

# THE LIFE & DEATH OF THE SCREAMING EAGLE



BY JOHN MacCORMACK

*The North Coast Times Eagle was born to its first life 30 years ago, on May 13, 1971. John MacCormack wrote a biography of the fierce muckraking coastal weekly a few months after it folded after 5 tumultuous years. Published in Portland's One Dollar magazine in the summer of 1976, the article began a new set of publishing tombstones. Within a few issues One Dollar folded and a Eugene magazine carried its epitaph, and died. It became a curse in Northwest publishing to pay tribute to a fallen press. —MPMc*

*"There is an 'Eagle' in some souls that can alight  
dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them  
again and become invisible in the sunny spaces."*

—HERMAN MELVILLE

This is going to be a long story, a wild west show of sorts, about a renegade Oregon weekly that for nearly five years rained a fiery, strange synthesis of populist journalism and outrage on a 100 mile stretch of the north coast from Astoria to Lincoln City.

It was a paper that consumed almost 200 staff members in less than 300 issues, that championed the most arcane and libertarian of human endeavors, that would have been labeled 'Underground' had it not been so far from the conventional that Underground was a title too wishy-washy to apply. It was a publication that strove to be so "honest and independent" that it frightened away advertisers by the carload and that ironically and incidentally won the gushing personal praise of Richard Nixon, a man whose Vietnam policies had very actually put its original publisher — the former chief of the U.S. Air Force Information Office in Saigon — in a madhouse.

It was a paper that lived a hand-to-mouth, day to day existence, that was waylaid at each turn by adversaries both real and imagined, that was fueled by an odd combination of heady idealism and skitterish paranoia and that collapsed under the weight of its own pervasive ineptitude.

At the end, in March 1976, the *North Coast Times Eagle* was a ghost, hunted by creditors in the streets of what were once its own cities. The corporeal body, a few crates of hastily packed files and decrepit equipment, lay in ignominious cold storage in Manzanita, its final place of rest. Robert Stanley Need and David Lardy, the original visionaries, were long since gone. Daniel O'Halloran, who usurped the primal kingpin Need, had been recently released from jail on his own recognizance for passing *Times Eagle* checks that bore his name as sole owner and bounced one time too many. On the newsstands the *Seaside Signal* and the *Headlight Herald* crept in silently from the north and south to reclaim ad revenue and readers five years lost to the screaming *Eagle*.

My own short dalliance with the *Times Eagle* began in December 1973 when I was hired by Robert Stanley Need, more or less unseen, as Clatsop County reporter. The county constituted the paper's north front, a Rhode Island sized Crown Zellerbach subsidiary bounded by the Pacific Ocean and Highway 101 on the west, the Columbia River on the north and logging road backcountry on the east and south.

I was at the time 23 years old and temporarily between jobs in Eugene, living on borrowed rent and idle time; in short, a model prospect.

In me, a green and willing enlistee, Need had at very least another body to shore up the north dike. If I showed talent, on the page or otherwise, so much the better.

From my standpoint, I had been given the keys to the backdoor of the north Oregon coast, an off-season netherland of blackness and rain, deprivation and cormorants flying low over Nehalem Bay. The *Times Eagle* constituted the elusive toe in the door professionally, a connection sidestepping the necessity of interviews, references, evaluations, appraisals and don't call us, we'll....

It was in short, a common law, no fault wedlock.

1973 had been a good year for the paper, it had been a stable, capable staff and most of the bills paid through the summer. Looking back, it would prove to be the best year of the five, with 10, 12 and 16 page issues hitting the streets every Wednesday.

To the south, the battle for Tillamook County was going full bore, with the *Eagle* on the offensive and the *Headlight Herald* scrambling page for page to match the political and feature coverage offered by the Wheeler upstart. To the north, Cannon Beach and Arch Cape were gradually acquiring a taste for the tonic and spice of the *Times Eagle*, while the slumbering fat cat *Seaside Signal* felt the first pinpricks of serious competition.

By midsummer of its second year, the *Times Eagle* had a hard core readership of more than 3,000 and had obliterated all circulation records to move into the top 20 of the state's 90-some weeklies. With its stylish front pages and hard driving editorial content it was at this time the best weekly newspaper in Oregon.

But 1973 would prove to be the year that wasn't quite a year at that, as the sudden crash for Bob Need and his newspaper came in October when the "San Francisco Angel" died during the 5th game of the World Series and unknowingly cut the heart out of what would have been his very own white elephant.

This well-heeled San Francisco media investor had been negotiating with Need for months to buy a majority interest in the *Times Eagle's* parent company, the Imperial Pacific Corporation. Endless long distance phone calls and hurried trips up and down the west coast through the fall had paved the way for a formal signing of the deal that would finally provide a vital financial foundation for the newspaper.

The San Francisco Angel was the fattest and most likely of a long host of Angels tracked down and courted by Need since the paper's founding. The deal was within days of being finalized when suddenly the heavenly connection became a bad joke incarnate as the would-be benefactor slumped over, victim of a heart attack in Alameda County Stadium, dying almost unnoticed in a crowd hysterical over a Sal Bando bases loaded double. Hearing the news, the staff walked out enmasse, the creditors threw up their hands and Need was left holding the *Times Eagle* by the scruff of its skinny neck, without money, people or reasonable hope. It had happened before and would happen several times again, when a staff body came to the grim realization that good writing and blue chip ideals were non-negotiable commodities in the local marketplace.

Between October 25 when the mass exodus occurred and late December when I arrived, Need had broken out the old dragnet and replaced most of the people. An odd company of walk-ins it was, the business manager came in from Pomona, California, a well-experienced though professionally disgruntled editor from Wyoming, via Moses Lake, Washington, and a long-haired, Volkswagen bussing Canadian stopped by enroute to San Francisco for a spell as Tillamook County reporter.

Local recruits became the circulation manager, photographer and composition staff, and the *Times Eagle* was off and limping again by Christmas of 1973.

Located in the north end of Tillamook County, the town of Wheeler (population less than 300) exists as a kink in the snaking rope of Highway 101, and the weathered custodian of Nehalem Bay. It is one of many such antiquations along the coast mainline that are attached like orchids, taking sustenance from the tourist stream for four months of the year and wet air for the balance.

It is a gull's town and a gull's bay, and above Wheeler they watched the comings and goings of the *Times Eagle* building and my arrival there with equal disinterest.

I had been lured up from Eugene by the promise of \$80 a week and Need's implied conviction that on his paper I would realize my latent potential to become a great writer. When I arrived a few days later the contract was renegotiated to \$60 a week and when the paymaster eventually made his rounds, I was left with \$40 in hand, the consequences of the publisher's inability to draw dollars from the paper's natural advertising base Tillamook.

Tillamook lay 30 minutes to the south, an inland bastion of wood mills, dairies and conservatism, completely bereft of the tinsel and levity of the on-beach coastal towns. A gloomy non-tourist trap of eastern European countenance, the county seat boasted the highest suicide and alcoholism rates in the state and was the theater of the *Times Eagle's* bloodiest battles.

Headquarters for the *Times Eagle* was the old U.S. National Bank building, a two story woodframe barnlike structure that had a bank vault as a rear appendage. A plywood partition divided the downstairs between a reception room habituated by "secretaries" and "administrators" and the newsroom, a jungle of antique typewriters, old desks and underfed journalists.

Cardboard signs hung with string from the ceilings gave directions to the "Layout & Composition Department" upstairs, where an inoperative cold water darkroom and a battery of nearly obsolete JustO'Writers and headline machines shared space with filing cabinets and layout tables.

It was a cavernous, ill-heated building adorned on the outside by a giant plywood cutout of the paper's imperial eagle icon and an American flag.

The paper's publisher and resident eccentric was Robert Stanley Need, a slim, darkhaired and mustachioed newspaper impresario who ran the *Times Eagle* from his bomb shelter office in the concrete bank vault.

With the Declaration of Independence and Constitution posted conspicuously at the entrance and a Michelangelo fresco of God imparting life unto Adam on the ceiling above his head, he chainsmoked Pall Malls and orchestrated the affairs of the paper from the crown room of his imperial fiefdom.

He was an aristocrat from the Commonwealth of Virginia (he declined the status of statehood) who walked with a wire-drawn eastern strut and inspired, cajoled or bullied his staff members with pompous venality and affected Gallic charm. (He claimed to be a French orphan). He took the measure of new recruits by alternately stroking and insulting them to discover if they had "the balls" to work for the *Times Eagle*.

Need had founded the paper with the help of David Lardy, an ex-service mate, in the spring of 1971, two years after their return from Vietnam. They had served together as combat newsmen during the Tet Offensive of 1968 and witnessed a "nearly complete news blackout" which (Need said) "generated an obsession for the establishment of a totally independent publication that would under no circumstances be allowed to become subordinate to the dictates of politics, social pressure or economic coercion."

For a four year period, dating from 1971, Need would serve the *Times Eagle* as high profile front man. In the purest Trumanesque tradition all the bucks, the bitches and the glory converged at his desk. The fact that the paper survived as long as it did in an essentially hostile environment is testimony to his genius for dealing with the public. The imaginative creator of three non-published novels (all written under the alias of David

Louis Gentier) was a virtuoso at diffusing hostilities over the phone by an outraged creditor.

Need could be all things to all people. Cooing endearments and promises to the irate, he would gently disarm and disorient his adversary, then drop the receiver back on its cradle and dismiss the affair with a shrugging "Fuck 'em." This became such a standard practice, in fact, that an admiring staff finally awarded Need with personal stationery that read "From the Desk of Robert Stanley Need" across the top and the above catch-all across the bottom in 3/4 inch type.

The first edition of the *North Coast Times Eagle* emerged from the bulrushes of Nehalem Bay on May 13, 1971 as an eight page tabloid with a hand-lettered masthead. The front page included an open arms welcome from Wheeler Mayor Virgil L. Staben and a declaration of editorial credo that read thusly:

*The North Coast Times Eagle presents itself to the people of the North Oregon Coast as an instrument through which their separate and collective voices, irrespective of creed, color, political bent, age (literal and figurative), may speak out in determination of their own future.*

*If it is not to be the Times Eagle who shall perform this trust, then surely others will inevitably come forth.*

*If it is to be the Times Eagle, then let the editorial staff of this newspaper take now and here a solemn vow to uphold its flag motto "To Serve All People" and further to establish but one single editorial policy, to preserve, proclaim and protect the Truth.*

Enconced on Rovik Street, the stem of the 'T' that constitutes city center Wheeler, the paper got off to a rolling start with 4 months rent donated by the benevolent landlord, the Rinehart Foundation.

A staff of highschoolers and local recruits under the command of Need, Lardy and graphics consultant Victoria Hawkins (who later was founder/publisher of the *Cannon Beach Gazette*) manned an arsenal of donated and makeshift equipment on a largely volunteer basis.

Seven weeks into the campaign, the paper discarded its tabloid format and assumed the tableau that would, with minor modifications, be the *Times Eagle* for the duration.

It was a bold metro styled after the 19th century *Harper's Weekly*, with an unjustified righthand margin, a front page centerpiece lithograph and a 72-point bold Quentin masthead. Astride the page top perched an imperial bald eagle, beneath whose talons was inscribed "To Serve All People." The final adornment was the *Times Eagle's* self-styled calling card, "The distinctive and unique journal of the Oregon Coast," which it certainly was.

Guilelessly, the *Times Eagle* posted its colors and declared its coastal mission. Within six months the paper had moved south into Tillamook and turned stones in the county planning commission. Splashed across the front page was the news that loosed the first tremors of a political quake that eventually ran helter-skelter through the county government.

The issue in hand was alleged conflict of interest on the planning commission over a proposed motel project at Twin Rocks, and when the *Times Eagle* had finished hanging the county officials' dirty laundry high on its masthead statewide media attention was drawn to the crooked land development scheme and eventually 6 of the 9 commissioners were asked to resign.

In so diving into an affair that had been considered untouchable by other local media, the *Times Eagle* established irrevocably a style and office it would hold regardless of costs.

It had emerged as a fierce crusading coastal advocate of strong environmentalist persuasions and a watchdog of local city and county governments, with an equally adamant overview of state, national and international affairs.

Tillamook, the cheese city, has never been wrongly accused of having either a grand sense of collective humor or a penchant for taking the long view and forgiveness route, and quickly the lines were drawn, and drawn in blood between the *Times Eagle* and a significant element of the political, media and business power structure of the county seat.

There would be no quarter asked or taken, and the *Times Eagle* quickly found itself a neighbor to its own East Berlin. Ad accounts unaccountably dried up and new ones proved elusive.

With its initial funding of under \$1,000 long since expended, the paper rapidly settled into an issue to issue existence, depending largely on providence, walk-ins and Angels for its staff and sustenance.

It adopted the lifestyle, and none too grudgingly, of a belligerent and impoverished in-law to the people and communities it served under its self-given mandate.

I pulled into Wheeler with my belongings in the backseat of a white 1962 Rambler just as the rest of the staff was leaving for the Christmas holidays. My first night in, I talked with Need over a half case of beer in the darkness of the deserted newsroom until 3 in the morning about who we were and what I was going to do for the newspaper. It was a conversion experience that would not wear off for three long months.

The next day we took my car up the backroads to Jewell, past a herd of elk, and ended up in Astoria as Need showed me the layout of my county, my beat as a *Times Eagle* reporter.

I slept on a couch near a grand piano in his living room and later I can recall eating Christmas turkey with the publisher and his wife Lois in the fisherman's shack atop the single hill in Wheeler.

Ken O'Toole arrived from LaGrande to rejoin the *Times Eagle* a few weeks later and the two of us, joined by his white dog Rockefeller, moved into the basement of an enormous house in Falcon Cove. O'Toole will go down in western history