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The Highlands Maconian

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FEBRUARY 11, 1954

Secrecy In Government

A lot of honesty is being brought to bear, by public officials and newsmen alike, on the widely debated issue of secrecy about public affairs.

A number of North Carolina newspapers, for example, groping for the truth about their responsibilities, insist that there are a few instances in which secrecy is justified.

Only a fanatic would deny that. It should be emphasized, though, that the instances are rare. Also that they should be clearly defined.

One such instance, long recognized, is the deliberations of a grand jury. The reason for secrecy there is fairly obvious; it is for the protection of the accused. A grand jury does not try; it merely hears accusations, and passes on their probable validity. The accused has no opportunity to present a defense. To make public such proceedings would be repugnant to every Anglo-Saxon tradition of justice.

Another instance, we think, is the informal consideration by a school board of the qualifications and disqualifications of teachers. If the board members are to do a thorough job, they must discuss the characters and personalities of the various applicants with complete frankness. Again, if these discussions were made public, it could do great harm to reputations of the individuals involved; and again it is a case in which the person against whom criticism may be leveled usually has no opportunity to be heard.

In an entirely different category is the situation where a government body, such as a board of aldermen, has in mind the purchase of a specific piece of property for public use. If the information becomes public before an option is taken, the asking price is almost sure to be raised. In short, premature publication of the board's intentions would be unfair to the taxpayers. It is worth noting, though, that once an option is obtained, the public has a right to be fully informed and to be heard before their money is spent.

A new problem involves national security. Much information that once would and should have been made public without hesitation today is being suppressed by the national government, in the interest of the military safety of the nation. In this case, secrecy is defended on the grounds it is necessary for the protection of all the citizens of the country.

In the first two cases, the protection of the rights of individual citizens is the justification for secrecy; in the last two, it is for the protection of groups of citizens.

In each case, citizens' rights are involved. The argument, often made, that public officials are entitled to protection against public criticism—that good men won't serve unless they can serve in secret, and that it is therefore impractical to let the public know how the public's business is being transacted—that argument will not hold water. It is the same as saying the public's business is none of the public's business.

Newspapers have a responsibility to observe secrecy, in a very few, narrow areas—for the protection of the rights of citizens.

But newspapers also have a responsibility to provide the public with information about the public's affairs. And because the newsmen's job keeps him on the scene where public business is transacted, whereas the public usually cannot be there, newspapers have the responsibility of leading the fight against the always-present danger of the abuse of secrecy, and the equally always-present danger of its spread beyond the few, narrow areas where there is any real justification for it.

Worse Than Segregation

In the past, the U. S. Supreme Court has restricted its rulings on matters of race to saying that rights and facilities must be equal. It has never passed on the constitutionality of racial

segregation. That issue, however, is now before the court, and a decision is expected in the near future.

The administrative arm of the federal government, however, refuses to wait for the court's ruling; it proceeds with its campaign to destroy segregation by administrative edict.

Its latest order is being put into effect on a nation-wide basis, despite the rather obvious fact that it is in conflict with statute law in states requiring segregation.

That is government by men, rather than by laws.

And that is worse than segregation ever has been.

Others' Opinions

SMOKING OUT THE CANDIDATES

(Greensboro Daily News)

The least that the Tar Heel press can do in this continuing struggle for freedom of information is to comply with the request of President Weimar Jones of the North Carolina Press Association and query legislative candidates in their respective counties this year as to how they stand on the "secrecy law" enacted by the 1953 General Assembly.

There should be a simple, direct question and an unequivocal answer: Do you favor retention or repeal of the 1953 act?

This is vital information which the citizenry, those who face the responsibility of determining the composition of the Legislature as a representative body at the polls, has a right to know and to demand. It is significant enough in its specific application; it is even more meaningful in the reflection which it will give of the potential legislators' attitude toward government as it affects public interest and accountability.

Somehow too many people have gotten the idea that this fight for freedom of information, for open transaction of public business, is the newspapers' fight. It is all that; but it is far, far more than that. It is only as public business is publicly transacted that sinister and special interests are barred, or their activities at least minimized by being brought into the light, that the public knows why certain steps were taken or certain bills passed and that there will be sufficient knowledge and understanding to assure intelligent voting at the polls. And here is where the success, even the survival, of our governmental system and way of life will be determined.

So, let the press as part of its fundamental obligation and a responsibility which it shares along with the Legislature and all public bodies, smoke the candidates out. How do they stand, pointedly and specifically, on the secrecy issue and all that it portends? And then if the public does not take over from there on, its mass indifference will truly be something to worry about.

Fundamental

From The Durham Morning Herald

Interest is picking up in the approaching campaign for the General Assembly and it's encouraging to see that opposition to the secrecy act is rather consistently expressed by candidates who have announced thus far.

Included in the number are some converts who voted for the act last year but who have changed their minds.

These conversions together with the voluntary retirement from the legislature of some who voted for the act and the candidacies for their seats by men opposed to it offer hope that this unfortunate legislation may be removed next year.

Involved in the secrecy act is a fundamental public right, and it's up to the public to say what, if anything, is going to be done about it. Does the public really give a hang that it's been prohibited from attending sessions of the legislature's money committees? Does it really give a hang how its money is used by the members of these committees?

If it has definite opinions the time to express them is voting day. Every candidate should and no doubt will express his views on this subject. And if ever there was an election in which voters were justified in making a choice solely on one issue, the Assembly election is it and secrecy the issue. For the secrecy issue is fundamental. If democratic government is to succeed, the people must have access to information about their government; they must know what is being done, who is doing it, and why. In addition to access to this information through their news media, they must also have the right to go direct to the source if they wish.

For each candidate who opposes the secrecy act and who intends to work for its repeal there is cause for encouragement. His intention not only testifies to his own belief but, more important, perhaps it testifies to his conviction, as a politician with his ears to the ground, that the public is alert to the fundamental right involved and intends to see that it's protected.

HORSE SENSE AND HORSES

(St. Louis Post-Dispatch.)

What's all this commotion about a horse that exercised horse sense? What kind of sense is a horse supposed to exercise, anyhow? A 20-year-old mare by the name of Gracie got her name in all the papers, a place on an honor roll, carrots for Christmas, and visits from important people, all because she brought her master back to his place of work when he fainted on his delivery route. Gracie showed horse sense and apparently nobody else had the sense—horse or otherwise—to expect it.

The only conclusion we can draw from this piece of busi-

OUR DEMOCRACY—by Mat

AMERICA'S DEFENSE

"What constitutes the bulwark of our own liberty and independence? Our reliance is in the love of liberty which God has planted in us. Our defense is in the spirit which prizes liberty as the heritage of all men, in all lands, everywhere."

—Abraham Lincoln
Speech at Edwardsville, Ill., 1858



NOW, MORE THAN EVER, IN A WORLD VASTLY MORE COMPLEX THAN IN LINCOLN'S DAY, THE BULWARK OF OUR DEFENSE IS THE SPIRIT OF MEN WHO PRIZE LIBERTY IN ALL LANDS, EVERYWHERE.

ness is that horse sense is not generally regarded as equine. Pretty soon somebody will be telling us that commonsense is not common. Or that hard sense is a lot softer than it looks. Things like that.

If horse sense isn't for horses, then whom is it for? Our own view is that it will be plenty soon to express surprise when some horse fails to show the expected horse sense. Gracie or Dobbin. Or whoever—

Poetry

Editor
EDITH DEADERICK ERSKINE
Weaverville, North Carolina

SNOWFLAKES

Little white angels
I think you are indeed
God's messengers of cool release
To a world in wintry need

Of the hope that beauty brings
To mortals here below,—
And I have heard that April sleeps
Not far beneath the snow.

BESS HINSON HINES

Highlands and California.

STRICTLY

PERSONAL

By WEIMAR JONES

CHAPEL HILL. — A social tea is no place for a man. Somehow the ladies seem to manage these things, with ease, and apparently with pleasure. But a man? He's like a whale trying to make a graceful turn in a goldfish bowl.

First of all, there is the problem of balancing a cup on a saucer, plus a spoon on the saucer's edge; meanwhile there's a sandwich to be held in one hand, perhaps a cookie or two in another, and a napkin, somewhere; and while engaged in that slight-of-hand, you are supposed to carry on an intelligent conversation.

Most men quickly decide that standing up is hopelessly impossible, so they look for a seat: seated, they can at least take advantage of a knee now and then. But the solution isn't as simple as all that—no indeed! For just as you get seated and have found ways and means to hold all the things you are expected to hold, and occasionally to get one or the other to your mouth, a lovely lady appears in front of your chair, smiles pleasantly, and starts a conversation.

Is a man to sit like an oaf, while the lady stands? Heaven forbid!

Both custom and courtesy demand that he rise, promptly; stand bolt upright. And what happens if he rises promptly? You guessed it. Nine times out of ten he pours the contents of his coffee cup all over the lady's dress.

So he adopts a wise compromise. He rises, to be sure; but slowly, laboriously, carefully, never for an instant letting his

selected for my charitable ministrations none other than Gordon Gray, the president of the University!

Nor did it help matters to realize that Mr. Gray had recognized me, but that the editor of a little mountain newspaper had failed to recognize the head of a big university.

That was only the first of a series of blunders of which I was conscious. So, when Mrs. Jones and I left and were safely out of earshot of host, hostess, and guests, I remarked:

"Never again will I go to one of those things. I always make a fool of myself."

My voice as well as my words must have betrayed how really low I felt, for Mrs. Jones, with her never-failing sense of when and when not to speak, was discreetly silent, then, about how exactly I had spoken the truth.

For I didn't know the half of it!

Of the real boner of that tea—the real boner, I am sure, of all teas, past, present, and future—I was serenely unconscious; probably the only person there who knew nothing about it.

It was several days later, when I was in a good humor, that my wife, who knows how much I enjoy laughing at any situation that is ridiculous, told me the rest of the story.

In the course of the afternoon, she observed me across the room, standing in a group. Then she observed something else:

A lady, to whom I must have just been introduced, was holding out her hand to me. I made no move whatever to take it. The seconds passed, and still I made no move to grasp the outstretched hand. It became obvious to my wife I never would.

Quietly she crossed the room, stood behind me, and carefully manipulating the elbow, she tried to push my right hand into contact with the lady's.

Did I shake hands then? I did!—with my wife!

If all this sounds as though I were ungrateful to my host and hostess, it certainly isn't so meant. I am deeply grateful to them, and not just for the invitation to the tea. I am grateful for the occasion that has provided my wife and me and our friends with some of the best laughs in months.

As proof that I am, I am going—if any Chapel Hill hostess will take a chance on me—to another tea!

Do You Remember?

(Looking backward through the files of The Press)

50 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

One bad man can do more in demoralizing a community than three righteous men can do good.

Mr. J. R. Pendergrass is about closing a contract with Mrs. W. H. Shancks to build a new store building of brick to replace the building he now occupies on the corner of the public square.

Henry Cunningham has given up the idea of going on the railroad as a flagman. He left yesterday for Macon, Ga., to take a course in a business college. Larry Waldrup also goes with him. We believe they have chosen wisely, and wish them success.

25 YEARS AGO

Macon had a little lamb, 'Twas in the days of yore. Now lambs have ceased to gambol Because of dogs galore.

According to W. D. Barnard, one of the county commissioners, the people of Macon must quit loafing and go to work. We agree that the salvation of the county as a whole lies in this solution. However, if half the population chooses not to work, that should be no reason why the other half should follow suit. Theoretically, the more non-producers in existence the more the working man should receive for his farm produce.

Mr. S. A. Munday has had the two tall pine trees that stood in front of the Pine Tree Inn cut down. The trees are said to have been planted here about 100 years ago by Mr. Munday's grandfather.

10 YEARS AGO

Fire of an undetermined origin damaged rooms in the Franklin elementary school building last Monday morning.

Miss Pearl Harris was a visitor in Franklin last Monday with her sister, Dr. Mary Michal, of Brevard, assistant health officer of this district. Miss Harris holds the position of head nurse of a sanatorium in Maryland.