

Tales from the beat, Part 2



Philip
Dine

Lots of you interact with the media in various ways: being interviewed for a news story; alerting outlets to events such as our food drive; writing commentary pieces illustrating the value of letter carriers; appearing on radio panels about postal issues.

Dealing effectively with journalists is key to communicating our message, but those who ply the trade can be somewhat idiosyncratic. Knowing what makes them tick helps.

Given the positive response to my initial “Tales from the beat” article in the July 2017 *Postal Record*, plus the fraught climate we face these days, here’s a second installment, aimed to provide insight into journalists, or perhaps just to make you chuckle.

I’m at a mid-sized newspaper near Boston, hoping to get to a bigger market. Assigned a major story one day—a Nor’easter about to slam the region—I spend all day doing interviews. Because it’s an afternoon paper that goes out around noon, I have all night to write the piece.

Adrenaline kicks in, spurred by the front-page display I anticipate, plus the value of a dynamite clip—by 6 a.m. I’ve handed it in and race home before the top editors arrive.

Computers having just hit the newspaper world, our reporters use typewriters on scannable paper, which editors slide into some newfangled machines, magically putting the stories on screens for editing. They’re still trying to master the new technology.

No mastery, however, this time. As it would turn out, a big-shot editor confused two keys on the keyboard, forms and notes—one creates an internal message to the next editor, the other makes actual edits to the story.

At noon sharp, oblivious to any issues, I rush to the newsstand to view my handiwork. Wow! Streamed across the top of Page One. Big headlines, powerful photos. The paragraphs on the front page are top-notch.

Excitement mounting, I turn to the story’s jump inside. Right in the middle of my riveting prose—for all the world to see—is this: *Try to get something better from the wires in the morning. This stuff’s boring as hell. We’re going to put everybody to sleep.*

I’m assigned to cover police brutality—in Mississippi. A black family from St. Louis, visiting relatives in New Orleans, was allegedly beaten while driving through the Magnolia State’s capital, Jackson.

I relish the assignment. Too young to go to Mississippi in the civil-rights heyday of the 1960s a quarter-century earlier, this might be the closest I’d get.

Before I leave St. Louis, several old-timers warn me to not

surprise authorities and to introduce myself to the police chief. I like to play my reporting cards close to my vest, but to relax them, I agree to do so.

After checking into the hotel, I quickly head for the police station. Having made no appointment, I assume I’ll be turned away and can begin reporting.

“Hello, ma’am,” I greet the desk person. “I was wondering if I could talk to the chief.”

To my surprise, she simply points to an office with an open door and says he’s in there.

He’s leaning back in his chair as I enter. “Hello, chief, my name’s....”

He interrupts, in rich Mississippi tones: “I know who you are.”

“I’m a reporter with the *St. ...*”

“I know who you’re with.”

“I’m here to look into...”

“I know why you’re here.”

I tell him I just wanted to introduce myself, before high-tailing it out of there—and wondering if my plane had mistakenly landed in the Soviet Union. How did he know anything about me? This was always going to be a delicate, even risky, story to pursue, but I at least expected the cover of anonymity.

The next few days I notice lots of everyday folks staring at me in the streets and alleys of Jackson, apparently wondering why this obvious out-of-towner’s constantly glancing over his shoulder.

Sent to Phoenix on a story, I call the local NBA team, the Suns, seeking a press pass. I’m not a sports reporter, but they give me one anyway.

Los Angeles beats them handily, and the locker room is relaxed. With no pressure, no story to write, I look forward to meeting the Showtime Lakers.

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar is sitting on a stool, reading a book. I politely ask if he recalls when his New York high school played a game in my town.

The league’s leading career scorer rises to his full 7 feet, 2 inches, peers down at me, and says icily, “No, I don’t remember”—before striding away.

I’m crestfallen. What had I done to annoy him?

Another legendary Laker, nameless here, approaches and quietly tells me, “Don’t worry. He treats everyone like that.”

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The *Postal Record* (ISSN 0032-5376) is published monthly by the National Association of Letter Carriers. Periodicals postage paid at Washington, DC, and at additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Membership Department, NALC, 100 Indiana Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20001-2144.

Subscription included in membership dues. First-class subscription available for \$20 per year (contact Membership Department).

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Circulation: 287,000. Union-printed using soy-based inks.

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