

"AND NOW, THE NEWS . . ."

By John S. Halbert

"How would you like to be a news reporter?"

The station manager posed that question to me one afternoon in the first week of November, 1964, as I sat in his office. "I have a proposition for you," he went on, eyeing the expectant look on my face as he lit a cigar. "I'd like you to help the news department cover the election." With that, he leaned back in his chair and awaited my reply, as a wispy cloud of blue cigar smoke floated up toward the ceiling.

I already knew that the station planned to cover the upcoming Presidential Election in which Barry Goldwater was challenging Lyndon Johnson. It had been a heated campaign: terms and slogans such as "Great Society;" "In Your Heart, You Know He's Right;" and "All the Way with LBJ" had been tossed about until a lot of people were becoming jaded. A History Professor at Florence State even sported a button that said, "AuH₂O," which, of course, was the chemical formula for "Gold-water."

The manager wanted me to broadcast the election returns from neighboring Franklin County, which meant he placed a lot of confidence in a very young broadcaster. I was happy for the opportunity, although I had never before done a live news remote broadcast.

"Well, how about it---ready to be a 'news hound?'" As I nodded, the boss shifted his cigar and penned my name on a schedule sheet. I was now, officially, a newsman!

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A few days later, in the late afternoon of Election Day, I drove the twenty miles down to Russellville, the Franklin County seat. There, I introduced myself to Probate Judge Weatherford, the highest-ranking elected county official, who greeted me cordially. After he showed me around, I set up my remote broadcast equipment, ran some tests, and braced for the flood of ballot returns that would soon be arriving

Hal Kirby, the manager of the local Russellville radio station, came over and introduced himself and his little daughter, who had tagged along, as she put it, "to see what the fuss is all about." He seemed to sense that I was inexperienced in the news-gathering business, and offered his advice and assistance. Even though we could have been considered competitors (our stations' signals overlapped, although our markets were a bit removed from each other), as a cub reporter on his first assignment, I was grateful for his mentoring.

Another local radio station, a true competitor in our market, was also there, and I met their reporter, along with newsmen from other broadcast stations, newspapers and wire services from across the region and the state who were on the scene

Before long, thousands of election returns from all over the county began to pour into the courtroom, where a crew of clerks were kept busy tabulating the ballots and posting the totals on a big board. As the hectic evening swept along, we representatives of the various news organizations found it was far more efficient to cooperate with each other, rather than to compete

(as our bosses probably thought we were doing). We divided the duties and shared the results among ourselves; an arrangement which, I soon learned, was common-place when a group of newsmen reported the same story for their respective news outlets.

On this election night, (as I would soon learn was typical on such occasions) a continuous parade of Very Important People and politicians crammed the packed courtroom, where they rubbed shoulders and loudly cheered or groaned, depending on how the trends went for their favorite candidates. As I mingled among Those Of Importance, several well-placed and influential people I met that night became vital sources for future news stories. I found that the key to the success of my burgeoning news career would be to cultivate those upon whom I could count for news tips and information. Later, on several occasions, I was able to break exclusive stories based on information they gave me.

My job that night at the Franklin County Courthouse was to report the results of county races, and how the Presidential contest shaped up locally. On the national scene, Lyndon Johnson was soundly defeating Barry Goldwater, although the Republicans were successful in several Congressional races in Alabama. Indeed, the 1964 election was the beginning of the "Republican Revolution" in the South that would break the century-old Democratic Party grip on Southern politics. I witnessed first-hand the political upheaval that began that night, and in addition, had the opportunity to report the facts.

Judge Weatherford, at the center of all this activity, kept us supplied with the latest information, plus coffee and sandwiches. All of us news people appreciated his good-natured thoughtfulness, especially me, as I was trying to learn as much as I could about news-gathering, while actually doing it for the first time. It was a long night--several local races were not decided until the last returns came in the next morning, and it was after sunrise before I headed back to the station, wondering if I had done an adequate job.

The station manager must have approved of my performance on that first news assignment, because Franklin County, over the next several years and as many elections became my regular beat. Later, our station joined forces with three others in a "Joint-Venture" called "Operation Ballot-Box," that combined the resources of the usually-competitive stations in a cooperative effort, that, eventually grew into a fairly sizable undertaking. I reported the Franklin County returns for the four-station hook-up, and garnered a lot of regional exposure. As time went on, it was like a homecoming of sorts, as the same reporters returned to the Franklin County Courthouse for each election. On these occasions, Judge Weatherford presided over the proceedings with his usual benevolent autocracy, and Hal Kirby's tutelage to me was, as always, a godsend.

Along the way, I became acquainted with his chief engineer, Jim Elliott, an announcer with a distinctive voice, whom I had heard on Kirby's radio station for many years. Elliott, in addition to his electronics and announcing career, told me he had once written a book about a Mississippi River steamboat tragedy that happened right after the Civil War, that had cost over a thousand lives. In addition to being a best-seller, it had been featured in a popular series of condensed books---a major accomplishment, for an otherwise obscure radio announcer from a small town. He detailed to me how he wrote and published his book; when I told him I wanted to someday write my *own* books, his advice and encouragement actually planted the embryonic seed that eventually grew into my writing career.

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At first, news reporting was only a relatively small part of my job at the radio station. It wasn't long, however, until I managed to convince the boss to let me cover more frequent news stories. One thing I soon discovered about radio news was its aspect of immediacy---in those days before the Internet, it was the fastest means of reporting a breaking story. Several times, I was right on the spot when a sudden story erupted, and broadcast the story live from the scene.

One day as I was driving in the news mobile unit with one of the station engineers, we spotted a large warehouse on fire. Pulling to the curb, I jumped out while the technician grabbed the mobile phone to tell the station we were ready to go live with a news broadcast. Turning on the remote transmitter, I started for the blazing structure, trailing behind me a long microphone cable. In a few moments, I was on the air, describing the inferno to the radio audience. The fire was located in the rear of the building, so I pulled some slack in the cord and ducked through the front door. Keeping up a running commentary, I made my way down an aisle of stacked merchandise toward the flames that were concentrated in an area of shipping crates. After standing in there for several minutes describing the scene, I felt a sudden tug on the microphone cord. Thinking, it had snagged on something, I pulled the cable back toward me, whereupon there was a tremendous yank on the cord that almost jerked the microphone out of my hand! I decided I had done enough, and retreated back toward the front door. Moments after I reappeared outside, and still on the air, there was a booming explosion that came from the same area inside the building where I had just been!

Before long, the firemen had the blaze under control, and I signed-off the broadcast. The engineer was agitated. "Did you feel the tugs?" I nodded, and he went on in a state of excitement, "that was the only way we could send you a message! I pulled on the cord to tell you to get out of there, fast---the firemen said the place was about to blow up!"

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The subject of fire seemed to reappear throughout my news reporting career. I was sleeping late one Saturday morning, when there was a phone call from the station: a big garment factory twenty miles away was on fire: could I cover the story? Leaping out of bed, I grabbed my camera and a tape recorder (in addition to my clothes!), and headed for the scene.

Arriving a half-hour later, I found the old, block-square, one-story brick building's midsection engulfed in flames. Spotting a ladder leaning against the building, I started climbing toward the roof. Just then, the Fire Chief stepped around the corner. "Hey, you!" he yelled up at me. "Get back down here! This ladder is for firemen only!" As he glared at me, I trooped back down and slunk away, pretending to be cowed. Satisfied that I was properly chastised, the fireman turned on his heel and disappeared.

With the frenetic firefighter now gone, I looked about for some other way to get onto the roof to take pictures and record my observations. Then, lo, and behold, I spotted---tossed aside nearby---a complete fireman's outfit! Looking around, making sure no one was observing what I was doing, I pulled on the fireman's slicker, boots and hat, and again mounted the ladder. In a few seconds, I was on the roof, headed for the middle of the building where, in the center of the structure, underneath an open area, the fire raged. Standing on the top of the building, I took a film-roll of pictures for the *Birmingham News* (that were spectacular), and recorded on tape a couple of minutes worth of description for the station. Then, I retraced my steps back across the now bubbling asphalt roof to the ladder, scooted down, and pulled off the fireman's outfit. Leaving it in the same disorderly pile as I had found it, I retreated to the other side of the burning

building where there was a sizable gathering of spectators, and acting nonchalant, melted into the crowd.

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"Fire's" cousin---"Explosion"---also played a significant role in my news career. One night in September, 1967, I had hardly arrived home from the station and my head had just hit the pillow a few minutes before midnight, when I was startled by a sudden, searing flash that momentarily lit up my bedroom, followed a few seconds later by a window-rattling "BOOM!" Obviously, something big had happened, so I called the radio station. The announcer on duty told me he had just had a report of a huge explosion at the big aluminum plant, the largest factory in the area, out near the airport. I scrambled back into my clothes, jumped into the car and headed for the scene.

When I arrived, a steady stream of fire trucks and emergency vehicles racing into the plant testified that a disaster of some sort had taken place. I stopped at the main gate and identified myself to the guard. "What happened?"

"Big explosion in the cast house!" the security officer told me. "A news conference is about to start in the plant office," he added, pointing at a nearby two-story brick building. I parked my car and double-timed up the front steps, where a shaken public relations assistant, in a quavering voice, directed me to a small conference room where a company spokesman was just starting to address a roomful of news reporters.

The official told us there had been a massive explosion in the cast house, a structure several stories high, where molten aluminum was held in a huge vat. Unfortunately, according to the company man, four men could not be accounted for and were feared lost. Hundreds of workers had been evacuated from the plant as a further precaution.

After the other reporters had departed, the public relations man (one of those "cultivated" sources) invited me to join him in his car for a tour of the area of the explosion. When the two of us arrived where the blast had taken place in middle of the mile-square plant, what we saw looked like the result of a World War II bombing raid, as all the factory buildings we could see around us in the dusty, shadowy darkness showed heavy devastation---all around us, whole outside walls were blown-in; portions of steel roofs and assorted towers and cranes were blown into the working alleys and byways, making it difficult for us to maneuver in the car around the wreckage. The scene was made even more ghostly by the fact that all the main lights were off---the vast plant was, for the most part, in darkness. Here and there, emergency lights cast fitful beams onto the outsides of buildings whose vast interiors were dark. The enormous structure where the blast had occurred sagged into a crater from which thin, acrid fumes curled upward through its shattered roof, settling-out into an eye-smarting haze. As we rode awestruck through the plant, we could see heavy steel beams that were bent like matchsticks, huge twisted chunks of debris thrown about, and that all the windows in the area had been shattered by the explosion. The magnitude of the disaster was staggering.

Back at the office, another company public relations person confirmed to me the deaths of the four workers. As several others were at a local hospital with injuries, I drove there, where their families were gathered. After a vigil that went on until dawn, I filed the story, went home, and---as I had done hours earlier---crashed onto the pillow.

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As a disc jockey, playing records on the air was exhilarating (“professional fun”, we called it), especially when the beat was lively. It was in those moments in the control room when I most enjoyed being a radio announcer who played records on the air. It was thrilling to watch the instrument dials and monitors indicating full transmitter power; needles in dials kicking in time with the beat; a great tune on the turntable; and thousands of listeners along for the musical ride. It was the essence of radio; a joy, which, for me, would never go away.

I had long been intrigued by how our broadcast signal behaved after it left our transmitting towers. As the station's nighttime power was primarily directed north and south, our programs came in loud and clear down on the Gulf Coast, hundreds of miles to the south of us, and in Michigan, a thousand miles due north, where our nighttime signal returned to earth with perfect clarity. It was fascinating to sit in the control room, observing a tiny stylus needle as it rode in the groove of a phonograph record on the turntable, and realizing that---even as I listened to its playback on the studio monitor---at that same instant, thousands of people, some of whom were hundreds of miles away, were also hearing the same miniscule vibrations reproduced as rich, vibrant music on their radios.

As the transmitters had to operate within strict government-controlled limits, once each month, the station's on-air signal was monitored by a professional broadcast engineering service, and our technicians used the results to adjust the equipment. In order to do this, for a half-hour after midnight, during what was called the "testing period," we went back to the full five-thousand watts we normally ran in the daytime. At this power level, our unfettered signal went around the world. On these occasions, we played Dixieland Jazz, along with frequent station identifications in order for the monitoring company in Atlanta, 250-miles away, to pick out our distinctive signal. Once, when one of the announcers offered to send a nickel to anyone who responded to our jazz music, we were startled to receive a reply from Invercargill, New Zealand! (We sent him his nickel.) Another time, someone wrote us a letter telling us they had heard our station perfectly one afternoon in a small town in northeastern Canada.

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Not long after the 1964 Presidential Election that I had covered from Franklin County, the Station manager re-arranged my schedule, and for the next several years, I opened the station at 5:00 A.M. on Saturday mornings and delivered the first newscast of the day at 5:25. I never really got used to waking up at 4:00 AM on Saturdays, especially if I had been out late the night before. It was particularly hard to get going on cold winter mornings, when the whole process had to be done in pre-dawn darkness. I decided right off that I was not suited to be an early-riser---instead, I seemed to be more attuned for the late-night hours. On one un-forgettable occasion, I signed-off shortly after midnight, hustled home for forty winks of sleep (actually, in this case---*twenty* winks), then dragged back to the station in time to sign back on at 5:24 AM! (The concept of "bio-rhythms," which would have explained why I never adjusted to the early hours, was still a decade or so in the future.) Nevertheless, there *was* one obvious advantage to getting the day's work over by early-afternoon. Thus I had plenty of time for a Saturday social life, that, in those days, was *soaring*.

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In the mid-'sixties, working at a station affiliated with the CBS Radio Network meant that some of the most famous newscasters of all time---several of whom, although still popular, were, by that time, in the twilight of their careers---anchored the CBS newscasts. Such renowned newsmen as Eric Sevareid, Richard C. Hottelet, Douglas Edwards, Walter Cronkite, Robert Trout, and the greatest of them all--Edward R. Murrow---were regular voices on our station. Looking back, it now seems incredible that those enormously-talented and renowned newsmen were actually a part of *my* radio shows, with their featured programs and regular hourly newscasts. Later, these men would be revered as being among the pioneers of broadcast news. Murrow, in particular, had long been considered "The Father of Broadcast News," from his classic, "This . . . is London---" live short-wave broadcasts over CBS Radio during World War II. But in those early days of my radio career, they were just doing their everyday jobs over the network and on our station.

Even though these men were consummate professionals, occasionally, their human side came through. Lowell Thomas, an elderly adventurer, author, and veteran radioman who was billed as "America's Foremost Newscaster," once came on with his regular late-afternoon news round-up. On one particular occasion, something must have tickled his funny-bone, because as soon as the usually-solemn Thomas began his live news program---he started laughing! The famous broadcaster guffawed non-stop for the whole ten minutes of his program---never once getting in a straight word of news! I couldn't imagine what had set him off, laughing and giggling like a giddy adolescent. His entire news report that day consisted of nothing but giggles, snickers, guffaws and uproarious laughter that went on unceasing until the his allotted time was up!

Late one afternoon in November, 1965, about a minute into the CBS network's daily "Walter Cronkite Reporting" program, I was startled to hear Cronkite's taped report warble to a stop on the air. Then---silence. And . . . more silence. At length, I broke-in and resumed my program, wondering what had happened. Evidently, there had been an operational slip-up in New York---most unusual for CBS, which ordinarily didn't make those kinds of mistakes. In a few minutes, the Associated Press had the story, and it was a big one: a massive electrical power outage had occurred all over the Northeastern United States and into Canada---the now-famous "New York City Blackout," an event that would later be commemorated in song and story---a story into which my radio program, a thousand miles from the scene, had inadvertently been thrust.

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One day during the summer of 1966, I dropped into the Student Union Snack Bar for lunch, where the regular crowd---those who were in the Summer Semester---had gathered for the usual gab-fest between classes. Sitting at the table was a striking brunette with long, swishy hair, to whom I wasted no time in introducing myself. She told me everyone called her "Ronnie," which she explained was a nickname for "Veronica," her actual name. When she said she was about to be a senior in high school, I was surprised, as she looked terrifically grown-up for a high-schooler. Ronnie said she was in an advanced academic program in which she took a college course each summer of high school, and would begin college in another year as a second-term freshman. Thus Ronnie was not only beautiful, but brainy; an appealing combination. It was the start of a relationship that lasted until she went off to Auburn University, a year later.

Ronnie lived with her parents east of Florence in a rustic house on Lake Wilson that featured a long, grassy front yard that sloped down to a boat dock and a swimming pier on the water---very nice digs, indeed. Aside from the fact that she could have been described as an intellectual---and a tall, slender, beautiful one, at that---for the rest of the summer, Ronnie invited me to her place at every opportunity for swimming and picnicking. When she found out that my favorite dessert was banana pudding, she surprised me one day with a huge dish of the stuff. The way to a guy's heart, for sure!

One Saturday, we drove over to Huntsville to an open house at the *Marshall Space Flight Center*. The Marshall center, located on a former Army base just south of the city, was where the *National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)* was at that time developing the "Saturn" rockets that would, before long, carry Americans to the moon. Our tour took us into the enormous fabrication and assembly buildings where the booster rockets were being built, all of which fascinated Ronnie to no end as she was planning to major in science and physics when she went to college.

In a hangar building, we gazed up at a gigantic first-stage of the Saturn. The tour guide told us that the stupendous booster rocket before us, half the length of a football field and thirty feet in diameter, was scheduled to launch the second manned mission to the moon. The gargantuan space launcher was cradled on its side on a mobile transporter---a huge conveyance that rolled on dozens of oversized tires. The Saturn booster, which had five big rocket engines clustered at one end, each the size of a small house, was connected to a long bank of blinking and beeping computers.

While we stood there in a crowd of visitors gazing in wonderment at the rocket, a half-dozen serious-looking men in white smock coats, evidently scientists, burst through a door at the side of the hangar and brushed past us. "That's Wernher von Braun!" someone whispered in a tone of awe. Spinning around, I stared at the backside of the leading individual as he stepped briskly away from us and recognized the world-famous German rocket scientist who headed the entire American moon rocket program. Ronnie squeezed my arm and grinned at me---for us, the race with the Russians to the moon had just now become our own reality---not only were we in the same big building with the huge rocket; but we had also rubbed shoulders with Wernher von Braun!

In addition to the Huntsville moon rockets, there were local connections to the space program. America's first satellite, *Explorer I*, that was launched in January, 1958; and the sub-orbital manned *Mercury* spaceships that came along a little later, had been launched on Redstone rockets whose airframes (the outside metal skin) had been fabricated at the aluminum plant near downtown Sheffield.

Later, as the much-larger Saturn rockets were produced at the Marshall Space Flight Center, they were barged down the Tennessee River through the locks at Wilson Dam on their way to Cape Canaveral, where they launched the Apollo moonships into space.

One Saturday, as I was visiting with some college friends at their home in Huntsville, the room started shaking. Moments later, came a deep growling, rumbling noise that grew so loud we had to shout at each other to be heard above the racket. A picture dropped from the wall, and dishes fell over with a crash in the china cabinet. Over the noise, one of the Huntsvillians yelled that they were test-firing the Saturn first-stage over at the Marshall center, about ten miles from us.

The unearthly roaring and shaking went on for two or three minutes, then stopped. "That's our cue!" one of the fellows called out, as my friends made a beeline for the door. "Let's go!" he

motioned to me, and all of us ran for his car. "We're going over there and get my dad!" he puffed, as we piled into the sedan. While we backed out of the driveway he told us that what we had just heard was the very first test-firing of the first stage of the *Saturn-V* moon-rocket at full power. His father was part of the developmental team, he said, and they had arranged that when they fired-off the rocket ,*everyone* would hear it for dozens of miles around, and we would leave the house to go to the test center and get his father. By the time we arrived at the main gate, sure enough, the man was waiting for us, with a big smile on his face.

"We're gonna beat those Russians to the moon---you just watch us!" he gave a jubilant grin, settling into the back seat. "The first stage," he went on, "worked perfectly in a simulated live-launch. It's big!" the man gloated. "At full power, the first stage of the Saturn develops one-hundred-sixty-million horsepower . . . that's more power than all the hydroelectric dams in the United States put together!"

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Sports were a big part of our station's programming and the mix included high school games, college sports and major-league baseball. After our one memorable 1966 summer with the New York Yankees, the next year we returned to the Chicago White Sox, where the venerable and courtly septugenarian, Bob Elson, still held forth in the broadcast booth at old Comiskey Park (in those days usually referred to as "Beautiful White Sox Park"). Milo Hamilton by that time had moved on to the Pittsburgh Pirates; his replacement was a vowelizing announcer named "Red Rush". The White Sox were still addicted to their marathon Sunday "Double-Headers," which meant that the games usually took the entire afternoon to complete, and occasionally went on into the night, depending upon where they happened to be playing. (A regulation game was nine innings and usually lasted two-and-a-half hours; more or less.)

On a sultry Sunday in the late-summer of that 1967 season, there took place one of the longest days of baseball of all time, and our station was a part of it from start to finish. Played at Detroit, the first of the two White Sox-Tigers games began at noon, our time, and eventually lasted twelve innings; a longer-than-usual contest that delayed the start of the second game to about four o'clock.

By the time I got off at seven, the second game was tied in the twelfth inning. As I had a date with a college girlfriend that night, by the time I arrived at her home on Shoals Creek, a dozen miles east of Florence, to pick her up, the game was still tied in the seventeenth inning.

At the conclusion of the movie around eleven-thirty, while driving her home, I turned on the car's radio and was amazed to hear that the game was still going---still tied---in the twenty-third inning! After spending some "quality time" with her, I left sometime after midnight. Wondering what the final outcome of the game was, I flipped back on the radio and was astounded to hear the rasping voice of an exhausted-sounding Red Rush trying to describe the contest, which, by that time, was in the twenty-fifth inning! (The *first* game that had lasted a long twelve innings, was, by now, a barely-remembered relic of the dim, distant past.) Just as I crossed the bridge over the Tennessee River, the contest finally ended after twenty-six innings! The two games, by that time, had lasted for over thirteen hours.

But the excitement of this night was not yet finished. As I drove into town, I observed a bright orange glow in the sky ahead of me. When I turned off the highway, I discovered what the

orange glow was all about: a couple of blocks distant, an enormous, three-story house was totally engulfed in flames! Fire was shooting out every window and had just burst out around the edge of the tiled roof as I drove up and got out of my car, open-mouthed. It was then I realized that---incredibly---*I was the only person who was witnessing the fire!* I stood stupefied in the middle of the street, absolutely alone, as the huge house burned right before my eyes! Where were the fire trucks? Where were the policemen? (This was a couple of decades before cellular telephones.) Was anyone trapped in there who needed to be rescued? For what seemed like an agonized eternity (actually about two or three minutes), I stood by myself, gaping aghast, as the flames shot into the night sky, accompanied by muffled booming sounds and strange crunching noises that came from somewhere deep inside the inferno. The fire had, by now, become so hot that, even as I watched, the bricks on an outside wall began to glow in a weird bluish color! Just as part of the roof was collapsing in a dazzling shower of sparks, I finally heard the first sirens in the distance. As the house was obviously gone, and as I was totally exhausted, when the firemen arrived a minute later, I called it a day and continued toward home. This was *one* story I would be contented to just read about in the newspaper the next day.

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By the time the 1968 baseball season got underway the following spring, the Milwaukee Braves had become the Atlanta Braves and the station became "The Home of the Braves" in the Shoals. And, in something of a reunion of sorts, Milo Hamilton moved to Atlanta to announce the Braves games; he was joined by a sportscaster named Ernie Johnson.

Each summer, the Braves had a promotion called, "Braves Radio Day," whereby the team recognized all the stations on the network, of which there were dozens scattered across the South. The first year, our station took a group of fans to the game in an airliner chartered from Southern Airways, along with the station's own "Lockheed Lodestar" airliner. The radio station staff watched the game in the air-conditioned comfort of the station owner's private skybox, which, as it turned out, was right next to the Braves' broadcast booth. Only a soundproof glass partition separated us from the two sportscasters. After all these years, for the first time I actually saw Milo Hamilton in person, and had the opportunity to watch the game announcers in action. In fact, we were so close to them, that if there had been no intervening glass wall, I could have reached over and touched their microphone.

The next year, an event occurred during the Braves Radio Day game that completely overshadowed the contest. A station-sponsored planeload of local fans flew to Atlanta in a DC-9 airliner, which was my first trip on a jet. It was Sunday, July 20, 1969---a date that would forever be remembered in world history. Along toward the middle of the game, the scoreboard sign began flashing the big unfolding story: The Apollo moon lander, in lunar orbit with two Americans aboard, had detached from the command module and would shortly attempt the very first manned landing on the moon. As the minute-by-minute updates continued to crawl across the bottom of the scoreboard, a stir of expectation began to build in the "Radio Day" crowd of more than twenty-six thousand. The stadium was soon awash in sound, as the throng cheered and applauded in anticipation of the long-awaited event that was now almost at hand. Then, as the time for the landing came near, the game stopped and the stadium's public address system plugged into the official "NASA" live audio feed.

When the *'Lunar Module'* touched down with the words, "Houston, Tranquility Base, here---the Eagle has landed!" the scoreboard began flashing: *MOON LANDING! MOON LANDING! AMERICAN ASTRONAUTS LAND SAFELY ON THE MOON!* By that time, everyone in the stadium (including the players on the two teams) was cheering and whistling and stomping their feet in rousing celebration of the triumphant news reaching us from another world. Then, in a masterstroke of timing, the stadium's public address system rang out with an instrumental rendering of the "National Anthem"! It was an awesome moment. As the last notes of *'The Star Spangled Banner'* faded away, the celebration burst forth anew as people all over the big baseball park hugged each other, slapped each other on the back; tears of joy flowed all over the place.. It was an electrifying moment that every one of the tens of thousands of people on hand at "Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium" that day would always remember. We Americans had, at long last, and at a tremendous national effort and cost, beaten the Russians to the moon, as two of our countrymen were, at that very moment, on the lunar surface!

As I had a scheduled air shift when we returned from Atlanta late that afternoon, the boss set up a portable television set in the control room so I could watch the moon story on TV. That evening, I saw the famous live scene of Neil Armstrong as he stepped backward down the leg of the Lunar Module, and planted the first human foot onto a foreign world with words that would become immortal: "One small step for man . . . one giant leap for mankind." It was a moment that would be etched in my memory, and in the memories of the hundreds of millions of viewers around the globe who also saw that historic first step onto another world.

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Several months later, I was sound asleep in the early hours one morning when the ringing telephone on the nightstand jolted me awake. When I picked up the receiver, the excited voice of one of the radio station's account executives on the line. "Apollo-Thirteen has blown up!" .

At once awake, I could hardly believe my ears. The moon-landing program already had accomplished two perfect trips to the lunar surface, and the latest mission had promised to be the most ambitious yet. Now, an unexpected life-threatening scenario was unfolding two-hundred-thousand miles from earth.

After we discussed the dire situation for a few minutes, I turned on the radio, where CBS had the story. According to the broadcast, the very survival of the astronauts was in jeopardy and NASA was desperately trying to work out an emergency rescue plan.

After several tension-filled days, the astronauts returned safely to earth and "Apollo-13" became one of the biggest and most dramatic stories of the Space Age.

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I had the good fortune to be on the staff a radio station that was both highly-regarded in the community and that had superb facilities. The owner had equipped the station with the latest electronics in the control rooms and studios, and our news mobile units were first-class. The furnishings in the lobby and in the offices, on the other hand, were in a traditional style that was more in keeping with the converted Victorian-era home in which the station was housed.

When a visitor stepped up onto the front porch and entered through the elegant front door, his first impression was how neat and clean was the place. The station even had a distinctive smell. (I often noticed the same aroma, which was actually pleasant, when I visited other radio

stations. It could have been described as a mixture of warm electronics and furniture polish.)

In an alcove just inside the front door, a clattering Associated Press teletype ran non-stop. Just beyond, in the lobby, was a big, colorful wall-map that showed the station's coverage area. Overhead, a classic chandelier hung from the open second-floor ceiling all the way down to the level of the first landing of the impressive, winding, deep-varnished wooden staircase. To the left, the manager's office was heralded by a sliding, twelve-foot-tall, varnished mahogany door. All-in-all, it was a very impressive place, and the radio station always shone with a like-new appearance. And, should the tiniest scratch appear anywhere in the building, the company's own painters showed up right away to brush away the imperfection.

But what really set the station apart was the helicopter. Probably no other radio station in a town of our small size in the entire country had its own Bell "Jet Ranger", a sleek, very fast jet-turbine-powered executive aircraft. The 'copter was the latest six-passenger model, luxuriously fitted out, which we used for covering news stories and for station promotions. With the station call-letters on each side, the chopper was a familiar sight in the local skies. For us, an added bonus was that everyone who worked at the station had plenty of opportunities to fly in the "whirlybird," as we often called it. The helicopter flights by the station staff usually landed and took off from an adjacent grassy lot in full view of the townspeople---reinforcing the image (that we carefully nurtured) that the station was the most important broadcasting outlet in the region. Those vertical flying jaunts into and out of the middle of town gave all of us virtual showbiz status.

One of the most popular promotions was the annual "Santa Claus Drop" when we delivered "Ol' Saint Nick" into the downtown. A crowd of citizens, the high school band, cheerleaders, along with mobs of expectant kids and their parents, awaited Santa's "gee-whiz" arrival that usually took place on the Saturday after Thanksgiving. One year, I rode in the helicopter with Santa, and watched first-hand how the Old Boy comported himself on his big day. As we swept over the assembled multitude on the first fly-by, our operative on the ground radioed us that the crew wasn't ready for us to land, so the pilot flew the Jet Ranger out over the countryside looking for alternative excitement. He found it in the form of herd of cattle. Before I realized what he was doing, we were zooming downward at full speed to nearly ground-level---straight toward the unsuspecting cows that were nonchalantly grazing in their pasture! Rotors roaring, we pounded waist-high across the broad, grassy field until we were almost upon the oblivious bovines. In the split-second before we would have pulverized them, the pilot hauled back on the control column and our "Santa-Copter" shot skyward over the incredulous creatures and roared away! As I sat strapped in my third-row rear seat, wide-eyed, white-knuckled and gasping from the dizzying effects of the tremendous alternate gravity forces at terrific speed, the pilot whipped the gyrating, shrieking, jet-powered chopper back around into a steep, diving turn and again headed for the herd! Once more, I was lifted against the restraining seat and shoulder harnesses as we dropped, then shoved back down with the force of twice my usual weight, all the time being rocked from side-to-side, as we made another heart-stopping run at the cows (who were probably, by now, ready to stop giving milk). As we again zoomed upward, our ground-based communicator laconically radioed us that we could now fly Santa to his downtown landing, which ended our aerobic cow-chasing.

Aside from being the most powerful station in the region, our CBS Radio Network

affiliation put us in the big leagues of news coverage. In the summer of 1967, a youngish Dan Rather, who was already making a name for himself at the network, paid us a visit. The soon-to-be-famous correspondent, who had recently returned from an assignment in Vietnam, spent an entire day with us, riding in the helicopter from place to place and attending various functions around the towns. On those excursions, I flew with him, pointing out local places of interest, after which we dropped him off at the owner's estate.

Then, in what was one of the most image-enhancing ploys imaginable, the helicopter delivered me to nearby Florence State, where we made a dramatic (and loud) landing in the middle of the campus, in front of awestruck friends and hundreds of other students and faculty. When I stepped out of the 'copter, it was hard to keep a matter-of-fact expression on my face! To say the least, station promotions of this sort did wonders for my social life.

* * *

Early one morning, some weeks after Rather's visit, a tornado hopscotched across the area, doing considerable damage on Colbert Mountain, south of town. Jack Voorhies and I garnered an Associated Press award for our live helicopter coverage of the destruction, which was centered around Colbert Heights, a community situated along the ridge of the mountain. The southwest-to-northeast track the powerful twister had followed was evident, as the debris of houses and farm buildings were scattered in that direction. The very edge of the storm track was readily visible from the helicopter---in many cases a particular house was completely demolished, but its next-door neighbor was untouched. This pattern of destruction continued for miles in the direction the storm had taken. In some instances, only the foundations of houses remained; the walls and roofs lay flat on the ground, hundreds of yards away. Farther beyond, in the adjacent fields, lumber and household furnishings of all description were piled in disarray. We could see straight down into living areas of roofless homes whose contents had been vacuumed away by the suction of the twister. In the midst of all this carnage, cows milled around in bewilderment as their pasture fences had been ripped-up and re-deposited some distance away, leaving them without their familiar boundaries. Nature's terrifying power was forcefully demonstrated, and our story won an Associated Press Award as the best "News Special" broadcast in the state that year.

● * *

Sometime later, when I was working at the local TV station I was invited to cover the local Army Reserve's regular paratrooper training exercise, at the riverfront park in Florence. The commander of the group thought it would be good publicity for me to fly in the helicopter, to shoot film and describe the paratroopers' leaps from the aircraft. Before we took off, the Jumpmaster stuffed me into a jumpsuit and strapped me into a regulation parachute harness, minus the parachute. About a dozen fully- equipped troops then climbed aboard the olive-drab U.S. Army helicopter of a type that had seen much service in Vietnam. The green-clad, camouflaged soldiers took their places on uncomfortable-looking benches on both sides of the spartan cabin, each row facing the other. On command, they buckled their ripcord straps onto a cable that ran overhead from the front to the rear of the 'copter's cabin. I took a position in a jump-seat at the rear of the aircraft, next to the big open doors on each side. As purely an afterthought, even though I didn't have a parachute, I also buckled my harness ripcord strap onto

the cable--a very fortunate move, although I had no way of knowing it at the time.

With dust flying all around us, we lifted off, then immediately spun around just above the ground and assumed a nose-down attitude as we roared off over the treetops at full speed. Climbing at a steep angle, we pounded downriver several miles, all the while gaining altitude.

As the paratroopers adjusted their gear and the jumpmaster issued a steady stream of instructions, I fingered my camera and flipped on the portable tape recorder strapped to my waist. A red light on the forward wall started flashing---evidently a warning, as the troops tensed. While the helicopter executed a series of sharp turns, then flew straight again, gravity forces alternately shoved us down into our seats, then released its grip.

Looking out the big open doors on both sides, I could see that we were approaching the drop-zone, three-thousand feet below us. A moment later, the troops stood and gripped their rip-cords that were affixed to the fore-and-aft overhead cable. The jumpmaster shouted an order, whereupon the paratroopers dashed for the side openings, each leaping in turn out into the void. I leaned out the open right door as far as I dared, snapping pictures as the parachutes opened. Seen from above, the unusual downward photo angle made the white parachute canopies appear as if a line of outsized mushrooms were floating in midair.

With the troops gone, I relaxed and checked my camera. But at that moment, the pilot swung the chopper into a sharp left turn---and I lost my grip at the edge of the door frame! In a split-second, I was swept out into space---hanging in my harness, tethered to the helicopter only by the ripcord line that I had earlier and casually clipped onto the cable! For long seconds, I hung helplessly, eight feet straight out from the yawning door, as the helicopter made a tight left turn with the two sets of triple-rotor blades streaking just above my head! Then the pilot reversed his course, whipping the chopper into a steep right turn! The gyrating aircraft literally flew itself into me, as I shot back through the gaping door onto the floor! The wide-eyed jumpmaster grabbed my leg as I slid across the deck, which kept me from again sailing out the opposite door into the void! The frantic soldier stabbed the intercom button and yelled for the pilot to land---fast!

In a few minutes, we were safely back on the ground, by which time, although shaken, we could talk sensibly about the experience. The pilot shook his head in amazement and said that I was still alive only because I had casually hooked the ripcord onto the safety line before we had taken off! He added that it was a huge miracle I had not been thrown into the spinning rotor blades while I was hanging outside the gyrating chopper!

* * *

At the height of the Cold War, from the late-'fifties into the early-'seventies, all across the country there was a big emphasis on Civil Defense. The listeners of other local stations were told to tune to us for official information if an emergency should arise, which re-enforced our belief that our AM-FMs were the most important broadcast operations in the area. In the mid-'sixties, through a government grant, the transmitter building was "hardened" to include a protective roof and walls, an emergency diesel electrical generator, and a functioning control room, from where we could broadcast should the main studios become disabled due to an act of war or a natural disaster. From time-to-time, to test the standby setup, we would do a disc-jockey show from the shelter. The transition was so smooth, the listening audience had no idea we had moved our program to the protected location, unless we talked about it on the air.

There were other, more subtle evidences that the uncertain world situation had cast its

malign influence over our towns. There was a setting (Number "9") on the CBS Radio "Net-Alert" receiver in the control room that was designated, "National Emergency." With the Soviets growling threats toward us with un-nerving regularity, I often wondered if that particular number would ever flash, but, fortunately, while I was there---it never did.

Once a week, we had to test the "Emergency Broadcast System," whose familiar announcement began with, "This is a test---of the Emergency Broadcast System . . . For the next sixty seconds this station will be conducting a test of the Emergency Broadcast System . . . we repeat---this is *ONLY* a test---" Then, a tone sounded for ten seconds, after which the announcer returned with, "This has been a test of the Emergency Broadcast System . . . If this had been an *ACTUAL* emergency, you would have been told where to tune in your area for official information . . . this concludes this test of the Emergency Broadcast System---" It was a program interruption that continues, in updated versions, to this day.

In addition to conducting these weekly tests, we also had to monitor a powerful station in Nashville and note on the technical log whenever it broadcast its own tests. In the control room equipment rack, a special receiver tripped whenever that station transmitted its test signal. It was all part of a national warning system that was supposed to warn citizens of an impending nuclear attack.

For thousands of radio and television station control room operators around the country, including me, a vivid event, still remembered to this day by those to whom it happened, took place one day while I was on the air with my program. Each Saturday morning at 10:33 A.M., and on Sunday evenings at 7:33 PM, NORAD, the '*North American Air Defense Command*' aircraft and missile early warning system, located deep inside Cheyenne Mountain at Colorado Springs, Colorado, conducted a test. The normal procedure was for NORAD to send a signal off a punch-tape that automatically over-rode the news teletypes of all the radio and television stations in the United States. It was so routine that hardly anyone paid much attention to it, as all we had to do was to log the test as having been received and attach a copy of the teletype report to the technical log. The test always began with ten rings of the teletype bell, followed by:

XX

**TESTING EMERGENCY ACTION NOTIFICATION SYSTEM REPEAT
TESTING EMERGENCY ACTION NOTIFICATION SYSTEM.**

**IF THIS WERE NOT A TEST YOU WOULD BE GIVEN A SPECIAL
AUTHENTICATOR WORD, INCLUDING A POSSIBLE ATTACK WARNING
MESSAGE.**

**THIS CONCLUDES THIS TEST OF THE EMERGENCY ACTION
NOTIFICATION SYSTEM. 10:33 A.M.**

XX

Ten more dings of the bell would follow.

Each month, the Department of Defense sent us a small manila envelope that we hung on a

hook in the alcove by the front door next to the Associated Press teletype. At the end of the month, as per strict orders of the government, we sent the envelope back to Washington, *unopened*, and another envelope took its place on the hook. This procedure was followed by every broadcast station in the United States that had a news teletype---which is to say nearly every one---and continued for all the years I was at the radio station. Inside the envelope, we were told, was a list of the dates of the month, with a different "Authenticator" word listed beside each date. There were some very specific instructions printed on the outside of the envelope, including a warning in heavy black letters that the FBI would investigate if it was ever tampered with or sent back opened. Many times I looked at the envelope with curiosity mixed with a vague fear that I might somehow open it by mistake and bring the FBI down onto me.

On that particular Saturday morning, I happened to be standing by the teletype when the alarm bell sounded. A few seconds later, I glanced at the text that was printing, and did a double-take---for the message coming over the teletype looked something like this:

XX

**THIS IS AN ATTACK WARNING. THE AUTHENTICATOR WORD IS (- - - -).
VALIDATE THE AUTHENTICATOR WORD (- - - -) FOR THIS DATE, WHICH
IS IN YOUR POSSESSION. UPON CONFIRMATION OF THE AUTHENTICATOR
WORD, ANNOUNCE THAT THE UNITED STATES IS UNDER A NUCLEAR
ATTACK AND THAT THIS STATION IS LEAVING THE AIR.**

**REPEAT: UPON CONFIRMATION OF THE AUTHENTICATOR WORD,
ANNOUNCE THAT THIS IS AN ATTACK WARNING AND THIS STATION IS
LEAVING THE AIR. 10:33 A.M.**

XX

Even as the "X's" started printing out, the alarm bell began ringing non-stop. As the bell clanged on, I stared aghast at the chilling notification, not sure what to do. Were incoming Soviet nuclear warheads about to explode on top of us? I yelled down the corridor to the Chief Engineer, who was in his office. He took one look at the incredible teletype message and gasped in incredulous disbelief.

"Should I announce we're under attack and sign off?" I asked him, wide-eyed.

"Open the envelope."

With shaking hands, I lifted the Government envelope off its hook and tore it open, realizing that---for better or worse---the FBI would surely investigate what I was now doing. I pulled out the single sheet of paper, located the authenticator word that was next to that day's date, and placed it by the word on the teletype message.

The words matched!

I thought the floor would drop out from underneath me; the older man's face was ashen. I had just turned to run back to the control room, when the teletype's alarm bells suddenly erupted anew. "Wait!" the technician called to me. "Look at this!" I dashed back to the front alcove where the teletype was rapping out a new message: *We were NOT under attack!* There had been an error at Cheyenne Mountain, the missive continued. Someone had played the wrong punch-tape!

"Of course!" I slapped my forehead, then my colleague on his back, as we both let out a long breath. "This is when they always run the Saturday test! I should have noticed that!"

A few minutes later, the story of the mistaken attack warning led the network news. All across the country, as it turned out, thousands of radio and television stations had actually announced that the United States was under a nuclear attack, and had gone off the air!

(Thirty years later, when I was with a radio station in Houston, Texas, a colleague and I discussed this incident. His experience at a Corpus Christi station that day had mirrored mine.)

There was a lot of hysteria concerning Civil Defense in the mid-'sixties. In one instance, with a great deal of fanfare, a competing radio station stuffed one of its disc jockeys into a tiny underground fallout shelter, from where he originated his radio show for two weeks. The whole idea was to portray that station as being defense-minded (and, incidently, to sell a particular brand of fallout shelter kit). To the fellow's credit, he lasted the entire two weeks in his claustrophobic, hermetically-sealed chamber, and emerged bedraggled a fortnight later to a hero's welcome. Along with his acclaim, the station pointed out that there had been a rise in local shelter sales during the promotion, that, without a doubt, pleased his bosses.

About that time, the Department of Defense's Office of Civil Defense selected thousands of heavy buildings, underground structures and other locations around the country, that were stocked with supplies for a specified number of people, and were marked with a distinctive (in those days) "*FALLOUT SHELTER*" sign, complete with logo.

As it turned out, I had my own experiences inside fallout shelters. When I was assigned to the station's news department, I became acquainted with the county's Civil Defense Director, an elderly gentleman whose low-key manner belied his passion for protecting the citizens from whatever dangers he thought could conceivably come along. He convinced me to take a course in "Fallout Shelter Management Instruction," which he insisted was very important to public safety I had never considered how involved running a fallout shelter was, until I spent a weekend in Montgomery, buried deep underground in the State Emergency Operations Center. For three days, a team of Department of Defense officials ran us two dozen volunteers, who came from around the state, through an exhausting course of survival methods, procedures and drills. The course's objective was for us to be able to instruct others back home to become Fallout Shelter Managers, and included some topics that were obvious and other subjects that were rather surprising. As it was expected that a typical fallout shelter would likely house hundreds of people---total strangers to each other, for the most part in close quarters for up to several weeks---matters such as sanitation, food, air quality, entertainment and security would become very important. Under such conditions, it would become necessary to set up a "government," with the fallout shelter manager assuming what amounted to dictatorial powers. For example, the manager had the authority to lock the door when the shelter reached its capacity, which would likely doom to death those who were left outside in a nuclear situation. Should anyone cause serious trouble during the stay in the shelter, the manager had the authority to have him (or her) confined, and even *executed* should that person's behavior adversely affect the overall safety of the others.

By the time I came forth from my stay in the underground chamber, I was certified by the University of Alabama, the State of Alabama and the United States Department of Defense to teach the "Fallout Shelter Management" course. Soon afterward, when I instructed several groups of citizens, the most dramatic and memorable moments were the "lock the doors," and the

"confine-or-kill the rabble-rousers" parts, which invariably brought forth stunned gasps and a roomful of raised eyebrows.

A friend of mine taught a related course in "Radiological Monitoring," that involved measuring the amount of radiation present after a nuclear blast. This was a critical matter, as no one could venture outside the fallout shelter until the radiation had receded to a specified, safe level. Therefore, each fallout shelter had to have someone who was certified to measure the radiation levels.

The Station manager, sensing a public-relations coup, volunteered my services as the Information Director for the county Civil Defense organization. Once a year, the group held an exercise in the county Emergency Operations Center, that was located in the basement of the Court House Annex. For an entire weekend, all the governmental officials of the cities and the county were jammed into the musty space that was crammed with boxes of emergency supplies, where we ran simulated emergencies that ranged from tornadoes to nuclear war. My job was to broadcast "official information," from the sequestered (and sweating) government people through our station's "hardened" transmitters to the outside world. These pretended disasters were both instructive and sobering, as we had an important responsibility to public safety that went beyond just being locked up in the basement of a building for a weekend.

Civil Defense was serious business in those days, with the Vietnam War at its height and the Soviets issuing constant threats against us. We were told that everyone in the Soviet Union had a fallout shelter assignment, and that their citizens were far better prepared for a nuclear war than were we Americans. All of this added to the urgency of our fallout shelter courses, which were widely promoted by public service advertisements.

There were other avenues whereby citizens could become involved with Civil Defense. A memorable television announcement exhorted viewers to join the "Ground Observer Corps," a volunteer organization that scanned the skies for enemy (presumably, Soviet) bombers that could have ostensibly appeared over us. The grainy, black-and-white commercial featured a small group of earnest-looking men and women and a couple of freckle-faced, sandy-haired pre-adolescent boys on a flat rooftop somewhere, all of whom were shown peering intently skyward through binoculars. As the commercial unwound, the sinister, silver underside of a four-engined propeller-driven bomber slid out from behind a high, smoky-gray cloud directly overhead. At once, one of the binocular-wielding youngsters excitedly pointed upward, whereupon an anxious-looking adult grabbed a military field telephone that materialized next to him. Then, as the bomber (that looked suspiciously like an American B-29 of World War II vintage) disgorged its lethal load, the screen dissolved into a pattern of bombs exploding on the ground. All the while, a terse male voice implored viewers to "Join the Ground Observer Corps." At the end, the urgent voice announced that the message was presented by the "Office of Civil and Defense Mobilization . . . Leo A. Hoegh, Director." (For some reason, the man's name, that was pronounced, "Hoy," was noticeably emphasized, and is still remembered by many.) The scary commercial ran for about a decade, until the mid-'sixties, by which time one would have supposed our nation's early-warning radar systems had become more capable than adolescent eyes in detecting enemy bombers flying overhead.

It was around that time that I returned to college for another of my periodic attempts at getting my degree. I took an advanced photography course that stressed taking photos of everyday objects in unusual situations. One of my pictures, that of a battered ladder-backed rocking-chair basking in the late-afternoon sun on the front porch of an old farmhouse, was published full-page in the local newspaper. I found that I had a knack for posing people and composing outdoor scenes, and developed a distinctive "close-up" style. I learned to do portraits, and actually got paid for several of those early sessions, which, technically, made me a professional photographer, although I didn't start out with that objective in mind. It didn't take me long to make the pleasant discovery that being handy with a camera was a terrific way to meet new people (especially young women).

Along with the photography class assignments, I took hundreds of pictures for the sheer enjoyment of it, sometimes with amusing results. One time, I set my camera on a tripod for a dramatic shot of a long bridge, intending to place myself in the lower corner of the picture, gazing (importantly) out at the water. After setting the automatic timer, I ran to where I was supposed to stand. However, the timer tripped before it was supposed to, and the resulting picture showed me from the backside, looking as if I was madly running into the river!

Late one very cold, cloudy, January, 1968 afternoon, a carload of fellow photography students and I crammed into my red Volkswagen and drove a short distance outside of Florence to the crumbled, cremated remains of the ante-bellum "Forks of Cypress" plantation house that had burned to the ground a couple of years earlier. The sentinel columns that had majestically surrounded the once-palatial home in happier times now stood in sad, stark, blackened rows; bleak and forlorn against the blustery wintery sky. While we shot several rolls of film of the ruined mansion and of abandoned farm implements strewn in disarray around the grounds, it started snowing and the temperature began to drop. In no time, a dusting of snow entirely changed the artistic effects of our pictures.

While we were taking our snowy photos, a poor old broken-down horse stumbled into our midst. The freezing animal was about the most pathetic creature any of us had ever seen, shivering uncontrollably with a layer of ice and snow across its back. But we had no idea who or where its owner was. We tried to comfort it as best as we could, but, as it was getting dark by that time, we had no choice but to leave it to its fate. As we drove away, the unfortunate animal gazed mournfully over the barbed-wire fence at us, still shaking under its mantle of ice and snow.

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In a remarkable series of coincidences, on several occasions, big news events happened while I was processing pictures in my upstairs hallway darkroom. One evening, my sister called up the staircase to me. "Come down here, quick!" she shouted. "Listen to this!" On the screen, President Lyndon Johnson was making a televised statement.

". . . therefore, I will not be a candidate for my party's nomination for another term," Johnson drawled into the camera, a strained expression on his face. "If nominated I will not run----if elected, I will not serve!" My sister and I looked at each other in amazement. The Vietnam war was bringing down the President! It was a stunning moment in history that we had just seen and heard on live television.

That summer, in Chicago, the Democratic National Convention was wracked by violence and controversy, as street riots and alleged police brutality threw the official proceedings into disarray. Those disturbances were an outgrowth of all the anti-war sentiment that had, in fact, finished Lyndon Johnson as President of the United States.

The parade of stunning news stories continued in that fateful year of 1968. Several weeks later, late one evening as I printed pictures while a popular television show's audio ran in the background, I overheard an announcer break into the program with a shocking news bulletin: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the most prominent figure of the civil rights movement, then at its climax, had been shot by a sniper at a Memphis motel and killed!

Not long after the King assassination, one evening as I was developing another batch of pictures in my upstairs darkroom, I overheard another startling news bulletin burst out of the downstairs television. Once again, I dropped everything and raced down the steps as the stupefying story unfolded: Robert F. Kennedy, the late President's brother, a candidate for the Democratic Party's nomination in that year's Presidential Election, had been shot and killed in a hotel kitchen in Los Angeles!

By now, I could only shake my head and wonder what the country was coming to, with these assassinations and all the other incredible events that seemed to be happening in rapid succession as 1968 staggered along.

In November, in my first opportunity to vote for President, Richard Nixon was elected on a platform of promises to end our involvement in the Vietnam War. But at the end of the year, before Nixon could be inaugurated, the entire country was shocked by the bloody carnage of the "Tet" Offensive, in which the North Vietnamese launched a massive, coordinated attack all across South Vietnam, killing hundreds of Americans in a matter of days. Much later, it became clear that the Tet Offensive had been the first link in a long chain of events that eventually brought defeat to United States forces in Southeast Asia at a terrible cost in American lives and national treasure.

* * *

Just South of Wilson Dam, on the Tennessee Valley Authority Reservation (known locally as the "TVA Reservation"), a relatively narrow, multi-storied factory building stood about two-hundred yards back from the winding, manicured roadway, just beyond a small forest of trees. A high fence, topped by a layer of barbed wire, surrounded the structure that bore no identifying signs, although it was plainly visible from the road and was lighted from top to bottom at night. Looking at it, one would have naturally assumed it was part of the adjacent TVA fertilizer plant. Even many local citizens had no idea of the true purpose of the facility, which, in reality, was part of the nation's defense establishment. For the plant, whose name was an innocent-sounding, "Phosphate Development Works," manufactured a component of nerve gas. Although restricted by international treaties that supposedly limited the deadly chemicals, the United States, nevertheless, had an active program that developed and manufactured chemical weapons, of which "P.D.W.," as the building was popularly called, was an integral part.

The father of a friend of mine was a chemical engineer in that plant, and he once hinted that the nerve gas was so deadly, it was made in component parts in widely-separated locations

around the country, one of which was the Phosphate Development Works. They were ultimately combined in a weapons laboratory somewhere to produce the actual chemical weapons, that may have taken the form of bombs, missile warheads, or both. The place was so cloaked in security that my chum's Dad would not talk much about it, despite my proddings. An air of secrecy surrounded the plant, and there was rarely any publicity given out about it. The other local TVA facilities, for example, held charitable blood drives and United Way campaigns that were reported in the local newspapers. But nothing of the sort was ever mentioned about the mysterious factory. Even published Government budget reports that listed the expenditures of all the local facilities were vague in their treatment of the plant. It seemed as if---in addition to the physical fences---an impenetrable intellectual wall also surrounded it.

* * *

Although the "Ku Klux Klan" had been founded right after the Civil War only about forty miles north of us, in Pulaski, Tennessee, I had never seen or heard of any KKK activity in the Shoals, until the summer of 1968, when our newsroom received a startling "invitation" to cover a Klan rally in Florence. As I mulled-over the strange note, trying to decide how to handle the story, I absently turned over the letter---as if the back-side was booby-trapped. It wasn't. Taking a deep breath, I made my decision: "I'll do it!"

At the appointed time, when I drove onto the parking lot of the Coliseum, where the Klan rally was to be held, the first thing I saw was a huge wooden cross erected about a hundred feet from the building's entrance. The cross was wrapped in burlap bags, and a phalanx of scowling Klansmen in their white outfits, each of whom held a torch handle in his hands, surrounded it. When I walked toward them, they violently shook their heads, frowned and gestured at me to back away. I then observed that none of the costumed men were wearing their pointed hoods, although I could see that each of them had one tied underneath the sash of his robe.

Shuddering, I went inside and found a seat in an area down in a front corner that was marked, '*PRESS SECTION*'. About a dozen other newsmen, some of whom I recognized, had also crowded into the small press area. Huge posters and portraits of George Wallace were arrayed all around the big arena, along with "Wallace for President," Wallace's "Stand Up for America," campaign slogan and "Vote for the American Independent Party" posters. Others advocated "White Supremacy," and other racist messages. From the looks of things, the Klan gathering would also be a "George Wallace for President" rally.

As I looked around, an uncertain feeling began to come over me "Is it safe to be a newsman in this place?" I wondered.

After a few minutes, a silent procession of several hundred white-robed men filed down the aisles and took seats in rows of folding chairs. As soon as all the Klansmen were seated, a grim-faced, robed man swaggered onto the stage, whereupon all the men arose from their folding chairs, yelling and cheering, stomping their feet and whooping "Rebel yells." The rafters rang with the robed men's shouts.

After a minute or so, the waves of cheering subsided and the Ku Klux Klan rally got underway in earnest. In all, a half-dozen speakers went to the podium to denounce blacks in general, and several well-known names of the currently ongoing Civil Rights movement in particular, along with other minorities the Klan evidently despised. Their leader, the main speaker, a gangly, hard-bitten-looking individual with a prominent bobbing Adam's apple, commenced a blistering attack on everyone and everything he considered to be anti-Klan---just

about every mainstream entity.

At one point, he pointed toward us in our "Press Section," and launched into a snarling tirade against the "news media," that he said took "un-American" stands against the Klan and its "cherished ideals." As if on cue, all the assembled Klansmen turned and glared at us. For a long uncertain moment, I feared we might be harmed---until the glowering "leader" at length turned away, his Adam's apple bobbing anew and his lips curling with sneering contempt as he began another acid attack on alleged Klan antagonists.

As the mass meeting went on, sure enough, before long it became a full-fledged "George Wallace for President" rally, complete with solicitations for campaign contributions to the American Independent Party. Wallace and his running mate, retired Air Force General Curtis LeMay (who had commanded the bomber group that had dropped the atomic weapons on Japan's Hiroshima and Nagasaki), were praised in glowing terms as men who would preserve "States Rights," and other institutions which seemed to be so important to the Klansmen.

After what seemed to be a very long while (but what was probably only about an hour), the rally concluded and the men began to disperse. In a hurry, we newsmen gathered up our materials and also prepared to get out of there as fast as possible. As I was stuffing notes into my briefcase, I heard someone loudly clear his throat. Looking up, a grinning robed Klansman was standing before me, with his hand extended. Impulsively, I took his proffered handshake, at the same time mentally reeling as I realized who he was---a very prominent member of our Baptist Church congregation! Standing next to him, in *his* white Klan outfit, was another familiar face from the same church! *At least two members of the church where I attended belonged to the Ku Klux Klan!* Although they seemed eager to keep talking, in haste I disengaged myself from the officious two and made for the exit.

Outside, in the dark parking lot, hundreds of Klansmen had surrounded the burlap-covered cross, where scores of flickering torches cast weird reflections all around. When the robed men recognized me as one of the "hated" newsmen, a murmur of voices arose. Not wishing to tempt fate by hanging around any longer than possible, I made a dash for my car and sped away.

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One Saturday afternoon not long after the Klan experience in the fall of that year of 1968, I happened to be driving by the Colbert County Courthouse, where I observed a large crowd of people gathered on the lawn. Curious, I pulled over and sauntered up to the edge of the multitude.

"What's going on?" I asked a gaunt, leather-necked man clad in overalls and a flannel shirt who was standing at the rear of the assembly with a rapturous expression on his face.

"George Wallace is here!" he beamed, in a state of euphoria. "He just arrived and is goin' to give a speech!" the excited fellow went on.

Sure enough, I spotted, down in front of the crowd on the side courthouse portico the famous politician in a white shirt and a tie (but no coat--it was a hot day), as he began to address the assembly. In a loud voice, Wallace gave a short, spirited speech, striding back and forth across the porch between the columns, constantly punching his fist into his hand for emphasis in his typical gesture; doubtless energized by the whooping crowd and occasional "Rebel yells." Toward the end of his speech, a florid-faced fellow puffed up waving a Confederate flag on a short pole, that brought forth another round of loud cheers, whistles and yells.

Such was the South in the late-'sixties.

Several months before Wallace's term as governor ended, he floated the idea of his wife

succeeding him---he would become her "number-one-advisor," as he put it. The suggestion caught on and she subsequently went into office in a landslide as the first woman ever elected Governor of Alabama. Lurleen Wallace continued her husband's policies; there were no noticeable changes in the way things were done. Mrs. Wallace, who, at first glance, hardly looked the part of a state's Chief Executive, grew into the job and became surprisingly assertive in a manner that belied her modest background.

About a year after she took office, she visited Florence State. Except for a little-remembered occasion when, as a youngster, I had shaken hands with Governor John Patterson, I had never seen a current governor. Even though I knew that governors were honored at every turn, I was hardly prepared for the pomp and ceremony that attended Mrs. Wallace's visit to the campus. I got there early and took a front-row bleacher seat in the old gymnasium (now the Media Center). By the time she was scheduled to arrive, the crowd had swelled to perhaps a thousand students and townspeople who jammed onto the bleachers and into temporary seats in the "Old-English" style building. As the radio station had assigned others to cover the story, I got in as a regular student, which meant I was able to enjoy the proceedings without having to concern myself with any news reporting.

Presently, we heard sirens shrieking outside and a couple of minutes later a booming voice called out, "All rise for the governor!" The gathering came to its feet, and over the top of the throng I could make out the bobbing, distinctive hats of Alabama State Troopers as a dozen or so of the officers strode briskly down a middle aisle to thunderous applause that reverberated inside the tightly-packed arena. In the midst of the Troopers was a smallish, brown-haired woman in a business suit.. As the procession wound its way onto a temporary stage that was erected at one end of the gymnasium, I recognized the well-dressed lady as the governor, who nodded and smiled at the throng.

After the introduction of dignitaries and some carefully-crafted complimentary comments by college officials, the governor delivered in a clear, resonant voice a short, upbeat speech. Although she was not an experienced speaker (Mrs. Wallace had been a rural-bred housewife before she was elected governor), I considered her performance to be as good or better than what one would have expected from a practiced politician. When she finished, the same big voice as before thundered out, "All rise, for the governor!" and the assembled multitude once more roared to its feet as the Troopers escorted Mrs. Wallace back outside. It was an impressive display of ceremonial politics.

Not long after her appearance at Florence State, she was diagnosed with cancer. For months, she battled the disease and had to leave the state for lengthy periods of time for treatment at the M.D. Anderson cancer hospital in Houston, Texas. During these absences, the Lieutenant Governor, Albert Brewer, of Decatur, took over as acting governor

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Several months after Mrs. Wallace's visit to Florence State, early one morning, I was jolted awake before sunrise by the ringing telephone. On the other end of the line was the station manager, with the news that Mrs. Wallace had died overnight, and that they needed me in the newsroom. As the death of the governor was not unexpected, I had already prepared some biographical material for the station to use at the appropriate time. Albert Brewer, a young attorney, was sworn-in later that day, ending for the time being the Wallace dynasty in the Statehouse, which had, by that time, lasted almost a decade. (Later, George Wallace would again be elected and serve as governor a second time. During that tenure, he signed the University diploma that I had, at long-last, earned.)

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Not long after Albert Brewer became governor, I was invited to a commemoration dinner in Haleyville, a town about an hour's drive south of Muscle Shoals. The new governor was on hand for the occasion, which was to honor a long-time legislator and political kingmaker who was from there.

When the dinner and speeches had concluded, I managed to introduce myself to Governor Brewer, and, after asking him some politically-oriented questions, made a request: Could he tape a few station promotional announcements for us? Almost to my surprise, he nodded, whereupon I whipped out some scripts I "just- happened" to have with me. Everyone around us were then treated to the spectacle of the Governor of Alabama recording commercials for our radio station's programs and listener contests!