

The Newspapering Life

By Carl Nolte '55



Carl Nolte '55 worked on the *San Francisco Foghorn* when he was a USF student and later served as USF's director of public information. He has been on the *San Francisco Chronicle* staff since 1961 and writes a column that appears Sundays.

Long ago and not far away, when I was living on Potrero Hill, a small, beat-up black car roared up to the curb where I was standing one fall afternoon when I was 11. A rumped looking guy rolled down the window. “Hey kid,” he said, “You want to make some money delivering newspapers?”

It was the beginning of a life-long infatuation with daily newspapering, working to put out a product that is sold for less than the price of a pack of gum and has a shelf life of about four hours. Working for newspapers, it turns out, is like writing history on an ice cube.

I started seriously writing for papers when I was at USF, working on the *San Francisco Foghorn*, at the time a weekly paper we dearly loved. After a year or so, I got to be the co-sports editor with Jim Breslin and I wrote a sports column. Being co-sports editor was the highest title I ever had in the newspaper business, and it took me close to 50 years of fancy dancing to get a column again. I have been writing a Sunday column, “Native Son,” for a few months for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, where I also work as a reporter.

But now newspapers seem to be headed for the junk heap. The other day CNN called newspapers dinosaurs, and one publication said the *Chronicle* was a prime example of an endangered species.

I surely hope that is not the case. I think the country needs newspapers—from the *New York Times*, which I think is the finest publication in the English language, to the *Chronicle*, which is something less, but still manages to hold up a mirror to the city and the region.

Of course, I come to this conclusion for personal reasons. I've done everything at the *Chronicle* except run it: I've been an editor (low grade, specializing in grunt work), taken pictures, worked as a reporter. I've written about fires, baseball, murders, bank robberies, politics, shipwrecks, history, and assorted silly stuff.

Working for a newspaper has given me a front row seat on all kinds of things. I've covered the construction of the tallest residential high-rise building west

of Chicago, I've steered a merchant ship into the Golden Gate, and asked the manager of the San Francisco Giants dumb questions. The *Chronicle* has sent me to Normandy, to Japan, and to Afghanistan. I've been in combat with the U.S. Army in Iraq. (That one wasn't too easy, since I was 69 years old at the time.)

I've written thousands of newspaper stories and edited thousands more. Most of them have been forgettable. But the *Chronicle* has also covered a lot of stories about the city and the region that would never have been covered elsewhere. We are the main source of news for the Bay Area—not the television, not the radio. The newspaper. Other than crime and car crashes, TV and radio news simply takes local stories out of the papers and uses them. In most cases, Internet news sites also do not develop their own content.

Of course, some of the stories covered by the *Chronicle* were stories nobody wanted to hear. While Giants slugger Barry Bonds was being depicted as a hero on the sport pages, his alleged use of steroids was being brought to light on the front page by two *Chronicle* investigative reporters. And last year's series of stories about University of California executives' pay raises while the system was raising tuition and fees and cutting back on student services certainly made the UC system unhappy.

These and other stories may not please people, but they are important. They are an important part of our community's understanding of itself. Newspapers supply information that is vital to the workings of a democracy; information that is often ignored by radio and television operations. And while some of what newspapers write about is available on blogs and other online sources, blogs often do not attempt to be impartial. Newspaper articles are the product of experienced reporters. Newspapers stand behind what they write.

If newspapers go away—which I hope does not happen—people will see a huge hole in citizens' understanding of the world around them. And then, I suspect, we might miss the newspaper dinosaurs. **USF**