

Memories of the way things might have been

The Herald-Sun

March 24, 2006 5:38 pm

In a line I often cite, Will Rogers said "Things ain't like they used to be -- and they never were."

Memory often burnishes the past, accentuating the positive and, if not eliminating the negative, downplaying it.

The truth of Rogers' observation undoubtedly provides an important perspective to the giddy reminiscences last weekend of a group of mostly middle-aged and beyond journalists, former journalists and hangers-on.

The occasion was a reunion and the opening of a downtown Raleigh bar.

Greg Hatem, the developer and owner of The Raleigh Times bar on Hargett Street, threw open his historic space a week before his official opening to host the reunion of staff members from the old afternoon newspaper of the same name.

The newspaper printed its last edition in 1989. A good many characters filled its newsroom and thousands of stories filled its pages during its nearly century-long run, but the weekend's festivities were mostly about a couple decades of its history.

Most of the 70 or so folks who gathered Friday night, and especially a smaller group that dined together Saturday, had spent varying lengths of time at the paper at or near the dawn of their careers in the 1970s and 1980s.

Starting around 1970, The Times, which had been acquired by The News and Observer in 1955, set out to be a clearly distinctive force in Raleigh. The N&O focused on state government news and its decades-old tradition of blanketing eastern North Carolina.

The Times' mission became to cover local news in Raleigh obsessively, ebulliently and voluminously.

I joined The Times in the summer of 1970, a few weeks out of Duke University, zealous, eager and combative. The war in Vietnam, civil rights, Richard Nixon's presidency and Watergate, and myriad other national and international events may have fascinated me intellectually as they had through my college years, but along with the rest of a mostly young staff I was happy to fling myself into covering local news.

Not just covering it, but covering it encyclopedically if, in hindsight, sometimes carelessly. And not just covering it, but covering it in a way we hoped would stick it to our after-hours friends but workday arch-foes upstairs on the third floor, where the much larger, older and, we thought, somewhat smug staff of The News and Observer plied its trade.

(Yes, the irony of my career is that 35 years after commencing it in competition with The News and Observer, I returned to the Triangle to take up the fight again.)

We had lots of news space and energy. We cranked out local news stories -- I once wrote, if memory serves, 11 stories from a single City Council meeting. We recorded new stop signs, every zoning case, every birth, every death, every building permit.

Perhaps most of all, as old colleague after old colleague recalled last weekend, we had a tremendous belief in the worth of newspapering and camaraderie we seldom equaled as our careers developed over many different paths.

Many of us are still in journalism, and still love our work. But the doubt that shadows an industry in transition more than once intruded on recollections of crazy assignments, crisis coverage, high-wire, deadline-beating reporting, great scoops and even stomach-churning missteps.

We talked about many of our colleagues who couldn't make the trip back, but a surprising number came long distances including from New York and Florida. Frank Daniels Jr., publisher of The News and Observer and The Times and whose family had owned the paper for four generations before selling to McClatchy Newspapers, was an enthusiastic participant, mingling with many of us who I know must have caused him more than a little worry in our impetuous youth.

Treva Jones, a longtime police reporter, was fond of repeating during the evening that we put out a pretty exciting paper "on a shoestring budget with two knots tied in it." She didn't really mean the shoestring budget, I suggested half-jokingly to Daniels.

He laughed: "Yes, she did."

Henry Scott, a former Times reporter, would probably agree. He recalled how my successor as city editor dispatched him to Washington to cover a presidential inauguration with no money for a hotel room.

He had loved it, and wrote some great stories.

It was that kind of paper, and that kind of time in our lives.

Bob Ashley is editor of The Herald-Sun. Contact him at (919) 419-6678 or by e-mail at bashley@heraldsun.com