



ROLAND TORPOR, 'THE BIG TRUTH'

as the only man to serve two stretches with the *Times Eagle*, and he immediately established himself as an example to be followed by settling into a twice-a-day diet of white rice and Campbell's cream of chicken soup. At 37 cents a serving it would prove to be a model diet for a *Times Eagle*. (His usual press room entrance and exit was through a back window. "You never know who's waiting out front," he claimed.)

Business as usual during my winter at the *Times Eagle* meant negotiating the log trucks on 101 down to Wheeler each morning to observe the ritual unfurling of the American flag by Need outside the building. Then, after an informal staff meeting with Need and his first lieutenant and editor Terry Blevins, we would disperse, as salesmen on their solitary mission into the no man's land of Tillamook and Seaside, and as reporters on the perpetual quest for the front page story.

Need claimed there was such a story behind every bush, in the third row of every town meeting and inside every stray wanderer on Highway 101. A reporter was to be heard and not seen, ran the editorial motto, and time spent behind the office desk was severely discouraged.

Despite the fact that the staff was working for next to nothing on good weeks and taking a loss on others, Need countenanced neither attitude nor performance that deviated from professional newspaper standards. In lieu of money, the staff accepted the unbound promise of a better future from the publisher.

As far as the writing went, Need set the style and we all followed quite willingly. Editing was minimal beyond integrity of content and the headlines were incandescent.

It was never the habit of the *Times Eagle* to underplay an issue nor was Need a man to hedge his bets, and when he smelled smoke he either found the fire or warmed things to the ignition point with his front page rhetoric; stories bylined RSN customarily ran to 5,000 or 6,000 words. Fully cognizant of potential holocaust, city and county officials rarely saw any advantage in denying first citizen courtesies to the *Times Eagle* reporters, despite the fact that they had a chameleon characteristic of changing names and faces virtually from week to week.

During my first month the situation was relatively stable, the rents were paid, and everyone was eating regularly. My time was spent in the Cannon Beach City Hall or on the docks in Astoria near the Bumble Bee plant, learning the Clatsop beat. Week nights were given over to various city, school board and chamber of commerce meetings and Friday was Cowpa League baseball night as I doubled as the *Times Eagle* sports editor.

While *Times Eagles* tended to be a solitary lot, it was in the bars and pool halls from Seaside to Tillamook that we gave a show of force. Local merchants and advertisers would greet Need with across the bar shouts of "pinko commie" and his full volume return "capitalist pigs" would turn heads to our entrance.

Need was a pool shooter who made up for a lack of finesse with cue ball velocity and when he occasionally managed a victory he was a spectacle of comic hauteur, saying "pity, pity" and "next quarter please" as he summoned the next challenger from the loser's table.

Tuesday was layout day at the paper and it began early with coffee swilled on empty stomachs, phone calls and frantic post deadline typing with Need in old jeans and red suspenders orchestrating the mayhem. It would end 18 to 20 hours and a dozen crises later upstairs in the layout loft when the completed pages were laid to rest with a final toast of Blitz or Oly to await the 110 mile early morning press run to Toledo.

On occasion the race with time came down to the last minute as Need and his business manager hustled the last few dollars for the printing money order on Wednesday morning while the circulation man waited and watched the clock.

For most of the staff, the only real payoff came shortly before noon on Wednesday when the new edition returned bundled from Toledo, proof and payment in hand for the Tuesday night ordeal.

Need's chosen instruments were the typewriter and the telephone, not the abacus, and he showed total disregard for financial contingencies by frequently printing entire pages he considered to be crucial to the public interest but were outrageously irresponsible by normal newspaper standards.

In 1973 he had printed Senate Bill 100 in its entirety, a three page spread that allowed the public to read first hand the document that had triggered the battle over coastal land use planning.

In the same year, he had turned over a full page to William E. Clark, a Brighton beach subdivider and the target of some of the paper's harshest criticism, to present the builder's defense in a piece entitled "The Case Against Seizure by Power of Eminent Domain."

The publishing of Clark's article outraged an element of the local readership which leveled accusations of a sell-out and bribe taking at Need and the *Times Eagle*. His response was to write a long editorial titled "Spending the Bribe Money" and print a front-page lithograph of a Roman orgy with a cutline "The *Times Eagle* Staff Enjoying the Bribe Money."

The *Times Eagle* had a way of winning unsolicited praise and criticism from the unlikely of parties, the classical example being a letter from President Richard M. Nixon that expressed "appreciation and best wishes" for "forthright comments and support." The piece which had drawn John Erlichman's attention and subsequently Nixon's was a guest editorial titled "The Other Side...Or Right On" written by someone who had taken issue with Need's vehemently pro-McGovern position and accepted the invitation for a rebuttal.

My late winter of its third year, the paper's business operations had been distilled to a simple formula. The money was divided according to Need's '3Ps' — Press, Postage & People (though in no particular order).

The paper had been on a financial downspin since the fateful days of Black October and after press and mailing costs were cut from the pie, it was increasingly infrequent that the staff had much in the way of mad money to handle things like rent, food and gasoline.

For me, what had begun as a romantic adventure in newspapering on the north Oregon coast took a dire tinge as February moved closer to March. Highway 101 had been severed by a landslide south of Cannon Beach and the Wednesday morning drive to Astoria for the county commissioners meeting necessitated a roundabout drive down to Wheeler to hit the company mailbox and forge Need's signature to whatever checks had arrived. The check money was used to buy the gas to fuel a mad dash back north through backroads to Astoria.

Company checks began bouncing in landlords' hands and the subsequent evictions changed the staff into a tribe of nomads. The final resting place for O'Toole, Terry Blevins, Rockefeller and myself was a three room unit in a dilapidated row house known as the Tolovana Slum.

With company resources reduced to the point where only a 4-page skeletal edition was affordable, the staff found itself without space to write and became the prisoners of poverty and inactivity. Time spent in the \$100 a month Tolovana dung-heap was given over to long afternoons behind drawn curtains, drinking beer and playing marathon rounds of Manzanita hearts, an appropriately cut-throat version in which the spade queen could fall on the first round.

It was a simple matter to sign up for Abundant Foods or food stamps when the time arrived. All one had to do was walk into the Tillamook or Seaside office and say, "I work for the *Times Eagle*," and the canned chicken and brown bags of bulgar and rice came rolling out, unobstructed by interrogations as to why one had a job but couldn't afford to eat.

In a comically absurd parallel plot, Need and his lieutenants were frantically calling and casting about among moneyed contacts, old, new or imagined, in the never ending intrigue to bail the paper out with capitalization. It was the fabled final solution, as fundamental to *Times Eagle* lore as cashing in beer empties for the press bill.

Within the space of a few short weeks in the early spring of 1974, Need had investigated and either lost or discarded schemes that included a \$100,000 no-strings-attached high interest loan from a third party Eastern speculator (reputedly Mafia connected), a federal grant that would have changed the paper from a privately owned non-profit enterprise to a publicly owned one, and a variety of manufactured consortiums of coastal, Portland and Seattle businessmen, all of whom were offered the chance to supply the Midas touch but eventually declined.

In the darkest hour of late March, one week after the *Times Eagle* had run an "Into Suspension" headline announcing the towel in the ring, a connection was unearthed 100 miles to the south in the most unlikely of persons, Vance Welty, publisher of the *Willamina Times*.

It was a case of desperation liking company, as Welty and his nearly bankrupt newspaper found their way to Wheeler, where a hasty merger was hatched in the concrete cell of Need's office.

With the business acumen and bravado peculiar to death row cases, the two entrepreneurs pooled their liabilities and announced the creation of the *North Coast Times Tribune*, a synthetic publication that had a readership spread over 5,000 square miles and immediately jumped into the top 10 of the state's weeklies in circulation.

It was a double shotgun wedding that fell through three weeks later when it came to light that Welty was operating one step ahead of foreclosure. The union was effectively annulled in the early morning hours of April 15, when the diminutive Mrs. Welty conducted a moonlight raid on the *Times Eagle* building to repossess certain *Willamina Times* equipment, including a 250 pound JustOWriter copysetting machine that had taken three men to carry upstairs and install.

The *Times Eagle* hit dead bottom in May 1974 when it celebrated its 3rd anniversary with a consumptive 4-page tabloid edition, the first of three such cadaverous issues that fulfilled nothing more than the minimum postal requirements for continued 2nd class mailing privileges.

It was a death march of cruel absurdity during an early coastal summer as one by one the staff was bled dry of hope and resistance and stepped out.

I had been the first to leave, ending a tenure at the *Times Eagle* distinguished by its brevity and insouciance to become a fry cook in Seaside shortly after the merger.

In July, a howl of final despair entitled "Requiem For A Year Gone By" rose up from Blevins as he felt "the rancid breath of doom" and announced his departure in a missive which contained the following:

Incarcerated in a slum in Tolovana Park....peering through the bars at mountains of dog feces, broken glass, discarded toilet tanks, hay bales and a dozen cars in various states of disrepair....I wait in solitary confinement for parole or pardon, both of which are beyond my control.

Blevins was replaced as editor and Need confidant by Michael McCusker, a former USMC reconnaissance-parachutist and combat reporter/photographer in Vietnam who afterward helped organize the Vietnam Veterans Against the War. He was on the verge of departing for a job on a staysail schooner in the Caribbean when Need phoned him 7 times in 2 days and convinced him to opt for Wheeler. ("Need said in so many words that it was my turn in the barrel," McCusker said later.)

With the phone disconnected, the equipment and dark-room virtually unusable, and without cars, the *Times Eagle* was ironically reduced to the level of the 19th century newspapers it so emulated and admired.

Stories were obtained by hitchhiking up and down the coast, press runs were made with cars begged or stolen, and editor McCusker drank cheap red wine, ate spaghetti and chili, and slept on the newsroom couch as the siege of "Fort Wheeler" intensified.

It was at this time, in the 11th hour of a newspaper that had perfected the art of living on the brink, that the first chapter of the *Times Eagle* came to an effectual end with the arrival of Daniel Patrick O'Halloran.

It was an end and a beginning, affected in broad daylight and on center stage, that would not become obvious for months to come, but it accomplished what three years of starvation and ostracism had not. By the spring of the following year, Robert Stanley Need would find himself standing on the Washington side of the Astoria/Meglar Bridge, hitchhiking to Seattle (and then to Virginia), a pariah at the gates of his own empire, leaving the *Times Eagle* forever.

O'Halloran cast himself as a mystery figure — and who or what he was, much less what he wanted, were never clear. To Bob Need, however, in the summer of 1974, he was, "Danny boy, the man who is going to save this newspaper."

O'Halloran and Need had first met in Vietnam where Bob sat at the USAF information desk in Saigon and O'Halloran was employed by the CIA (or its equivalent; one of any number of clandestine agencies) as a counter-insurgency agent (or the equivalent) who did "a lot of floating around between Cambodia, Laos and Saigon."

He was billed by Need as a man of corporate business contacts and business know-how who had spent his postwar years in politics and advertising; in short, a man who would oversee the paper's financial affairs and open doors to a final capitalization.

O'Halloran was and remains an anomaly in the ranks of *Times Eagles*, past and present. He was well dressed, forceful and professional sounding, completely devoid of early '70s scruffiness and idealism that were the trademark of the Need employee.

A lithe, dark-eyed man 10 years Need's junior, O'Halloran exuded an underspoken animal presence that gave the credence to his OOT casting. To the old guard he had the look of a predator, a Rasputin who had somehow gained Need's confidence.

His name first appeared on the masthead as publisher of the paper in September of 1974, a few weeks before the *Times Eagle* dropped its issue price from 10 cents to a nickel in response to *The Oregonian's* raising its rate to 15 cents.

What exactly transpired between September 1974 and April the following year when Need surrendered the paper to O'Halloran is difficult to ascertain. Of the 5 or 6 parties qualified to offer a version, 3 are on the East Coast and either unavailable or refuse to comment, and the others agree only in the description of the affair as ugly.

McCusker lasted until October when he found himself being squeezed out of his bosom proximity to Need by O'Halloran, and retired to oversee the Picture Window Cottages just south of Cannon Beach.

"I quit because I could see I was going to be working for O'Halloran," McCusker said. "He was a bullshit artist who liked to step on people and whose only integrity was his dishonesty."

With McCusker gone, the core staff assumed the form it would retain for the next 8 months, with David Attmore, John Troxel and Fred Jacoby functioning under the direction of Need and O'Halloran.

By Thanksgiving the phones had been reconnected and the paper had regained at least the appearance of its old style and vitality. Money problems were the same as always, if less immediate, and for the first time in 6 months reporters and ad salesmen were going to Tillamook and Seaside on a regular basis.

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