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When Undercover Was King/More Bleeding at the Sun-Times

By Michael Miner @hotype

Investigative reporter William Gaines, who just retired from the Tribune, won his first Pulitzer Prize in 1976. By 1988, when he won his second, the rules had changed.

"The first one was an undercover job," Gaines remembers. "I was a janitor in the surgery room of the Von Solbrig Hospital at 65th and Pulaski. It was a privately owned 100-bed hospital. We heard from a source that from time to time janitors would be used to go into the surgery rooms and move the patients back to their beds without washing up. There were terribly unsanitary conditions there."

Gaines belonged to the Tribune's "task force"--four reporters, headed by Pam Zekman, who worked strictly on investigations and routinely went undercover. "It wasn't hard to get a job," he says. "The first guy would find out what they [the target] wanted. The second guy would be exactly that. In a sense we falsified our backgrounds. We could say we were anything, but we couldn't say we were Tribune reporters."

Gaines was the second guy at Von Solbrig. He hired on as a janitor, wrote his notes on paper towels and stuck them in his pockets, and the reporters outside followed up his leads. "You can get a better story by being undercover," says Gaines. "You can't neglect the reporting. We didn't just base the hospital story on my account. We looked up every possible public record and did a lot of research on medical procedures. The undercover thing was kind of the icing on the cake."

One thing he discovered was that Von Solbrig was routinely telling welfare families that everyone in them needed their tonsils out. The hospital then charged medicaid for the operations. His colleagues outside made calls and established that it's extremely rare for two people in a family to need tonsillectomies at the same time--let alone five.

And there was the time he and another janitor were summoned to wheel an unconscious patient back to her bed after an operation. "Next to every surgery room is a recovery room, where patients are supposed to go and have their vital signs monitored."

The two janitors rolled the child past the recovery room, "back to her bed, and placed her in her bed. Then, when we looked at the pay vouchers submitted to the state, there was an amount for the recovery room.

"That part of the story we couldn't have gotten any way but by being there," says Gaines. "We could have got the tonsils. The vouchers are public records, so we could have seen how many tonsillectomies they were doing and chased it down. But the recovery room we couldn't have done."

After Von Solbrig, the task force hit a north-side hospital that sent an ambulance around to collect drunks in flophouses and offer them a clean bed and three square meals a day for three days in its alcoholic-treatment center. Medicaid paid for those three days. The Tribune's William Crawford became one of those "patients," and Gaines went in as a "relative."

By 1988, when Gaines won his second Pulitzer, the task force and, for that matter, undercover reporting itself were history. For half a year he and reporter Ann Marie Lipinski and associate metro editor Dean Baquet pored over records and conducted interviews, and in the end the Pulitzer board honored "their detailed reporting on the self-interest and waste that plague Chicago's City Council." Gaines focused on zoning--the way it works and how the way it works lines pockets.

The day after the hospital series broke, the board of health held an emergency meeting. The two hospitals soon went out of business, and Gaines and Crawford testified before a U.S. Senate committee. When I asked what the Tribune's pore-by-pore examination of the City Council accomplished, Gaines said, "That's a tough one. I'd have to say it just educated people to how the City Council worked. It put it all in one big story people could read. I don't think it reformed one thing."

Neither did the Tribune's eight-month examination of the City Council ten years later--a study the paper in 1997 hailed as a "fascinating window into the inner workings of government in Chicago." Gaines worked on that one too. "I was able to get into even more depth on how zoning works," he says. "I think you could do a City Council series every year--every six months."

The difference between Gaines's two Pulitzers was the difference between bagging an elk with a gun and bagging the whole herd with a camera.

Gaines can name an occasion that symbolizes the dawn of undercover journalism at the Tribune and another that symbolizes the dusk. When he arrived there in 1963 "the colonel was dead, but his people were in place, and it was pretty much run as the colonel ran it. It was heavy on police news, hard stuff--no questioning the official version, no questioning of police sergeants."

At 4:45 AM on December 4, 1969, Chicago police assigned to the state's attorney's office raided the Black Panthers' west-side headquarters, shot up the place, and killed two Panthers. The police account had them being met by a hail of bullets and returning fire in self-defense, and the Tribune made no attempt to contradict it, instead running an "exclusive" statement from the state's attorney a week later that offered a version of the raid other papers were already starting to pick apart.

"That was such an embarrassment," says Gaines. "That was the classic example of taking the official version. The tone of the approach changed from that day on. It's not forgotten either. It's like the Dewey headline. From time to time it's mentioned that we don't want another story like that one."

In 1970 Bill Jones went undercover as an ambulance driver, and the Tribune won a Pulitzer for a series that the Pulitzer board said exposed "collusion between police and some of Chicago's largest private ambulance companies to restrict service in low income areas, leading to major reforms." Jones then founded the task force.

In 1972 Bill Mullen went undercover as an election clerk, and the Tribune won a Pulitzer for uncovering "flagrant violations of voting procedures" during that year's primary.

Then Gaines and Crawford went undercover, and the Tribune won a third.

Pam Zekman had an idea for an investigation that would top them all, an act of bravado a little too grand for the Tribune. But when she changed papers, the Sun-Times gave her

the green light. Collaborating with the Better Government Association, the Sun-Times opened a bar, the Mirage, on Wells Street, and in early 1978 began writing stories about the casual corruption that turned out to be the cost of doing business in Chicago. "It was a sensational story," Gaines remembers. But in his view it was a story "overshadowed by what the reporters did to get it."

If the story was overshadowed by its reporting, so perhaps was the reporting by its writing. The writing, by Zay Smith, was so irresistibly colorful that the Sun-Times continued to report on the Mirage's bar-stool fauna long past the point when there were any boodlers with palms out left to humiliate.

"It was kind of like the candidate who starts way out in front," says Gaines, remembering the Mirage, "and everybody starts sniping at the guy. It was such a great story and flying so high that everyone was saying, wow, can they give it two Pulitzers? And then the Pulitzer committee gives it that extra second."

The extra second to think it over was fatal. Over the pleas of Tribune editor Clayton Kirkpatrick, who was the Mirage's friend in court, the Pulitzer board decided to take a stand against duplicity. "I guess the Pulitzer committee didn't want it taking over journalism, and that's why they stepped on its neck," says Gaines. "That's one theory. They said, 'Let's get back to long gray type.'"

And he says, "That was the end of undercover investigative reporting."

I can think of three things that have happened to bury the form. The legal climate changed, as the disgraced objects of undercover operations who'd been losing libel suits discovered they could win in court by charging deception instead; a new school of propriety, with former Tribune editor Jack Fuller at its forefront, argued that ultimately it was in journalism's best interests to always keep its cards on the table; and editors decided that if their undercover work was never going to win a Pulitzer, what was the point?

In 1994 Gaines wrote a book called *Investigative Reporting for Print and Broadcast*. In September he becomes an academic, assuming the Knight Chair for Investigative Reporting at the University of Illinois at Champaign. As a professor he knows he'll be challenged to defend the old ways, because he gets that all the time already. "I don't push the idea in the textbook," he says. "I mention it's done and how it can be done properly. But I ask, 'Is it necessary?'" When they put me on some panel it's usually because I won a Pulitzer and it involved undercover reporting. I don't see much reason for carrying on a crusade. I'll defend it, and if it came back and they asked me to, I'd bring out my mop and broom. But TV can do it much better. They can take a hidden camera into a public place somewhere, and all we can do is describe it in words."

Gaines isn't apologizing. He shouldn't.

More Bleeding at the Sun-Times

William Gaines isn't the only top investigative reporter Chicago has just lost. The Sun-Times's Charles Neubauer is moving to Washington, to join a Los Angeles Times investigative team that's being doubled from four reporters to eight.

The first time Gaines won a Pulitzer, Neubauer shared the award. The Pulitzer jury did an odd thing that year, combining the Tribune's series on medicaid fraud with its series

on Federal Housing Administration abuses in Chicago and giving the joint entry a Pulitzer for local investigative reporting. Neubauer worked on the housing stories.

He's the rare investigative reporter who's never been anything but. As a graduate student at Northwestern he worked for the Better Government Association, and he moved from the BGA--which specialized in projects done in tandem with newspapers--straight into investigative journalism, which he did at the old Chicago Today for a year and for the Tribune from 1974 to 1983, when he joined the Sun-Times. It's important to him that readers understand he got there before Rupert Murdoch bought the paper.

Investigative journalism is a small world. When the Tribune Company bought the LA Times last year, it brought in John Carroll from the Baltimore Sun to be editor and Dean Baquet from the New York Times to be managing editor. Both had strong investigative backgrounds, Baquet's reaching back to a tour at the Tribune. They decided to build up their investigative unit in Washington, and two months ago hired Deborah Nelson away from the Washington Post to run it. "The first time Dean Baquet and I sat down over lunch to talk about who we wanted to hire, the first name that came to both of us was Chuck," Nelson tells me. "I think Dean described him as a quintessential Washington reporter who by accident of birth spent his years in Chicago."

Which may be so. Neubauer's most famous investigation, done with Mark Brown, put Dan Rostenkowski behind bars. "Rosty was the quintessential Washington politician," says Nelson, "but he had the misfortune to be from Chicago." Neubauer knew Baquet from Baquet's years at the Tribune, and he and Nelson were buddies. Before going to the Post two years ago she'd spent six years at the Seattle Times--she won a Pulitzer there for an investigation of federal housing programs for Native Americans. And before that, she'd spent ten years at the Sun-Times. She and Neubauer used to do stories together.

Neubauer's big reason for hesitating when Nelson offered him Washington was his wife, Sandy Bergo, who's been a producer for Pam Zekman ever since Zekman left the Sun-Times for Channel Two 20 years ago. But he's 51, and offers won't keep coming, and Bergo figures she can find a good job in Washington too. "This was a chance to do something a little different," Neubauer says, "and work for my friend Debbie and Dean and John Carroll--people who really want to do this stuff and will support it."

Which is not to say, he adds, that "the new guys" from Vancouver running the Sun-Times don't. But the parade of Nelson and Charles Nicodemus and Neubauer out the door, and the loss of Mark Brown to a column, leaves the Sun-Times with few troops to go to war with.

News Bites

One Nebraska study. One set of facts.

"Study: Nebraska is fair in giving death penalty," Chicago Tribune, August 2. "Nebraska's system for administering the death penalty shows no evidence of racial discrimination and appears to limit capital punishment to the worst offenders, according to a major report released Wednesday."

"Nebraska Is Said to Use Death Penalty Unequally," New York Times, August 2. "A new study of capital punishment suggests that it is applied unequally in rural and urban areas and that defendants whose victims are affluent are more likely to get the death penalty."

The Sun-Times has allayed all doubts that its coverage of Donald Trump won't be fearlessly and aggressively over the top--as Sunday's all-caps banner headline "Trump's Rich Vision" and Tuesday's banner "Trump Selects Local Architect" attest. Trump proposes to team up with the paper's owners to build some sort of supertower on the Sun-Times's present riverfront site. But before that happens the paper will turn over any rock and rake any muck--as soon as Trump needs it cleared to lay a foundation.

"He's known more for meeting the demands of the rich--not the architectural critics," wrote business reporter David Roeder, whose two-page interview noted Trump's "slight smile and a chin cocked upward." Trump said he understands what the rich like, and he intends to give it to them, at the highest prices in town. "Don't just look at the skin of my buildings," he told Roeder. "Look at the inside and how they work and how people like them."

So he's asking the public to judge his building by what they'll never see.

The name of the Channel Two producer who played a shadowy role in the Steve Zucker mystery is spelled--the last two weeks of this column notwithstanding--Lissa Druss.

Art accompanying story in printed newspaper (not available in this archive): photo/Lloyd DeGrane.

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