

The Literary Club
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ROOKIE

Sitting on our front porch, my mother spied me bounding around the corner into Gum Street with a pencil stuck behind my ear. She knew. Her hunch was confirmed when I gleefully exclaimed: “I got the job! I got the job!” It was late May 1951. I was 15 years old.

I was returning from the newsroom of The Evansville Press, where Dick Anderson, the sports editor, had just started my journalism career by hiring me as a part-time assistant in his three-member department at the princely sum of 75 cents an hour. I would run errands, fill paste pots, take scores over the phone, cover some Little League baseball games, and otherwise do what Dick wanted done.

The sights and smells of that old newsroom remain lodged in my memory as reminders of the happy, exciting times I spent there. The damp odor of newsprint, the incessant clackety-clack from the banks of teletype machines, the rush of constant human movement, the crunch of bins overflowing with endless rolls of canary yellow copy paper – all of this mixed into an irresistible creative rhythm. Around deadline time the sense of urgency was unmistakable.

The Press was a daily newspaper owned by Scripps-Howard, a media chain with properties around the country. On that afternoon I entered the company’s payroll and would be employed by the concern in one position or another for the next 57 years.

I didn't know it at the time but Dick Anderson took pride in mentoring young talent. One of his protégés, Gene Miller, would soon win a Pulitzer Prize, the top honor in journalism, for work he did at *The Miami Herald*.

My unwritten job description was to do whatever Dick wanted. He had recently recovered from a heart attack but was still overweight. He typed with two fingers as he chewed the filter end of an unlit cigarette. He had a reputation around the newsroom for being an ornery cuss, a viewpoint I think he rather enjoyed

I was too green, yet at the same time too self assured, to realize just how far over my head I was. But Dick and his kindly assistant patiently took me by the hand. Within six weeks, I had what was for me a big assignment, covering something called the "Plughorse Derby," a Junior Chamber of Commerce fundraiser at Dade Park, the local race track. My coverage of that afternoon's racing of broken-down farm horses earned my first byline. Seeing my name in print served to puff up a young ego far beyond proper bounds.

Next was a turn at covering baseball – from a decidedly different point of view. Evansville had a Class B baseball team, the Braves, which played at Bosse Field in the Three-I League. A railroad siding ran alongside the outfield and fans would climb atop boxcars parked there to watch games for free. Dick was curious what they were able to see from that vantage point, so he sent me to find out.

Another time, to test my accuracy, he had me go to Bosse Field to count the number of bricks in the outfield fence – and I had better have the right number.

By the fall of that first year, I had settled in. I guess I passed muster because when the school year began, I kept working part-time, drawing assignments to cover the Friday night high school football games. On one occasion they threw me the keys to the Press car and told me to drive to Carmi, Illinois to cover a game. I leaped at the chance to take along several high school pals, even though I didn't happen to possess a driver's license. To make matters worse, when I tried to pull into a parking space near the game site, I hit the bumper of the car in front of me. It belonged to the Carmi police. When the patrolman got out to see what had happened. I could sense my budding career coming to an end. However, the officer took one look at the Press sign on the door, gave me a big thumbs-up and waved me on to the game.

When basketball season rolled around, I found myself sitting at the press table reporting on players who had been my teammates and opponents only the year before. The coaches treated me like a regular member of the press corps, greenhorn or not.

Such was the pattern I followed through my remaining time in high school. By the summer of my graduation, however, I concluded that if I was going to make a life of newspapering, I didn't want it to be restricted to covering sports. That didn't seem worthy enough. So Dick talked things over with Jim Margedant, the city editor, who was amenable to having me move onto the city room staff for the summer. I would fill in for vacationing reporters, taking their places on the police beat, the courts and city hall. As before, that meant I would do what Jim needed doing. Thus, my horizon broadened to taking livestock quotations from the local stockyards; the weather summary from the chief weatherman, Stan Rampy; and obituaries from area undertakers. I even wrote up a wedding announcement or two.

During the month of August, which was racing season at Dade Park, there was another chore. Some of the editors liked to bet the ponies. So about noon I was delegated to take their wagers to Luhring News Company, down the street from the newsroom. Lucille Luhring, the brassy red-haired daughter of the owner, ran a bookie shop in the back room. Since this form of betting was forbidden by Indiana law, it would have been bad form for an editor to get caught in a raid. They sent me instead. Lucille knew my purpose and I had no trouble being admitted to her smoke-filled chamber where a Damon Runyon cast of characters would be milling about. I wasn't too much concerned about getting caught, though, because Lucille's younger sister, June, was married to Fred Althaus, an Evansville policeman. During his off-duty hours, Freddie often worked the front counter at the newsstand. It seemed implausible that in the buddy-buddy world of law enforcement, he would be victimized by a raid.

The cast of characters drawn to Lucille's bookie operation was not nearly as interesting, though, as the reporters and editors who inhabited our newsroom. The less reputable yellow journalism of the early days in the 20th Century was waning, to be sure, but newspapering had not yet entered the more sterile, professional state that would arrive shortly -- much to the craft's detriment, as things turned out.

Ours was a barebones operation. E.W. Scripps, our iconoclastic founder, once advised his underlings, "Do not be afraid to be called a skin flint or a miser." So steeped were we in Mr. Scripps' culture that even everyday office supplies were rationed. We had to turn in our pencil stubs to the office secretary in order to get new ones. We weren't supplied with notebooks to take on assignments, but carried sheets of folded

newsprint. This penuriousness even reached the restrooms, where one didn't find paper towels but only cut-up surplus newsprint.

Carl Ritt, who never went to college, was the managing editor. He was a one-time basketball star who, after he fell victim to the bottle, could be observed late into the night editing copy while simultaneously reading Shakespeare.

Among those sitting around the rim where stories were edited was a curious old-timer named Dutton McBride, who had a mysterious past that we understood once included a run for high state office in the Dakotas. Mac was a kindly man and a brilliant headline writer but he fought his demons with frequent visits to the men's room, where he secreted a bottle away in the water chamber of one of the johns.

It was in the reporters' ranks, though, where I most relished the company. Ed Klingler, a dandy who still wore spats, was the dean of the reporters – an urbane gentleman with no formal higher education who seemed to know everyone in town and who could write a story on deadline faster than anyone I ever knew, then or later. Mace Broide, a fast-talking New Yorker, covered politics and grew so close to his sources that he would eventually go to Washington as the top assistant to a senator from Indiana. Harriet Bass Jenner, who entered journalism covering an Indianapolis police beat where not many women ventured, ran the society pages with a mother hen's eye for detail and uprightness. Bob Flynn, who came from Syracuse, had once tried his hand at prize-fighting and now devoted his energies to fighting corruption.

Bob was our investigative reporter and a much-admired journeyman. I played a minor role with Bob that first summer in a story that caught Bud Sensmeier, the city's fire chief, red-handed using on-duty firemen and taxpayer dollars to build himself a new

home secreted away in a nearby rural area. A source had tipped Bob onto Bud's misdeeds but the story needed verification. That meant catching the laborers at work. The strategy we concocted called for me to drive a car innocently but noisily along the gravel road bordering the work site to divert attention while Bob and a photographer crawled undetected through the heavy surrounding brush to take pictures. After a morning of nervous plotting and driving up and down, we had our pictures and Bob had one of the year's best scoops.

During subsequent summers of my college years I was rotated to other jobs in the newsroom to gain a variety of experiences. These glimpses into the real world of daily journalism brought a growing conviction that I wanted to make it my life's work.

My first stop in the summer of 1954 was the nerve center of the paper, the copy desk, where all of a day's news came together for editing. I joined a battery of editors, who sat around a desk shaped in a half circle. In the middle facing us was the news editor, Ottrell Miller, who parceled out stories to be read carefully and headlined. It was his job to lay out the pages of that day's paper and to decide how the news would be presented. Along the wall behind the rim stood a line of constantly chattering teletype machines over which international, national and state news was transmitted into the newsroom on long rolls of paper. If a matter of great import was being sent, bells would ring. The pressure of five deadlines a day, the rat-a-tat-tat of the teletypes and the hum of activity around the copy desk created adrenalin-pumping excitement.

Ottrell was exacting and sloppy at the same time, an odd cross-eyed Kentuckian who had trouble communicating clearly. As I was trying to learn my new tasks, he was tough on me, throwing back stories while muttering his dissatisfaction with my headline

attempts. Finally one day he gave me a story reporting that Congress had passed a law requiring “E pluribus unum” to be placed on all U.S. money. For it I wrote this headline: “ ‘In God we trust’ / now currency must.” A broad smile came over Ottrell, who usually only glowered. His reaction told me I had finally earned a passing grade.

The copy desk job also gave me entrée to the production side of the newspaper. Through a nearby door was located the composing room, an expanse of space filled with machinery – the Linotype machines that cast stories into lines of metal type, the makeup area where the type was placed into page forms, and the stereotype department where these forms were cast into curved lead plates, ready for placement on the huge printing presses in the basement of the building. Because so much molten metal was being used, the heat in the room became almost unbearable on hot summer days before air conditioning. The Linotype operators sitting at their keyboards next to the bubbling metal pots often worked in their undershirts, sweat dripping from their brows in temperatures well over 100 degrees.

These printers became my friends, although I was their target for constant ribbing. Because they belonged to a strong union, it was a cardinal sin for any non-printer so much as to touch the pieces of type they were assembling. Although we scrawled on page “dummies” where we wanted type displayed on a page, if they thought they knew a better way, they weren’t reluctant to offer suggestions – or simply to follow their own whims if an editor wasn’t watching. From them I picked up an immense amount of practical wisdom.

This was the summer when my financial picture had grown bleaker. I was learning plenty but the work was not financially rewarding, given my paltry wage. I

worried over how I was going to make the upcoming college tuition payment. Then one morning, when I was manning the early shift, into the office strode the Dade Park racing secretary delivering that day's lineup of races to the sports department. We were friends and he stopped to ask how I was doing. OK in everything, I responded, other than worries about next semester's tuition. Putting down the racing program for that day, he pointed to a long shot in the first race and suggested that it might be paired with the favorite in the second race for a sound Daily Double bet. I gathered he knew something I didn't, so later that morning I scooted down to Lucille Luhring's and placed \$2 on the combination he suggested. She had a \$50 ceiling on how much she paid for winning tickets unless the bet was "insured" with an additional 50 cents. I insured my wager. Sure enough, the insider advice was right on the money, my Daily Double choices both won, I pocketed roughly \$200 and my tuition worries vanished.

In the two following summers, I was assigned for the most part to the Tri-State desk, which meant gathering news from the outlying areas of southwestern Indiana, southern Illinois and western Kentucky. Some of this work was drudgery. With Speedgraphic in hand, I was sent out on the summer county fair circuit and challenged to make each fair seem interesting and different, even though they all followed the same format. In the eyes of a city boy, the cows and pigs and chickens looked pretty much the same.

One memorable morning I was dispatched to a farm area near Hopkinsville, Kentucky, on the border with Tennessee, near the big Army post, Fort Campbell. A family there had reported seeing "little green men" amid a frightening night of unexplained fireworks. Their story immediately attracted widespread attention because it

occurred during a time when the nation was swept up in accounts of people sighting unidentified flying objects – UFO’s. When I reached the house where the family lived and spoke with them, I quickly concluded that what these hillbilly farmers had probably seen was through the lens of a night of wild drinking. The nearby presence of Fort Campbell and the possibility of nighttime helicopter maneuvers offered a plausible scenario for their supposed visions. So I called in my story. Imagine my horror when I returned to the office to find that afternoon’s paper featuring a big headline that little green men had landed, followed by a story – under my byline – that reported with a straight face the family’s improbable account. To make matters worse, the staff artist had drawn a sketch purporting to show what the visitors from outer space could have looked like. I was horrified but the editors couldn’t stop laughing. My embarrassment deepened several years later when a book was published seriously examining the UFO phenomenon and mentioning the Hopkinsville “landing,” attributing the story to my authorship.

Such was my introduction to the sometimes zany world of daily newspapers. Increasingly, though, the assignments involved more serious matters. I wrote a series on how the tiny upriver burg of Yankeetown was being transformed by the arrival of industrial giant Alcoa with plans for a gigantic aluminum rolling mill, which was swallowing up the little town’s former way of life. The company’s public relations people didn’t like what they considered my unenlightened reporting of their version of industrial progress.

Then came the 1956 integration crisis in western Kentucky. It occurred just before I was ready to enter my senior year at Marquette. We caught wind of some black families in Sturgis, a farming and coal mining community of 2,200, balking over the

segregated schools their children were being forced to attend. After all, the U.S. Supreme Court a year earlier had held otherwise. I was sent to interview them in their Boxtown neighborhood and to talk to the county school superintendent, Carlos Oakley. He showed me the tiny frame Dunbar school where they were assigned to start classes in a month and tried, without much conviction, to persuade me that the separate facilities were equal to the facilities in the town's all-white high school. That was too much to swallow.

When time came to enroll for the fall term, nine of the youngsters signed up for classes at Sturgis, not Dunbar. It didn't take long for tensions to mount. As I interviewed townspeople, again and again I heard that trouble was on the way.

The day after Labor Day, when classes were scheduled to start, a crowd of 500 lined Kelsey Street leading to the steps of Sturgis High, shouting racial epithets. As the youngsters from Boxtown approached, the crowd forced them back. Police stood by and did nothing as the youths retreated to their homes.

The next morning the crowds again gathered but this time no black students appeared. Instead, at mid-morning a car arrived from the state capitol in Frankfort bearing the top officers of the state police and commissioner of public safety. They had been sent by Governor A.B. (Happy) Chandler to make an assessment. Those who knew Happy knew he took seriously the plight of the Negro, as evidenced by his role in breaking the color barrier as major league baseball commissioner. The Sturgis area was the only place in Kentucky where court-ordered integration was being defied. The state's authority was being challenged. Happy's answer wasn't long in coming. That afternoon he activated units of the Kentucky National Guard. The lines were now drawn.

As dawn arrived after a nervous night, we awakened to find the high school ringed with 65 state police cars. Seven hundred National Guardsmen had pitched tents behind the school. Two tanks stood at each corner of Kelsey Street. The community reacted in outrage. Cars and trucks bearing shouting passengers streamed into town, choking streets leading to the school.

I happened to be standing next to General J.J.B. Williams, the Guard's adjutant general and a decorated tanker from Patton's army, when the nine youngsters, flanked by Guardsmen, started up the school walk. The crowd tried to surge forward to block them. There ensued a confused period of pushing and shoving amid curses and screams. In the melee, I turned to see one Guardsman pointing an M-1 with fixed bayonet inches from my chest. General Williams shouted to him that I was OK. I learned years later that those fuzzy cheeked citizen soldiers with no riot training actually carried live ammunition that morning.

Happy Chandler's show of force worked. No shots were fired. No one was injured. Five protesters were arrested for disorderly conduct. And the nine young men and women made history as they walked through the front doors and became registered students of Sturgis High School for the first time. It was September 6th, my 21st birthday.

As the story wound down and I packed up for college, *Time* magazine commented in its press section that Sturgis was "the most dangerous story American newsmen have faced since Korea." In a subsequent postmortem assessing media coverage, General Williams singled me out. "He sees a lot of things," the general said, "and his reporting (was) the most accurate and vivid to come out of Sturgis."

I guess I had passed my rookie test.

