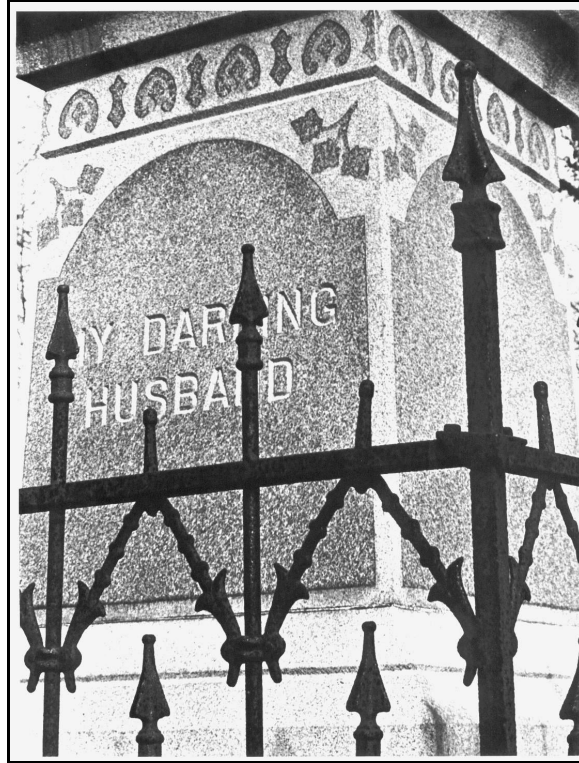


## Stringing for the Observer

*Discovering that I had some talent but only infrequently anything worth saying...*



(Picture shot for story in Observer)

It started when I was commuting from Shelby to Celanese and got stuck one morning behind a truck full of turkeys on the Gastonia side of Kings Mountain. I don't remember if I was driving the MG sedan or the Volvo. The turkeys were packed inside wooden cages stacked on the open truck. Several of the large white birds had either been pushed or managed to work themselves out of their crates and were hanging on the sides of the truck. Feathers billowed behind. At least two of the birds fell onto the road, one hit by a trailing car and the other scooped up by a motorist who managed to stop in time. I think Thanksgiving was near.

Moved by the plight of these unfortunate creatures, I wrote a letter to the Observer editors. I don't recall the content, but the tone was passionate and tragic (sometime in the vein of "oh, the humanity"). I think I used the phrase "dirty white bundles". The letter must have been fairly well written because Jack Claiborne, an Observer editor, asked me to come by.

I went to the old Observer building on Tryon. It was around lunch. Jack met me in the newsroom. I remember it was dark and cluttered but not nearly as crowded as I would

have imagined. Most of the desks were unoccupied. Jack said that was because the Observer was a morning paper and most people came in after 2:00 PM.

(In the seventies, long after I had blown my opportunity to become a reporter, I could see the cluttered news room when I read Wolpert's story about old drunken newsmen fighting a duel with manual typewriters. Wolpert was so enamored of this mystique that he called women "tootsies" and bought a Speed Graphics style camera.)

Jack would not have fitted Wolpert's image of an editor. Although not fat; he was not rail thin either. And he seemed kind, speaking with a soft southern accent. I don't remember the exact conversation. The gist was that Jack liked what I wrote about the turkeys and wondered if I wanted to try some stringer (e.g., free-lance) work for the Observer. I believe there might have been a policy then to use stringers and maybe even a policy to encourage potential writers. Also, there was a tradition of noted newspaper people coming to the Observer from the Shelby Daily Star. Although I had never worked for the Star, I had the same last name, Weathers, as the publisher.

Jack suggested that part of being a good stringer was the ability to dig out local stories. To help get me started, he would give me one lead. Why didn't I find out what was behind the name of the Shelby department store, "A.V.Wray and 6 Sons" and write about that? The store was located downtown, across the square from the statue of the Confederate soldier. Jack wondered about the name every time he drove through town. I don't recall if he knew anything else – for example that each fall Wrays displayed on the sidewalk in front of the store the first bale of cotton produced that year in Cleveland County. And of course he didn't know that my mother got my clothes from the cheap section in the basement and that one year, after the first snow, my father took me with him to Wrays to buy boots and gloves for the entire family.

I said yes. It didn't sound especially grand, but I knew several of the Wrays, so I didn't think it would be too difficult.

Over the next few years, I sold a number of stringer pieces to the Observer, getting paid a modest amount (fifty cents maybe) for each column inch. Most of the stories were cute and a little contrived. One was grand. It was an "eye" piece (or "I" piece) about the Sunset Cemetery in Shelby. It had arty pictures of tombstones and wintry trees and text vaguely reminiscent of Walt Whitman. One of the pictures is shown at the front of this recollection. As I recall, the story occupied an entire page. I never saw anything like it again in the Observer.

Another story was simply unfortunate. It was about a coworker at Celanese named Oscar Juan Garcia. He came from Peru, worked on a training program in the knitting lab, and then moved to the New York office. I went out drinking a few times with him and Dieter Schein, the East German knitting engineer with abnormally long arms. Once, in the lab, they had a faux fight, Oscar using his feet and Dieter his hands, each claiming his technique was better. I was impressed and intimidated. Because I couldn't think of anything else to say, I made a big deal in the story about how Oscar was a "mestizo" – a

person of mixed Indian and European heritage. Given that Oscar grew up in a wealthy family, I couldn't write it as a rags-to-riches story; however, I did imply that by coming to Celanese in the U.S, he had certainly overcome something. By the time the story came out, Oscar had already transferred to New York. The last I heard from him was when he called to tell me that New York management saw the story and fired him – for being a mestizo he said.

As I recall, Jack eventually moved on to some other activity in the Observer. I might not have gotten along as well with the person who replaced him. In any event, I gradually stopped submitting stories. However, while still around, Jack did offer me a job on the re-write desk, editing wire copy to fit available space. I declined, citing hours and money as the reasons. I didn't mention the real reason. The idea of working at that dark, horseshoe shaped desk until 11:00 or 12:00 every night, weekends included, scared me silly.

A couple of years later, after the Observer moved to its new facility, I tried to resurrect my previous opportunity but by that time, any job at the Observer was precious. I got the impression that my re-write job now required a degree in journalism, and not just from any school.