

"MORE NEWS, IN A MOMENT . . . "

By John S. Halbert

Whenever I needed to get away from it all, I turned to my old standby: Photography. As I had pretty much outgrown the upstairs hallway darkroom, my friend Frank and I combined our equipment and set up a photo lab in his basement. Those were halcyon nights and days as each Friday after I got off from the radio station at midnight, he and I processed pictures until nearly dawn. Joe, a radio colleague, often joined us, and we had a great time down there in that basement with our tanks, trays and enlargers, listening to rock music on Chicago radio stations and munching junk food all through the night. It was in those sessions that we developed our "glamour" style, as we made the marvelous discovery that many coeds from college enjoyed being photographed. Our cameras thus became wonderful instruments of introduction to girls. It was all good, clean fun, and we rewarded our exuberant student models with enlargements of their favorite pictures of themselves. Several of the girls' parents were sufficiently impressed with our work that they framed our pictures of their daughters and hung them prominently in their homes.

* * *

Shortly before the Christmas school vacation break one year, I had a telephone call from Mr. Threadgill, who had been my school principal from the second through the eighth grade, and who was still the Headmaster. He asked me to take a series of pictures at the Atlanta Avenue School, which was in its last year of use before being torn down and replaced with a new building. Mr. Threadgill wanted me to produce a yearbook-like souvenir booklet as a memento of the old school and its last classes of students.

As I took group photos of each teacher's class and scenes of the building, waves of nostalgia came over me. I located my eighth-grade locker, situated directly across the hall from the principal's office, in what (for me) had been a most inconvenient location, as we boys had often used it as a sort of headquarters for some of our infamous juvenile pranks. ("The Great Baby Frogs Caper" had originated in that locker.) The wooden-floor hallways---always shiny and a little slippery after being oiled-down---still looked much the same as when I had walked them years earlier. My nose once more tingled from the distinctive, pungent-aromatic smell of the red sawdust-like floor cleaner the custodians used with their push-brooms.

In the cafeteria, I could have sworn the same old equipment I had known as a youngster was still in use---the manual dishwasher and the antique ice cream machine were still there. Were the students still eating off the same plates we had used decades earlier? For that matter, were they the same plates and utensils my *father* had used in the 1920's and the 1930's, when *he* had attended the same school? As the day's lunch hour had just concluded, the cafeteria still had the familiar school-lunchtime aroma that brought back vivid memories.

In the auditorium---now silent and empty---things still looked pretty much the same as they had been at the weekly chapel meetings we had attended all through elementary and junior high school. Behind the stage, the big painted mural still dominated the rear wall. The taupe stage

curtains looked, as they always had, as if they could use a good dry-cleaning. The gold-fringed American Flag that we had saluted and pledged allegiance to from the second grade until I went off to high school still flowed down its wooden staff at the side of the stage, albeit now a bit washed-out-looking. Two squat, empty, white-painted planters were still in place on the left and right edges of the platform. The heavy black podium presided from its usual front place at center-stage, although there were now noticeable scratches and scuff marks on it. The painted wooden trim that surrounded the stage on all sides now had a dull, faded appearance. The hundreds of folding chairs we had sat on and arranged and re-arranged at the principal's behest were now stacked against the walls, looking very tired.

I remembered the "Cub-Scout" meetings I had attended in the auditorium every fourth Thursday night for years while in elementary school. I stepped up onto the stage to where we had once performed our Elizabethan "This is Thy Life---Robin Hood" skit in the fourth grade---the first time, by the way, I had ever delivered a commercial, even if it was a parody of a real one:

~
*"Proctor's Practical Pike-staffs! The staff with the SUPERIOR spike! '
'Tis a Proctor', 'tis no Gamble!"*
~

Stuff like that.

Another time we put on an Indian tribe skit, memorable because part of the play required us to smoke a "peace-pipe" (actually a self-made wooden "prop") during the performance---but several of us (including me) started choking on the fake "smoke", to the amusement of the audience. And there were other skits, many others. For a moment, it seemed as if I could still see us nine boys onstage in costumes delivering our pre-adolescent punch-lines to our parents' and friends' laughter and applause.

Leaving the now-vacant auditorium, I tramped down into the musty subterranean furnace room, where the ancient boiler carried on, gurgling and clanking, still shooting its pungent little puffs of steam out through the rusty pipe joints, as it always had. The old coal shovel with which I had seen the custodian fire the furnace many times leaned forlornly against the coal bunker. The dank room had a decaying look to it, and was obviously in its last days. Adjusting my camera, I shot some photos of the outdated furnace and boiler in what would undoubtedly be my last visit down there.

I went outside and walked around the school grounds for one last time, stopping here and there to take a picture or two, all the while reminiscing about the melancholy-looking old building in which I had spent so much of my youth.

The veteran school was still a solidly-handsome, three-story brick-and-stone structure with the year "1918" in foot-high, stone-carved numerals over the main entrance. The building had originally been built as the Sheffield High School, and had served as such until the late-'thirties, when it was gutted by fire. Even though rebuilt as an elementary and junior high school and still structurally sound, its crime now was that it was old . . . just too old---

I finished my photo shoot and put the camera back into its case. Standing at the rear of the school building, I looked across the small cobblestone parking lot at a big rectangular pattern of foundation stones outlined on the ground---the only remnants of where, for decades, the companion of the Atlanta Avenue building, the two-story, brick-and-stone Annapolis Avenue School, had once stood. I walked over onto the now-barren site of so many of my youthful adventures. The pair of brick structures had formed a complex with instruction from the first through the eighth grades. But when a new Junior High School was built on the bluff

overlooking the Tennessee River in the early-'sixties, the Annapolis Avenue School was torn down. The Atlanta Avenue building, now an elementary school, had trooped on alone for a few more years, until . . . now, its days were also nearing an end.

Just beyond where the Annapolis Avenue School had been, I could see the new replacement building now nearing completion---a fine, modern, concrete-and-glass structure---functionally a great improvement over the old buildings. But I knew it would never be able to match the history or the charm of the Annapolis and Atlanta Avenue Schools.

* * *

A newsman is supposed to be aloof from the stories he covers---just reporting the facts, and all that. At times, for me, this was difficult when violence, tragedy and children were involved. In a case that gripped the entire community, a two-year old girl was beaten by her parents so cruelly as punishment for a minor infraction that she died of a ruptured bladder. At the ensuing trial, I was called to jury duty, from which I was excused when I told the court I had covered the story as a news reporter and had already formed some strong private opinions as to whether or not the parents were guilty. A complicating factor was that the defendants had only recently moved to town from out-of-state.

The story had so inflamed the townspeople that no local attorney would touch the case, and a young lawyer, also newly arrived in town, was appointed to represent them. As the disturbing details of the child's death were revealed during the trial, a wave of revulsion came over the entire community, and by the time the jury rendered its guilty verdict, the defense lawyer was so unpopular that he soon afterward left town in disgrace. (Some insist he was run out of town.)

Another time, there was a house fire and a toddler was missing. What made this story especially wrenching for me was that the fire happened in the same neighborhood where I lived at the time. I took my microphone and a camera inside the gutted dwelling. Later, while re-packing my equipment, I happened to glance down behind a charred sofa, where, on the blackened floor, I spotted a gray object in the shape of a small human. At first, I thought it was a doll, but when I looked more closely, I saw in horror that it was actually the burned-up body of the missing child!

Early one Sunday evening, while I was having dinner in a popular Florence restaurant with a friend, a State Trooper came to our table. As many local law enforcement officers cooperated with me on police-related news stories, he had recognized me as I sat in the booth. "There's been a terrible wreck . . . out on the new highway construction project---seven people are dead." He went on that the vehicles were being towed to a local wrecking lot and the bodies would soon be at a particular funeral home.

We arrived at the wrecking yard just as the death cars were being brought in. I would have never believed it was possible for two vehicles to be so totally demolished, unless I had actually seen them with my own eyes. The cars had collided head-on at full speed on a new section of the highway that was not yet officially open. The horrific impact had compressed the front halves of both big sedans accordion-like all the way back to the rear of the front doors. The mangled V-8 engines were in the cars' rear seats. The thick, heavy drive shaft of one car was bent double and had punched a hole in the roof. Seven people had lost their lives---even a pet dog in one of the cars was dead.

After surveying the sobering wreckage of the two cars, we drove to the funeral home, where the wreck victims' bodies were just arriving. When I walked through the door, the first thing I

saw was an elderly man lying peacefully on a stretcher, as if sleeping. The man was dead. Several other corpses were lying about on ambulance gurneys. Through an open doorway, I observed the ghastly sight of the funeral director re-shaping a woman's bloody leg. I turned away, stunned by the carnage. Ironically, the smashup had happened when some of the victims had been on their way to attend a wake at another funeral home.

As it turned out, there were so many fatal accidents on that same fifteen-mile stretch of roadway over a relatively short period of time, that the State Highway Department erected a huge sign over the thoroughfare in both directions:

WARNING: YOU ARE NOW ENTERING THE HIGHWAY OF DEATH!

* * *

One Sunday afternoon, as I was driving down Woodward Avenue in Muscle Shoals, I heard sudden loud sirens behind me. Looking into the rear-view mirror, I was startled to see a solid phalanx of Alabama State Troopers, Sheriff's and city police cars converging on my rear bumper. What must have been a dozen or more squad cars, with lights flashing and sirens screaming, raced past me down the thoroughfare and disappeared. Wondering what could have happened, I switched on the car's radio. An excited announcer was just coming on the air with the bulletin: The Colbert County Sheriff had been murdered! According to the report, Sheriff Ramon "Red" Cook, while destroying an illegal whiskey distillery in the southern part of the county with a group of his deputies, had been ambushed by moonshiners and shot to death. A massive dragnet was underway to find the killer or killers.

I floor-boarded the gas pedal and made for the scene, which was in an isolated, rural section of the county. As my car roared down the highway, I remembered how Ramon Cook had been elected sheriff on a law-and-order platform, promising to crack-down on illegal alcohol in dry Colbert County. Now, his zeal in enforcing the laws had apparently led to his death in the line of duty. When I reached the area of the crime, I was stopped by officers at a roadblock who refused to allow me to go any farther, explaining that the desperadoes were still at large and it was dangerous for me to be in the area.

In due course, the criminals were caught and punished. The governor appointed the fallen sheriff's wife, Frances Cook, to fill the unexpired term of her late husband, and she thus became the first female sheriff in the state's history.