

Aging Lifestyles: Remembering sensational reporting of yesteryear

by Joe_Volz

I suppose I could call myself a pioneer purveyor of sensationalism, having spent my salad days as a young reporter in the 1970s writing for a long-since departed tabloid, the Washington Daily News.

Those were the days when newspapers didn't have to worry about being out-sensationalized by the Internet or bloggers or even by TV, just beginning to plunge into gossip.

The Daily News, whose motto was "Give light and the people will find the way," folded 35 summers ago. The problem, I guess, was that we were not shedding enough light on much of anything except the scandals of the day. Maybe we were ahead of our time.

This summer, in a reflective mood, I wondered what kind of progress we had made in reporting all the news that, well, is unfit to print. The Internet Age, for example, now spends copious amounts of web space covering Paris Hilton, Lindsay Lohan and Britney Spears.

Oh, to be a generation younger and out there chasing those stories. However, it's not that we didn't have some corkers of our own.

Let's take a stroll down memory lane to the long forgotten sensations of yesteryear before the computer age. Watergate, of course, was the big story that Summer of '72 - for the serious papers. But it took months to figure out just who had done what to whom. The White House press secretary had pronounced Watergate a "third rate burglary."

And Watergate was missing one great element we tabloid writers lusted to write about - sex.

So, we chased after femme fatales like Elizabeth Ray, the Capitol Hill secretary who never learned to type. Her boss, Rep. Wayne Hays, (D-Ohio), didn't think it was necessary. And there was Fanne Foxe, a stripper billed as the "Argentine Firecracker," who fell in love with the powerful Rep. Wilbur Mills, (D-Ark.).

I remember when the Daily News died that summer of '72. A bunch of us mourners, who had worked in the dingy, three-story fake colonial building that housed the newspaper a few blocks from the White House, were standing by the loading dock when an ancient woman hobbled down the street.

She stopped where some Washington Star trucks were parked but loaded with regular-sized Stars rather than our slender tabloids. (The Star had bought the Daily News, only to succumb itself nine years later.)

We watched the woman prodding her cane at those bundles of papers. One of our reporters, Jerry Oppenheimer, said, "I think she's crying.

"Do you miss the Daily News?" he asked her.

She hesitated, smiled and replied, "You know, all these years I've been walking by the building and this is the first time the trucks didn't block off the sidewalk, making me go into the street."

Sensationalism was, indeed, our most important product. We proudly thought up names glorifying our most unworthy citizens. There was the Freeway Phantom, a killer who liked to bump off girls named Denise.

The paper was perpetually broke.

Yet, there were normally well-informed citizens who could not believe that we were so impoverished. Pat Collins, now a Washington TV newscaster, and I had done an investigative series on the Metropolitan Police Department's reluctance to crack down on high stakes illegal gambling by prominent businessmen. They ran their own club, protected by the cops.

The prevailing wisdom at police headquarters was that we had paid somebody \$6,000 to get our hands on some confidential police documents. That brought a big chuckle in the newsroom. We couldn't have raised \$6,000 unless we won the lottery.

Well, the News is gone.

I was in Miami Beach at the Democratic Convention, which nominated another loser, George McGovern. I called the office with a biggie for our noon Redline deadline. Some gunmen had been arrested in the lobby of McGovern's hotel, but the editors could have cared less. Our headline for the last edition had already been written - in 72-point type. It said "Farewell."

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