

## **NC Journalists and Journalism**

Roy Parker, reporter, editor and historian, compiled a list of nearly 50 journalists who appear in the six-volume Dictionary of North Carolina Biography. The Dictionary included the 21 journalists whom Roy Parker described in this tribute to NC Journalists, prepared in 1998 on the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first meeting of the NC Press Association.

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## **“The Newspaper”**

What did a typical North Carolina newspaper newsroom look like 80 years ago?

The best description is in a work of fiction, a short story by North Carolina's most famous author, Thomas Wolfe (1900-1938).

Titled “The Newspaper,” the story undoubtedly describes the office of the Asheville Citizen. As a teen-ager, Wolfe delivered the newspaper. His brother briefly worked as a reporter.

Wolfe sets the scene of his story with a passage in the form of stage directions for a play:

*“The time: A hot night in June 1916.*

*The place: The city room of a small town newspaper.*

*The room has three or four flat-topped desks, typewriters, green-shaded lights hanging from the ceiling by long cords, some filing cabinets. Upon the wall, a large map of the United States. Upon the desks, newspaper clippings, sheets of yellow flimsy, paste pots, pencils, etc. Overall, a warm smell of ink, a not unpleasant air of use and weariness.*

*To the right, a door opening into a small room which houses the A.P. man, his typewriter, and his instruments. To the left, a glass partition and a door into the compositor's room. The door stands open and the compositor can be seen at work before the linotype machines, which make a quiet slotting sound. The A.P. man's door is also open, and he can be seen within, typing rapidly, to the accompaniment of the clattering telegraph instrument on the table beside him.*

*In the outer room, Theodore Willis, a reporter, sits at his desk, banging away at a typewriter. He is about 28 years old, consumptive, very dark of feature, with oval-shaped brown eyes, jet black hair, thin hands, and a face full of dark intelligence, humor, sensitivity.*

*At another desk, his back toward Willis, sits another reporter - young, red-headed, red-necked, stocky - also typing.*

*All the men wear green eye-shades. Theodore Willis is smoking a cigarette which hangs from the corner of his mouth and which he inhales from time to time, narrowing his eyes to keep the smoke out.*

*Harry Tugman, the chief pressman, enters at this moment with a bundle tied in a newspaper under his arm. He is a powerful man, brutally built, with the neck, shoulders, and battered features of a prize fighter. His strong, pitted face is colorless, and pocked heavily with ink marks.”*

Wolfe's classic picture could serve as the introduction to the working environment of North Carolina daily journalism for at least another 50 years.

By Roy Parker Jr.  
January 1998

## **NC Press Association**

The shape and business of collegial gatherings of North Carolina editors was set in the earliest days of the North Carolina Press Association, formed on May 15, 1873, at a “convention” of 29 journalists gathered in the Wayne County courthouse in Goldsboro. The convention was called for both professional and political purposes.

Professionally, the new organization hoped to better regulate the flood of patent medicine and other forms of Victorian Era quack advertising that inundated the journalists’ offices. Some editors rejected the medicine while others accepted the ads gratefully, even offering cut-rate advertising fees. A resolution called for the new association to “examine the character and reliability of all advertising agencies seeking business with members.”

The gathering also had political aims. It prepared a resolution for the North Carolina General Assembly calling for preparation of statistics and other information on the state that could be used not only to further economic development but also probably to dampen the propensity of editors to make far-fetched claims about their communities.

The association was also fraternal. Editors and publishers

generally liked each other's company. The Georgia Press Association sent a telegram to the new association saluting "the fraternity of the 'Old North State'" and asking for a report on its activities.

The social aspects of the association quickly rose to the fore at this founding meeting, when members were invited for a free ride on the cars of the Atlantic Rail Road to the developing town of Morehead City, located on the sound just down the tracks from Goldsboro.

By 1875, the social aspect of NCPA was traditional. At the meeting that year in Wilmington, the gathering took on a "carnival atmosphere" as members rode the steamship Raleigh along the Cape Fear to Smithville or Southport. The Wilmington Concert Cornet Band joined the group.

The trip to Wilmington also set a pattern of holding NCPA conventions around the state, rotating between east and west. Asheville hosted its first convention in 1881 and Morehead City, in 1886. By 1900, Asheville would have another convention; Morehead, two more.

Another ironclad tradition established early was to rotate the presidency each year, usually requiring the vice president to prepare the program for the coming year.

By 1900, with Asheville once again the scene of the convention, more than 130 editors and publishers, many with spouses and children, were in attendance. NCPA itself had become a tradition for newspapers in the state.

By Roy Parker Jr.  
January 1998

### **William Henry Bernard**

William Henry Bernard (1837-1916) was both Mr. Editor and Mr. Democrat of Wilmington for 40 years after he became editor-owner of the Wilmington Star.

Bernard was a Virginia native who came to North Carolina by way of Texas. He had once edited The Star Spangled Banner, a newspaper in Texas.

Bernard was first a staunch Whig who opposed secession, and then a 24-year-old soldier in the first regiment of Confederate troops from North Carolina who saw battle in the Civil War.

When his brief war career was over (he was discharged for physical disability), he worked on newspapers in Fayetteville, where he had settled with his wife, a native of the town on the upper Cape Fear. Late in the war, using a press from a defunct pre-war newspaper, he actually published a daily newspaper, the Daily Telegraph.

When the war ended with Fayetteville battered by General William Tecumseh Sherman's army, Bernard moved to Wilmington with Col. John D. Barry and founded the Wilmington Dispatch. In 1867, he left the Dispatch and began the Wilmington Star.

Bernard served as the Democratic Party's chairman. His newspaper became a powerful voice for the resurgent party, fighting against the post-Civil War Republican Party that, thanks to large numbers of newly-franchised black voters, was often in the majority. Working as both party chairman and editorial propagandist, Bernard, at times, foiled the majority.

His newspaper's editorial platform was stridently in favor of state's rights and white supremacy. It also plugged for improving railroads and economic development for the port city. He lived to see Wilmington's rise from bitter racial strife in the 1890s to a growing rail center and shipbuilding port during World War I.

The Wilmington Star-News continues as one of the state's longest-established daily newspapers. In contrast to its white supremacy tone of 100 years ago, a more modern-day editor Alfred G. Dickson, won a national award for his editorials condemning links between the Ku Klux Klan and law enforcement officers.

By Roy Parker Jr.  
January 1998

## **Tom Bost**

Modern news coverage of North Carolina state government and politics could be said to have started with William Thomas "Tom"

Bost (1878-1951), who became Raleigh correspondent for the Greensboro Daily News in 1914 and was still covering state government when he died in 1951 after a brief illness.

By the 1930s, Bost was already the “dean” of political reporters, referred to as the “Boswell of state government,” known by office holders and office seekers as a journalist who would be fair and accurate in his coverage of their activities.

Earlier political reporting had concentrated mostly on campaigns and speeches. Bost offered more. He wrote stories about budgets, policies and personalities in government. The General Assembly was his special love, and he set the standard for describing legislation and characterizing legislators.

Bost's reputation for fairness and thoroughness was remarkable. He was fair despite his strong political views. He was an ardent New Deal Democrat. He was thorough though seldom taking notes of the sort that journalists so assiduously collect. His peers marveled at the knowledge he carried in his head and the memory that allowed him to listen to speeches and interviews without taking a note, yet repeat what he heard without error.

Bost also set another standard as both reporter and commentator who could ably address any number of issues affecting North Carolina. His daily column, “Among Us Tar Heels,” addressed politics, history, social developments and anything else about North Carolina that struck his fancy.

Bost's strong religious beliefs made him a lifelong opponent of capital punishment. He attended more than 250 executions out of “religious duty,” trying through his writing of the gruesome details to inspire abolition of the gas chamber.

Born to poverty near Salisbury, Bost spent two years at the University of North Carolina and worked on newspapers in Salisbury, Charlotte and Durham before coming to Raleigh in 1912 to work as city editor for the News & Observer. The desk job didn't suit him, and he took the Greensboro job two years later.

Bost's wife, Annie Kissler Bost (1883-1961), came with him to Raleigh. Earlier a school teacher and executive secretary of the State Federation of Women's Clubs, she was named commissioner of the state's public welfare system in 1930 and held the post until 1944.

By Roy Parker Jr.  
January 1998

## **Beatrice Cobb**

Her name was Beatrice Cobb (1888-1959), but several generations of North Carolina journalists knew her as “Miss Bea” or simply “Bea.”

The daughter of the publisher of her hometown newspaper, the Morganton Herald, she started a typical early 19-century career for women by teaching school for four years.

But then she went home to work for the paper, and when her father died in 1916, the 28-year-old Bea took up her career as editor and publisher that would last until her death in 1959.

Attending an annual meeting of the North Carolina Press Association in 1922, she found herself chosen secretary of the organization by her male peers. She held that job until her death.

She made over the post into an unpaid nearly full-time activity. She recruited new members from among the state's editors and later, often, had a big say in choosing annual officers for the organization. She modernized the association's newsletter and turned it into a monthly publication. She organized winter meetings in Chapel Hill and summer meetings, usually at resort locations, that became obligatory gatherings for a large portion of the state's journalism family.

Part of Cobb's clout in journalism grew from her political clout. From 1934 until 1952, she served as a Democratic National Committee woman from North Carolina. Beginning in 1928, she attended a half-dozen Democratic National Conventions.

Cobb was influential in Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal as an advisor on allocations to federal agencies in the state. She was the only Southerner on a committee named by FDR to choose a successor to James A. Farley as Democratic National Chairman. As a political campaigner, she had worked with Farley who managed Roosevelt's first campaigns for the White House.

Her deep knowledge about the state's politics and political personalities and her affability made Cobb effective as both public official and editor.

Her newspaper was dedicated to widespread coverage of local affairs and regularly won NCPA awards for public service, reporting, photography, editorials and sports. She hired newsroom editors and reporters who also took active roles in journalism organizations in the state and carried on the newspaper after her death.

The University of North Carolina recognized Bea Cobb's leadership in journalism and politics by awarding her an honorary doctorate in 1949.

By Roy Parker Jr.  
January 1998

### **Willard Cole and Horace Carter**

When Willard Cole (1906-1965) and Horace Carter took on the Ku Klux Klan in Columbus and Robeson counties, they had to keep loaded shotguns by their front doors.

But tenacity and courage eventually won them the 1953 Pulitzer Prize, the first ever awarded to weekly newspaper journalists.

Cole was a Wilkes County native who edited the Whiteville News Reporter. The younger Carter served as editor under Cole at the Tabor City Tribune, a newspaper associated with the News Reporter.

The two began editorializing against the resurgent Klan as early as 1950, when night-riders, many from South Carolina, began holding cross-burning rallies in the rural countryside along the Pee Dee River and harassing families in the area.

Week after week, Cole hammered the KKK activities, ran names of Klan leaders, interviewed people who said they had been terrorized and prodded law enforcement officers to take action.

Cole had been in Columbus County for 20 years, first as head of the Tabor City Chamber of Commerce, and, since 1948, as newspaper editor in Whiteville, so he was personally familiar with

many of the people he attacked. A Klan leader said, "I guess we despised the editor of the News-Reporter most."

Klan violence reported by the newspapers led to the arrest over 80 men on kidnapping and assault charges, and all were convicted.

The Klan in the Pee Dee region made journalism history again in 1958, when a nighttime Klan rally near Maxton was broken up by hundreds of angry Lumbee Indians who poured out of the woods on a cold January night to chase two dozen robed participants to their cars.

In the melee, a reporter and a photographer for the Fayetteville Observer were slightly wounded by the birdshot flying through the darkness. Reporter Pat Reese and photographer Bill Shaw had to stop by the hospital before heading back to their newsroom to report the night's events.

Shaw's photos, taken just before the shooting began, were the best visual record of the event, which made national headlines and eventually led to congressional hearings that exposed 20th-century Klan activity throughout the South.

By Roy Parker Jr.  
January 1998

## **John Campbell Dancy**

John Campbell Dancy Jr. (1857-1920) of Tarboro was the son of a former slave who combined politics and journalism to become a leading spokesman and activist for black North Carolinians after the Civil War.

At a time when most white editors were ardent partisans of the Democratic Party of the day, Dancy was an effective editorial voice for the Republican Party.

His father was a well-known builder, but the teenage Dancy was drawn to the newspaper office. He apprenticed as a typesetter for his hometown journal, the Tarboro Southerner.

He attended Howard University in Washington, returning home when his father died. He became principal of the local school

for black children. His interest in politics was whetted when black Congressman Adam Hyman made Darcy an aide and took him to Washington for a few months.

To further his political interests, Dancy launched the North Carolina Sentinel and, as its editor, editorially backed black candidates and the Republican Party generally. The newspaper was among a half-dozen black-owned journals in North Carolina during the decades after the Civil War. All concentrated their editorial attention on politics and education.

Three years after beginning the Sentinel, Dancy's writing attracted leaders of the African Methodist Episcopal Church Zion who invited him to come to Salisbury to edit the Star of Zion, a weekly journal that covered church affairs and black news from around the state. Dancy was editor of the influential publication for five years.

Meanwhile, he attended national conventions of the Republican Party, campaigned for the party in North Carolina and other states and, in 1891, was named Collector of the Port of Wilmington, the highest-paid federal job in North Carolina.

After Dancy's editorial days ended in the 1890s, he became one of the most notable black speakers of his day, delivering commencement addresses at Tuskegee and Livingstone and speaking from the same platform with Booker T. Washington in Carnegie Hall on the centennial of the AME Zion Church.

The final years of Dancy's active career (1901-1910) were spent as Register of Deeds for the District of Columbia, another important federal job.

By Roy Parker Jr.  
January 1998

## **The Daniels Family**

For more than a century, four generations of the family of Josephus Daniels, a Washington, N.C. ship's carpenter, were giants in North Carolina journalism, working principally owners, publishers and editors of Raleigh's The News & Observer.

The elder Daniels was killed in 1865 by a freak shelling of a vessel returning him to his home village. His wife, Mary Cleaves Seabrook Daniels, moved to Wilson where she raised five young sons, two of whom became journalists.

Charles Cleaves (1864-1951) and his brother, Josephus (1862-1951), launched the Kinston Free Press in 1882. Charles Cleaves edited it for three years and also worked on the Wilson Advance. Charles Cleaves earned a law degree, quit newspapering in the early 1890s and practiced law in New York for 35 years.

Meanwhile, Josephus worked on the Wilson paper, owned an interest in newspapers in Kinston and Rocky Mount, went to the University of North Carolina law school and ended up in Raleigh both as printer to the state government and editor of the State Chronicle.

Josephus Daniels purchased and then edited The News & Observer, which had been a rival of the Chronicle. For the next 50 years, he was the state's most notable editor and leading political figure. When not writing fiery editorials on yellow legal pads as the editorial conscience of the liberal wing of the state Democratic Party, he was Secretary of the Navy in the administration of Woodrow Wilson and ambassador to Mexico under Franklin D. Roosevelt. He wrote a multi-volume autobiography that is a virtual political history of the state during his era.

Three of Josephus's four sons spent their careers on the family newspaper, Frank as publisher, Jonathan as editor and Josephus as circulation director. Frank Daniels was an influential figure in newspaper industry organizations. Jonathan authored books of social commentary and history and was on the White House press staff briefly in 1944-45.

Frank Daniels Jr. succeeded to the publisher's mantle in 1971 and began a career that included important posts in industry organizations, such as chairman of the Associated Press, and, like his grandfather and father, president of the N.C. Press Association. He became a major force in North Carolina art and culture through the philanthropic Daniels Foundation and was influential in the economic development of the Research Triangle as a member of the Raleigh-Durham Airport Authority.

His son, Frank Daniels III was editing the newspaper when Sacramento-based McClatchy Newspapers bought The News & Observer in 1995.

By Roy Parker Jr.  
January 1998

## **James Davis**

James Davis (1721-1785) was North Carolina's first printer and first newspaper proprietor. He brought his press and type with him from Williamsburg when he arrived in New Bern in 1749 for what would become a 35-year stay.

The colonial Assembly of North Carolina had sent word that it needed an official printer, and Davis was well trained, having apprenticed under the first printer in Virginia, William Parks.

Davis announced his business “at The Printing-Office in Front Street.” You can still see a typical print shop of Davis' day on a visit to Colonial Williamsburg.

While busy with official duties as public printer, such as publishing a revised edition of the colony's laws, Davis launched the North Carolina Gazette in 1751.

The Gazette seems to have been discontinued by 1761, but Davis was soon back to printing, with the North-Carolina Magazine or Universal Intelligencer, first published in 1764. The four-page newspaper lasted until 1778, when the difficulties of printing in the midst of the Revolutionary War forced him to discontinue publishing.

The columns of the Gazette were typical of colonial newspapers, with a lot of information from outside New Bern but little local news. Much local information was contained, however, in paid notices, which came from other parts of the colony.

North Carolina's second and third newspapers were in a sense the offspring of Davis' first. In 1764, when the colonial Governor tried to take away Davis' official post and give it to Philadelphia printer, Andrew Steuart, Davis used his considerable political clout (he was also a member of the Assembly from New Bern) to thwart the move.

Steuart gave up the fight and moved to Wilmington, where he launched another North Carolina Gazette. But Steuart drowned while swimming in the Cape Fear River, allowing Adam Boyd to buy the Gazette's printing equipment and begin the Cape Fear Mercury in 1769.

During the Revolutionary War, Davis supported the Patriot cause, but he made everybody mad when he took umbrage at the recruiting methods of a young French officer attempting to raise a volunteer regiment in Craven County.

Davis himself raised a mob and threatened to wreck the camp. He was denounced for "arbitrary and scandalous behavior" that had "given New Bern a name that every inhabitant except himself and minions would blush at."

So, in a sense, James Davis was also the first editor, but hardly the last, to incur the wrath of his community.

By Roy Parker Jr.  
January 1998

## **Gordon Gray**

Gordon Gray (1909-1982) was among the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most notable North Carolina newspaper publishers. His only problem was he almost never had time to be a publisher. Public service continually pulled him away from the newspaper office.

Born to a well-to-do Winston-Salem tobacco family, Gray trained as a lawyer and became a newspaper publisher by heading a corporation that bought the Winston-Salem Journal (morning) and Twin City Sentinel (afternoon) in 1937, as well as a local radio station.

In the next four years, however, Gray was often away from the newspaper office, serving as a member of the North Carolina General Assembly from Forsyth County. Then World War II came. Gray rose from private to captain. He returned to Winston-Salem in 1945 and resumed his editorial career.

A Washington friend called and asked Gray to become undersecretary of the Department of the Army. In 1949, President

Harry Truman named him secretary of the Army. He became the first secretary to have previously served as a private.

Gray had hardly settled into the secretary's office in the Pentagon when his home state called. In 1950, the board of trustees of the University of North Carolina offered Gray the presidency of the UNC system, as successor to Frank Porter Graham who had been appointed to the U.S. Senate by Governor Kerr Scott.

For five years, Gray presided over the state's higher education institutions that were exploding with post-World War II growth, while often traveling to Washington to take on special assignments for the White House.

In 1955, he stepped down from the university post to become undersecretary of the Department of State for international security. He led other key jobs under President Dwight Eisenhower.

Finally, in 1961, he returned to North Carolina to become president of the newspaper corporation and a corporation of radio and television stations throughout the region.

When he was in his editorial office, Gray exercised energetic and determined leadership, supporting community service and civic betterment, the hallmark of so many of North Carolina's newspaper editors in every century. His talent for leadership led Gordon Gray away from the office more than most others.

By Roy Parker Jr.  
January 1998

### **C.W. Griffith**

Clarence Wilbur Griffith (1904-1958) epitomized the hometown newspaper editor in North Carolina who combined a zeal for the future of his community with a deep devotion to its past.

As editor and then owner of the weekly Forest City Courier in Rutherford County from age 21 until his death in 1958, Griffith built an editorial following through vigorous advocacy of economic, cultural and tourist development of the mountain region of the state. His newspaper regularly won awards for its coverage of local news and for its interest in community causes.

Griffith was an enthusiastic member of the North Carolina Press Association from his earliest days as an editor. He helped establish the Western North Carolina Weekly Press Association and was its president and secretary.

Like many other hometown editors in the state, Griffith was an active politician. He served a term in the General Assembly in 1933-35 and was a longtime political warhorse on the county's Democratic Party executive committee.

Griffith participated in nearly every important booster effort in western North Carolina. He was a member of the Great Smoky Mountain Museum Commission; a leader in chamber of commerce, Red Cross, Boy Scouts; an advisor to the National Youth Administration; a trustee of the Rutherford County Library and even the North Carolina governor of the Sons of the American Revolution.

In keeping with his principal avocation, that of avid local historian, he was the historian of the NC Press Association from 1938 until his death. He also wrote a history of Rutherford County, dozens of articles and genealogical papers and essays on all phases of North Carolina history. He was president of the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association in 1929 and served on the North Carolina Historical Commission, the policy board of the state Division of Archives and History from 1938 until his death.

An affable but hard-charging man, Griffith was at his desk in the office of the Forest City Courier on a cold January day, working on the next edition, when he suffered a fatal heart attack in 1958.

By Roy Parker Jr.  
January 1998

### **Thomas Henderson Jr.**

Thomas Henderson Jr. (1787-1835) left an important mark on North Carolina's early journalism before he pulled up stakes in 1823 to move to the state of Tennessee.

After working a short apprenticeship on the North Carolina Journal in Halifax, in 1809, the former printer became co-owner of the new Raleigh Star with Dr. Calvin Jones. In 1815, Henderson became

the sole proprietor and changed the name to the Star and North Carolina State Gazette. The newspaper was published each Thursday from its shop “at the upper end of Fayetteville Street near Casso's Corner.”

For an early 19th-century editor, Henderson set high standards for the content of his paper. He announced there would be no rumors or “stud horse advertisements” in its columns. Competing with the powerful Raleigh Register, the Star hewed to a middle-of-the-road political line, although Henderson personally professed Federalist principles.

Eschewing long articles, Henderson ran summaries of congressional and other national news and local intelligence. He was popular enough with legislators to become the state printer for several years.

Henderson's own strong interests in agricultural matters, literature and cultural affairs were reflected in his newspaper's columns. His print shop was also a bookstore. He encouraged the compilation of a statistical and informational almanac covering all the state's counties, a project he hoped would encourage better communication between the eastern and western reaches of North Carolina. The project floundered during the War of 1812, but the sketches he received from a dozen counties were later published by historians.

During the war, Henderson briefly commanded a unit of Raleigh militia that accompanied a military tour of the coastal defenses. From then on, he was referred to as “Colonel Henderson.”

Henderson's move to Tennessee was made possible when he was hired by the University of North Carolina to negotiate for Revolutionary War land claims that the university wanted as escheats. Henderson's successful negotiations made him wealthy; he was awarded land equal to half the university's claim, tens of thousands of acres.

Henderson sold the Star and moved to a plantation in Madison County, Tennessee. There, he continued as a leading citizen and political activist, often a visitor to the governor's mansion. He served as patron of a local academy that he founded.

By Roy Parker Jr.

January 1998

## **Abraham Hodge**

Abraham Hodge (1755-1805) furthered his career as a printer by spending the winter of 1778-79 with General George Washington at Valley Forge, operating the press that turned out orders, commissions and recruiting posters for the Continental Army.

When the war was over, Hodge, a New Yorker, sought warmer climes in the little village of Halifax, North Carolina. In 1785, he was named state printer by the state's General Assembly and held that lucrative position until 1800 except for one-year in the 1790s.

And he would become the most active founder of newspapers in 18th-century North Carolina. During his career, he had printing establishments at various times in Edenton, Fayetteville and New Bern, as well as Halifax, which was usually his home.

In partnership with Andrew Blanchard, Hodge was founder-proprietor of the State Gazette of North Carolina in New Bern and then moved the newspaper to Edenton. In 1792, he was back in Halifax as founder of the North Carolina Journal. Hodge continued to edit this influential newspaper until his death. But he was busy elsewhere as well.

In 1796, he and young William Boylan established the Minerva and Fayetteville Gazette in the village on the Cape Fear. But when Raleigh was finally established as the state's permanent capital, in 1799, Hodge & Boylan moved their presses to the raw settlement in Wake County and renamed it the North Carolina Minerva and Raleigh Advertiser.

Like nearly all newspaper proprietors of the time, Hodge ran a political journal. He was a staunch Federalist, and his paper engaged in hard fought editorial combat with the growing power of the anti-Federalist, later called Republican, political forces in the state.

The 1800 national election of Republican Thomas Jefferson and his followers in the state ended Hodges' longtime hold on the state printer's post. But he continued to publish the Minerva until he retired in 1803.

Hodge gathered information for a 1794 North Carolina Almanac, and he was among the first contributors to the tiny library at the new University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

By Roy Parker Jr.  
January 1998

### **Walter Ney Keener**

Walter Ney Keener started out to be a lawyer and a politician but gave up law for the editorial office and wound up working in a half-dozen North Carolina editorial offices. Few journalists saw as much of North Carolina as Keener.

Keener graduated from Wake Forest College with a law degree and went into the newspaper business, co-owning the hometown paper, the weekly Lincoln County News in Lincolnton. He edited the paper on the side while building up his list of law clients. He served a term in the General Assembly as representative from Lincoln County.

In 1909, bit solidly by the newspaper bug, Keener abandoned the law. He first went to the Raleigh Times, where he worked as city editor for two years before moving for a year to the Durham Sun as both managing editor and city editor

He moved to Charlotte in 1913 to become city editor of the Charlotte Chronicle, and, only after a few months, he was on the go again, this time to the High Point Enterprise as editor. After another two years, he went to yet another North Carolina newsroom, taking a position as editor of the Wilmington Dispatch.

Keener's whirlwind nine-year tour of the state's dailies ran its course in 1918, when he returned to Durham and the editorship of the Durham Morning Herald. When the company acquired the afternoon paper, The Durham Sun, he became editor of both newspapers, a post he held until his death 13 years later.

A man of wide interests and strong opinions about his community, Keener put the Durham newspapers firmly on the side of economic development, improved education and modern local government. His editorials were described as “forceful and effective.”

Raleigh's News & Observer said, "Frank Keener was frank, independent and courageous, with a deep aversion to shame and pretense wherever it appeared."

Keener was an active civic clubber and a devoted alumnus of his alma mater in nearby Wake Forest. When he died at 51, he was buried in the Wake Forest Cemetery.

By Roy Parker Jr.  
January 1998

### **H.A. `Slim' Kendall**

Henry Wiseman "Slim" Kendall (1897-1968) was an editorial writer who sheathed his iron-hard opinions in the velvet of a superbly elegant writing style.

He was a native of Shelby. His newspaper career began with a brief stint on the Morning New Bernian in New Bern. From 1920 until 1930, he was editor of the Rocky Mount Telegram. He joined the Greensboro Daily News in 1930 as associate editor and became editor in 1942.

He championed mental health care, advancements to public schooling and prison reform on the state level. He turned well-trained reporters loose on local problems in a city where racial and social tensions often ran high, especially during the post-World War II period.

Kendall's polished writing style influenced other editorial writers, and he was often called on to lecture and advise on improvements to journalism. As an active member of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, he was influential in fashioning and promoting better standards for writing and reporting. He won first-place awards from the North Carolina Press Association for editorials, and, posthumously, the Edward R. Murrow Award for reporting.

Like so many North Carolina editors, Kendall took a personal role in many local and state organizations dealing with the issues he championed in his editorials. He was on the North Carolina Educational Study Commission, devising postwar plans for the state's institutions of higher educational. His contributions to higher

education, both editorially and personally, led to an honorary degree in 1960 from his alma mater, Duke University.

He was a member of the policy board of the state's mental health hospital system. In Greensboro, his work on behalf of mentally-ill children led the local association to name its center for him. The Greensboro Chamber of Commerce gave him the city's "outstanding citizen" award in 1958.

As associate editor and editor of the Greensboro Daily News from 1930 until his retirement in 1965, Kendall made the newspaper an influential voice in local and state affairs for the causes he championed.

By Roy Parker Jr.  
January 1998

### **Thomas J. Lemay**

Thomas J. Lemay (1802-1863) was a politically-active editor in the fiercely-partisan journalism of antebellum North Carolina, when editors often competed with personal invective in their editorial columns,

As editor-owner of the Raleigh Star and North Carolina Gazette from 1826 to 1853, Lemay tried to calm the purple prose by asking editors to agree not to discuss personalities or use "indecorous language" in their columns.

His efforts to bring new standards for editorial policy as well as standardize financial procedures led to the earliest gathering of North Carolina newspaper editors as a professional group.

In 1837, Lemay joined Thomas Loring and Joseph Gales, editors of other Raleigh newspapers, in calling for a meeting in Raleigh. Thirteen of the state's 25 editors showed up.

The call for an editorial ethics code was ahead of its time, however, and it fell on deaf ears in most editorial offices. The meeting of editors, however, set a tradition that would lead to other ad hoc gatherings of editors, and eventually to the founding of the North Carolina Press Association.

Lemay was among the earliest to grasp the possibilities of the telegraph. In 1850, he followed the example of Edward J. Hale of the Fayetteville Observer in getting telegraphic copies of important government papers tapped from the office of their political friend, Secretary of the Navy William A. Graham of North Carolina.

Like nearly all North Carolina editors of his day, Lemay was for state's rights and a small federal government but strongly favored local and regional internal improvements, such as support for the state fair, state help for railroads and economic development.

Lemay took special interest in improved farming methods. In the 1840s, he established the monthly North Carolina Farmer. He also issued a yearly Lemay's North Carolina Almanac.

As a journalistic mentor, Lemay left his mark on the most famous of all 19th-century North Carolina editors, William Woods Holden of the North Carolina Standard. The young Holden spent five years as an apprentice and employee on the Star while living in Lemay's house. When Lemay sold the Star in 1853, Holden had been editor of the Standard for 11 years and was already a political leader of the resurgent Democratic Party.

By Roy Parker Jr.  
January 1998

## **Tony McKevlin**

Eye-witnesses say Anthony John McKevlin (1902-1946) was the fastest two-fingered typist North Carolina journalism ever had. As a sports reporter and then editor, Tony McKevlin marveled other reporters when he sat in the press box at a football game, writing play-by-play description almost faster than the players could execute the plays. But his contributions demonstrated far more than speed on a portable typewriter.

The South Carolina native was sports editor of Raleigh's News & Observer for 14 years, beginning in 1927. In an age when sports reporting was still a very partisan craft, with reporters often taking unabashed stands for one team or another, McKevlin insisted on even-handedness and accuracy in the copy. He standardized

statistical coverage of sports. He set up his columns in a section that became the model for newspapers across the South. His coverage enhanced the standing of high school and collegiate sports.

In 1941, McKevlin's career took a new and significant turn. Upon the death of the much-respected Frank Smethurst (1891-1941), McKevlin was named managing editor of the newspaper just as the United States entered World War II.

With male reporters in short supply because of the war, McKevlin recruited women, still a rarity in Southern newsrooms, for many reportorial jobs never before held by women. As in his sports department, McKevlin insisted on high standards of accuracy and fairness in copy, even in the political reporting of a newspaper that was a fierce editorial supporter of the Democratic Party.

Several women who trained under McKevlin and filled the wartime posts went on to major jobs in political and cultural reporting, notably Marjorie Hunter, who covered the North Carolina General Assembly and then went on to a distinguished career in the Washington bureau of the New York Times.

The war took a toll on McKevlin's health, as he worked for a time as both managing editor and city editor of a newspaper that was often shorthanded. He became blind in one eye. Mrs. McKevlin died just as he took the job.

A terminal illness was neglected until he collapsed and was taken to Rex Hospital in Raleigh where, for several weeks, by telephone from his bed, McKevlin continued the complex jobs of a newspaper publisher and editor. He died at 44, still practicing his craft.

By Roy Parker Jr.  
January 1998

### **C.A. McKnight**

Colbert Augustus McKnight (1916-1986) seldom heard anyone call him by his full name. He was always "Pete" McKnight.

McKnight was editor of the Charlotte Observer during the roiling years of the 1950s and 1960s when the racial revolution swept the South.

His was a tough job. For more than a half century, the Observer had been a bastion of economic conservatism and white racial superiority in the community and in North Carolina. He exercised both editorial and personal influence to move Charlotte toward peaceful acceptance of desegregation of schools and other public institutions.

McKnight's soft-spoken style belied his tenacity in remaking the Observer. He rebuilt the newsroom, adding bureaus throughout the surrounding area and in the state capital in Raleigh. He pressed his reporters to dig critically into community problems. He used his standing as a "big wheel" in the chamber of commerce to rally the city's business elite behind steps to desegregate public accommodations and to back court decisions requiring extensive busing to achieve integration of schools in the fast-growing urban area.

McKnight's newspaper career started as a teenager when he worked for his hometown Shelby Star. He spent a summer in Cuba, working with an older brother who was an Associated Press correspondent there. After graduating from Davidson College, he worked for the Charlotte News as a reporter and editor of feature pages. During World War II, he was editor of an English-language daily in Puerto Rico.

Back in Charlotte, he was soon editor of the News. In the early 1950s, he founded the Southern Education Reporting Service, which published a monthly journal reporting on racial developments in Southern education. The Knight newspaper chain brought McKnight back to Charlotte as editor of the Observer in 1955.

McKnight's energy and commitment to modern journalism made him influential among his peers. He served as president of the North Carolina Press Association and the American Society of Newspaper Editors. Scores of young journalists trained under him and went on to important jobs in the Knight chain and on other newspapers.

A health problem that made him nearly blind caused McKnight to leave active editorial leadership in 1976. But his mark

was on the Observer for good. Editors and publishers who followed him tended to view their role in the activist, community-oriented mold of Pete McKnight.

By Roy Parker Jr.  
January 1998

## **John Charles McNeill**

North Carolinians don't much associate John Charles McNeill (1874-1907) with journalism. He is better known as a giant of our state's literature. His collection of verse titled Songs, Merry and Sad was so beloved that he was unofficially proclaimed the poet laureate of North Carolina in 1906, 25 years before there was an official post of that name.

But McNeill spent as much time during his short life as a newspaper writer as he did in his other vocations of teacher and lawyer. And, in fact, much of his poetry and all of his prose, first appeared in newspaper columns, specifically in the Charlotte Observer.

McNeill grew up in the bosom of a large Scotland County family in which writing was revered. The family spent much time at a Lumber River summer place known as Riverton. His father, Duncan McNeill, had been an editor and poet. John Charles was an avid reader of classics and, at Wake Forest College, considered himself a poet and teacher before he acquired a law degree.

McNeill briefly practiced law in Lumberton and Laurinburg and served a term in the General Assembly as representative from Scotland County.

McNeill's poetry about the crisp days of October, the "possum time" of rural North Carolina and days spent with his "sunburnt boys" swimming in the dark waters of the Lumber River (he called it the "Lumbee") were popular in his day, and remain so today, with two editions of his poetry still in print.

But when the Charlotte Observer published some of his many poems in 1900, he found a journalistic connection that would last until

the end of his life. Editor Joseph P. Caldwell liked his work so much that, in 1904, he invited McNeill to become a full-time writer.

From then until his short life ended, McNeill turned out scores of columns and dozens of poems for the Observer. His manuscript collection of Songs, Merry and Sad won the first Patterson Cup in 1905, the state's highest literary honor.

A collection of 40 of McNeill's prose pieces in the Observer, clipped and collected many years ago by the late Jasper Memory of Wake Forest College, was published in 1998 by what was then St. Andrews College Press in Laurinburg under the title Home in the Sandhills. The final piece was a poignant good-bye, titled "Thoughts on Going Home to Riverton."

John Charles McNeill is buried in the Spring Hill cemetery at Wagram, only a couple of miles from his boyhood haunts on the Lumber.

By Roy Parker Jr.  
January 1998

## **Catherine and Victor Meekins**

Catherine Deaton was a young music teacher, but she knew about newspapers. Her father was publisher of a weekly newspaper in Mooresville.

When Catherine married the sheriff of Dare County, Victor Meekins (1897-1964) in 1929, among the first things she thought about was a newspaper for the then-isolated Outer Banks and Roanoke Island.

Once their three children were brought along, in the early 1930s, the Meekins started the weekly Dare County Times.

In his early 20s, Victor Meekins had worked for the legendary W.O. Saunders on the Elizabeth City Independent, so he fell naturally into the role of both leading public figure and newspaper editor. Catherine handled much of the other news and managed the business.

Meekins continued the dual role of editor and sheriff until 1946. Then, he became chairman of the Dare County Board of

Commissioners. Catherine, meanwhile, was busy with newspapering. At one time, the Meekins published weekly newspapers in Tyrrell and Hyde counties and at Nags Head. They consolidated them into the Coastland Times in 1949. The newspaper is still owned by a son.

Victor Meekins was a man of all purposes for his native Outer Banks. He was born in a big 19th-century house on the northeast “soundside” shore of Roanoke Island. His family had been on the island since colonial days.

He boosted tourism, backed development of the Cape Hatteras National Seashore, pushed for bridges and roads and developed advertising materials for the area he named “the Walter Raleigh Coastland.” He also became a well-to-do owner of beach property in the post-World War II boom times on the coast.

Victor Meekins’ editorial style was pithy and strong. His news stories, especially about projects he considered vital for his community, were unabashedly one-sided. Off the editorial page, he was known for his colorful profanity and laconic good humor.

For nearly 30 years, Meekins collected (or concocted) colorful stories about the Outer Banks in columns titled, “The Old Sea Captain and the Drummer.” The pieces were assembled in a booklet, with the subtitle “Salty Dialogue from the Land of Wind and Water.” The paperback was for years a favorite of visitors to the Outer Banks.

By Roy Parker Jr.  
January 1998

## **Spencer Murphy**

Spencer Murphy (1904-1964) was born into a first family of Salisbury, the son of Pete Murphy, a noted North Carolina political leader famous for his defense of free speech in the 1920s “Monkey Debate” in the General Assembly.

After a busy student career at the University, where he founded the Buccaneer, a campus humor magazine, Spencer Murphy came home to Salisbury to become a reporter for the afternoon Salisbury Post. From then until his death, he was a leading North

Carolina journalist. He became editor of the Post in 1936 and executive editor in 1954.

Murphy's editorials were frequent winners of the North Carolina Press Association's first-place award for editorial writing and received national recognition from the Freedom Foundation. He wrote articles for the Saturday Evening Post and the Literary American. In 45, his newspaper was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, for a report on the plight of a widow and her children.

Murphy's perspective on such issues as racial justice and the plight of the poor were echoes of his father's progressive stands. Spencer Murphy was on the executive committee of the North Carolina Social Hygiene Society and a director of the North Carolina Conference for Social Service. After World War II, he was an ardent internationalist, a board member of the North Carolina United World Federalists and president of the Citizens Committee for United Nations Reform.

Murphy was also deeply interested in furthering cultural causes. He was president of the North Carolina Symphony Society in the 1940s and a trustee of the North Carolina Library Association. He was also a trustee of North Carolina Central College in Durham, filling an unexpired term of his father's.

His death at 60 was unexpected. The Greensboro Daily News summed up Murphy's contribution: "As one of the 'Young Turks' of North Carolina journalism in the late 1920s and early 1930s, he did much to help re-orient the political and social thinking of North Carolinians. Through his years as columnist and editor, he established a reputation as an independent thinker."

By Roy Parker Jr.  
January 1998

### **Roy and J. Mayon Parker**

The Parker brothers, Joseph Roy (1895-1957) and James Mayon (1901-1977), made Ahoskie a weekly newspaper hub in the 1930s with one of North Carolina's first newspaper chain operations.

In a single printing plant, built just before World War II, they published four weeklies, including their hometown Hertford County Herald and papers in Bertie, Gates and Northampton counties.

The older Parker became owner-editor of the Herald just after graduating from Wake Forest College in 1915. He had been a summer printer's devil and pressman while at school. Mayon, who had a similar back-shop beginning, joined him in 1928. When they acquired the Bertie Ledger-Advance in Windsor, Mayon moved there to edit it, and then moved to Ahoskie to take over the firm when Roy Parker became ill in 1934.

In the 1920s, Roy Parker was among the first to acquire a linotype machine for a weekly newspaper, and the Herald twice won the coveted Savory Loving Cup, then the state's most prestigious journalism award for content and design.

In the early 1930s, Roy Parker and several other editors, notably Victor Meekins of the Coastland Times in Manteo, commissioned a Nags Head beach cottage, planned as a clubhouse and retreat for North Carolina's press and named "the Fourth Estate."

Parker was president of the North Carolina Press Association in 1933-34, a professor of weekly journalism at the University of North Carolina in the 1940s and a member of the 1957 General Assembly from Hertford County when he died.

Mayon was equally innovative. He acquired one of the first press cameras owned by a weekly, a Graflex, in 1928 and took thousands of photographs of the region. He called the first meeting of the Eastern North Carolina Press Association.

Mayon's earliest and enduring claim to fame is that as sports editor of the Wake Forest College newspaper in the early 1920s, he coined the team nickname, the "the Demon Deacons." Throughout his career, Mayon Parker used stationary identifying himself simply as a "Printer." And it is on his gravestone.

For a quarter century, the Parker Brothers, Inc. weeklies won dozens of NCPA awards for all phases of news and editorial operations. A 1939 historical edition was later expanded into a local history book, The Ahoskie Era of Hertford County by Roy Parker.

The newspaper group remained in the family, led by Mayon's son, Joseph M. Parker, until the 1980s.

By Roy Parker Jr.  
January 1998

## **Robert Lee Vann**

The second half of the 20th century saw a notable array of North Carolina journalists who made their careers and left their mark on journalism outside the state.

They include such contemporary personalities as Goldsboro's Gene Roberts, retired editor of both the Philadelphia Inquirer and New York Times, and Laurinburg's Penny Muse Abernathy, currently a UNC-CH professor, but in 1998, president of the New York Times News Service and the highest-ranking newspaper corporate executive from the state.

But in the first half of the 20th century, North Carolina's most influential contributor to national journalism was born in the Hertford County village of Ahoskie. He never knew his father, and his mother was a cook in the household of a prominent family in the nearby farming community of Harrellsville.

Robert Lee Vann (1879-1940) rose from the cotton field to become founder-editor-publisher of the Pittsburgh Courier, which by the early 1930s counted 250,000 readers across the country, the largest circulation of any black-owned newspaper in history and one of the few newspapers of any kind to have a national circulation.

Vann managed to acquire a first-rate education at Virginia Union University and Western University in Pennsylvania, and was licensed as a lawyer in that state in 1909.

From then on, he was a leader in politics, national and local, as spokesman and advocate for black causes. He moved in high Republican Party circles, debated with W.E.B. DuBois over the administration of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and even criticized A. Philip Randolph as an obstacle to organizing the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.

A powerful voice for the Republican Party in the first decade of the century, he became increasingly disillusioned in the 1920s. In 1932, he made a historic break and led his newspaper into the Democratic Party, urging black voters to support Franklin D.

Roosevelt for president. His defining editorial called on his readers to “turn the picture of Lincoln to the wall.”

By 1940, however, Vann was disappointed with FDR's failure to do more economically for black citizens. Shortly before he died, he announced his support for Republican Wendell Wilkie.

Vann's fame made him a role model for black businessmen and politicians. He was honored when public schools in Ahoskie and Pittsburgh were named for him and scholarships were established in his honor at Virginia Union and Western. A World War II Liberty Ship was named for him in 1943.

By Roy Parker Jr.  
January 1998

#### LEARN MORE:

The Dictionary of North Carolina Biography provides information about other North Carolina journalists. Biographies on notable NC journalists appear on this site for the NC Journalism Hall of Fame: <http://www.jomc.unc.edu/hof>. Click on journalism, advertising and/or public relations to read the summaries. The author of this series, Roy Parker Jr., was inducted into the UNC-School of Journalism and Mass Communication's Hall of Fame in 1999. Read his biography: <http://www.jomc.unc.edu/n-c-halls-of-fame/n-c-journalism-hall-of-fame#parker>.

Contact your local newspaper to find out more about its history. Also, look for that information on an individual newspaper's website. The masthead on an editorial page identifies the current owners and managers of the newspaper.