

## ***A NEWSPAPER MAN***

**By Michael Ventura**

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As my Aunt Anna once said to me: “Michael, you come by it honestly.” By which she meant, once upon a time my mother was a newspaper woman and it was only fitting that I should be a newspaper man.

When I was a boy, ten-ish or so, Mama began to tell me newspaper stories. I was reading history and science books by then, and keeping a diary, and I see now that Clelia (her name’s pronounced KLEL-y-ah) was gently prodding her first-born toward the vocation of writing, using the greatest teaching-tool a parent has: telling stories of her youth. During the next decade it was a favorite subject whenever we managed a private conversation (which was rare, due to circumstances too complicated to relate right now). How she’d been a writer, and an editor, and how thrilling it was... working days on end with little sleep... taking bad copy and writing it over to make it good... her secret pride when the author got the credit she deserved... how much she enjoyed shaping sentences that flowed clearly and passionately... up all night with last-minute editorial and layout changes... taking the proofs to the printer at dawn... sleeping in a chair at the printer’s so she could hold the first issue “hot off the press,” the pages still warm in her hands... “Remember,” she’d instruct when I was older, “words are music.”

Clelia’s newspaper days were during the Second World War in Italian East Harlem. She was in her early twenties. Her paper was *L’Unita del Popolo* (The Unity of the People), a Communist weekly founded by Italian refugees on the lam from Mussolini. There was hardly any money, people were always coming and going, they seemed to live in the office, subsisting on coffee and cigarettes, and they constantly argued politics. They felt they were doing something important. Clelia did whatever was at hand -- proofreading, sweeping, anything -- but her favorite task was to edit and sometimes write the English-language page, as well as editing stories in Italian. “I was a dedicated revolutionist,” she said with pride. “To me that meant a world at peace, well-fed, well-housed.” It was the only period of my mother’s adult life that she spoke of with happiness and excitement, and the only job she ever spoke of with love.

Many years later, when I’d been writing for weeklies for some time, I suddenly realized: “Mama! I’m doing exactly what you raised me to do! Here I was thinking myself a rebel, and what I really am is an obedient son.” (Never a Communist, though. The best way not to be a Communist is to be raised by one. The children of Communists -- “red diaper babies” -- generally become good bourgeoisie or, like me, kind of an anarchist.)

It’s wonderful, the rare times when one’s parents are right. I found being a newspaper man every bit as romantic as my mother’s portrayal. Not that there’s no drudgery; there’s lots. But, as a mostly-forgotten writer named Logan Pearsall Smith once said, “The test of a vocation is the love of the drudgery it involves.” Especially getting a paper off the ground... the constant work, the uncertainty, the arguments, the gawd-awful mistakes (on the *Austin Sun*, trying to find space at the last minute for a good piece, we sometimes jumped a story backwards -- it began, say, on page 12, to be continued on page 8)... the publishers, their backs against the wall, get dictatorial while the staff, barely eking a living, get mutinous... the tragedies, and there are tragedies: I knew the reporter who broke the Jim Jones cult story in California, which eventually forced Jones and his cult to Guyana, where they eventually drank (and gave their children to drink) deadly Kool-Aid; my friend was never the same after that... the burn-outs... friendships made, friendships lost... the prima donnas (yes, I am one of those, I confess)... and, most of all, learning to be a professional. Prima donna or no, a professional learns that when you don’t make your deadline your editors, proof-readers, copy-editors, fact-checkers, illustrators (and I’ve been most fortunate in my illustrators), lay-out artists, all work late because you screwed up. You depend on them to catch your mistakes, they depend on you to come in “clean” (requiring not much re-writing), on time and fairly good, so that the paper stays afloat and everybody gets paid.

This is what any professional learns: You must achieve a cruising-level that you never dip below. You're not always at your best, but your next-best is still good enough to print. And every day, or every week, or every month, depending on the publication, you've created together a kind of time-capsule, an artifact that has importance beyond its immediate intentions.

For instance: I have, tacked to a wall, a full-page facsimile of the *Boston Evening Globe*, September 11, 1918. A headline screams: SOX WIN CHAMPIONSHIP. But there's also: *U.S. Troopship Torpedoed... Guide for Men Registering for the Draft Tomorrow... Petrograd Afire, Many People Slain*, "indiscriminate massacre of people in the streets[; reports] did not indicate whether the massacre was organized or was merely the result of a general state of anarchy." And finally: *Shortage of 1,000,000 Barrels of Gasoline Indicated*. "Washington, Sept. 11 -- Fuel Administrator Garfield informed the Senate today... that, unless conservation steps are taken immediately, there would be a deficit of approximately one million barrels of gasoline at the end of the year." Look at old newspapers and you see the world's always been burning in one way or another. For all the undeniable changes, the basic issues beneath those changes and the events that ensue remain remarkably the same. We are always in trouble. Tumult is a human constant.

It may be odd of me, but I find that a little comforting. Civilization survived 1918, when millions died by violence and epidemic; it might survive 2006.

The artifact you create when you print a newspaper goes beyond the stories, the reviews, the columns; the paper goes beyond the concerns of the day. I open an *Austin Sun* from 1976, an *LA Weekly* from 1986, an *Austin Chronicle* from 1996 and now 2006, and turn them over page by page, looking at everything. The news and reviews are surprisingly similar, though slanted in different ways and emphasizing different styles. But the art, the photos, the ads, the design, are mostly (often drastically) different. Each issue is a Rorschach of its day. Head-shop ads in the '76 *Austin Sun*; no tattoo parlors. No tanning salon ads in the '86 *LA Weekly*, and no plethora of ads for cosmetic surgery. Hair is long, then short. Women in ads are full-bodied, then slim. The hot music is "cosmic country," then blues, punk, hip-hop. What would have been considered soft-porn and unprintable in '76 is standard advertising fare in '96. Read the '76 *Austin Sun* and you'd think we're on the brink of social revolution. (We were, but it came from the Christian Right, about which the *Sun* had no clue.) By the '86 *LA Weekly*, the ads (if not the copy) are unapologetically bourgeois. There is, however, one constant: the personals are lonely and horny.

A future historian wishing to study how small cities grew recklessly and unpredictably in the last 25 years, will use the *Chronicle's* Austin coverage as a prime source, a case study. That historian will find the letters as significant as the news and editorials. Week by week a historian will be able to chronicle (no pun intended) a mid-size city struggling toward its future. And this has less to do with the virtue, or lack of it, of individual articles; it has to do with the paper's totality. How ads are laid out and what they advertise, will be more telling to the sociologist-anthropologist-historian than my columns. What I write won't be nearly as important to those scholars as the fact that, in this time and place, I had the liberty to write as I do, with editorial support and (most significantly for historians) a market.

The opinions in my mother's commie newspaper might today be a subject of mockery. But that there was a lively immigrant Communist weekly in East Harlem in the early 1940s -- that, in itself, has significance transcending her paper.

Every contributor to a newspaper -- not least, the letter-writers and ad-designers -- creates this artifact, precious to history.

I will indulge in a brag. In our time of sameness, when even most so-called "alternative" papers are corporately owned, it is no small thing that a personally owned, individual newspaper could survive in Austin, Texas, for a quarter century. No matter what you think of us, that fact says something honorable about the people, the place, and their time.

Mama was right. This is a great job.

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