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Police Reporting at *The Ocala Star-Banner*

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It was the Spring of 1966. The Civil Rights movement was at one of its most divisive moments, with violent confrontations occurring throughout the South. America's military build-up in the Vietnam War was underway, motivating the government to increase the number of young men being drafted into service. Anti-War demonstrations were beginning, particularly on university campuses among those who felt most affected by the threat of being called to serve.

In those heady days Ocala was still very much a sleepy little, old Florida village. According to the 1960 census, the community had a population of less than 14,000 residents. Situated in the rolling countryside of Central Florida, Ocala was in the center of the state's thoroughbred horse racing farms, an industry that had begun in

the early 1940's and by the mid 1950's had produced the area's first Kentucky Derby winner, Needles.

In the late 60s, most people passed through Ocala on US-301, one of the main arteries into the state from the Northeast. Those who stopped grabbed a quick meal in a roadside restaurant or spent the night in one of the numerous motels that lined the highway. If they stayed, they were probably headed for one of Florida's most popular tourist attractions, Silver Springs, or perhaps the now long defunct Six Gun Territory, a wild west town, complete with saloons, dance halls, and regularly scheduled gun fights. This was Florida tourism in the days just before Walt Disney World. The 1960's, however, would be the turning point for the community, as Ocala was caught up in the state's exploding population growth, experiencing more than sixty percent growth during each of the next two decades.

I was nineteen, a pimply-faced reporter for the *Ocala Star-Banner* with less than two years of college to my credit. It was my first full time job, a job for which I was totally unprepared. The move would change my Selective Service status to 1-A,

removing my student deferment and making me eligible for immediate induction into military service. It was a threat that worried a great many young men of my generation, twisting our plans for the future and drastically reshaping our lives, but it was also an uncertainty that most of us tried to ignore, at least until the last possible moment.

When I started at the *Banner*, I had never taken a journalism course or written for a student newspaper. I still dreamed of becoming a great American novelist. At that point, my only newspaper experience came from delivering the *St. Petersburg Times* with my father and mother as a boy and working part-time for the same newspaper as a copyboy, city desk clerk, and early morning truck driver. As a result, I understood almost every aspect of how a large newspaper worked, from when the story left a reporter's notebook until the newspaper was tossed onto the reader's front lawn.

Why the *Star-Banner* hired me that spring is still a bit of mystery, especially with a major journalism school just thirty miles up the road. I hope it was because they saw at least a little potential, although it probably had more to do with the poverty level salary of \$75 a week they paid, barely fifty cents an hour above the minimum wage of the time. When I was hired, the *Banner* was still owned by the Perry family newspaper chain, a tight-fisted group of 27 publications that would make millions for the

family a few years later when they sold off the chain. It was the final heyday of newspaper journalism and the *Star-Banner*, like many small town afternoon newspapers, was just beginning the fight against the assault of television's evening news programs.

The newspaper had begun life as the *East Florida Banner* the year after the Civil War ended, later merging with the *Florida Iacon*, before becoming a daily publication in 1890. By the end of that decade, the rival *Ocala Weekly Star* was born in the press room of the *Florida Baptist Witness*, the official publication of the Florida Baptist Convention. Interestingly, two of its early editors included Frank Harris, a Confederate veteran, and later C.L. Bittinger, who served as a commander of the Grand Army of the Republic before moving south. Not until World War II did the *Star* and the *Banner* merge into the *Ocala Star-Banner*.

During my time in Ocala, the paper was located on the second floor of an aging, nondescript office building on a side street a block off the main square. I can still remember climbing those dusty wooden stairs to the second floor, which was one large open space, divided only by the walls of the stairwell. To the left was the advertising department, occupying a space at least twice as large as the newsroom, which says a lot about the true priorities of most newspaper publishers, then and now.

Almost everything at the paper seemed to be worn out – the offices, the furniture, even some of the people. The paper itself was printed on an old press first used by one of the Atlanta newspapers, the *Journal* if I remember correctly, to print their color comics, another tidbit of trivia that sticks in my memory.

There were some fascinating individuals at the *Banner*, some of whom came from old school journalism, when newspapermen were hard-drinking, chain smoking escapees from a Damon Runyon play. Others at the *Banner* were the future of journalism, younger and more idealistic. These individuals were among my earliest mentors, people who helped to shape my career as a writer.

The editor of the paper was David Cook. He was the man charged with the administration of the editorial side of the business, the public face of the newspaper. He was also the representative who attended Chamber of Commerce and civic club meetings, glad-handed local politicians, and wrote editorials. He was the man who hired me, and he would be the guy who sent me packing. Curiously, our paths would cross again, ever so briefly, at the *Tallahassee Democrat*.

Cook was the only member of the editorial staff afforded any privacy. His desk was in the back corner of the newsroom, protected from roving eyes by a single wood and cork partition. He sat behind an old wooden desk,

with two walls of windows behind him. My only interaction with him outside of his office was at civic club luncheons. His family moved to Ocala when he was four and he has lived the vast majority of his life there. Except for a dozen years in Tallahassee, he spent most of his professional career at the *Star-Banner*. Today, in his early 90's, he uses the wealth of experience he acquired working for the paper to write local history and he is the author of *Historic Ocala: The Story of Ocala and Marion County*.

At the other end of the newsroom sat Bernie Watts, the managing editor, an almost speechless fellow who spend most of the hours approaching the paper's early afternoon deadline at a small rectangular table in a dark, windowless area, hunched over piles of copy. He was a real workhorse, the man who oversaw every word that appeared in the paper. A World War II veteran and a University of Florida journalism graduate, he made certain the *Banner* adhered to basic journalistic standards and met each new deadline.

During my six months at the *Banner*, I rarely spoke to Watts. To be totally honest, I was afraid of him. Our conversations always came in response to his questions concerning the news articles I wrote. I still have a sense of dread when I think about being summoned to his desk, I imagine it is what it must have been like to have faced the Spanish Inquisition.

Watts went on to become editor of the *Star-Banner*, when Cook moved to Tallahassee. He worked for the paper for more than 45 years, holding almost every editorial position at some point in time, finally retiring at the end of 1994. He died in 2013 at the age of 93. In true Watts style, his obituary in the *Star-Banner* remembered him as “an inveterate, bred-in-the-bone newsman, having composed his own obituary.”

Thom Wilkerson was the city editor, a frustrated poet from Boaz, Alabama, who produced at least three thin volumes of verse. From my perspective, he was the friendliest member of the editorial hierarchy. He appreciated words and edited them with loving care. I also think of him as someone who hoped that fate would not condemn him to a career in backwater journalism. I long imagined that he went back to college and became an English professor at some small liberal arts college in the Northeast. It was certainly where he belonged. However, according to his biography on a list of Alabama authors, he took the path of a great many newspaper journalists, moving to corporate communications. It appears that in the early 1980’s he edited a corporate magazine for Barnett Banks, a publication that most certainly benefited from his poetic talents.

My two closest friends on the newspaper were my roommate, Sam Rawls, and a fellow reporter with whom I shared the police beat, Brian

Howland. Both were a few years older and looked after me like big brothers.

Sam, the assistant sports editor, was the one man at the *Banner* destined to become nationally known. A sports enthusiast, he briefly played professional baseball, rode the rodeo circuit and enjoyed golf well enough to hobnob with sports figures such as Ted Williams. Back then Williams worked for the Boston Red Sox minor league teams, teams that did their spring training at Gerig Field in Ocala. One of America’s legendary baseball players, Williams was noted for his explosive temper. On a round of golf with Sam, Williams started yelling and screaming, throwing his golf clubs into a water hazard after an especially disappointing shot. As for the spring training field where Williams coached, it was named for a local druggist and mayor, J.J. Gerig, who was known in Ocala as “Mr. Baseball” because of his love of the game. The field was built during the Great Depression with funds from the Works Progress Administration.

Sam, or “Scooter” as only his closest friends were allowed to call him, a nickname that came from his baseball days, and I were roommates for most of my time in Ocala. We rented the top floor of a huge old house on Fort King Street, which had a private elevator, and was one of the coolest places I’ve ever lived. When we were first shown the apartment, he had whispered to me to low key my interest in the place so perhaps we could get the landlord to come down

on the rent. As we walked into the main room of the apartment, his jaw dropped and the cigarette he was about to light fell to the floor. I am surprised the landlord didn't up the rent when he saw that reaction.

One of my favorite memories was the afternoon Scooter called me back to the newsroom after all the deadlines had passed and the place was normally empty. Upon my return I was introduced to a tall, lanky fellow with a firm handshake and a friendly smile. That man was Satchel Paige, one of the greatest baseball pitchers of all times, a man who played most of his career in the old Negro League. Then in 1948 he became the oldest rookie, at age 42, to play in the Major Leagues. Life at the *Banner* was filled with surprises.

Scooter would ultimately abandon the sports desk and become a full time cartoonist, publishing under the name SCRAWLS, which were his first two initials and his last name pushed together. Clearly it was his destiny. I wonder if his first professional cartoon is still hanging on the wall at the *Banner*. It was a drawing of LBJ as Batman.

Working for the *Palm Beach Post* during the mid-1970's, Scooter and a columnist for the *Post*, Steve Mitchell, wrote *How to Speak Southern*, a collection of cartoons and one-liners. Published first by the *Post*, the book sold out two editions, but that was just the beginning. It was the opening days of the Jimmy Carter presidency

and being southern was in style. As he later recounted the story, Scooter got a phone call one day from New York. The caller said, "We'll give you a hundred dollars for a 24 hour option on your book." It turns out the call was from Bantam Books, which took over publication, promoting it as "The laugh sensation that's sweeping the nation." Forty years later the book is still in print.

Brian Howland, a more experienced reporter, shared the police beat with me, and introduced me to some fascinating tricks of the trade. His stories often quoted an unidentified sheriff's deputy, who always seemed to have the perfect punchline for finishing a news story with a humorous twist. It turned out Brian was an honorary deputy, complete with miniature badge and ID card. He was the unidentified deputy being quoted. Brian had a rather interesting history. He was a graduate of a Michigan university where he was a guinea pig in some of the early scientific research concerning the effects of LSD. In Ocala, he supplemented his income by working as a classical music disc jockey for a local radio station. I remember spending a Sunday morning with him in the control room, watching this rather seedy looking, unshaven fellow in a cut-off college sweatshirt, spinning Beethoven and Bach for his audience, explaining his selections with the exceedingly cultured voice of an English gentleman. Radio benefits from the imagination of the audience.

Turnover among reporters has always been high on small town newspapers, mainly a result of low pay and because these small newspapers tend to attract people who are just starting their careers or those who are close to the end. There were two other reporters, both with a wealth of experience, who joined the *Banner* the same week I started work, and despite my brief tenure, I outlasted them both.

When I arrived in town, I rented a room in the Ocala Hotel, an old railroad hotel that sat between the town square and the train station. Once a showplace dating back to the early boom days of Florida, it had slowly declined and would reach its final days before the end of the decade. The hotel was a dusty establishment, with faded and well-trodden carpets, high ceilings and transoms over the doors to allow air to circulate since there was no air conditioning. The rooms were clean, which was what mattered, and mine had a large window overlooking a side street. I could only image the parade of traveling salesmen and tourists who had occupied the hotel in the many decades prior to my arrival.

The two other new reporters also took rooms in the hotel and as a result we had several long and fascinating conversations during our off hours in the upstairs lobby down the hall from our rooms. There we sat together in cracked leather chairs with broken springs, while they chain smoked and I absorbed their tales of earlier times.

Both men had previously held senior positions at larger newspapers, but as is often the case in journalism they had fallen victims of alcohol. The *Banner* would prove to be their last hope.

I had known one of the men, Ogden Sharpnack, by reputation during my time at the *St. Petersburg Times*. He had been city editor of the afternoon newspaper, the *Evening Independent*. A World War II Navy veteran, he worked for St. Petersburg newspapers for 25 years. I owe him a lot. He was one of the few people who took the time to help me with my copy, making suggestions before I passed it on to the city editor. Of all the people I worked with at the *Banner*, he is the one I wish I had gotten to know better. He was a kind hearted fellow, a short term mentor who took me under his wing as few have ever done. Sadly for me, Sharpnack left too quickly, moving back to St. Petersburg, where he died just two years later at the age of 47.

The other person who started with me at the *Star-Banner* was a fellow whose name I don't remember for sure. I have researched the paper from those days and think it was Bill Statham, but this is based solely on the time frame, the fact that his stories focused on the civil rights movement and that his is the only byline that rings a bell in my memory. Bylines were rare back then. They were generally used to impress readers with the efforts of the newspaper, such as sending a staff

writer out of town to cover a story, or for an important piece of reporting. In those days a byline was a reward that reporters earned. They were never taken for granted as they are today.

Statham came from a newspaper in Mississippi, a paper that had taken a courageous editorial stand in support of the civil rights movement. As a result, the newspaper was attacked and the lives of the staff were threatened by local members of the Ku Klux Klan. Statham's wife and family had left him, and so he drank to escape the insanity and violence of the Deep South during the early 1960's. He was one of the untold victims of southern racism, black and white, who struggled to overcome the bonds of bigotry.

It is odd some of the experiences that stick in my memory from my days at the *Banner*. Perhaps the strangest is how I spent my first day off. Not really knowing anyone, and not having a television, I went to the movies. It was the long ago demolished Florida Theatre on Silver Springs Boulevard. They were showing a collection of four truly bad horror movies, one after another, all with the word blood in the title. I spent the afternoon watching this odd collection of films, sitting in the back row of an almost empty theatre, with only an occasional trip to the concession counter for candy, popcorn and another soft drink.

My afternoon at the movies was not, however, my most wasted

experience. For that I must credit the Selective Service's decision to test young men of college age to see if they were worthy of a student deferment. I was nineteen and a prime candidate for the draft, a fate I would be spared the following year when I joined the Marine Corps Reserve. The Selective Service test was not mandatory, but was highly encouraged, and offered the possibility of regaining my student deferment, so I signed up to take the test at the local community college. There I spent the best part of a Saturday, pencil in hand, hunched over the exam in a large teaching theatre with other hopeful young men. I never learned the quality of my performance, since several weeks later the exam idea was abandoned. Such were the frustrations of young men in the mid-1960's. The only people to profit from the examination were the folks at the Educational Testing Service who prepared the test.

Most of the news I covered back then was pretty basic stuff. I made the rounds of the local police agencies, attended civic club meetings, and wrote an occasional feature. Looking back I suspect that the editor had devised an unofficial training program to help get me started in journalism. I also think he must have felt sorry for someone struggling to survive on such a meager salary, or maybe it was to help a young man whose cooking skills were limited to ordering at a local restaurant, which is where I ate most

of my meals, or opening a can of beans. As a result, I was assigned to cover two or three civic club meetings every week, an assignment that always included a free meal.

One of the first and perhaps the most important learning experience I mastered as a young police reporter had to do with traffic accidents. Accidents stories were a standard part of local news coverage, from fender benders to death on the highways. The two incidents I remember most provide examples at both ends of the scale. The first involved two drivers from Silver Springs, Maryland who met for the first time when their cars crashed into each other at the entrance to Silver Springs, the famous tourist attraction east of Ocala. The oddity of the story made it newsworthy. The other was the first fatal accident I covered. Then it was standard procedure for the highway patrol to call the newspaper any time there was a fatality on the highway. As the police reporter, I was expected to grab a 35mm camera, jump into my car and get to the accident site as quickly as possible, which I did, arriving before the ambulances. What I found was a scene of horror, something I knew I never wanted to see again.

I had learned a very valuable lesson. While I would cover a number of fatal accidents later in my career, I always drove slowly until I saw the ambulance pass me in the opposite direction. Then I would speed up, arriving at scenes with lots of twisted

metal, but never again was I required to see or photograph the human victims of such terrible events.

It was in Ocala that I also got my first taste of political campaigns, hanging out at the local headquarters of Miami Mayor Robert King High's campaign for Governor. High was a reformer who bucked the established Democratic Party in Florida by supporting the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and working for racial equality. Forgotten by most modern historians of Florida politics, High was one of the people who helped Florida escape the chains of the Old South.

A veteran of the Army Air Corps from Tennessee, High moved to Florida where he used the GI Bill to attend the University of Miami and Stetson Law School. Becoming mayor of Miami in the mid-1950's, he helped to expose the seedy side of the community, working undercover with a local reporter, he visited strip clubs notorious for cheating customers, gambling and other shady dealings. He also led the fight to get the Florida East Coast Railroad to pay long overdue property taxes. He was fluent in Spanish long before that was a necessity for Miami politicians and he successfully pushed for reductions of both electric power and telephone rates in the area. Perhaps his most memorable accomplishment as mayor, at least from today's perspective, was convincing the American Football League to put a team in South Florida – the Miami Dolphins

In 1964, High ran unsuccessfully for the Democratic nomination for governor, losing to Jacksonville Mayor Hayden Burns, an old guard Democrat nicknamed "Old Slick" because of both the amount of oil in his hair and his questionable politics. Ever since Reconstruction, statewide elections had been decided in the Democratic Primary. Because of a change in the Florida Constitution, the governor's election was moved to non-Presidential Election years, giving High a second chance in 1966.

High ultimately won his party's nomination in 1966, but lost the general election to Claude Kirk Jr., the first Republican governor of Florida since Reconstruction. That campaign was significant in that it marked the beginning of Florida's transition from a state controlled by Democrats to one controlled by Republicans. Interestingly, racism also seems to have made the same transition between the two political parties. Sadly, that was the end of High's political career. He died the following year.

I will admit that my motivation for becoming involved with the campaign had less to do with politics and more to do with an attractive older woman, a divorcee, who managed High's local campaign office. At 19 almost everything revolved around sex -- if not real, certainly imagined. I don't remember her name, but more than half a century later I still remember having an intense attraction. It was the same year I read Stephen

Vizinczey's newly published novel *In Praise of Older Women*, a tale that whet the sexual appetite of many in my generation, and it certainly added to the thrills I imagined might result from having a relationship with her, something that never happened.

If my inexperience offered one end of the scale, the sexual adventures of one of my Ocala friends, who will remain unnamed, certainly provided insight into life at the opposite end. He was worldly, wise and seemed to my innocent eyes, a truly experienced fellow. One of his more exciting adventures occurred one evening when he appeared at the door of my apartment in just his underwear. He had been having an ongoing relationship with a woman in the advertising sales department, a tall, thin beauty with just touches of silver in her hair. Every man in the newsroom had the hots for her, but her wedding ring kept most of that lecherous hoard at a safe distance.

Well one evening, while her husband was away, my unnamed friend and the lovely advertising saleswoman embarked upon a very dangerous tryst. They were enjoying themselves in her bed when the husband returned home unexpectedly. Needless to say, my friend only had time to grab his boxer shorts, literally jump out the bedroom window and make a mad dash for safety. He worked his way to my apartment through back alleys in the dead of night, avoiding street lights and passing cars. The problem was he had

left his new sports car abandoned within gunshot of her house.

Together, we drove back in my car, not certain what to expect. Certainly a jealous husband with a shotgun on the porch was well within the realm of possibility. Dropping him off a couple of doors away, he silently slipped out of my car, stealthily approached his car, opened the door and grabbed his keys from the floorboard where he always left them, fired up the engine and was off. No shots fired.

On the following day, the lovely advertising saleswoman walked nonchalantly through the newsroom and dropped a small brown paper grocery bag into my colleague's chair. Inside were his clothes and wallet. Fortunately for all concerned, the unsuspecting husband had been slow to reach the bedroom, and all the incriminating evidence had been hidden away. Some people, and my friend was certainly one of them, live charmed lives.

Of all the forgettable feature stories I wrote for the *Banner*, one of the few I remember was one about a local band called the "Posmen," a group of guys from Ocala who were trying to make it in the music world. My article was the first news article written about them. Not long afterwards, they changed the name of their group to "The Royal Guardsmen," taking advantage of all the British groups topping the music charts, and become a one-hit-wonder

with their song "Snoopy and the Red Baron."

Another odd story involved a Baptist minister who was promoting his latest book. During the interview, I asked him about premarital sex. Having been raised a Southern Baptist, I knew the church considered such activity a deadly sin. Much to my amazement, the minister condoned it. His statement seemed like heresy and certainly highly newsworthy, so I included it in my story. The editor, however, wasn't impressed and cut it from the article. The definition of what is and is not news has always been highly subjective.

Without question, the most memorable, and certainly the saddest news story I covered during my days at the *Banner* was a murder trial that involved a young black man charged with the death of a filling station attendant during a late night robbery. The proceeds of the robbery totaled less than \$20, even small change back then, and certainly not equal to the value of a human life. The trial lasted for several days, and for some mysterious reason I was the reporter assigned to cover the verdict. Sitting in the first row immediately behind the defendant and his public assistance attorney, it was easy to eavesdrop on their conversation.

When the trial came to its conclusion, the jury was out for only a few minutes, returning to the courtroom to announce their verdict. They found the defendant guilty as

charged, which carried a mandatory death sentence. Everyone in the courtroom except for one person understood the punishment. That one person was the defendant, who turned to his attorney and asked simply, "What does this mean?"

That question and his totally innocent tone have stuck in my memory all these years. I cannot tell you if I thought the man was innocent or guilty. In the South then, black men rarely got fair trials, certainly not from a jury of all white men. What I do know, based on the tone of his voice and the expression on his face, is that the man had no idea what had happened, nor did he understand the fate that awaited him. Even today that still seems very wrong.

Race was a key reason why I lost my job at the *Banner*. I committed a fatal error for a reporter on a small town southern newspaper. In those days, news stories identified African Americans, usually with a phrase such as "a local Ocala negro" after their name. Inadvertently, in a news article of only two or three paragraphs, I switched the names of a black man stopped for a traffic violation and the name of the white highway patrol officer who pulled him over. The officer seemed to take it as an honest mistake, although looking back that may have been because he did not want to confront me directly. He may have expressed a very different opinion to the management of the *Banner*. Upon my return to the office, the editor summoned me to his

makeshift office behind the corkboard partition where his opinion of the incident proved to be far less forgiving. That was the way things worked back then.

All in all, my departure from Ocala proved to be a good one. I went back to college that fall, enrolling at Florida State, taking a job on the daily campus paper, *The Florida Flambeau*, where I had far more real life experience than most of my colleagues, and got part time jobs writing sports for the *Tallahassee Democrat* and working in the Cowles Capital Bureau. My extraordinarily diverse career as a writer, which would be filled with numerous twists and turns, had officially begun.