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Hot Times in the Old Downtown

PATRICK McCAULEY

A low-frequency hum rumbled from the south wing of the twelve-story tower, imperceptible perhaps to office workers stirring about on upper levels, but a dramatic signal to staffers on the second floor that another edition of the *Huntsville Times* was on the roll. From 1928—through depression, war, and launch of the Space Age—the newspaper was published in the spectacularly handsome Huntsville Times Building at Greene Street and Holmes Avenue in bustling downtown Huntsville.

Recorded there was America's economic meltdown, the tragedies and triumphs of local boys locked in democracy's titanic struggle against totalitarianism, and the technological revolution that was transforming Huntsville and the world around it. "It's a pretty good little country daily," a journalist from New Orleans had said when he was recruiting me for a reporter's job in a place I had to look up on the map. My surprise and delight soared as I approached that buff and white edifice, which ascended into the crisp autumn air, where I would begin my career in newspapers and my love affair with Huntsville.

By 1949, the *Huntsville Times* was a fixture, a well-founded institution in this city. Established in 1910, it had wandered a shaky route to a couple of locations in downtown Huntsville; but by 1928 it had prospered to the point where a monument to its prominence was appropriate. J. Emory Pierce, founder, proprietor, editor, publisher and promoter, undertook the ambitious task.

But one need not have climbed to the twelfth floor on that bright day in 1928 to see the dark clouds on the horizon. No sooner had the *Times* staff settled into their swank new quarters and cranked up the new Goss rotary press, than the stock market crashed. Pierce's ambitious plans for publishing and real estate crumbled. He was bankrupt, defaulting on \$200,000 of construction bonds. The sparkling new

building was taken over by the Bond Holders Protective Association for \$115,000, later to be sold to the Proctor family of Bridgeport. On October 10, 1931, the newspaper, new presses and all, was sold at auction to Victor Hanson, publisher of the *Birmingham News*, (who was represented at the auction by Henry P. Johnston) for the price of \$44,350 plus assumption of \$15,000 of notes and other obligations. For the next quarter-century, the *Times* would be a tenant in its own namesake.

After the transfer of ownership, Henry P. Johnston of the *Birmingham News* was appointed publisher, and Jack Langhorne, also of the *News*, became advertising manager. Johnston returned to Birmingham in 1934. Langhorne became business manager, later general manager, and eventually publisher after the *Times* moved to Memorial Parkway. Reese T. Amis took over as editor in 1931; he brought many years of metropolitan newspaper experience—in Nashville, Atlanta, Miami, Memphis—and classy educational credentials—Vanderbilt and Yale—to the task at hand. Amis held the position of editor until after the paper's move to the Parkway in 1956.

A new era at the *Huntsville Daily Times* began. Actually, the new era began on November 5, 1931, when the name of the paper was changed to the *Huntsville Times*. The logic for the change was that the name Pierce had given it, the *Huntsville Daily Times*, was a misnomer. From its inception, the newspaper was published Monday through Friday in the afternoons and on Sunday mornings, but not on Saturdays. Thus, it was not a daily publication. There was yet more confusion about the name because there once had been the *Huntsville Weekly Times*, and later generations of readers were to assume that the *Huntsville Times* had evolved, as did many American newspapers, from weekly to daily publication schedules. However, the *Huntsville Weekly Times* was a promotional gimmick designed by Pierce to sell a subscription for home delivery of one paper a week, on Thursdays, to readers who could not afford to subscribe for six days during the farm depression in the 1920s that foreshadowed the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Despite its plush new quarters, the *Huntsville Times* then was a sparse journalistic

enterprise. Circulation in 1931 was 2,600, if its founding proprietor's figures could be trusted. And they could be, for Cliff Wilkerson who was the press room foreman recalled in a conversation on March 10, 2005, that the initial press run in the new

plant was 3,000. Advertising lineage, the lifeblood of a newspaper, was fewer than 20,000 inches a month in 1931 before the transfer of ownership, and it showed no improvement in 1932 and 1933.

The first week's payroll under the new management listed fewer than twenty-five employees and totaled \$378. From the outset, T.A. Winston was composing room foreman, and Leo Brown was chief compositor. A. L. (Smitty) Smith joined the organization in 1932 to direct a group of twenty-five carriers and distributors



This arched window over one of the entries dominated the second floor office that once housed the tape-punch operators and the AP machines. Photograph by Linda Allen

who were not employees but independent contractors. Roy Buchanan was hired in December 1931 as advertising manager, bringing that staff to three. By 1934, Mrs. Ruth Kelly, who had been secretary to Secretary-Treasurer W.P. Nicholson, was appointed to the new position of national advertising manager. And Eleanor Hutchens, who in future years would teach English at UAH, recalls times in those early days when she was the only reporter.

Over the next twenty years, circulation rose steadily. It was 16,000 in 1951, and 20,000 by the time the paper moved to its present location. Advertising, too, grew with the increasing prosperity of the city in wartime and jumped again with the reactivation of Redstone Arsenal for guided missile development. By 1955, the last full year in the downtown building, advertising lineage regularly exceeded 50,000 inches a month.

So the newspaper I joined as one of three reporters in October 1949 was an efficient and prospering little operation in a magnificent monument to hopes and dreams. There were by then forty names on the payroll, and Reese T. Amis was still the editor. His command post was in the spacious second floor corner office overlooking Greene and Holmes (directly above the insurance agency of John Rodenhauer who soon would be elected to the Huntsville City Council). The sports editor (my New Orleans friend and advocate for employment) worked at a desk in a corner diagonally across the room from the corner occupied by the editor. And desks for the four other writers were in the long narrow room, more like a wide corridor really, extending south and overlooking Greene Street. In the space behind the semicircular window above the entrance, were two tape-punch operators, Mary Belle Smith and Carolyn Hummel, and the Associated Press (AP) machines. It was a neat, compact newsroom, characterized by the incessant ringing of telephones, the clatter of manual typewriters, and those electric marvels of the day, teletypes.

The advertising department occupied the second floor wing overlooking Holmes Avenue and the business office was adjacent to advertising. Beyond the *Times* offices were attorney William Page, destined for the Circuit Court bench, and insurance adjuster Ed Mitchell, whose future was to include serving on the Huntsville City Council and managing the Huntsville International Airport/ Intermodal Center and the Huntsville-Madison County Marina and Port Authority. On the ground floor below all this business activity, Mr. and Mrs. Alva W. Burkett operated the best little sandwich shop in town before they opened Huntsville's first modern bookstore on the ground level of the Russel Erskine Hotel.

A thoroughly modern structure in 1928 when it was completed, the Times Building had steam heat throughout and was comfortable in wintertime, but there was no central air conditioning. In the 1950s, the newspaper corporation installed room air-conditioners in the offices on the second floor which brought some relief but not comfort, and the mechanical departments were sweltering hot for six months of the year.

The press was on the ground floor of the wing south of the tower with the reels holding the rolls of newsprint below in the basement. The roar of the press at full speed was deafening but filtered into the tower as a low-pitched hum. Newsprint storage was in the basement west of the reel room, the whole press area being ventilated through skylights in the roof of the paper storage area.

The composing room was located above the press room and also had skylights. It was teased by breezes wafting through the row of windows facing east that were complemented by a large ventilator fan and another row of windows on the west end. Still it was like an oven. The composing room where text was transformed into lead type was a cacophony of groaning machinery, clanging metal, and gurgling melting pots. The pungent odor of molten lead seeped into the hallways and crept into the elevator shaft. Memory varies on the number of Linotype machines in service there because, fifty years later, surviving operators remember them as being rigged for different purposes: some were tape-fed for “straight matter,” while others were operated manually to set the small agate type used in classifieds, the large 14- to 24-point type for headlines, and the display ads. Consequently, the recollections run from three Linotypes, which is too few, to twelve, which is too many. In a 1985 seventy-fifth anniversary section of the *Times* there is a pre-war photo distinctly showing six Linotype machines. “Doomsday” type, the really big stuff reserved for the end of wars and the Titanic sinking, was kept in separate wood-type cases next to the wall.

You may think a newspaper is a cauldron of excitement; and it is, except then as now, the multiple snippets of information gathered had to be reduced to scheduled routines while leaving some slack to accommodate the unexpected or there would never be a timely press start. The only sure constant is the unexpected. Electronic processing has reduced the clatter and the clutter and eliminated the acrid smell inside a newspaper office, but not the surprise of making it through another edition.

In the old Times Building before computers there was a constant procession between the newsroom and the composing room. Whoever was going at half trot

to the composing room, be it lowly cub or editor-in-chief, would grab the finished copy from the spike on the editor's desk and take it "out back." Whoever was going to the newsroom, printer's devil or foreman, would grab the galley proofs from the hook on the wall and take them "up front." In the shop, as the composing room was called, the copy for ads and news was "set" into lead type which then was assembled with headlines and illustrations and locked together in steel page-forms called chases. On moveable work surfaces called turtles, these forms were rolled to the next production process, stereotyping. There, page-size mats (of a composite that felt like heavy, moist cardboard and rubber) would be laid over the type-filled chase, and under great pressure the mats would pick up every jot and tittle of the type faces and zinc photo cuts. Half-cylindrical lead casts would be made from the mats (which in fact were largely asbestos to prevent flaming when hit by the flow of molten lead) and fitted on the press cylinders, inked, and applied directly to the newsprint. The newsprint, on great rolls weighing up to a ton each, was delicately threaded through the press rollers in a marvelous, mysterious maze that placed printed Page Two behind Page One, and Page Three in front of Page Four.

Two new eight-page units of Goss letterpress were installed in the press annex of Mr. Pierce's Taj Mahal, and they served until the Times moved to the Parkway and converted to offset. I still think it strange, after a lifetime in newspapers, that an eight-page unit will give you sixteen printed pages by the expedient of putting a



The original ornate mailbox still adorns the entrance lobby and receives letters dropped from upper floors. Photograph by Scott McLain

different half-cylindrical page-cast on opposite sides of each cylinder; or, it will print twice as many eight-page impressions in the same amount of time by putting duplicate casts on opposite sides of each cylinder. And those of little faith had only to stand on the sidewalk on Greene Street outside the plate glass wall of the press room and watch the sheets come out. On many a Saturday night, it was the most exciting show in town.

As the week progressed Monday through Thursday, each day's paper increased in size from eight to twelve to sixteen to twenty-four pages, slumping to ten or twelve pages on Friday and rising, sometimes, to thirty-two pages on Sunday. That was full press capacity: one full-page half-cylindrical cast on each side of each cylinder of the two eight-page units.

On the second floor, life was not less complicated. In 1949, four writers in the office facing Greene Street divided labor like this: Bob Axelson, later to become editor of the *Orange (Texas) Leader*, covered Madison County and surrounding counties. Martha Witt Smith (who with Harry Rhett cleared the corpses off the voter registration list in 1947) covered schools and organizations. I covered the city and neighboring cities. We all dabbled in politics and soon would be writing about the rising cadence of activities at Redstone Arsenal. Sara Baker was the society editor, and when her husband was called to active duty during the Korean conflict, Sweetie Eslick took her place. Paul Newman in his corner of Mr. Amis's office was the sports editor and helped Amis edit AP copy. In fact, we all helped edit wire copy when the crunch was on, and we wrote headlines and picture cutlines too.

The process started at 7 A.M. Reporters were out walking the beat by 9:00, back at the desk by 11:00, writing furiously to turn out one or two, six or eight stories by noon, because the press would start at 1 P.M. (if the editorials were finished), in order to put the first couple hundred papers on the day train to Scottsboro. There would be a pause to freshen up the front page emphasizing local news, and the press would hum again. Investigative reporting and feature stories were done in the afternoon for publication on a later day.

No paper was published on Saturday, so Saturdays started at 8 A.M.; but the time clock started at 2 P.M. because city hall and the county courthouse were open until noon. The day ended somewhere around 1 A.M. with the night train to Scottsboro being the controlling factor.

Through the 1930s and World War II, little changed except the faces in the newsroom. There was a succession of replacements among reporters with names like Mimi Sims and W. O. Fritts, remembered decades later for their colorful personalities, and Virgil (Pat) Carrington Jones, known for his passion for antebellum houses. He wrote feature stories on dozens of them in Madison and Limestone counties, and after returning to his home in Richmond, Virginia, he wrote volumes of popular southern history inspired by his sojourn in Alabama and his ramblings into Tennessee. He wrote about the feud between the Hatfields and McCoys that extended over generations and three volumes on *The Civil War at Sea*. The best known of his books, perhaps because they were the basis for an early television series, are *Ranger Mosby* and *Gray Ghosts and Rebel Raiders*. Eventually Pat Jones became the administrative aide to a Virginia congressman, but for the rest of his days he maintained connections with friends in Huntsville, especially his old *Times* colleague Ed Duffy in advertising; and he once regaled the Huntsville Press Club with tales of working in the old Times Building.

After World War II, the staff grew gradually. Will Mickle came on board about 1952 and when Amis retired in 1957, became editor. Paul Newman went to the Scripps Howard paper in San Angelo, Texas, and John Thompson succeeded him as sports editor, later to become a copy editor on the expanding staff at the Parkway location. Mignon Bray was added to the reporting staff, which spilled into the office overlooking Holmes Avenue adjacent to the editor.

It was not all deadlines and drudgery. Amis was not a patient man. He was fair, explicit, kind, courtly, demanding, skeptical, tough-minded, witty, salty, but not patient. In the rush toward deadlines, he would frequently flip his cigar butt or dump his pipe bowl into the overflowing waste paper basket beside his desk, then rush to



Reese T. Amis served as editor of the Huntsville Times from mid-1931 until 1957. Courtesy Louis Amis

the composing room, leaving the resulting blaze to be doused by whoever smelled the smoke. He would correct a reporter's spelling once or twice, but soon would call a repeat offender to the front of his desk and direct him to the great *Oxford Unabridged Dictionary* across the room. Once a young reporter frustrated at his failure to find a word he could not spell, retorted in chagrin, "Well, hell, Mr. Amis. You think the dictionary is never wrong!"

About noon on the first primary election of my tenure, the editor barked at me, "Call some polling places and see how many votes they've got." Among others, I called

New Hope, where the election official responded to my query with another question: "How many you need?"

Until 1952, photos had to be sent to Birmingham to have zinc cuts made for printing. The Fairchild Corporation developed a machine that copied a photo onto plastic that could be stuck directly on a press plate. It expedited photo usage for small papers; but the task was distracting and time consuming. One hectic day, a reporter impatient for a picture to go with his story, grabbed the plastic image and trimmed it himself on the cutting board to fit his space—and sliced his new tie in three.

One Saturday, two huge mountain men appeared in the office. We had seen them a few weeks earlier up on Greene Mountain where Axelson and I had gone for stories about the horrible road conditions, and had achieved immediate results from the

county commission. The appreciative residents wanted to give us each a one-acre bluff lot overlooking the Tennessee River. I like to think it was fastidious ethics that compelled us to decline the sincere offer instead of the remote location, for within a few years those lots were prime building sites, convertible to big bucks.

A daily visitor to the *Times*' little piece of the premises was Fred Esslinger, the building manager. He would stand over the teletypes, intently reading the racing results and that other oddsmaker's scratch sheet, the stock market quotations. Staff

members knew our editor loved the ponies and would make a wager with anybody who thought one horse could run faster than another, and we speculated whether the building manager actually made book up there on the top floor. But we never ascended to the aerie to see, lest the truth destroy an intriguing rumor. Life is a gamble, as no one knew better than cotton farmers dependent on the vagaries of weather; but even they didn't know how great a gamble. Before federal legislation stabilized cotton production and prices and before states monopolized the lottery, local numbers vendors in the lively, segregated business district along Church Street made the spot cotton quotation, printed each day in the "ear" of Page One, the winning number.

In the presidential election of 1952, Senator John Sparkman, a resident of Huntsville and friend of the editor, was nominated to run for vice president with Governor Adlai Stevenson of Illinois. A man of staunch principles, Amis agonized



A young Patrick McCauley when first working as a reporter for the Huntsville Times in the early 1950s. He later returned to the paper and was appointed executive editor from 1966 to 1985 and editor from 1985 to 1994. Courtesy Patrick McCauley

over his editorial endorsement but opted for General Dwight Eisenhower. The local Democratic establishment was outraged. On the morning after the election, Eisenhower victorious, a coffin bearing an effigy appeared at the entrance of the Times Building. “Burn it,” Amis growled.

Through it all, the *Times* did a creditable job covering Huntsville and surrounding areas during a period of growth and transition. Reese T. Amis, though advancing in age, set a vigorous example for hard work and integrity right up to his retirement soon after the paper moved to Memorial Parkway. While local coverage was its first priority, the *Huntsville Times* recognized its readers’ role and interest in a changing world. That “pretty good little country daily” had moved into a different league.

Eventually, the newspaper grew beyond Mr. Pierce’s boldest dream. A building site on Clinton Avenue across Spragins Street from that rival skyscraper, the Russel Erskine, had been acquired for a new *Times* office, but World War II with its claim on materials and manpower delayed construction. By 1949 word drifting from the front office had it that all the top executives were ready to begin construction except Mr. Amis, whose depression era experience had left him with the conviction that you should not start something until the money was in the bank to finish it. When I left Huntsville in 1954 for graduate school, the debate was still on. Memorial Parkway was an idea whose time was coming, but the site where the *Huntsville Times* now stands was then a bog in a cotton field between Huntsville and the mill villages to the west.

Downtown, all that bustle and the hum of the presses would soon fade away.



The two eagles flanking each doorway are the most imposing architectural ornaments in downtown Huntsville. Photograph by Linda Allen