

Time For Reflection



It is July 1931. My hand still tingles from clutching a high school diploma a month before. I have been waiting for this day with excitement and apprehension.

I am about to launch my career as a legal secretary. I walk from my home on Montgomery Street opposite Laurel High School, where I learned my skills, to 357 Main Street. I enter a white frame building, walk down a narrow hall and timidly open a door on which is printed "George P. McCeney, Attorney At Law."

Mr. McCeney welcomes me as he would his own daughter. He is kind and puts me at ease. His booming laugh dispels all fear. That awful first moment I had been dreading is over. I am lucky. Not many of my co-graduates have yet found work in the midst of the Great Depression. I not only have a job, it is close to home.

In spite of my tender age (I will not be 16 for two months), I feel confident I can be a good secretary. I'm eager to commence and to learn.

Three years later I am devastated at Mr. McCeney's death. His kindnesses to me are indelible and in years to come will be emulated as I become an employer.

I am "inherited" by his son and successor in the law practice, G. Bowie McCeney. Bowie encourages me to study law. In September 1936 I take a leave of absence for three years from my position at 357 Main Street and become secretary-bookkeeper at the notable Cosmos Club in Washington while I pursue law studies at night.

It is June 1939. Law degree in hand, I return to 357 Main Street. The building I enter, though, is a new four-story brick building that dominates Main Street with dignity. I resume association with Bowie McCeney. He has acquired the Laurel Leader unexpectedly within the past six months. He hands me a copy with a grin and says, "My career as an editor just ended. Yours is just beginning."

I am stunned. I am indignant. Law is my love. I know nothing about writing. I don't want to be a reporter. "You can do it," Bowie said confidently. "The Leader isn't much now, but see what you can make of it." Another challenge.

Retired General Everard E. Hatch is Mayor of Laurel. Governor Herbert R. O'Connor is in the State House, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt resides at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Greta Garbo is playing in "Ninotchka" at Laurel Theatre.

The Leader is an 8-page tabloid with four live news pages. The patent medicine ads are more interesting than the local news. Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound...Nature's Remedy...Smith Bros. Cough Drops...Doan's Pills...all panaceas for pain.

Comics take up almost a page. Another is filled with "East and West," an engrossing serial story. State, national, and international news summaries, and the latest from Hollywood make up most of the rest of the four "canned" pages.

Weddings and deaths are front page news. Personal items about weekend guests and luncheons and parties and births also have front page prominence.

With considerable disinclination I take up my new duties.

Little do I suspect that newspapering, not law, is about to become my career. I look upon this job with some disdain, for not only am I expected to dig up news, I must sell advertising, lay out the ads, make up the four live pages of the paper.

I am modest about calling people for news. I am embarrassed to ask merchants for ads. I much prefer to assist Bowie in his law practice and to handle his insurance business, which later becomes mine.

But I find the City Council meetings pretty interesting. Mayor Hatch, in his late seventies, calmly announces at a meeting early in 1940 that "the sewage disposal plant of Laurel has completely collapsed...our sewage goes straight into the river. The State Board of Health is writing us polite but emphatic letters...The cost of correcting it is \$62,000! I throw up my hands! If I were younger, I would take hold of the problem and try to solve it. But I am too old, and I must leave it to younger hands..."

As his career ends, mine is born. I am discovering that reporting news is exciting.

It is September 1946. The Leader becomes a full-sized newspaper as Bowie McCeney merges the Bowie Register and College Park News (I have been editing the former for two years, the latter a few months) with the Leader, and changes its name to The News Leader.

It is June 1980. Twenty-one hundred and thirty-two editions of Laurel's newspaper have been edited by me. I wonder how many pages, how many words I've written. This is the last edition. These are the final words.

I look back over the years. Like a kaleidoscope, people and events flash through my mind. It is impossible to review them here. Time and space do not permit. But never mind. This is one career that inescapably is recorded in black and white. The archives reveal all. Weaknesses, as well as modest triumphs.

They also reveal a lasting love for the Laurel community. It grew hesitantly, slowly, with caution. Shared experiences, happy ones, tragic ones, normal ones, tempers it into an enduring love. The community gives every indication it is a love requited.

We know each other well. We are comfortable with each other.

Remember World War II and "Our Boys" column? I guess that's when we really got acquainted. The first column appeared October 23, 1942, and continued long after V-Day. We shared not only letters from our servicemen, but much more during those years.

Just think what else we've been through together. The Korean Conflict, Vietnam. The arrival of National Security Agency in 1958 and the repercussions that changed a small community into a burgeoning city. Desegregation. An awakening to civil rights. The Atomic Age. The Space Age.

It's all there in those 2132 editions. How you reacted to change, how you coped with problems, how you rejoiced over achievement, and how you had fun. Remember Laurel's Centennial? And the Bicentennial in Laurel?

Those 2132 editions prove that Laurel is really something special. She just isn't any place. She has charisma and character and courage and compassion.

Can you imagine how proud I am to have been the chief chronicler of Laurel's saga for more than four decades? I didn't do it alone. It was done with teamwork. You have been my partner all these years.

I thank you for helping me to write your newspaper. I thank the advertisers through the years who have used The News Leader as their media. I thank all those people who have enriched The News Leader with their by-line columns; all the parents and coaches and volunteers for their input; the schools and churches for their cooperation; public officials for their open doors.

Recognition, awards, plaudits have been heaped generously upon me as editor and I appreciate them deeply, but I have always shared honors with my staff and with the community. You helped to earn them.

You were a wonderful audience. You let me talk out loud in "Pen Points," and it is on request that I resurrect the head for this farewell.

"Pen Points" and subsequent editorials permitted me to bring you into the intimacy of my heart, my soul. You shared Christmases and Easters, and the love which abounds in my family. You shared my solitude, my vacations, my fortieth birthday, my love of nature, my exciting happenings. You came to know how strong is my faith in God, and you shared some of my hilltop experiences.

You felt my grief at the death of family and friends. You were tolerant of my feeble efforts to philosophize. When I expressed opinions, you listened with respect; and when I was bold enough to make recommendations, you often acted upon them. The power of the pen became an awesome responsibility, not to be abused.

Time for reflection is over. My life and my livelihood have been in Laurel and The News Leader. It has been a good life and a good livelihood.

For nearly 50 years I have been opening the door at 357 Main Street and reporting to work. I can never lock the door on the memory of those years, nor on the people who have come in and out of that door.

One doesn't spend nearly half a century on the same spot without cause. My association with Bowie McCeney was a remarkable one. The opportunities he offered me were good reasons to remain on Main Street. I cannot end my career without paying him tribute.

Bowie personally underwrote the Leader for many years before it was financially sound, and though he took a back seat in publishing, it was his business acumen and judgment which provided a stable newspaper for Laurel. That he offered me the opportunity to be his editor and to become his partner were compliments of the highest degree.

He was far ahead of his time. He was offering equal opportunity to women, with equal pay, decades before the Equal Rights Amendment was thought of. His death in December 1978 brought to an end an unmatched friendship and business relationship and eventually led to my decision to sell The News Leader. I have found it a lonely, arduous course without him.

I shall return often, not just in memory, but in person to Main Street — to visit Dougherty's Pharmacy and Gavrilles, where I enjoyed lunch and comradery through the years...to the Post Office which provided consistently efficient and courteous service...and to look in on other Main Street neighbors.

I am about to depart 357 Main Street. As I walk cautiously over the street I have traversed so long, I thank Mayor DiPietro for finally making an honest woman of me. For 20 years I have been writing about the proposed Main Street reconstruction. And it's happening right now! As I end the longest chapter of my life, the oldest street in Laurel will soon begin a new one.

Time now to pick up my bag of memories and start my journey into the future.

The future is a long awaited holiday with time to look at the stars; time to watch the flight of a bird; time to be quiet; time to visit family; to enjoy friends, to explore museums; pursue the arts; travel to new places; dig in a garden. Time to volunteer my time and self to a community which has given so much to me.

And, as on any journey, each day I will unpack my bag...