers and technically competent people and and the reason that area, sort of in the east, developed, and why Slidell developed is because so many of these people came all the way from Seattle and, you know, the West Coast and other venues. But I know a lot of them came from the, basically the Boeing establishment in and around Seattle, and because we didn't have these, you know, adequately trained engineers and technical people, you know, it was good, I mean, it was overall good for the economy, but it didn't because it was nice to have all these people now, all these people weren't living in New Orleans, but because of the New Orleans school situation, most of them lived in St Tammany,

Jack Davis 1:14:51
so, but they took control of the school systems there.

Charles Ferguson 1:14:56
Yeah, it was in that sense. It tied in. To the race equation.

Jack Davis 1:15:04
In at the end of the 1970s at the newspaper, The States-Item, was merged with the Times Picayune in 1980. I remember it well. I was there and you were you were leading this strategic move that involved the editors of the little paper, The States-Item, taking over the entire enterprise. And it felt very exhilarating at the time, not just because I got a better job, but because it gave New Orleans a much more muscular newspaper to deal with its own situation. Is that, what were you trying to do with that?

Charles Ferguson 1:15:49
Well, what I was trying to do in this course, we thought we had solved the problem until Al Gore invented the internet, but the solution to declining circulation was seen in following the readers to the suburban areas where the demographics were good. And I had tried to do that on the The States-Item, because our circulation was going down about 1% a year. This is, you know, I was the editor of a paper that was losing about 1% a year. National norm for afternoon metros was about 2% but I come up with a fairly modest plan for zoningThe States-Item, which was not approved by the ownership so

Jack Davis 1:16:39
zoning and being publishing,

Charles Ferguson 1:16:40
publishing specific editions for specific area – sort of like what the Advocate's trying to do in New Orleans now – for Slidell, giving them a paper that seemed like their local paper. So in any

event, the person who this was the person, Ashton Phelps Jr, who became publisher of the paper. I think he was a publisher then said, Well, could you do this If we merge the papers, would you have enough staff to do this? And without thinking about it, this was while we were at a meeting out in Scottsdale, Arizona. I quickly did a calculation, and I think the combined staff was then, like 325, people. I said, Yes, I I think I could do it. So that's what we did. And we had to be quick, within a month's time, and Jack (Davis) was an important part of this. We had to figure out exactly how we were going to configure these zones, staff them with existing staff, and so on and so forth, and harking back to the sort of the minnow swallowing the whale analogy, when I said I was going to do this, I said I told the publisher and his father that I had to have my people doing this because I couldn't do it with the people who were then running the Times Picayune and they, you know, I had to start off, I said that, you know, Jack Davis has to be in charge of news gathering, and we're going to figure that out. And there was a guy by the name of Tom Gregory, and he's going to be in charge of producing this incredibly complex paper on on deadline. And then I had this confrontation with the guy who was sort of the managing editor at The Picayune, Fritz Harsdoff, the lovely guy was going to be in charge of syndicates or something. And the only place where I really had a battle that I lost initially was Vince Randazzo was city editor, and I could never figure out why that was the Times-Picayune city editor, and I couldn't figure out why this. So anyway, I lived with that until I made him travel editor, which it was too good [for him] to turn down. So he took that and we worked that out. But this, I this was probably the greatest moment in the history of the paper. I would say the paper was better than either one, the merged paper was better than either one had ever been then. We had a lot of talent on on the paper. And I would say that the heyday of the Times-Picayune was not in the 70s, but in the 80s.

Jack Davis 1:17:10
Well, would you mind characterizing the Times-Picayune in the 1970s before the merger?

Charles Ferguson 1:18:39
Well before the merger, I was part of the group that thought it was pretty mediocre. It was generally thought of as one of the 10 worst papers in the country. The Picayune, not The States-Item, but we sort of existed in its shadow. But I, you know, I think it grew to be, if not, one of the top 10 papers.

Jack Davis 1:20:09
this is after the merger,

Charles Ferguson 1:20:10
After the merger, and not one that maybe not one of the top 10, but certainly top 15 or 20 it, and it was because, frankly, of the talent that we had put together onThe States-Item, which was a very, for somebody who was interested in journalism, was a very attractive place for a person who was serious about the business to operate. And you know, go back to you, Jim Amoss, who's now the editor, now the editor, Walter Isaacson, who became editor of now Walter – was Walter there after the merger?I can't remember, but he was hired. He was on The States-Item.

Jack Davis 1:21:04
and he was, he was, ended up being editor of time Time and head of CNN,

Charles Ferguson 1:21:09
and now as head of the Aspen Institute, Dean Baquet, who became editor of the Los Angeles Times and is now the number two editor at the New York Times. Presumably the next editor, Chris Drew, we mentioned earlier a really fine reporter, but was not involved in management. All the people who am I overlooking, but just tremendous talent by any standard.

Jack Davis 1:21:36
Well there was Laurie Hays, who is now one of the top editors, Bloomberg.

Charles Ferguson
Bloomberg, Laurie Hays and started off on the Bureaus. Her husband, Fen Montaigne was a terrific writer.

Jack Davis 1:21:47
The thing that summarizing this, in my mind, is just the idea that the owners of the Times-Picayune took a moribund big paper, put it under the control of the of the people who showed how they could run the small papers well, and ended up with a Times-Picayune, starting in 1980 that was on a track to becoming one of the best papers in the country. And I think it was, I think it was a morale boost for New Orleans at the time. And you know, people were celebrating the architecture and the Poydras Street and the food and the music and the apparently good economy. We also had a paper that was recognized as good and able to attract people that you're describing.

Justin Nystrom 1:22:39
If I could interrupt that, yeah. Clar ..., clarify what made the Picayune a bottom 10 paper in the 1970s sort of clarify what that

Charles Ferguson 1:22:50
Well, it, first of all, it was did not cover the news aggressively. It did cover the news from an institutional point of view. They go to the city council meeting and sit there and take almost like a transcript, a court stenographer. That was one thing. Two. The lines between the advertising and the news departments were blurred, and this is one the first things I ever did was to eliminate what was called ‘business office must,’ and we eliminated all that kind of stuff, and established a church/state relationship so that there was total integrity of the news product, totally separated from the advertising aspect. So there were, moreover, as sort of an extension of this. There were full page ads on section fronts in the Times Picayune, the only newspaper in the country that had ads on the section fronts from the biggest advertisers (D.H) Holmes and Maison Blanche, and when I brought the subject up with the publisher, He was understandably very nervous, and so I said that let's go talk to at that time, the Maison Blanche was owned by a

Baton Rouge family, the Sternbergs, and Holmes was run by a guy whose name I can't think of right away. But anyway, we went to them with some proposals, and basically they didn't care, you know, as long as they got a good position for their ads, they didn't have to be on the section front. That was one of the major breakthroughs in terms of establishing editorial integrity in this newspaper. Another thing was, this is almost laughable, but the Mystic Club[11], you know, a prominent carnival organization's queen always ran on page one of the paper on the Sunday preceding Mardi Gras, and that, you know, didn't seem like a good thing.

Jack Davis 1:25:29
What was the basis for, for that tradition?

Charles Ferguson 1:25:32
You know, I never knew, but I went to Ashton Jr, and so we had to go have a conference with Ashton senior, who was then the chairman, his son, Ashton Jr, was a publisher, to say, Oh, I don't know, Charlie, if you want to do this, I think it's a mistake. I think you need to go talk to the captain. And the captain at that time was Dennis McDonald.

Jack Davis 1:26:05
This is the captain of Mystic,

Charles Ferguson 1:26:07
Mystic. And so I called Dennis, and he said, Oh, no, you got to talk to Louis Freeman, who was the Freemans are huge in the Carnival picture. But so I talked to Louis, and he said, listen, Charlie, this is your paper. You can do whatever the hell you want to do with this thing, and we don't care. So we moved it inside, into the social section and end of story. But that was sort of in a less important way, part of why the Times-Picayune was regarded as not exactly a great newspaper.

Jack Davis 1:26:48
In terms of the trends that characterized the 1970s The States-Item seemed much more in tune to music and the culture and the food and . .

Charles Ferguson 1:26:59
Without a question,

Jack Davis 1:27:00
. . . The Times Picayune seemed to be in another city or another time.

Charles Ferguson 1:27:05
Well, they were, and, I mean, they covered the symphony. They had a music, you know, they already had a full time music. Symphony critic, Frank Gagnard, was the last one. But yeah, as you say it was out of touch, it was institutional, if it was there, and we could sit there and look at

[11] Not to be confused with the Mystick Krewe of Comus, The Mystic Club was founded in 1922. Its primary events are a bal masque and the seating of an annual court. It is not associated with a parade.

it, and it was Jim Gillis. I covered the legislature for a couple of years, and always envied my counterpart on the Picayune, because he just sat there all day and saw this stenographically, took things down and then topped off a couple of stories at night, and went home, went out to have dinner at the Capitol House at about seven or eight. And I had to do all my overnighters, and I'm struggling, and I didn't even have a teletype machine, so I had to go make sure I got to Western Union in downtown Baton Rouge before one o'clock. It was, it was, but I was covering the important stories, and not just sitting there and saying Senator Lauricella got up and said, this is a good bill. So that that's what you got from the Picayune across the board.

Jack Davis 1:28:13
So after the merger in the 1980s when you became the editor of the Picayune, you continued to improve the paper steadily every year. What did what did that? What was different about New Orleans in the 1980s than in the 1970s from the vantage point of the editor.

Charles Ferguson 1:28:39
Well, I think from a business that's a funny thing for an editor to say, but from a business point of view, things were going very well. This thing we had done was working like a machine from a business point of view, however, and beginning in about 1985 there were pretty clear indications that there were underlying economic problems in the city, and that's when we had begun the decline in the oil industry. And the convention business continued to grow, but it did not offset what we had lost and in the oil industry. So I think there were while I think those of us at the paper were felt that things were fine for us, I think that there was some ominous signs, maybe on the horizon, that there was some problems down the road.

Jack Davis 1:29:37
Let me ask Justin, sorry, let me ask Justin if he has any – I'm sure he does – any questions.

Justin Nystrom 1:29:45
that I want to sit over there though.

Jack Davis 1:29:47
Do you want to take a quick Yeah,

Charles Ferguson 1:29:49
yeah. Do you want to break? Would you like being entered? Are we I just hit record it. I

Justin Nystrom 1:29:54
didn't know if we were starting or not. I thought I'd hit record or interview with Pascal Calogero, where I shut off the camera, and he told us all this great stuff about working as a longshoreman.

Charles Ferguson 1:30:05
What kind of shape is Pas in?

Jack Davis 1:30:07

Well, we talked to him probably eight months ago. He was very sharp and droll. I don't think he was as mobile as he wanted to be.

Charles Ferguson 1:30:22
Well, he's definitely not mobile. Yeah,

Jack Davis 1:30:28
[pause in taping.] We're back. The trains have passed and the construction noises have died down. One, we don't want to get out of the 1970s without talking about the other mayor in New Orleans, Dutch Morial, who was the first black mayor of New Orleans, elected in 1978.
What was the newspaper, The States-Item's, and later The Times-Picayune's [attitude] in its relation with him.

Charles Ferguson 1:31:00
Well, I'll go back and start with my personal relationship. When Dutch decided to run for the House he didn't live in the district, he was running against an RDO long-time by the name of Danny Daly, who represented the Irish Channel. I knew Dutch, although not well through my involvement and things I forgot, maybe the Urban League or something. In any event, he came to see me at that time. I was the, I'm trying to think of what my title was, but I was essentially an editorial writer. We were in the old building on Lafayette Square. He came to see me, and he said, you know, Charlie, I know this isn't going to do any good, but I'm running for the House, and I'd like to have your support, meaning the support of The States-Item. I said, Well, you know, I don't know. Sounds like a good idea to me. I knew Danny Daly from my days of covering the legislature, and I knew that he wasn't very good, so we ended up supporting Dutch. And I think the Times-Picayune did as well, both papers supported Dutch when he ran for the House, and then from there, when John McKeithen was passing his tax increase, he got Dutch's vote by making him a juvenile court judge. That was the price of his vote, because it was pretty controversial tax increase, and Dutch got a juvenile judgeship out of it, and from there, he was elected to the Court of Appeal. And that's when Moon appointed us co chair of Armstrong Park,

Jack Davis 1:32:52
you and Dutch Morial

Charles Ferguson 1:32:54
Dutch Morial and I were named head of the Armstrong Park Commission. So I and I supported Dutch when he ran for mayor, and there's never an occasion on which he ran and we didn't support Dutch. And I think the same was also true of the Times-Picayune, and I'm not absolutely certain about that, but I think that he always enjoyed the support of both papers. And incidentally, the sort of a footnote to that is, if I had decided to run in 19– when I was making this decision, was actually in 1977

Jack Davis 1:33:40
You were, you were contemplating running for mayor yourself, in, 1977 at the end of the Moon second term

Charles Ferguson 1:33:47
and but I was really more interested in being editor of the States Item. I probably shouldn't be saying these things in title as well as in in fact. But anyway, the polling had showed that if I got into the runoff, and there was some question about this, because Nat Kiefer, Tony Morrison and Joe DiRosa were the other candidates the field for the night. It was the field for 78 Dutch. It was a given that Dutch would be in the runoff, and there was only one person who could not beat him in a runoff, and that was Joe DiRosa. And that, in fact, turned out to be the case, which is why Dutch was elected mayor. But if I had gotten in the runoff, I would have beat beaten Dutch. I'm glad that scenario did not turn out. I was happy with what I was doing. But in any event, Dutch was elected mayor, and he quickly, he and Moon for reasons that I've never fully understood, never got along, and I sort of became a victim of Dutch's animosity toward Moon, so much so that he thought that Moon and I were in a conspiracy to get him when he was mayor, and he compiled this elaborate, what he called dossier on Moon and me and what we were doing to get him. And when he finally brought it over, it was laughable. But anyway, that's sort of what I know. One other thing, when we were co chairs of Armstrong Park, Dutch dropped out at some point

Jack Davis 1:35:39
on Armstrong Park? This was when Moon, if I recall correctly, Moon Landrieu, asked you and Dutch to find a suitable memorial for Louis Armstrong.

Charles Ferguson 1:35:52
I'm sorry. I should have and

Jack Davis 1:35:54
the park had this space at the park [that] had already been cleared by prior administrations' urban renewal plans.

Charles Ferguson 1:36:05
Yeah, all the way back, actually, to Chep Morrison, but actually implemented under Vic Schiro. And the idea was to, under this urban renewal plan, to raze that neighborhood that had a lot, you pointed out, significant architectural houses there and make a cultural center along the lines of Lincoln Center in New York. Well, by the time the Landrieu administration came in, in the last house, while Moon has been blamed for doing this, it's only because the last house fell after he took office, but so he inherited a situation in which elite Cultural Center no longer had any currency – one, and two, there was no money to do it. Meanwhile, Louis Armstrong, our city's most famous citizen, who was never honored during his lifetime by his native city, has died. So Moon, the mandate was to find us a suitable memorial for Louis Armstrong in his hometown. And so that was our mandate. Actually, the idea for taking the 32 acres around the auditorium and Congo Square and so on, and turning it into memorial was, I think, a brilliant idea. And it was not mine. It was actually Winston Lill's idea, but the entire jazz community supported it, because this was sort of the birthplace of jazz, not just Louis Armstrong, but a lot of other people, Storyville there. So anyway, we came up with this idea of and Dutch supported it.

Jack Davis 1:38:02
And Winston Lill was?

Charles Ferguson 1:38:05
Head of Public Relations for the city. And so anyway, this side note was, we, they decided that I was going to go down on a Saturday morning. Moon always and all of his close associates on Saturday morning sat around his office talking things over shooting the bull and maybe having a drink. So they said, Charlie, this may be a little controversial with Moon. So you go down there and tell him what our recommendation is going to be. So I go down there and I [found] Richie Kernion [chief administrative officer] and Blake Arata [city attorney] a bunch of guys sitting around. Moon, you know, you appointed Dutch and me as co-chairs, yeah. So what did you all come up with? I said, Well, Moon, you know, the 32 acres around the auditorium and the, you know, the, whatever they call the concert hall, yeah, we're going to make a park out of that. He said, What! He said, I thought you were going to recommend a statue or something like, I said, no Moon. This is what we want to do, and it's going to be sort of along the lines of Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen. So that's when Moon and Verna, Jane and I went to Copenhagen to see Tivoli Gardens. But Dutch was very good in the early going on this,

Jack Davis 1:39:29
And he was very supportive of that.

Charles Ferguson 1:39:30
He was very supportive of the idea. And Moon said, okay, but I want you to go down and you and Dutch to go down into Treme and the immediate surrounding neighborhood, and hold a series of town hall meetings to let people vent. And this we did, and we were catching a lot of flak from people like Jim Hayes and Ron Chisholm and so on. And I will say this to Dutch's credit, because he had a heck of a lot more credibility with these people than I did. He threw the flak right back at ‘em and said, Look, we're not going to talk about all the problems in the city and the Landrieu administration. We're here to talk about this park, and this is an opportunity for the city to make some kind of redemption to this neighborhood that was taken under the urban renewal plan started by Morrison and implemented, actually, by Vic Schiro. So I was impressed by that. But at some point when we actually, when it all got approved, when we had to go before the City Council, and I got raked over the coals, and everything by some of these councilmen, Dutch was nowhere to be seen, and so when the work actually began, he had absented himself for reasons that have never I don't know why, but anyway, So that was pretty much my involvement with personal involvement with Dutch. We were fairly often at loggerheads with him when he was mayor, the newspaper, the newspaper, over various things. I mean, overall, we were supportive. We supported him when he ran, when he ran for reelection, as a matter of fact, before he got so mad at Moon and then sort of took it out on me, he gave when the first volume of Kissinger's memoirs came out, he bought it for me and gave it to me with a very nice inscription, and I've got it around here someplace, but at some point, I mean, to sum it up, I would say, from a newspaper point of view, always supported him, maybe not on every issue or how he handled everything, but in terms of a personal relationship, he I've just always thought I was a victim of his animosity toward Moon. And I don't understand that I always had a most

cordial relationship with Sybil [Mrs. Morial]. But anyway, he, you know, I think that Dutch was also, I think Moon was a major transitional figure in our city's history. And I think he was a terrific mayor. I think I think Dutch Morial also was a transitional figure, sort of continuing on the same thing.

Jack Davis 1:42:37
And would, would it have been easier for Dutch Morial to continue doing this heavy lifting, on, on, especially on race, if he'd been, if he had embraced the Landrieu administration?

Charles Ferguson 1:42:55
Oh, without? Oh, I think definitely so. Instead of being at odds, I didn't understand Dutch until Fen Montaigne – We were talking earlier about Fen Montaigne – did that three-part cover story in Dixie Roto. This

Jack Davis 1:43:09
was when Fen was covering City Hall for The States-Item.

Charles Ferguson 1:43:13
Yeah, and he did, and it was really insightful.. . . He grew up with the fact that he was neither white nor black. I mean, as far as the law was concerned, like Ralph Dupas [??], “One drop,” Anatole Broyard, the whole thing, “one drop”. So he was black as far as the law was concerned, but he was really white. And I think that you know, when he ran for mayor, the first time that he didn't get all the black support because he was white.

Jack Davis 1:43:52
And which time was that

Charles Ferguson 1:43:54
the first time, which was 1978 When Dutch ran the first time, he got he didn't get all the black vote. He did the second time because he was opposed by Ron Fauchaux, and he was able to use that to his advantage to galvanize and unify the black vote. But he didn't get it all the first time. And the reason he didn't get it was because at that point he hadn't established his bonafides with black. I mean, I think Dutch's sort of wasn't innate, but his general bellicosity and hostility and all that, I think was owing to the fact that he was, you know, neither fish nor fowl. He was well . . .

Jack Davis 1:44:42
we at The States-Item. We did not give an easy ride all the time to Moon Landrieu. We didn't know again, there were, there were lots of critical stories and stories that miss.. saw things going wrong, that the. We wanted to point out, even if they weren't necessarily going wrong, the same kind of stories when we in the in the Morial administration prompted on a number of occasions, as I recall, Dutch to say, you're doing this right. You're doing this for the first time, and you're doing it to me because I'm black. Did you hear much of that?

Charles Ferguson 1:45:24
. . .. He was definitely, definitely taking that position, and it was a tool. Yeah, exactly. That's what I was about to say. I didn't know whether it was genuine or whether it was a useful tool to put the paper on the defensive and made it make us question our motives. Yeah, I agree with that analysis. Yeah,

Jack Davis 1:45:49
one thing that happened as a perhaps antecedent to your considering running for mayor was television show on WYES, public television, called “City Desk,” I think you did that for six

Charles Ferguson 1:46:09
or seven years, for seven years, every Friday, every Friday and, well, you were on it many times. Yeah, I did that for a long time until I actually became editor of The States-Item. But when I had the polling done, it showed that more people, even though this was the second most popular program on Channel 12, it was by far the most popular, well watched local program. It was the most popular overall program, with the exception of Masterpiece Theater, which was then doing ‘Upstairs Downstairs.’ But the polling that was done showed that more people, and incidentally, when the polling was done, it showed that the two best-known people in New Orleans were Jim Garrison and Frank Minyard, who had 95% name recognition. now, they had some negatives and so on. The candidates who were running for mayor or avowed candidates, Dutch, Ned, Keifer or Joe DiRosa and Tony Morrison all had about 75% name recognition among registered voters. I had 45% name recognition among registered voters. But of that number, more people knew me as editor of The States-Item, AS the person who ran The States-Item, than knew me as the anchor of “City Desk,” yeah, it was not, I mean, I'm sure had had, you know people. It was a popular show and so on. But actually, more people knew me from my association with The States-Item. Always thought that was very interesting.

Jack Davis 1:46:29
The show had four reporters or writers fromThe States-Item talking about the week's news developments. What impact did that have, do you think, over time, on the way New Orleans understood how things worked?

Charles Ferguson 1:48:19
You know, I probably not a great impact, you know? I think it had an elite audience. It had a high... people look forward to seeing it on Friday night. And in that sense, I think that it was useful among elites. But I don't think that it was, would, wouldn't claim that it was important. It would be difficult to measure how important it was, if at all. But I think that people in the sort of a league, the League of Women Voters and so on, people who followed politics probably could have been influenced by our slant on on the news. In that sense it might have been useful, just hard to quantify.

Jack Davis 1:49:12
I'm going to pause at this time and turn this over to [Justin]

Justin Nystrom 1:49:17
Great we're running. I read in the Mark Cave interview that you did with Historic New Orleans Collection 2009 and you mentioned that Ashton Phelps was very influential in splitting apart ideologically. I guess you could say or or editorializing. ideological would be not a good newspaper. Person, word to use,

Charles Ferguson 1:49:44
No, you split the papers. Ashton Sr. was in the . . and as I said, I thought that it was so that Walter Cowan and I could be happy. And. And not sort of under the yoke of the guy who was then [editor] over both papers, George Healy, but I think there may have been a practical consideration, and that was that The States-Item might prosper more as a clearly independent voice.

Justin Nystrom 1:50:16
So you would characterize that more as a business decision, because in sort of freeing you up, he empowered you to be a voice.

Charles Ferguson 1:50:27
Well, I would say, and I don't, this is my take, and I never discussed it with Ashton Sr. or Newhouses or anybody. I think basically they had a problem with the editor who was over both papers. I clearly represented the future and was destined, if I stayed on course, to play an important role. So I don't think they wanted me to leave the paper, and added to which was the consideration that there might be some practical benefit to having a clearly different voice from The Times-Picayune. I mean, a tangible benefit that might, you know, increase circulation. I don't know that that's my but I think the most important consideration, though, was to free us and to get us away from the yoke of George Healy, because we represented the future.

Justin Nystrom 1:51:34
Did you get a sense that Phelps appreciated your editorial stance?

Charles Ferguson 1:51:40
He did. I think he did. I had a very good relationship with Ashton Sr. He used to like to argue, you know, he's a lawyer. So sometimes in the afternoon, around 3: 30 or four, when I had a lot of stuff going on, he would say, you got a minute? And so I'd go into his office and we'd talk about Vietnam or something. I mean, he liked sort of intellectual stimulation, so we got along fine.

Justin Nystrom 1:52:12
I'm going to jump around, since these are follow ups. We visited in Columbus, Mississippi last fall with Ben C Toledano we haven't talked about him in this interview, but maybe some of your thoughts about his running against Landrieu.

Charles Ferguson 1:52:33

Well, he, he, you know, Ben C wanted to hold a major office, and he ran for the US Senate and and he ran against Moon. He had the two things that made it possible for Ben C to even think about running against Moon – were one the lingering bitterness in the Fitzmorris campaign about Moon beating Jimmy Fitzmorris, so there was a hard core of disaffected conservative, not necessarily Republicans, but conservative people who didn't like Moon knew they couldn't beat him, but wanted to make him run an extra lap. The second thing was that the police union, headed by a guy named Irvin Magri, detested the Landrieu administration because it was bringing reforms in the police department, or at least reforms that the police union didn't like. So that was the core support for Ben C because the number of Republicans at that point, you could count on on one hand. So anyway, Ben C runs, and it's, you know, unsuccessful. I think he got 43% of the vote, or something like that. . . . Moon and Ben C are roughly contemporary, so Moon's a little bit older, I think, than Ben C, but rough. They knew each other, knew who they were and so on. But from Moon's point of view, it was a pain in the neck, because he was ready to go to work. He thought he'd won the election over Jimmy Fitzmorris, and then all of a sudden, out of the clear blue sky, here comes Ben C but the thing that made the Ben C's candidacy halfway credible was the two things that I mentioned, the Fitzmorris disaffected in the police union,

.

Justin Nystrom 1:54:31
So the desegregation issue, also the Public Accommodations Act.

Charles Ferguson 1:54:34
He may have the Public Accommodations Act. I don't remember how it figured, but it probably did figure in it, but that was something that we strongly supported. We meaning the newspaper strongly supported the Public Accommodations Act, one, because it was the right thing to do, and two, it's because it had a. Lot to do with how we were viewed nationally, and how the NFL would view New Orleans.

1:55:12
What's the most important story you ever ran in the 1970s

Charles Ferguson 1:55:17
the most important story what

Justin Nystrom 1:55:20
you felt was the most influential story that?

Charles Ferguson 1:55:32
Are there any hints? I don't I'm just drawing that, not that I personally, because I wasn't writing anything except but the story that we published in the 1970s. in the 1970s. it's a good question. I'm just drawing a blank. If I don't, I don't know, it's

Justin Nystrom 1:55:59

well, maybe we can circle back to that, because I have a couple of related. Okay, was there ever an issue as editor that you felt you wish you had pushed harder? In retrospect,

Charles Ferguson 1:56:20
I frankly, I don't think so. I I was pretty forceful in the things that I believed in. I'm talking about sort of internal management of the the paper, and I never did anything that I thought was bad, that I was being told I should do I never I just said I'm not doing this and and

Charles Ferguson 1:56:56
I can't fit that you mean that I rue the fact that I didn't push hard enough to do a certain story or something.

Justin Nystrom 1:57:01
No, I guess I'm trying to get at these sort of tough choices you make as an editor, and that, you know, down the road, you said, you know, maybe we should have pushed on that.

Charles Ferguson 1:57:10
But I don't know. I don't mean they were always my biggest problem was, if the paper was not the stories and dealing with all the external things, it's I was trying to do some things, and there was sort of a fair amount of internal resistance all along the way, because one of the holdovers from the ancient regime was that we don't want any union problems around here. We don't want any labor type problems. And I was hiring all these bright, smart people, a lot of them wouldn't, weren't just from New Orleans or graduates of LSU or something like that, but they were from far away, and that was seen by some as a potential danger from a labor relations point of view. So I sometimes got questioned on some of my hires. It was more a pain in the neck, but I didn't never went back. I just kept on hiring people I thought were the best people that I could hire.

Justin Nystrom 1:58:28
Is your pattern of hiring these outside people, this outside talent, bringing to New Orleans, do you feel that was running counter to what was going on in the city as a whole?

Charles Ferguson 1:58:36
No, I think that that actually helped the things that we were talking about in the earlier segment with Jack. And Jeff, Jack is an example of that, because he brought a younger, different perspective from a different place, and he was writing about architecture and the importance of architecture city. No, all of these people, I think, actually added to the breadth of our coverage.

Justin Nystrom 1:59:00
Well, I mean, but beyond the I guess, would this have been a good thing outside of your newspaper, for the city in general, for other for corporate leadership in New Orleans, for instance, to bring in, outside people like you did. It seems like
The States-Item for a while was it was a model of what to do in this regard. Was this not a pattern being followed elsewhere in the city?

Charles Ferguson 1:59:23
Well, that's hard to say, because if you look at law firms, they're going to be mainly hiring in and local people, graduates of Tulane, Loyola, LSU oil industry. And moreover, I don't think people who are in jobs like that, insurance, cannot have the kind of impact that somebody who is in the newspaper business can have. And you don't have to be the editor to have an impact. I mean, you can be a writer or reporter writing about architecture or food and have a far greater impact than some executive at Freeport McMoRan as a rule. So I would say the people who were at The States-Item during the 70s, which were sort of in a unique position to exert an influence over the overall culture, but, you know, maybe not cause a glacial change and some of the underlying factors that we're dealing with today, but certainly it's part of the appeal and the charm of being in the media is that you can have influence, and we certainly had a fair amount of influence in those days and

Justin Nystrom
What were the most important lessons in the 1970s
Charles Ferguson 2:00:52
the most important. we're talking about the city now?

Justin Nystrom 2:00:54
The City, and both heeded and unheeded.

Charles Ferguson 2:01:01
I guess the biggest lesson from this vantage point today is that we didn't understand how fundamental our problems were. I mean, we knew that we had, you know, educational deficit, and we knew that we were too reliant on the oil industry and that would someday no longer serve us well. We knew the port was limited in a certain way, although that problem was exacerbated by technology. I guess, looking back on it, we underestimated the challenges, the fun we thought in the going back to the 70s and the beginning of the ‘70s and the ‘69 mayoral election, we thought that all of these problems, or I thought all these problems, were solvable or improvable to one degree or another. And so I'm sitting here today looking at the situation in New Orleans. And of course, there are a lot of other factors that didn't exist to this extent then. And I realized that, you know, if we fail, we didn't set the city on a totally different course. I mean, there are all kinds of limitations, geographic limitations, but we honestly thought, or I honestly thought, that in the ‘70s, in the ‘60s, ‘70s, we were battling sort of silly and immature, but we were battling toe to toe with Atlanta and Houston to see who was going to be. We're going to regain our position as Queen City of the South. And you know, we're going to be the biggest and the best. And that obviously turned out not to be the case. Now, his question of how you judge things and by economic prowess is not the only criterion, but in in our way where, you know, have all these things that we discussed earlier, but still in all we're not very well off. Where the underlying forces in this city are not positive, and that's, that's a hard thing to accept at a point where you no longer have the power to really do anything about it except bemoan the situation. That's, that's fairly difficult thing to accept.

Justin Nystrom 2:03:42

I think that's an interesting I wanted a reflection question on the end of the so

Jack Davis 2:03:49
I am satisfied.

Charles Ferguson 2:03:51
Oh, good. Well, that's good, great. That's I would like to have.