

"It's 10 minutes to presstime and the president's been shot!"

By David L. Riley
The Athenaeum Society
06 January 1994

It seems that in everyone's lifetime there occur events that galvanize and change their lives; that crystalize around them the events of the day and stick forever in their memory.

Two generations ago that event might well have been the electrifying news from France that the Armistice was to be signed and the Kaiser at last was vanquished. In the next generation, time stood still when crackling battery-powered radios told America that Pearl Harbor had been bombed and much of the Pacific Fleet lay in the oily water off Ford Island.

Instantly, events of one's lives were classified either as "before the war" or "after the war." Was it the same way with the outbreak of the Civil War, the sinking of the battleship Maine, or with the signing of the Declaration of Independence?

With the onset of the Cold War, confrontations more often constantly simmered than exploded and what drama there was largely remained behind the scenes.

But that changed in 1963 in Dallas, just over three decades ago.

Without asking, I would imagine that everyone in this room could pinpoint where they were and what they were doing when television and radio programs were interrupted to tell of the shooting of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas.

Hopkinsville was no different than the rest of the nation. People here craved more information, we craved confirmation of the obvious and instantaneous rumors were a fact of life. We simply wanted more.

This paper studies a glimpse of that day in Hopkinsville

Newspeople are guardians of information and keepers of the many "filters" through which the day's news passes.

Joe Dorris was editor at the KENTUCKY NEW ERA in November 1963, a critical post within any newspaper from which a newsman decides which stories from outside the community are used, where they are used and what emphasis they will receive through placement and the size of headline. Basic guidelines, certainly, are established by the paper's editorial board.

Educated at Georgetown College and earning a masters degree in journalism from the University of Missouri, Dorris had started in the rough and tumble world of Western Kentucky newspapers as a sports writer and had seen his way through every post between there and editor.

"Back in those days, I was making out the front page and I'd make it up about 11:30 then I'd take my lunch hour, which was a half-hour, which consisted of going down to the stock market," he said. "I think it was Hilliards then, I don't think they had gone with Lyons yet. "I sat down and started watching the tape up there and I hadn't been there a minute or two when some guy came in and said — there may have been two or three people in there — and he said 'I understand they took a shot at President Kennedy down in Dallas,' and one of the other guys said, 'Just my luck, bet they missed him,' Dorris recalled. "You see, Kennedy wasn't very popular with the stock market and investors," the editor explained. "He was a do-gooder about like Teddy (Sen. Ted Kennedy, D- Mass.) is and as far as the market is concerned. He was always just going to take all the money and give it to all the poor. Of course, he had nine-tenth of it in the United States anyway, the Kennedy family.

It was a lifetime of breaking rumors down and learning not to take anything at its face value that kept Dorris firmly in his seat. Besides, stocks and bonds, as he terms it, were his idea of entertainment. "I didn't think any more about it and went on looking at the thing there (the stock market tickertape board),' he said. "I thought it was some rumor or something or someone was going to pull a gag. "But then," he remembers, "someone else came in and said, 'I understand they hit the president.' So I put on my hat and took off for the office ... Must have been about 12:15 something about like that."

Let's back up for a minute and look at what else was going on with the local scene that week.

Reviewing the papers of that week, you see the slice of life that could well have happened at any year during that season.

- The president had been presented a turkey by a farmers's group.
- Preparations were under way for that night's Christmas Parade here.
- Frankfort was abuzz with an upcoming change of administrations — that of Hopkinsville native son Edward T. Breathitt.

• A new admissions and treatment building had been requested for Western State Hospital on the Russellville Road and a brand-new police station had been approved by City Council.

- Farmers were perplexed about prices at the next week's burley market.

So it was against this backdrop that Dorris walked at a fast clip the five or six blocks back to the newspaper's office at Seventh and Bethel streets.

"So I got back up there and nothing had come in on the wire but I was very confident in the AP," he said. "It was like the Bible and I grew up with that [but in those days it was a bunch of bastards like everyone else.]

"I guess I had been there 10 minutes and I kept on expecting every minute they would come in with a story since it had been on the radio — evidently that's where those people had heard it," he said.

The newspaper was king as far as national and international news went in those days.

"Actually in those days we had so much of a public opinion monopoly that they didn't pay too much attention to radio or television either one, because most of the stories in the early days — and I don't know if you could extend it to this period — all in the world they would do is take the NEW ERA," he said.

Radio, certainly, had been in town as early as WFIW in the 1920s and CBS affiliate WHOP had been broadcasting since 1940. But without the fully developed international news networks like the Associated Press (AP), United Press (UP) or International News Service (INS), radio and television were behind the eight ball before they began on breaking news like an assassination.

In many respects, the Kennedy assassination proved to be a watershed for the electronic media and the way they approached stories. It was, in fact, probably the first national breaking story that received the full treatment and immediacy that the electronic media can provide.

"So I began to wonder what in the world was going on because it had been on the radio and there wasn't a thing in the world on the wire," Dorris remembered. "So about 10 minutes after I got there, why, we had a bulletin that said some shots were fired at the president and at the governor down there, (John) Connolly, and that was all."

You need a little background on the mechanical process to understand the newsman's terminology.

News came into the newspaper on the teletype, a chattering device that printed copy about as fast as a person could type on the other end. Atop the machine was a bell that rang every time a bulletin arrived.

At the same time as a story was coming into the newspaper, it was being converted into code on a perforated tape. That tape could then be run through a linotype machine and converted into metal — hot metal, it was called. Prior to that, all stories, whether local, national or international, had to be manually typed into metal by a linotype operator.

These lines of type were proofread, arranged in a frame according to an editor's layout sheet, converted into a 50-1b. semi-circular metal plate and mounted on the press. Only then was a paper "put to bed" and began rolling from the pressroom into the circulation area, ready for newspaper boys and motor route carriers alike.

But by now, none of that process could have begun that afternoon, Dorris said.

"After, say, another 15 minutes there was another one-line bulletin that said it was reported he had been hit and I waited another 15 minutes and there was another one-line bulletin saying they had rushed him into the hospital," he recalled.

Time, obviously, was beginning to tighten.

"I knew it was going to have to be the first position story and I still had confidence in the AP," he said. "I don't remember why but often wondered what that first position story that was already in type and everything. It was a pretty good story or I wouldn't have put it seven columns. "So I made out another [layout] page with this headline and we junked the other piece and dumped the other hot metal," he said. "I didn't know what in the hell to do... by that time I was beginning to get a little panicky — we had about a 2 o'clock deadline."

Now, not only was the deadline beginning to get crowded, but Dorris' office began to resemble a train station's waiting room.

"You know in the newspaper business, in the office, nobody pays any attention to the wire when it comes in," he said, but "Directly, I had about 15 people in there looking over my shoulder. It (the teletype machine) was 'bulletinny' all the time but it wasn't always about that. "I must have gotten, I'd say, at least 25 bulletins — one liners — but nothing that could fill up a story," he said.

"There I was stuck, I didn't have a first position story and a handful of one-line bulletins. And I mean not a one of them picked up another paragraph or anything," he said.

"And it went on and on and on. So somebody called in and said the Christmas parade had been cancelled so there was a story there so we junked that one — I don't have any idea what that one was. If I don't know what was up there I certainly don't remember what was down there. "It (the parade) was supposed to be that night. They had found out about it and had cancelled the parade but we still didn't have a story. "Pretty soon I got a great long story on how the stock market was closed on account of Kennedy's death and I still didn't have but one paragraph up there," he recalled.

"First thing I know, which was then about 1:30, this story here comes in and I still had nothing up here. I would say about five or 10 minutes past 2 they come in sending a comprehensive story," Dorris said.

"You talk about a man breathing a sign of relief. We were the only afternoon paper in Kentucky that got it. We had a later deadline in the first place and we'd go to press later than anybody else" he said. "I'd say we went to press about 2:30 and we weren't too far wrong because once they got started, they ran a story in here and I mean they went right on through with a comprehensive story.

"But I know it was two hours after I first heard there'd been shots, that they'd shot at him," Dorris recalls.

"By the time I'd got through, I'd torn up the whole front page and thrown out everything I had, so there wouldn't be anything else on there that I could possibly throw away or that I could get along without it," he said.

It would be foolish to presume that Joe was working alone or in a vacuum on a story like that. Every day is a team effort and on days like this, everyone pitched in.

Walker and Tom Wood were copublishers, the society editor doubled as proofreader. Ken Litchfield was staff writer and Tom Covington covered sports.

While all this was going on, Walker Wood and Jim Cherry were experimenting with a headline, and three or four were hand set for Dorris' selection. The one that won out was 60-point, although a 72-point headline — a full inch — was attempted.

Files were scrounged for a photo of President Kennedy and luckily one was found, Dorris said.

"The photo had just been sitting up there. It was from back in the morgue. If we'd had anyone's picture sitting back, we'd have had the president's" he said.

Successfully getting the paper to press allowed the staff then to breath a momentary sigh of relief as plans were put together for future coverage.

"Everybody gathered around the television, hoping they would have some updates and I do remember television that night had a picture of bringing the body back home and Lyndon Johnson being sworn in on the plane," he recalled.

And that day, with its inherent confusion, wonderment and second-guessing proved to be here and across the country a watershed event in new coverage and in our lives.

Do you remember where you were Nov. 22, 1963?