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Good Times: An evening to recall afternoons past

BY SYLVIA ADCOCK

They said to bring a relic. People brought old front pages in various shades of yellow. I brought myself. Last Friday, the Old Media--or, perhaps, the Very Old Media--gathered in the former home of the Downtown Wig Shop on E. Hargett Street in Raleigh. We must have walked by that building a million times, never knowing there were slugs of lead type jammed beneath the floorboards, never knowing that the building once housed the newspaper we worked for, *The Raleigh Times*.

The paper is gone now, one of scores of afternoon papers that closed in the 1980s and 1990s in one of the first major contractions in print journalism, cutbacks that turned two-newspaper towns like Raleigh into one-paper towns, ending decades of head-to-head competition.

But perhaps fittingly, the original *Raleigh Times* building--lovingly restored by developer Greg Hatem--is becoming a bar. To christen it, Hatem invited the disbanded staff to come and have a few drinks. We came. We came from as far as away as Florida and New York, as close as Greensboro and Durham. We had a few drinks, all right. Some things never change. Thank God.

The people who gathered at 14 E. Hargett St. last Friday were the last of a breed, journalists who cut their teeth on afternoon papers, where the news cycle was short but sweet. We stood next to the bar near the concrete slabs in the floor that held the printing presses, where Hatem found the lead type slugs, each the width of a newspaper column, the characters forming snatches of stories from the past.

As the staffers spanning several generations picked up their ID tags--press passes with *The Raleigh Times* logo--the stories that didn't make the paper began to make the rounds. A slide show organized by former *Times* photographer Karen Tam showed black-and-whites of earnest-looking reporters and editors and photographers who came of age during the Watergate era of the 1970s. Some of the photos were shot in the *Times*' newsroom on the second floor of *The News & Observer*'s McDowell Street building, others with reporters on assignment. Another--this one not shot in the newsroom--bordered on pornography. OK, forget borders, it was pornography. "Kinda blocks out the sun, doesn't it?" said the reporter whose full frontal image flashed on the screen.

Other memories were a bit more tame. "I remember how Treva [Jones] would be talking to a grieving family and she'd say, 'Well, I'm going to just put down the phone for a minute and let you cry,'" says David Lauderdale, who came to Raleigh for the reunion from Hilton Head, S.C., where he is a columnist for *The Island Packet*.

Jones, now retired, was hired as a cop reporter in 1967 in the days when few women covered news; most worked in the "Women of the Times" section that was filled with features, social notes and recipes. Treva never wrote a recipe. She said she later learned she wasn't the first choice for the job. The first hire vanished after a week, never picked up her paycheck, and left a note in her typewriter that said, "I can't take this anymore."

"Thirty-two years later," Jones says, "I came to the same conclusion."



The Evening Times building, back in the days when "the pace of the day lent itself to some cutting up in the afternoon."

The reunion came about after Tam saw the sign in the window advertising the Raleigh Times bar with a 1912 shot of the newsboys out in front. "I was eating lunch around the corner about a year ago," Tam says. "I passed the building and it said Raleigh Times, and they had the old pictures. I said, 'Oh, my God.'"

Tam says the bar owners were originally going to invite the *Times* staff to come on opening night of the bar, mixing in with regular folks. But we got our night. "They wouldn't understand us and this wonderful business, which is kind of, like dying," she says, calling the gathering "a celebration of *The Raleigh Times* in particular and the newspaper industry as a whole."

The *Times* closed for good in 1989, with a headline that said "That's All, Folks." But the reporters and editors who were there in the late 1980s said the real closure was two years earlier, when the staff was merged with the larger *News & Observer* staff. Gone was the cutthroat competition, the identity.

It wasn't just the promise of free drinks that brought 75 people back after nearly 20 years. "A lot of people got their start in the business at *The Raleigh Times*," says Sharon Kilby Campbell, who was at the *Times* from 1971 until 1986 and later returned to the Triangle to become managing editor of *The Chapel Hill News*. "We worked together, we helped each other. [Former city editor] Harold Muddiman ran a newsroom that knew how to have fun and still put out a good product. We were scrappy, feisty."

And, perhaps most importantly for the development of that elusive state called camaraderie, "The pace of the day lent itself to some cutting up in the afternoon," says Campbell. Once the presses started rolling for the final edition, and the trucks started backing out of the bays, there was nothing more we could do to beat *The N&O* until the next morning. They owned the afternoon; we owned the mornings. There was often time to retire to the nearest bar--the now-defunct Queen Bee or the Players' Retreat--and still get home for dinner.

But in the mornings at 7 a.m., we'd hit the ground running. Obituaries were passed around, left on our typewriters like reminders that nothing is forever. If the morning paper had a story we didn't, we'd have to match it and find a fresh angle--and you had to get it before the first edition deadline at 9:15 a.m., a time that is burned in my memory like a stopped clock. There was barely a moment to catch your breath before the next deadline at 12:15. By that point, many of us were on the scene of a breaking news story, often calling in details as they happened.

Occasionally, when we'd break a particularly good story that the morning paper didn't have, a few of us would walk up to the third floor--where *The N&O* newsroom was--and pretend to use the library. We'd watch as Alton Thorpe (affectionately known as J.B.) whacked the stack of our papers on *The N&O* city editor's desk, the ink still fresh. We'd watch him scan the headlines, tear out our story and walk over and leave it on the desk of *The N&O* reporter who would be assigned to follow it. It didn't get any better than that. Today, he'd just e-mail it, which wouldn't be nearly as satisfying to watch.

I have never had a better time in journalism," says Arthur Sulzberger Jr., the publisher and chairman of *The New York Times*, who came to last week's reunion with his wife, Gail Gregg, who was editor of the *Western Wake Herald* during the couple's stint in North Carolina. Sulzberger was a green reporter at the *Times* from 1973 to 1976, fresh out of college. One of his assignments was to go to the courthouse and copy down the names of everyone convicted of DUI for a public listing in the paper.

"I covered Ed Koch for *The New York Times*. This was more fun," he says, drinking red wine and wearing a press pass with his photo showing a 23-year-old in oversized glasses in need of a haircut. "I learned so much," Sulzberger says, taking out a case of cigars. He asks Hatem if it's OK to light up. This is North Carolina, Hatem says. Of course.

When Hatem bought the building a few years ago, he didn't know it had housed a newspaper that was part of Raleigh's fabric. It wasn't until he began researching the address that he found the 1912 photos of newsboys in front of the building. Little by little, he unearthed the remains, restoring the 15-foot-high original ceilings and purchasing a metal detector to find all the old type. Other relics unearthed from the old building--a package of Piedmont cigarettes, a New Testament and a tin of Three Sheiks brand condoms--are under glass in the bar.

At nearly midnight, we are still at it. The bulletin board set up in the front of the bar is covered with the old front pages. The stories start to wane. By 1 a.m., there are only a dozen of us with ink in our veins left standing.

Then the lights turn out. The party's over.

Sylvia Adcock began working for *The Raleigh Times* at \$4.50 an hour while a student at N.C. State. She recently moved back to Raleigh after 16 years at *Newsday*, where she was part of a team that won the Pulitzer Prize for spot news reporting in 1997 for coverage of the crash off Long Island of TWA Flight 800.