

# WORKING AT THE WORD FACTORY

*The Curious Life of a  
Small-Town Newspaper Journalist*



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*For my wife, Marsha, for putting up  
with all the odd hours, then and now*

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## BECOMING A WRITER

ONE OF THE BEST JOBS I ever had was in some ways also one of the worst. In comparison to what some friends and other family members made at their jobs, the pay was rather sad and the benefits somewhat meager. In addition, the hours were irregular, awkward, and often interfered with my other interests. On the other hand, it was seldom boring, often interesting, regularly challenging, and occasionally exciting. This job had me doing things like flying in a vintage World War Two B-17 bomber and talking to people who wanted to become President of the United States. It was the kind of job where anything could happen and often did.

One day my boss asked: “Hey Eric, how would you like to go into a burning building Saturday?” I declined. It wasn’t due to any lack of courage or curiosity on my part. I said, “No,” because I knew my whiskers would interfere with the tight seal required for the SCBA (self-contained breathing apparatus) firefighters wear into such deadly environments. I had no inclination to shave. I’ve had my whiskers since departing the military in 1971 and I’m rather attached to them, so-to-speak.

There was no reluctance on my part when the question was: “Hey Eric, how’d you like to go to Belize.”

I got my passport and when the day came I drove to the former Pease Air Force Base in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, to hitch a ride on an Air National Guard KC-135 refueler for a five-day excursion in that Central American country where I accompanied local National Guard Engineers as they wrapped up a humanitarian project building schools.

For seventeen years I was a reporter for a weekly community newspaper, a really good one. The award-winning *Monadnock Ledger-Transcript* was named 2010 New England Newspaper of the Year by the New England Press Association and received the 2011 New England Award for Outstanding Journalism. By my reckoning I produced more than five million published words during my years there. In the process I garnered eighteen journalism awards for categories of writing that included business writing, editorial writing, education reporting, feature writing, investigative reporting, spot news reporting, spot news photography, sports columns, serious columns, and humor columns. I was twice named Columnist of the Year by the New Hampshire Press Association.

When I first started writing I had no intention of doing it for a living. I was a guy working at the feed store, hustling 100-pound sacks of grain. It was another job in a long line of jobs. I had a tendency to do things until they stopped being interesting, ceased being a learning experience, or were no longer a necessary evil. Then I moved on to do something else.

I had given commercial fishing a shot, been a tank commander, moved stuff around with a fork truck, and been a junior executive in an electronics company. I had managed a square mile of land, doing some farming and logging, and rearranging that landscape with roads, ski trails, a beach, an orchard, and such. The longest I had done anything was a nearly decade-long stint of bartending and managing bars. The reason that job lasted so long was the endless variety of people, who kept it interesting . . . okay, and the free beer. Hell, assuming my liver held out, I might still be doing it—except the last bar I worked at burned down and I found something else interesting to do.

One big constant in my life, from childhood into retirement, has been a love of the outdoors and outdoor sports. I am a hunter, a fisherman, a hiker, and a paddler of canoes. I'm a reader, too: novels, magazines, newspapers, cereal boxes, you name it. One of the things I regularly read is the local newspapers. Back when I started writing, there were three local weekly papers reporting the news in my neck of the woods. And not one of them had an outdoor column that offered a consumptive hunting and fishing type outdoor enthusiast much of anything. The closest thing was a short-lived column called "Tracking Nature" that had nature news of a passive type suited more for a hiker or wildlife watcher. I spent years moaning about this deficiency, as did a few of my hunting and fishing friends.

Then one day I was scanning the help-wanted ads and discovered the *Monadnock Ledger* was seeking an outdoor columnist. I decided to give it a try. I had always harbored a secret desire to be a writer. I just never seemed to have the time to get around to doing it. I decided this was the time.

The editor's name was Ed Blaguszewski, and the newsroom was on the second floor of a tired, retired Baptist church in downtown Peterborough, New Hampshire. The stairwell wall was hung with plaques representing the first place journalism awards the paper and its reporters had won. I was impressed and a wee bit intimidated. What made me think I measured up to these standards?

Blaguszewski interviewed me and said there were a couple other applicants for the job, which paid the princely sum of \$15 per column. He wanted each of us to write a sample column (for free) so he could decide who to pick.

I bought a two-dollar secondhand battleship gray Royal manual typewriter at a neighborhood yard sale and I taught myself to peck out the words with my two index fingers. Twenty years and millions of words later I am still pounding out the words with those same two fingers and an occasional thumb thump on the space bar. It's tough for an old dog to learn new tricks like touch typing. I know that's not much of an excuse, but what can I say? It's all I got.

Anyhow, I got the job, which was to produce an outdoor column once every two weeks. And I settled into a routine where I wrote a column longhand, sat on it for a week to get some perspective, and then rewrote it, in longhand again. The final step in the process was the polishing and typing, which was accomplished with generous applications of a cover-up substance called "Wite-Out." (I didn't have a 'delete' key back then). Then I hand-delivered the columns to the newspaper, which gave me a chance to meet some of those award-winning journalists and photographers, who actually seemed like pretty normal people.

This all happened back in 1988. Within a couple years I had acquired a Brothers word processor, which eliminated the need for Wite-Out because it didn't actually print the words on paper until all my editing was done and mistakes corrected.

I wrote those every-other-week columns for several years, all the while striving to convince the editor that outdoor activity didn't cease in the wintertime. I also took on another outdoor column for *Hawkeye*, a monthly, state-wide hunting and fishing newspaper, which I am still writing twenty years later. As time progressed I gradually became slightly more proficient with the whole typing business. My pay for the *Ledger* columns increased to \$25 a column. Suddenly I was actually making something close to minimum wage. Then Blaguszewski gave me a freelance feature assignment to interview a local gentleman who tied trout fishing flies. The staff photographer went along and took the pictures. That feature ran on the front page and I was paid fifty dollars. Seeing an opportunity to actually make a buck, I began pitching feature ideas and getting occasional assignments.

Just as things seemed to be going pretty good, Blaguszewski left the newspaper to take a public relations job. A new editor was hired and I wasn't so sure about my status anymore. Then the *Ledger* ran another want ad, looking for a part-time (20-hour) reporter to cover news in the town in which I lived.

I decided this was something I could do. It was 1991. I was 47



years old. Slingshotting 100-pound sacks of grain around had resulted in a couple injuries. It was dawning on me that maybe working at the feed store wasn't something I could do gracefully right into my senior years. Maybe it was time to try something new. The new editor, Joe Yonan, was a freshly minted college graduate. I felt like I was being interviewed by a kid. The "kid" looked at my clips and I waved my camera around like I actually knew how to use it. Damned if he didn't hire me.

My wife had a regular full-time job with health insurance coverage for the family, which enabled me to say yes to this low-paying part-time work. It was my first lesson about being a newspaper reporter—I realized I wasn't going to get rich doing it. I believe that was why Blaguszewski had gone to public relations—to make some money.

Why did I do it? Because I thought it would be interesting. It was. Because I thought it would be a learning experience. It was. After a year of working part-time the job went full-time and I was covering two of the largest towns in the paper's sixteen-town coverage area and one of its largest school districts.

I loved doing it from the get-go. It wasn't always easy. It wasn't always fun. It was almost always interesting and occasionally challenging. Every time it got to feeling same-old, something new would happen. And I was meeting an endless stream of really interesting people.

The new editor, Joe, the kid, was good. I never studied journalism. I learned on the job. Joe read my stuff and asked questions. Getting the answers often meant having to go back to people I had already interviewed. I hated doing that, so I learned to anticipate the questions the readers would be asking as they read my stories and I provided those answers before sending my stories to Joe. He taught me to report well, wouldn't let me get away with doing things like writing about "a number of accidents" in a snowstorm story. "One is a number," he'd say. "Tell me what number." I might not get the exact number but I could write something like "at least ten cars went off

the road and there were three two-vehicle crashes,” which is a whole lot more informative than “a number of crashes.”

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When something doesn't quite fit in a story, one option is to box it and present it in a sidebar.

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I went to work during one of those really bad economic slumps. Advertising was off and it's the ads that determine the size of the news hole and the number of pages. So I learned to write tight and make every word count. Joe showed me how. He started with words like “that” and “currently.” “That” is way overused and often superfluous, he told me. “Currently” is a given in the news business. “Lose it,” he said. I did. He was right.

It was my second important lesson about the reporting business. The editor was my safety net. Looking back from where I am now I have to say I was fortunate in that the editors made my writing better more than ninety-five percent of the time. I forgive them for the other few percent.



## ONE THING LEADS TO ANOTHER

THERE'S A LESSON TO BE LEARNED from my experience of finding a job at a newspaper. Sometimes getting a journalism job is simply a matter of getting your foot in the door by way of something like a freelance column or an internship. What I learned is this: one thing leads to another. In all likelihood what will happen is the paper will expand or someone will leave. If you take what's available, do it well, and demonstrate you can meet deadlines, you'll probably be a shoe-in for the position when it opens. Why should the newspaper undertake a big search and be understaffed in the process when they already have a proven writer? If nothing else you'll end up with a portfolio of clips of your published writing to show around when seeking a job somewhere else.

I found the same adage (one thing leads to another) is true of news reporting, as well. Take that trip to Belize I mentioned. That journey to report on the efforts of the local National Guard Company resulted in a total of six stories and nine photos running over the course of three issues. In addition to the main articles about the military mission I wrote about the country's culture, its schools and students, and its history and Mayan ruins. I also wrote about the U.S. Ambassador.

Much to my surprise, the first piece of art I saw in Belize was a Robert Collier oil painting of Mount Monadnock, a landmark I see every day at home. The painting was hanging above a couch in the ambassador's residence. I soon discovered Ambassador George Bruno was from my home state, New Hampshire, and so was all the art at his residence. Years later I met Ambassador Bruno again. I was on another assignment at the Ronald Reagan Center in Washington, DC where we were both attending a "roast" for former presidential press secretary Marlin Fitzwater, who served two presidents. Ambassador Bruno had become a Senior Advisor in the United States Army and was at that point involved in relinquishing control of the Panama Canal to Panama.

In Belize I also met General Wesley Clark who was shortly to be on his way to the Balkans to take command of NATO Troops. The next time I met General Clark, years later, he was running a campaign to become President of the United States and I was writing about it.

One thing leads to another.



## COMMUNITY NEWS

THE NEWSPAPER BUSINESS, as we know it today, is a changing, evolving institution. More and more, people are getting their news via other sources, like TV and the Internet, which provide up-to-the-minute-news. In the past few years a dozen metropolitan dailies have closed their doors and let the presses go cold. Others, beset by technological forces and a bad economy, have cut back, laid off staff, closed bureaus, reduced page size and tightened their proverbial belts. New Hampshire's daily state-wide newspaper, the *Union Leader*, has come out with a Friday/Saturday edition and eliminated the Saturday newspaper in parts of the state. The New Orleans *Times-Picayune* has gone from a daily to three editions a week. Several large newspapers, like the *Chicago Tribune*, have tried outsourcing suburban news. And now the *Boston Globe* is printing the newspaper for its competitor *The Boston Herald*, cooperation which probably means extra profit for the *Globe* and a cost savings for the *Herald*.

Innovation is part of the evolution. Most papers now have a web edition and offer online paperless subscriptions for people who read them on devices like laptops and iPads. And using the internet allows newspapers to react immediately to report breaking news.

If there's an exception to the kind of newspapers threatened by