

Youth may have its advantages, but when it comes to unraveling the complexities of State Capitol politics, there's no substitute for a lifetime of experience.

IMAGE IS NOT AVAILABLE ONLINE DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS.

A paper copy of this issue is available at call number LH 1 .O6S6 in Bizzell Memorial Library.

# The News Brothers

By ANDY RIEGER  
photos by Scott Anderson

1989 FALL 11

ATLANTA—It's 7:15 a.m., and the Oklahoma delegation to the Democratic National Convention is beginning to drain the overworked coffee urns of the Best Western Hotel on Peachtree Boulevard. An early-morning caucus is like a tonic for busy conventioners, working press and hangers-on.

State Sen. Gene Stipe, a fixture at most Democratic functions since he was first elected from Pittsburgh County in 1948, saunters into the hotel's coffee shop and walks past two tables of beckoning young reporters anxious to find some news angle on an otherwise dull convention day. Stipe heads for a back table occupied by two more sedate gentlemen.

"How you doin'? What do you know?" chimes Ralph Sewell, patriarch of the Capitol News Bureau in Oklahoma City. His quick smile and touch of the Welsh gentleman's accent makes Sewell a popular coffee partner. Stipe, the McAlester senator, proceeds to hold court with Sewell and his convention-covering colleague Carter Bradley. The young reporters inch toward them, hoping to fetch scraps of information that might escape "the news brothers," as they are dubbed affectionately by the Capitol press corps.

But stealing a story from the pair or the two cohorts they left in Oklahoma City is not an easy heist. Sewell, 81, Bradley, 70, Jim Young, 66, and sometime-colleague Howard Wilson, 73, often run circles around the youthful daily newspaper and television reporters who call the Capitol's fourth floor press room home.

"You have to get up pretty early in the morning to beat them," says one veteran Capitol reporter.

Their weekly "Capitol Spotlight" column is published in 56 state newspapers. In a separate, individualized legislative service running in more than a dozen dailies, they provide hometown legislator coverage and often report the historical aspects of a piece of Oklahoma legislative news. The authors don't need a library. Just about anything of importance that has happened in Oklahoma since statehood came during their lifetimes.

"You know, we kid each other and say we're the over-the-hill news bureau— although I don't know if I'd want that publicly said," confides

IMAGE IS NOT AVAILABLE ONLINE DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS.

A paper copy of this issue is available at call number LH 1 .O6S6 in Bizzell Memorial Library.

IMAGE IS NOT AVAILABLE ONLINE DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS.

A paper copy of this issue is available at call number LH 1 .O6S6 in Bizzell Memorial Library.

*Ralph Sewell (top photo) capped his first news career with a law degree, then taught in the OU School of Journalism before recruiting Carter Bradley (bottom) a veteran newsman, senatorial aide and state higher education alumni director.*

Sewell. "A better way to say that would be that Bradley and I were out there covering the Capitol before Gene Stipe became a legislator. We're the only persons out there with seniority on Stipe."

State publishers claim that the popularity of the news bureau is related directly to the varied experiences of the men who run it. All four began their careers on *The Oklahoma Daily*, the student-operated newspaper at the University of Oklahoma.

Ted Phillips, another former *Daily* staffer, now publisher of *The Seminole Producer* and president of the Oklahoma Press Association, is a typical unabashed supporter of the Capitol News Bureau. "The Capitol News Bureau is a unique service that fills a

reporting void," Phillips says. "The services offered by CNB give Oklahoma's non-wire service newspapers a report on state government that they would not otherwise have for their readers."

The strength of this service, he contends, lies in the experience behind the keyboards, "something the metro dailies and wire services do not have, much less the 'teevee talking heads.'"

OU Alumnus Herb Pate, general manager of *The Madill Record*, says the service is well edited and often is aimed at his rural readers. The CNB writers' historical perspective brings many comparisons into their columns, Pate says. "It's amazing how much things that happen now will parallel with things years ago. We think we

IMAGE IS NOT AVAILABLE ONLINE DUE TO  
COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS.

A paper copy of this issue is available at call  
number LH 1 .O6S6 in Bizzell Memorial  
Library.

IMAGE IS NOT AVAILABLE ONLINE DUE  
TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS.

A paper copy of this issue is available at call  
number LH 1 .O6S6 in Bizzell Memorial  
Library.

*Howard Wilson returned to Oklahoma to retire after a long news  
career, but his Capitol News Bureau cohorts just won't allow it.*

*Jim Young, the kid on the Capitol News Bureau staff at age 66,  
brought along 35 years of experience in covering state government.*

have new problems, but really we have  
the same problems year after year.”

The penchant and memory for details of past news events is a specialty of Sewell, who can sit and tell stories for hours. He is a former assistant managing editor of *The Daily Oklahoman* and *The Oklahoma City Times*. After working there in a variety of roles for 39 years, he retired in 1973 and was recruited to teach journalism at OU. A year later, he completed his law degree from Oklahoma City University.

“When I came down here to OU in 1973, Bob Carrell (then the J-school's director) said ‘I'd like you to be innovative,’” Sewell recalls. “I started the legislative reporting class with five students.” Sewell phoned five state newspapers and signed them up for a weekly Capitol news report to be produced by his students.

Each student was given a local paper to write for and a small office space in the Capitol basement. “Carrell wanted to give the stories away, but I wanted to charge for them. I said ‘They won't value (the service) if you give it to them.’”

Sewell taught the legislative reporting class every spring from 1973 to 1984, when he “retired” for the second

time. At the same time, he started individualized legislative columns to be sold to the state's smaller daily newspapers.

The columns' popularity increased, and more publishers signed up. Sewell needed some full-time, year-round help. The Oklahoma Press Association started keeping the books since most of the bureau's clients were OPA members.

By 1983, the weekly service was up to 30 columns. Sewell, who had already recruited Wilson, drafted Ed Montgomery, a retiring Capitol correspondent for *The Daily Oklahoman* and *The Oklahoma City Times*. (Montgomery left CNB two years ago to write editorials for *The Norman Transcript*.) Bradley joined the service in 1984, a month after his first retirement.

“There just wasn't any way that the legislative class could take care of both the dailies and weeklies. So when I left the University, I agreed to take the dailies with me. We didn't have as many back then. You know we never did solicit for those legislative reports. We grew from five to 30 by word of mouth.”

The legislative reporting class, open to seniors and students with consider-

able writing experience, has been taught by a variety of part-time instructors from the working press since Sewell left. Class members still write for various state weeklies but now work out of *The Oklahoma Daily* newsroom.

Young also had a long career with *The Oklahoma City Times* and *The Daily Oklahoman*, covering state government for the better part of 35 years. Nowadays his beat includes contributing to the news service's weekly columns and covering for daily newspapers in Weatherford, El Reno, Miami and Elk City.

Writing for smaller dailies puts reporting in a different perspective for him. “You've got a situation where you have to turn something out every week. There would be a lot of times at *The Oklahoman and Times* where nothing would be going on,” says Young, a bureau regular since he retired in 1985.

The angle of most stories, too, takes a different approach. “You take the position that the big, breaking news story is going to be in *The Oklahoman*. You've got to get a new twist. You've got to see how the issue affects your area.”

Bradley, a one-time United Press

newsman and later an aide to U.S. senators Bob Kerr and Mike Monroney, retired in 1984 after spending more than a dozen years as executive director of the Higher Education Alumni Council of Oklahoma, an organization he helped form while in Washington. His knowledge of higher education comes in handy when writing for Norman and Stillwater newspapers.

Bradley's interest in higher education began during his Washington years. He worked as chief clerk of the Senate Aeronautic and Space Sciences Committee during the days of perceived Russian dominance of the space industry. His committee drafted the language of legislation authorizing the Apollo space program.

The value of committing public dollars to programs in the sciences is a deeply held belief of Bradley. "We are still far behind other states in terms of competing for R&D (research and development) money. That has become conventional wisdom these days. We really need to do a lot about this."

Bradley was state manager for UP for 17 years. With 88 wire service clients, he often reported alongside Wilson. Prior to the wire service position, he worked for *The Ponca City News* and *The Oklahoma City Times*.

Observers say Bradley's state experiences, Washington work and knowledge of state politics makes him uniquely qualified to rate Oklahoma's government. He insists that state government of the 1940s and 1950s did a commendable job of weathering social changes mandated by the federal government.

"The U.S. Congress has made many agencies of state government into agencies of social change," he says. Bradley points to the 1954 school desegregation decision and how it was handled by Governor Raymond Gary as evidence of "good state leadership."

The press, too, had a hand in smoothing out mandated social changes. "We played a role to some extent, and we talk about this a lot. Somebody referred to it as a 'gentle conspiracy.' We had a governor who provided leadership," he says. "We did not have inflammatory journalism because we didn't have inflammatory politics."

Wilson also had a good view of state government in post-war Oklahoma.

He operated State Press, a 60-newspaper column service, after returning from World War II. He later worked for *The Oil and Gas Journal* in Tulsa, Houston and Los Angeles. Retiring in 1981, he returned to Oklahoma, where he had covered the Capitol with Sewell in 1941, Sewell for *The Oklahoman* and Wilson for *The Tulsa World*. His old friend quickly put him to work for CNB. Wilson tried again to retire in 1987, but the gang has coaxed him back for a second stint when the Legislature reconvenes in 1990.

The news bureau workers may be rooted in history, but they are technically up-to-the-minute, sporting portable computers at their offices and homes. Modems allow them to file stories directly to newspapers and to exchange files with each other. The start up for CNB wasn't so high tech,

---

### "We did not have inflammatory journalism because we didn't have inflammatory politics."

---

however. "I bought some old Catch typewriters from *The Oklahoman* when they switched to IBMs," Sewell recalls.

But it's the human element, not the equipment, that gives the news bureau its edge. The veteran reporters' age and political experience makes them sought-after figures among younger correspondents and among legislators themselves.

"When they come in to visit, you know you can talk to them. You can let your guard down around them. They're friends," says Ginger Barnes, a legislative secretary.

"Once in a while I have to remind (the news sources) that I'm not father confessor—but then every reporter has to do that," says Sewell. "If the young reporters want something historical, they always ask us. I was a kid in short pants in Oklahoma City when (Governor Jack) Walton was impeached, and I remember the (Ku Klux) Klan parade when the Klan de-

fied Walton. They got the Legislature to pass a law saying it was a crime to be masked. I was pretty awed, of course. I was just about this tall then," he says, lowering his hand to the three-foot level.

Besides sharing political savvy, Young contends that the team has developed into something of an information conduit among legislators. As reporters, they have the advantage of moving freely among government agencies and branches and absorbing details.

"The most in-the-dark member of state government is the rank-and-file legislator," he says. "The leaders aren't always clueing them in. A lot of times, we're the ones that tell them what's going on. We're not anything special. We just know what's going on."

The ability to grasp just what is going on in state government these days is a much more difficult task than it was when Wilson first drove out to N.E. 23rd Street and Lincoln Boulevard in 1941. There were fewer agencies then, fewer reporters and fewer fights.

"One major difference is that the governor is not the controlling force in the Legislature that he used to be," Wilson says. "Up until (J. Howard) Edmondson, the governor chose the speaker. He had greater control of the House and Senate. He named the floor leaders in both houses. It's different, more confrontational now."

The relatively low costs of CNB's service makes localized state government news affordable to smaller newspapers, he says.

"You won't see any young people out there," Wilson explains the news bureau's lack of competition. "They couldn't afford it." He contends the four men's work today means more to them than when they depended on reporting and writing to support families. "In a way," he says, "all we have left is our reputations."

"We're not out to make a lot of money — or even to make a living. None of us is independently wealthy, but we all have our pensions and Social Security. We go out there to cover our first loves—politics and lawmaking."

Says Sewell, "I'm just a real lucky guy. I'm doing the same kind of thing that I did when I was 25. I just wish I could be 25 again." 