

ago lost its punch. The biggest crusade I remember was Carl Freund's tireless (and endless) series exposing pinball machines.

From its beginning to its end, the *Press* was more style than substance. The principal reason that the *Press* was so interesting to read in the 1950s was its writers, particularly Shrake, who worked rewrite, along with six or seven other duties. There was a time when Shrake would write all the police stories, most of the city and county stories, handle club news, obits, stock markets, call-ins about five-legged dogs and eighty-pound turnips. Then in the afternoon Delbert would let him write features.

"I'd do highly descriptive features about subjects I'd never met, except on the telephone," Shrake recalled. "Gene Gordon would go out and take some pictures, and I'd do the captions. Then Delbert would put the features on his spike, where they'd stack up for weeks. At one time I had 37 features on his spike waiting for space in the paper."

On an average day Shrake would write fifteen to twenty stories under other reporters' bylines. He did a great Carl Freund, with lots of references to "nickel-gulping monsters." He made Harold Williams' stories extra racy, using as many action verbs as he could, and making sly use of terms like "beautiful, scantily clad housewife." Under Shrake's keen eye all of John Ohlendalski's stories read like labels on detergent boxes.

There were other good writers on the paper, but almost all of them were in sports. Not that the *Press* sports page read like a sports page. Some of Jenkins' best columns had to do with how hard it was to open a package of crackers or buy gasoline. Todd was the only writer I ever knew who wrote his lead in advance of a game. Every *Press* sports-writer knew it was bad form to tell the score until at least the fifth paragraph. The first paragraph usually started out, "He was an old man who fished all alone."

Delbert Willis fancied himself a writer and longed to find the Jap who blew off his leg in World War II. This dream came true in 1966 when Delbert and his wife traveled to Japan for a reunion with twelve survivors of the Japanese battalion that had been blown apart at the battle of Morotai Island in 1945. Four of the Japanese soldiers who attended the reunion held out on the island until 1956. Delbert wrote a moving piece about the reunion, and about Morotai Island, "a little bit of real estate which no one really wanted."

The *Press* was "that rag" . . . "that other paper." What a beautiful disgrace. How pathetic. How like itself, and like the city it reflected. Lovely, crumbly,

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sad, misguided, vulnerable.

The *Star-Telegram* might be a disgrace to journalism, but it was Amon Carter's paper. Whereas the *Press'* surrogate publisher, Walter Humphrey, went big for golden weddings, Santa Pals, enlarged turnips, spelling bees, teen news, and, if you can believe it, soil conservation (nobody ever discovered what Humphrey thought soil conservation was), Amon Carter, Sr., was partial to oilmen, ranchers, and government contracts.

Amon Sr.'s all-time hero was Will Rogers. He commissioned a statue of the old Oklahoma Cowboy and donated it to the city in November 1947. This was when Elston Brooks and the rest of us were in high school, but Elston remembers it well, since he was one of seven teenagers arrested for desecrating the statue, or rather the crate it was packed in.

The statue sat in front of Will Rogers Coliseum for nearly a year, still crated in its shipping container. The reason was, old man Carter wouldn't allow anyone except Harry Truman to preside over the unveiling. Truman must have had other things on his mind that year. Anyway, it became a local pastime to go out at night and rip the boards away from the likeness of the old Oklahoma Cowboy. The last straw was when some of Carter's drunken friends at the Fort Worth Club decided to do it. Carter was outraged. The next edition of the *Star-Telegram* promised to bring future vandals to justice and offered a \$5000 reward.

It was the next night when Elston accidentally found himself swigged out in the back seat of a car parked in front of the crate, which six of his teenage friends were happily dismantling. The cops had them all by morning.

"I was just a teenager, but I was living alone in a flophouse at the time, paying \$9 a month rent," Brooks recalled. "I had my own radio show . . . *Ballads by Brooks* on KXOL . . . and I had produced a teenage musical called 'Is Your Juvenile Delinquent?' . . . the answer of course was of course not. I mean we were sponsored by the Fair Department Store and all. Also, the *Press* was interested in hiring me to do the Teen Times page. Then suddenly I'm down at the police station, my whole career in ruins.

"They had all seven of us. The others brought along their parents and were taking it pretty well, but I didn't have any parents. Then Mr. Carter walked in in his camel's hair coat and Shady Oak hat. He walked with this aura of great power. Everyone except me and Blackie Sherrod, who was covering police then for the *Press*, stood up and came to attention.

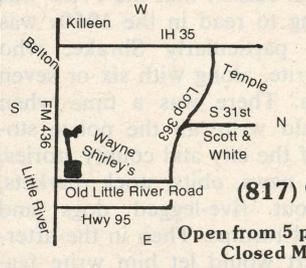
"Carter was very kindly. He lectured

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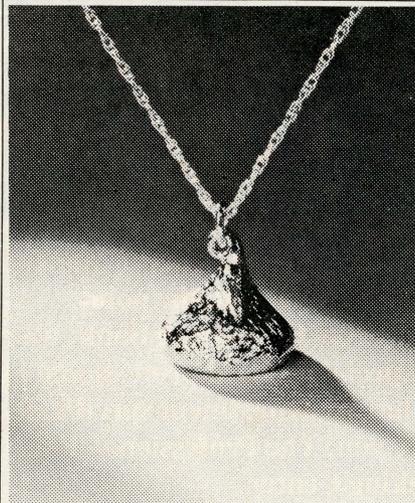
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us on what a great person Will Rogers was, then told us we wouldn't be formally charged. But he was going to do one thing, even though it violated his own, long-standing rule. For the first time ever, the *Star-Telegram* was going to publish the names of juvenile offenders.

"Well, there was general elation. The other six went out and bought extra copies of the paper. But me . . . I mean, I was losing everything. Nobody was about to hire a teenage hoodlum."

The *Star-Telegram* eventually hired Brooks (he's now the amusements editor), but only after the *Press* broke him in on Teen Times. Brooks would have still been at the *Press* on Black Friday except he was fired by mistake by C. L. Douglas, who didn't understand that the reason Humphrey was taking Brooks off Teen Times was to become a full-time cityside reporter. The *Press* never learned to communicate too well at the top level, probably because no one up there ever understood for a minute what was happening or why or how.

The *Press* was a sanctuary for freaks, for idealists, for demonologists, for outcasts, for drunks, for honest young writers and reporters and curiosity seekers. I forget some of their names, but I remember them. The chap on the copy desk whose lunch always consisted of raw carrots, each bite of which he chewed exactly 88 times. And Nat Lehmerman, who drove a cab, sold doughnuts, and wrote sports on the side. God, can I see that afternoon at Colonial! It's May and there is electricity in the air, the tortured figure of Ben Hogan is walking up to 18, leading the tournament by a stroke, the worshipping hometown crowd silent as a maiden's prayer. And right there with him, marching step for step in his tan cutoffs, waving his arms and talking a mile a minute, is Nat Lehmerman.

Nat is saying, "C'mon, Ben, baby, open up. What are you thinking right now?"

The *Press* brought out that side of you. If you didn't take yourself too seriously, how could you take Ben Hogan any other way?

Nobody will miss the *Press* except the people who used to work there, and maybe an occasional practitioner like one Fort Worth doctor's wife, who told me, "I liked it because it was little. I could take it with me in my sitz bath and fold it over when I got ready to turn a page."

A long, long time ago, a *Press* editor is supposed to have told a cub reporter, "The poor folks take us because we're the least expensive newspaper in town. The rich folks read us to find out what we're telling the poor folks."

A long, long time ago, that may have been true. ♣