

## Finally Taken Seriously, 1969-73

*By Steve Wells*

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I had been drama critic for my high school newspaper, and was hoping to eventually become that for the CD. As it happened, no one was doing it, so I got the chance right away, and did film reviews as well. I became instantly addicted to the newsroom environment.

It wasn't until the end of my era that the paper began to be taken seriously. Up until then it was pretty much sloppily put together and was usually only four pages published four days a week (no Monday issue) so as not to interfere with weekend partying.

The most memorable moment for me was not my own narrow and unlikely election as Editor-in-Chief, but the even more unlikely landslide election of Tim Wheeler the following year, for it signaled that the philosophy we had fought so hard to instill was indeed taking hold.

The philosophy was simple: It doesn't matter who you are, nobody's going to be judged on any basis other than the quality of their work and commitment. Those who felt entitlement due to the fraternal-elitist system wherein the CD was treated as yet another extra-curricular activity instead of as a serious journalistic training ground got a rude awakening that year. My election the year before in their eyes had been a fluke; Wheeler's sounded the death knell.

After Bill Bardenwerper's election as Editorial Editor, the entire elitist-biased Honor Committee (in an unprecedented bastardization of the word "honor") entered the third floor meeting room in Newcomb Hall to applaud their chosen candidates in defeat and observe the remainder of the proceedings with a jaundiced eye. The losers went on that summer to establish The Declaration. And shortly after Wheeler took office, the first non-fraternity/society candidates in memory won the Honor Committee election going away, helped by the fact that supporters of their opponents were found to be violating elections rules. But, in terms of the CD, the entire orientation had changed, and the environment had become one that would yield many top professional journalists for decades to come.

The true father of all this was Rob Buford, a brilliant writer who was Editorial Editor in '71-'72, and broke away from his own Kappa Sig beginnings to be the only managing board member to support "the new wave." Sadly, Rob died of lung cancer at the age of 46. His death, along with that of film critic Paul Chaplin who was one of the first victims of AIDS in the '80s, was tragically premature.

Among my other memories:

The first article I ever did for the CD was interviewing first-year students on their preference for shirt-and-tie or casual attire in the classroom. By the time I left almost four years later, ties had become part of UVa folklore.

One night while editor-in-chief, I received a call from the Charlottesville airport from Chuck Robb, who was a third-year law student at the time, asking me if I could extend our deadline an hour so he could bring up a “thank you” letter to the University community to go in the next day’s issue. He had just arrived back from his father-in-law Lyndon Johnson’s funeral. Half an hour later he arrived in my office with what can best be described as handwritten scrawlings on a couple of pieces of yellow legal paper (which I still have in my old files but would be happy to contribute to any formal CD archives). Together we did a quick edit, and sent it back to the composing room. His last task of a grueling week completed, he sank into the sofa in my office and, completely exhausted, shared his private thoughts about his relationship with LBJ; I just happened to be the one in his presence when he was finally able to let his guard down.

Also while editor-in-chief, I received a note from a third-year law student named Christian White challenging me to a duel on the Lawn as part of a raging battle over whether the third party candidate he supported in the 1972 presidential election should get treatment from the CD equal to that afforded Nixon and McGovern. Finally, after a rancorous extended battle over it, the Managing Board voted and overruled me, 3-1 (for the only time that year), and we gave him the equal coverage he demanded. The following day I received a note from him saying he’d arrive in my office that afternoon for a “spleen-venting” session during which I could spend as much time as I wanted telling him exactly what I thought of him. At first I thought it was a joke, but when I realized it wasn’t, I had someone call him off.

I recall the hatred I felt from most of the University (except, I recall, the law school) after we “reluctantly” endorsed Nixon for a second term in ’72. It was an impossible choice that year, given how inept McGovern was, and we viewed Nixon as marginally less objectionable. Despite what eventually came to pass, I still think we made the correct decision at the time.

I remember with pleasure the camaraderie in the old composing room (or I should say “rooms,” since we moved it into what had previously been the fire hazard of an unfinished attic space during my year as editor-in-chief), capped by the nightly appearance of courier George Fitch to drive the finished product to Culpeper to be printed, after complaining of course about the lateness.

In my first year the major issue was the Vietnam war, and the strike in the spring of 1970. I perhaps described it better in my “parting shot” of March, 1973, but it was very bizarre to see students marching up Emmet Street and engaging in an all-night standoff with police. In those days universities were hotbeds of political activity, and some actually shut down. University presidents either became ideologues (best epitomized by Grayson

Kirk of Columbia) or apolitical peacekeepers (like Edgar Shannon). The University remained open and there were no Kent State-type incidents.

In my second year it was the advent of undergraduate coeducation, welcomed by most. I remember one of our features columnists unwisely wrote a column comparing “Connie Coed” with “Rhonda Road-date.” That pretty much sealed his fate to only be able to date the latter. [The following year this same columnist approached me, in the wake of our having begun to also publish a column by a black student who called himself “Brother Ed,” with a proposal that he change his name on his own column to “Master Charles.” None of this was meant TOO intensely, but this time we saved him from his own non-p.c. humor.]

Race *was* becoming a bit issue on the Grounds, though, and the focal point came to be a white Unicop named Walter Chaffin, whom the black community accused of being racist. In the winter of my fourth-year, University officials made a clandestine deal with Chaffin, that he would leave the force temporarily and enter a police science course in Richmond at the University’s expense. We got an anonymous tip about this in the office one night around 6 o’clock, and were quickly called into a meeting with high-level University officials who were furious that somebody had leaked it to the CD. The student leader of the black community called it a “whitewash.” We ran a news story the next day, accompanied by an editorial entitled “A Tolerable Peace.” Perhaps Mr. Shannon’s peacekeeping approach had rubbed off on me by then, but I don’t think today I would have been as fast to endorse the University’s superficial but expedient solution to the problem, and the reasons have as much to do with a possible violation of Chaffin’s rights (since there was no proof of racism) as they do with the dissatisfaction of the black community.

Also during my fourth year, Mr. Shannon unexpectedly announced his resignation as President. He did this late on a Friday afternoon. We immediately set about publishing a two-page “Extra!” for Saturday. I took to the phone and began tracking down every bigwig in the state for a quote, from U.S. senators (at home) on down. It wasn’t until a few years later that the impact of Mr. Shannon’s resignation was felt, when Frank Hereford took his place and sadly set the University back with the mint julep elitist values that Mr. Shannon had worked to move the University beyond.

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