40 years in journalism begin with an eye-opening tour of the ‘dog watch’

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Wide-eyed and wide awake despite the 11:30 p.m. Friday starting time, I gazed upon my new workplace, The Chicago Tribune’s fourth-floor city room, with wonder and anticipation on that long-ago April 12, 1974 date.

George Castle in the Tribune’s wire room on March 16, 1975. UPI was a full-fledged wire service then with its two teletypes along with AP and Reuters.
Five months later, a corresponding look on my face was described as a “glow” by my mother as I arrived home at 8 a.m. Sunday after another shift and an invitation to help a popular columnist at “The World’s Greatest Newspaper.”

That’s how a long, strange career trip began that took me to this site, this fledgling Chicago Baseball Museum and who knows what points down the road? Those Watergate Spring weekend overnights may be 40 years ago on the calendar, but the emotional clock has ticked a lot faster than that. It seems much less in mental time, but that’s how short life really is.

I look back at the start of my career, lucky enough to have drawn continual, albeit modest, paychecks in a radically changing, and sometimes mind-blowing, business during that time. Then I calculate how odd the atmosphere of manual Underwood typewriters, clattering wire-service teletypes and conveyer belts will seem to the next generation, remotely wired for all the links to the world they could have ever craved. Conversely, who would figure in ’74 that Star Trek-style communicators, appearing centuries ahead of schedule as cell phones, would be the average citizen’s electronic appendage early in the 21st century? Or that same person wouldn’t really use those phones for a lot of voice communication, preferring the technologically sexier but actually slower method of texting and e-mailing?

I wasn’t too concerned about futurism when I started my first job in journalism. I was just too awed working at the largest newspaper in the Midwest at a time of scare stories of tough job prospects due exploding journalism-school enrollment in the wake of Woodward and Bernstein’s investigative heroics. Who would hire all these newbies in an economy sliding along with inflation raging just after the OPEC oil embargo that brought upon tension-filled gas lines?

Even with the industry’s troubles, I still worked in a four-newspaper town in early April 1974. The Tribune owned the five-day-a-week afternoon tabloid Chicago Today, transformed from the old Chicago’s American, once a Hearst newspaper. Sports columnist Rick “The Ripper” Talley no longer had Cubs manager Leo Durocher, cashiered nearly two years previously, as his favorite target. The Today was published next door to Tribune Tower, but we wouldn’t see its staffers until late summer, when it was folded into the Tribune. Meanwhile, the revered afternoon broadsheet Daily News and its Page Three star attraction, columnist Mike Royko, shared space with the morning Sun-Times in their barge-like building two blocks west of Tribune Tower. Despite its excellence and a bevy of Pulitzer Prizes, the Daily News had less than a four-year lifespan remaining due to changing reader tastes and the difficulty of selling and delivering an afternoon daily in a big metropolitan area.

The Tribune itself had been transformed over the past five years from its Calvin Coolidge-style Republican philosophy espoused by longtime press baron Col. Robert R. McCormick and Don Maxwell, his hand-picked editorial successor. Urban working people in Chicago hated the pre-1969 Tribune, although they let up on Sundays to buy the massive paper for its heft and breadth, namely the classified ads and comics. Taking over as editor in ’69, Clayton Kirkpatrick transformed the paper into a modern editorial operation with political bias usually purged from reporting. Although still
staunchly Republican on the editorial pages, “Kirk” steered it to an independent course that included an amazingly quick turnaround to publish the book-length Watergate transcripts in ’74 and a call for Richard Nixon’s resignation.

Double the minimum wage a nice payout

At that “new” Tribune, I hired on as a copyboy for a pair of 7 ½-hour shifts a week, beginning at 11:30 p.m. — the “dog watch” or “lobster shift” — on Fridays and Saturdays. My job was the newspaper industry’s traditional bottom-of-the-rung gig, flitting from desk to desk and down to the mailroom to fetch coffee. I’d receive handsome pay for an 18-year-old college freshman: $4.60 an hour, exactly double the minimum wage.

Everything in scale, remember, at the time. If the Tribune hired a reporter right out of school, like the well-regarded Lee Strobel, he’d make $274 a week. Gary Deeb, the controversial TV-radio columnist with whom I’d soon strike up an interesting relationship, made $30,000 annually, similar or better than many of the ballplayers whose merits we debated the night away.

How do you get a job as a part-time copyboy? I noticed a help-wanted job in hefty classified-ad section of the Sunday Tribune, then and for 25 years into the future the best

An overhead view of the Tribune’s city room at night as Randy Youngman moves copy around while night city editor Bill Grady works. First-generation computers, called video display terminals (VDTs), are seen, but they were not in full operation at this point in time.
place to look for work in Chicago. Desiring to break into journalism, I dearly wanted the job, and it took the proverbial friend of a friend to boost me into the gig. My mother’s chum, Ada Friedman, in turn had a female relative or friend – I forget the exact details at this distance -- who was a top supervisor in Tower Insurance, the Tribune’s insurance subsidiary. This helpful woman put in the good word, and I had the job.

The hours were a killer, both physically and socially. Colleges generally hold classes in the normal 9-to-5 routine, so I had to turn around my body clock two nights a week, then convert back again to the mainstream on Mondays. And at 18, one’s social life is typically just revving up at 11:30 p.m. Friday and Saturdays. But I was willing to make the sacrifice.

Getting downtown from my home in West Rogers Park neighborhood was a bit of a challenge. Violent crime skyrocketed in the 1970s. I did not have access to a car for the spring and summer of 1974. The CTA’s “Howard” (now Red Line) L was not perceived as safe at night, as least by my mother. She persuaded me to take the slow 151 Sheridan bus, making every stop on arterial streets as it worked its way the eight miles from Devon Avenue to downtown. That proverbial slow boat took the better part of an hour. And snaking down Sheridan Road through Uptown, then a tough neighborhood, was no picnic. I had to keep my eyes open on the bus just as much as would have on the L. Going home, in daylight, I hopped on the northbound subway at Grand Avenue.

By September, my uncle, who worked in a now long-gone Oldsmobile dealer on Cicero Avenue, was concerned about my nocturnal commute. For $75, he bought a junker 1965 Buick Special with a bashed-in left back door that had just traded in to his dealership. I now cut my travel time by more than half, zipping around in style now armed with a V-8 engine. Dashing home at 7 a.m. Sundays, I’d zoom as fast as 75 mph – 30 mph over the speed limit – on a near-empty Lake Shore Drive. Chicago’s finest stopped me just once, clocking the Buick at just 62 mph. I just avoided a trip to the police station for going more than 20 mph over the limit. I’d keep this Buick for another five years-plus, until Nov. 1979, selling it for $50 when the gas tank began leaking.

Free parking outside Tribune Tower

The dark hours were convenient for parking. No $4 for two hours of meter-feeding in 1974. I parked free just south of the Tribune’s front door on Michigan Avenue. That helped on nights the weather ticker reported the wind-chill had dropped to 60-below. I’d simply walk out the front door to start the car every two hours. “Brown Beauty,” as I nicknamed the Buick, never failed me except on the morning someone heisted my battery.

My duties were mundane. I’d help fellow copyboy Randy Youngman, sporting an Afro-like hairstyle and pitching by day for the North Park College baseball team, running the huge city room switchboard. Youngman’s brother Owen worked in the paper’s sports department and rose to a top editor’s position, while Randy eventually became an Orange County Register sports columnist in southern California.

The main city-room number was 312/222-3540. We’d put through calls to staffers and keep the late-night cranks away from the crew. By humoring these lonely folks, we’d let
them down easily. One regular kept phoning in poetry. I told him the poems were published on the religion page. Another caller was a preacher person, claiming she had the “power of God.”

So early in the morning of July 7, 1974, I had a little fun with this so-called representative of higher powers. Fresh from his 715th homer, Hank Aaron was in town for the final season visit by the Braves. When this would-be prophet called, I asked her to demonstrate her power by turning the wind around to blow in when Aaron stepped up in the first inning later that day against the Cubs’ Rick Reuschel. Challenged and exposed, she hung up. On just a few hours sleep and accompanied by Milt Rocklin, one of my old Mather High School teachers, I did see Aaron bat and homer off Reuschel in the fourth, his last-ever Wrigley Field homer.

Another time, late-night WIND-Radio deejay “Chicago Eddie” Schwartz called, grilled me around 4 a.m. on a breaking news story and I ended up as the voice of the Tribune with everyone else having departed for the night. Between 4 and 7 a.m. Saturdays and Sundays, Youngman, his successors and I were the only regularly-scheduled employees on duty in the city room. Legendary photographer Val Mazzenga might be in the photo lab or on the street, but the copyboys generally held down the fort in the pre-dawn hours.

In addition to punching the switchboard buttons to answer “Tribune newsroom, may I help you?,” I worked the wire room with its noisy sets of teletypes from the Associated Press, United Press International, Reuters, the City News Bureau, the weather ticker and a public relations wire. No more than every half hour, I had to “clear the wires,” tearing off the long rolls of paper with their stories spewing forth from the teletypes. Ifuntended, the paper would back up into the machines to be “eaten.” Even on the news-slow Saturday overnights, the AP and UPI machines kept busy transmitting long feature stories – UPI’s package was “World Horizons” – that couldn’t be sent at busier times. The only times the wires totally shut down was on Christmas morning, when around 2 a.m. UPI would transmit the word “silence”. And that was the only occasion when a hush fell over the empty newsroom with no background noise save for some generic electronic hum.

The third of four legs of my work consisted of moving pieces of copy from desk to desk for editing, and then eventually down an air-fueled conveyer belt to the linotype machines in the composing room below. I’d be summoned by the cries of “copy!” or even a baritone “boy!” from Falstaffian copy editor Bob Hughes.

**$9.90 tip for 10-cent coffee**

My final task was fetching caffeine or even alcohol assistance. The staffers frequently sent me for 10-cent cups of coffee from the mail room below. One of the dispatchers was David Condon, the legendary sports columnist who was the 20-year proprietor of the “In the Wake of the News” column. Condon would give me a $1 bill for the coffee, adding I should keep the change. One legend had a drunk Condon handing another copyboy a $10 bill, mistaking it for $1, and telling the kid to take his cut after shelling out the dime.
Since the best food the mailroom had to offer were soggy Italian beef sandwiches, I suggested we take advantage of the deep-dish emporium Pizzeria Due three blocks away on Wabash. I’d jump into the Buick three hours into my shift and tote back a large sausage, mushroom and onion deep-dish pizza along with a six-pack of Heineken dark beer. No wonder I put on weight in college with this fourth daily meal plus libation. With probing cameras limited to movie versions of “1984” and no bosses around, we ate and drank well on the job, toasting the ghost of Col. McCormick. And, anyway, weren’t we at the proud end of a newspaper tradition that featured flasks and bottles handy in desk drawers?

All the routines, all the lost sleep and the body-clock-in upheaval were made palatable by the people encountered, both future stars and workaday types with decades of experience dating almost as far back as the “Front Page” era of Chicago journalism.

Coming in on Friday night, I met two young night-shift reporters finishing up their city-side reporter duties for the week. One was mustachioed David Axelrod, fresh out of the University of Chicago. Thirty-five years later Axelrod joined Rahm Emanuel as the powers behind the throne as Barack Obama’s top White House advisors. Analyzing their Oval Office counsel was senior Tribune columnist Clarence Page, who in 1974 was a five-year Tribune veteran working with Axelrod.

The copy editors were the most colorful of the entire crew. Bob Hughes wandered through the city room singing, off-key, “Amelia Earhart, Where Have You Gone?” Wild-haired, handlebar-mustached-adorned Jim McCormick, an import from Chicago Today, announced “the papers are up!” when another edition was delivered. Old-hand Bob Corbet, who dated back to Col. McCormick’s days, advised me to get more experience elsewhere and “come back to the Tribune a star.”

The copy editors were scheduled to work from 11 p.m. on Friday to 7 a.m. Saturday. However, their work completed by 4 or 4:30 a.m., they slipped off en masse into the night. The entire overnight crew zipped their lips about all our early getaways. In another era, in another century, such over-staffing was rigorously eliminated, and then
Another veteran was telegraph editor Bob Seals, in charge of non-local breaking news off the wires. Thankful for good service, Seals tipped me $20 at Christmas. That was no small amount of money for a mid-1970s college student.

The night news editors were unsung heroes. They sat alone at the command desk to design the late editions. George Schumann drove in every night from New Buffalo, Mich. and said he “slept in shifts” to handle the overnight hours. Don Husch was a quiet, friendly man who stayed at the Tribune through the removal of part of a lung due to the company’s then-excellent medical benefits. Randy Weissman was a proud Reds fan glorying in the peak of the Big Red Machine. Max Saxinger was every bit a Chicago Today import, hard-driving and opinionated.

The night city editors worked until about 4 a.m. Usually reporters the rest of the week, they were the last local writers on duty should something break for the final edition, which had a 2 a.m. deadline, unthinkable today. They included Bill Grady, Bill Sluis (proud of his Mokena residence) and Dan Egler.
Flying fish and UFOs prank reports

I had the most fun with Noblesville, Ind. product Egler, who bragged about seeing the last Indiana Rose Bowl football team while in school in 1967. Last I heard, Egler was a Republican political operative in Springfield working for Bill Brady. But in 1976, he was on the receiving end of several of my pranks.

A wall divided the city room from another section of desks. I slipped into this area to concoct a phony foreign accent to call Egler with a report that fish were jumping out of the lake at Montrose Harbor, attracting a crowd. He didn’t fall for it. But the near coup de grace came weeks later when I again phoned Egler to report a UFO had landed on a golf course near his Evanston home. When I peeked around the corner, Egler was calling the Evanston police. Too convincing, I charged around the corner to wave him off the call.

Off in a corner of the huge room was the sports department, run by editor Cooper Rollow. One chief copy editor had a great newspaper name – Spence Sandvig. They were a different breed. Almost all the night-side editors smoked dirigible-sized cigars, an old tradition and perhaps a sign of smug satisfaction. The stogies looked out of place on the young guys, but they still chomped down on them -- even a college-age summer sports intern like Joel Bierig, later a Sun-Times baseball writer. A non-smoker was Fred Mitchell, a July 1974 night-side hire, who will soon mark his own 40th anniversary at the Tribune.

The first hint that you can’t always believe everything you read in sports sections came on Aug. 30, 1974. When the Cubs, dipping to 20 games below .500, went on a West Coast road trip, Rollow opted to save money by not sending along beat writer Bob Logan. Keeping writers off the road in those circumstances, while not traveling at all with the Bulls and Blackhawks in the winter, was a Chicago journalism staple in that era.

Instead, “Lefty” Logan covered a Friday twi-night doubleheader in San Diego off Rol-
low’s office color TV. The paper put a San Diego dateline on Logan’s story with a “Special to the Tribune” byline. Such not-so-truthful policies haven’t really changed with the passage of decades. The two remaining downtown papers still put out-of-town datelines on advance stories of road games, even though the story was written in Chicago before the beat writer flew out of town.

Another sports night-sider was editor Steve “Steve Cynic” Nidetz, who by day sat in Wrigley Field’s right-field bleachers with future Tribune baseball beat writer Alan Solomon, and Marv Rich and Les Wolper, a pair of inseparable diehard Cubs fans. In the summer of ’74, “Steve Cynic,” who called Chicago “Clout City USA,” refused to stand for the National Anthem at the ballpark until Nixon was removed from office. “Steve Cynic” was on his feet by the time the Dodgers came in around Aug. 19 to carve up the Cubs three in a row.

The Cubs in a way came to Tribune Tower six years before Tribune Co. bought the team. Walking down to the lobby several times in the middle of my shift, I witnessed famed Wrigley Field home clubhouse boss Yosh Kawano visiting to buy a newspaper. I never knew Kawano was a night owl. Maybe he was just up early. After all, the Cubs did not play at night in Wrigley Field.

I was as impudent with David Condon one night in Oct. 1974 as I’d be with Egler. Condon was noted for writing that his beloved Fighting Irish always had a 12th man on the field, i.e., God. Hours after Southern Cal’s Anthony Davis ripped apart Notre Dame for six TDs at the LA Coliseum, I encountered Condon in the hallway outside the city room. “How are you?” he asked. Smart-ass as I was at 19, I shot back, “How’s Notre Dame?” Condon’s commentary upon hearing that cannot be repeated here.

Sports acumen certainly paid off talking with Gary Deeb. He’d come into the features office down the hall late at night to finish his five-day-a-week column and avoid taking calls from pesky readers during regular business hours. Nicknamed the “Terror of the Tube” by Time magazine for his savaging program reviews and inside-reporting, Deeb also was a big sports fan. I was in essence educating him since he was a newcomer from his native Buffalo. One night he offered to have me do “legwork” – research – for his new Tuesday sports TV-radio column. Thrilled, I came home with that special look as my mother noted.
Using the Underwood for Deeb legwork

For the next two years I’d type my work on one of the office Underwoods via “four-books” — a white original copy and three pink duplicate sheets separated by carbon paper. Deeb paid me $25 or $50 out of his own pocket, and up to 90 percent of some of his sports columns were of my origination. Deeb had an unusual way of composing his columns. He’d write them in longhand draft, do his editing and then type a near-pristine final copy. Later, Deeb persuaded his editor to run my own TV piece, published during his vacation in July 1976, on the lack of new science-fiction shows in the interregnum between *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*. Written prior to my 21st birthday, the *Tribune* paid me $50 for the story.

In the first half of the 20th century, a copyboy’s job often led to the step-by-step climb into full reporter’s status. Unfortunately, I blew my chance. In the spring of 1976, *Tribune* news editor John Waggoner, the No. 3 news executive, offered me a summer news internship, which was an excellent stepping-stone to either a full-time job at the *Tribune* or another newspaper after graduation. But I turned down Waggoner, with whom I had developed a good relationship coming on duty late on Friday nights as he wound up his shift.

Despite my work for Deeb, I felt I wasn’t ready. I believed I hadn’t had enough published experience. Deeb was a lone wolf type and hardly a mentor, so he did not pound me to take the internship. To this day, I wish I had an older, wiser hand who’d have told me I’d have two or three levels of copy editors to polish my prose and serve as a safety net under me. To use a baseball analogy, does the raw 21-year-old prospect in Double-A refuse a promotion to the majors? Hardly. A year later I told Waggoner I was ready for the internship. “It’s a tough world out there,” he responded, the offer long since removed from the table.

With the hours wearing me down physically in the shift from nights to days for college and back to nights, I finally left the *Tribune* in April 1977. I got a summer internship at the downstate *Decatur Herald*, where I learned a lot from city editor Roger Hughes. Yet through the decades, I wonder what would have happened if I had said “yes” to Waggoner.

Maybe I wouldn’t have written this story, for this site, based on a different career course through four decades. Maybe I wouldn’t have covered Chicago baseball for 35 seasons, forged all the relationships I’ve amassed in the game and further developed a yen for baseball history.

If, if, if. In 1974, old Caleb Chestnut, 80-year-old sage of the Wrigley right-field bleachers, said “if,” used liberally in baseball, “is not a word.” So I can’t play the “if” game. I’ll just fondly remember the start of the journey that has taken me here, and the interesting people encountered along the way. That was as valuable an education as any journalism school.