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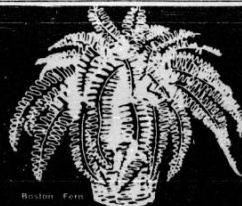
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VOLUME 14, NO. 6, FEBRUARY 1985

SAN DIEGO'S WEEKLY



Tom and Bill Missett

It's surly. It's outrageous. It's despised and defended. It's those Missett brothers and their newspaper, the Blade-Tribune of Oceanside, where they

Dig for Dirt

Ten o'clock on a sunny morning in Oceanside, and deadline adrenalin animates the windowless newsroom of the daily Blade-Tribune. Reporter Bob McPhail has just returned from his early rounds at the Vista jail and the courthouse, and he's settled behind his video display terminal to write two stories before the 10:45 deadline. A half-dozen other reporters are also making last-minute phone calls and pounding the keyboards while their boss, city editor Earl Biederman, barks into a telephone, and his boss, managing editor Bill Missett, sits before a video screen and calls across the room to one of his reporters, "Hey Terry, how many inches you got on the McLeod story?"

"Eight!"
"Hey, McPhail, can you give me

twelve [inches] minimum on the Miller letter?"

"Yeah."

Missett returns his attention to the video screen and the front-page stories of the day. Biederman, who has put aside some pressing work, is still on the phone with PR man Dan Armstrong from the Oceanside school district, upbraiding the school spokesman for trying to withhold a letter sent to the school board by District Attorney Ed Miller's office. The previous day, reporter McPhail had requested a copy of the letter and was turned down initially by both Armstrong and the D.A.'s office. McPhail had contended that the newspaper was entitled to the letter under the California Public Records Act, but the school

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By Neal Matthews and Paul Krueger

Photographs by Craig Carlson

(continued from page 1)

district lawyer in Sacramento stated that the letter was personal and therefore exempt from the public record provisions. When McPhail turned to the D.A.'s office a second time and spokesman Steve Casey again refused to turn over the Miller report, McPhail gave a reason why. "You mean to go to hell isn't good enough for the *Blade-Tribune*?" bantered Casey. "I guess you could say that," McPhail replied, asking for the D.A. to cite the legal code under which he thought he could withhold the records. Casey said that if McPhail had called back and told McPhail he could have the letter, which stated that the D.A. wouldn't prosecute the South Oceanic Elementary School principal for not reporting to the proper authorities the case of a student who had been sexually abused. The letter also contained a veiled reprimand and advised that the school board instruct its teachers and administrators in the proper procedures for handling such cases. When D.A. spokesman Casey called McPhail back, he said that he was a newspaper reporter. "Ed [Miller] is sick of reading that section [of the records] act."

But city editor Biederman isn't satisfied with that small victory, and he uses up crucial deadline minutes to berate school district PR man Armstrong. After explaining to Armstrong how the *Blade* was able to get the letter from Miller, Biederman declares, "You tell [the school board's attorney] that this kind of legal bullshit just won't cut it around here." He hangs up and explains, "We won't stand for this bullshit. If you let them tell you that crap, you're just leaving a problem that we can't solve. If you let me get me entitled to something, we'll get the same nonsense from them."

Biederman is especially peeved because the *Blade* had just won a three-year battle with the city over release of a police report regarding former police officer H. Scott Grubbs, principal of the Grubbs-Greyhound, an alleged mishandling of a sex scandal involving a teacher and a female student. After the city appealed all the way to the state supreme court, the report was finally published in the paper last week and published last



Bob McPhail

for freedom-of-information fights with government agencies, and for its size it "breaks" more than its share of important stories. "Get it, check it, print it," is a motto that city editor Biederman takes to extremes. The mountain of facts the paper plops onto the streets of North County every morning is a veritable avalanche of information. (The paper's motto is "If it isn't publish" could satisfy the most voracious news junkie. The paper is densely crammed with stories, and while it contains the obligatory section on lifestyle and a popular sports section that is filled with local high school coverage, its forte is hard, breaking news—murders and protests, in-jokes, inside paragraphs.) McPhail calls it "a reporter's paper, not a writer's paper," and city editor

Biederman seconds that. "This is old-fashioned journalism," he says. "We're a *content* newspaper. We write 'em tight and pack 'em in. It's ugly and packed, but I've never heard anyone remark that there's nothing in the paper."

Biederman's nine reporters produce between twenty-two and twenty-seven stories each day. Their coverage includes Oceanside city hall, police, and schools; Vista city hall, courthouse, and schools; Carlsbad city hall, police, and schools; Fallbrook; the San Diego County Board of Supervisors; Camp Pendleton; the utility companies; and Tri-City Hospital. Obviously, each reporter has multiple responsibilities and is required to write two or three stories every day. The large metropolitan dailies, where reporters may write less than one story per day, consider the *Blade* to be a good journalism training ground.

But what most distinguishes the *Blade* from almost every other daily in the county is its relationship to its host city. Unlike the *San Diego Union*, which has historically been an integral part of the local ruling establishment, the *Blade* takes pains to remain an outsider. Although publisher Tom Missett has been an active civic leader, he says he's scrupulous in reminding people that he participates in Oceanside affairs as a private citizen, not as the local newspaper publisher. The paper maintains a distinctly irrelevant attitude toward Oceanside, Camp Pendleton, and the surrounding communities, and it often goes to great lengths to question authority rather than to report uncritically the actions of the authorities.

Until now the *Blade* has enjoyed a virtual monopoly along the North County coast. Under the corporate banner of the South Coast Newspapers group, it has expanded its territory by acquiring or starting the *Scor*, a weekly distributed on Camp Pendleton; the *Citizen*, a weekly distributed in Del Mar and San Diego; and the weekly *La Costan*, which goes to residents of that community. Howard Publications, which owns twenty-two dailies and about ten weeklies across the nation, including the *Blade-Tribune* and the other papers in the San Diego area, also owns the San Clemente *Star Post*, giving the *Blade* and its brethren an unbroken string of papers from southern Orange County to Del Mar. But the San Diego *Union and Tribune* are

currently engaged in a multimillion-dollar effort to move into North County and battle the *Blade*, as well as the *Times-Advocate*, which has a broad circulation around Escondido.

"They, the *Union* is the big kid from North County," explains Tom Missett, forty-four-year-old publisher of the *Blade* and brother of Bill, the forty-five-year-old editor, "and I don't blame them for coming up here. I'd try to do the same thing. They've got [circulation] problems in their own back yard. This is where the growth is. But this isn't their territory; they've [targeted North County].

When I came here [in 1967], they had sales people and classified working in their office down the street, and they've come in four or five times, but they've never made it. They may have easy pickin's elsewhere, but not San Diego County, but we're street fighters. We're not MBAs, and we didn't go to Ivy League schools, but I tell you what — we know how to sell newspapers and we know how to deal with the competition. We want to read. We'll kick the *Union's* ass, and you can quote me on that."

The Copley papers are looking covetously to the north, in part because of the remarkable success of the two afternoon dailies, the *Blade* (circulation 32,000) and the *Times-Advocate* (circulation 36,000) of Escondido. Circulation for both papers has been climbing steadily over the last ten years, bucking the nationwide trend of afternoon dailies collapsing in great numbers. Tom Missett won't reveal financial figures, but he says the *Blade* hasn't been in the red since he took over in 1971. Things are going well enough that the paper is investing five million dollars this year in a new printing press, which will fortify it for the impending North County newspaper war.

The soul of the *Blade* is an anomalous cross between publisher Tom's country-boy business savvy and editor Bill's scathing, take-no-prisoners journalistic style. It's a mix of Tom's establishment leanings and Bill's distrust of authority; of high professional standards and sensational journalistic junk. One minute Bill can be editing a story about how the city of Oceanside has been ordered to pay the *Blade* \$17,300 for attorney's fees in the precedent-setting Graybeal case (the money is being used to establish a scholarship fund for journalism students), and the next minute he's se-

tecing stories and writing headlines for the paper's "two-headed-baby page." This is the back page of the front section, which has been described by court supervisor Paul Eckert, a friend of the paper, as containing "every depravity of human life... not just in the Western Hemisphere, but throughout the world." It is a short wire service story on executions, axe murders, child molestation, distant catastrophes, and other Bills of ghoulish interest. It's where Bill wrote the headline, "Touchy, touchy, over the item about a man who killed his wife." The headline was followed by "she laughed at his manhood. 'Herpes-infected monkey stolen from laboratory.' 'Youngsters beat deaf-mute boy to death.' 'Cood killer executed as his moon watchmen; and 'Morgue workers cremate wrong body'—all on the page's recent front cover." "When guys go to the door the street after hour, they're not talking about the Meese nomination or the Helsinki Awards," says Bill Misset. "They're talking about the two-headed babies. Gathering it all on one page means that if you're off-tense about that stuff, you don't have to read it."

Publisher Tom Missett is also a great fan of that back page. "It's got something for everybody," he draws in a deep Virginia accent. Tom is constantly conducting market surveys to determine what the readers want from the magazine, and he knows exactly what people say they think it's too sensational. Often the same people will say their favorite part of the paper is that back page. "We listen," says Tom, who has a penchant for making his point in a folksy, down-home way. "We've had sales about the International dog food company," he explains. "They had their national sales convention in Atlantic City, president of the company gets up, they got 5000 salesmen, and he goes, 'I got a message from the dog food in the world. They all stand up and say, 'We do!'' He goes, 'Who's got the greatest dog food advertising program in the world?' 'We do!' And who's got the greatest dog food package? 'We do!' And he goes, 'Who's the greatest? We're not sellin' it!' He packs a sixty-five-year-old guy who's been sellin' all his life stands up in the back of the room and says, 'Because the goddamn dogs don't like it!' So we've got a message from the dog food. What do you think? Will the dogs like it? Because that's what we're doin'. We can

put ourselves up on a pedestal, the First Amendment, the Fourth Estate — whatever. But if the dogs don't like it, save yourself the time and energy."

The rock 'em, sock 'em style of the *Blade* is perfect for Ocean-side, a town where the dogs like to wrangle as much as they like to read about the wrangling. It's a town where crime was rampant for ten years and the annual Fourth of July riots became legendary. It's a town where gangs of transvestites still roam the streets on military paydays. A town where violence takes on a particular viciousness

due to the physical vitality of the young Marines who seem to be the victims on payday weekends, and the perpetrators on nonpayday weekends. Its proximity to the San Onofre nuclear power plant has led to controversy. Its beautiful beaches are eroding into sea walls, and the town fathers have split into two camps, one for each other into paralysis over how to solve the erosion problem. Its political campaigns are mud baths, and its image, as officially stated in a city-funded report, is considered negative by more than half of its own residents. In short, it's a great place for an aggressive newspaper to dig up interesting stories. Which is precisely why the *Blade* is both respected and despised.

"There's a dark cloud hanging over the city of Occaneeide," remarks county supervisor Paul Eckert, "and it's Bill Missett creating it." Eckert's district includes most of North County, and he is one of many politicians who think the *Blade* is a primary cause of Occaneeide's image problem. "It's a well-run, well-organized paper; Bill Missett's the problem," continues Eckert. During the Occaneeide image study, Eckert was asked how the city could improve its reputation, and the supervisor replied, "Get Bill Missett to take a long vacation."

Eckert and Missett took a dislike to each other at their first meeting. Missett, who is a tenacious interviewer, says that when Eckert was running for supervisor in 1978, the candidate stopped by the newspaper to talk. "I started discussing issues with him," recalls Missett, "growth, beach erosion, whatever, and the man could not rationally and intelligently discuss *any* subject I brought up. He sat there and tried to bullshit me, and I do not bullshit easily."

Eckert claims that soon after he

won the election, against the endorsement of the *Blade*, Missett called him up and "demanded" that he fire Jon Jontig, then-director of the North County bus system. "I told him, 'You run your business, and I'll run mine,'" says Eckert, "and we haven't talked much since."

"I'm sorry Mr. Eckert feels offended that an editor calls him and gives him input," replies Missett. "But the board eventually did fire Jontig. And my calling the supervisor isn't why Eckert dislikes Bill Missett."

Indeed, aside from the strong exception the supervisor takes to almost every editorial Missett writes about him, and the fact that they disagree on almost every issue, Eckert is still a good reporter. The only major claim was a computer glitch that mangled a story about Eckert during the 1978 campaign. "It was purely and simply a computer error," says Eckert. "I was not even involved. I was only there when he hears that explanation." The story appeared on the front page of the second section under the headline, "Eckert's first political step a big one." It was a standard candidate's profile, with a few details about the end of the story somehow got transposed with a story about gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson, which had run a few days earlier. The transposition in the Thompson section is very smooth, but the quotations are outrageous:

"A North County resident for 25 years, Eckert, 43, has served as a member in various chamber of commerce groups and is a member of the Greater a comic character and still trying to deal with my editors and pay my bills . . . No American writer has ever been through anything like this, I ask for your sympathy. . . ."

"What is your favorite place in the U.S.?"


"Texas strikes me as being the last place in the country where the American dream is still tangible — you can actually drive around there drinking Wild Turkey out of the bottle, and be admired by the police. . . ."

"'Why did you come here tonight?'"

The entire press run of about 25,000 papers hit the streets with the story like that. *Blade* editors called Eckert and profusely apologized, and ran the complete (corrected) story the

(continued on page 12)

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Dig for Dirt

(continued from page 13)

paperman who still writes editorials for the Howard newspaper chain. He became editor and publisher of the 7000-circulation Suffolk, Virginia *News-Herald* in 1942. Though the boys weren't encouraged by their parents to enter the newspaper business, they both gravitated to it, starting with delivery routes and then working a series of jobs in the mailroom, the pressroom, on the linotype machines, and in the advertising department — everywhere but behind a typewriter.

Tom was a born salesman who showed business sense immediately, appointing himself assistant circulation manager at age eight and eventually becoming bona fide classified advertising manager in 1961. Bill always liked associating with the reporters, and although he was an advanced reader and showed early writing skills, he never pictured himself a writer. He entered Virginia Tech as a geological engineering major but flunked out two years later. (Still sensitive over his failure as a student, Bill pointedly notes that he has an IQ of 138.) He joined the navy in 1959.

While Tom was advancing swiftly on the business side of journalism, Bill had no choice but to enter the editorial side. While he was in boot camp in San Diego, it was discovered that the twenty-year-old Virginian had

eaten years of newspaper experience. He was drafted onto the staff of the base newspaper at the Naval Training Center, and eventually he was sent through the navy's well-regarded journalism school in Michigan. He spent the rest of his hitch editing the base newspaper in Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico.

By 1963, when Bill got out of the navy, his father had been hired by Bob Howard as editor and publisher of the Casper, Wyoming *Star and Tribune*. (He later merged them into a single morning paper.) Tom had already moved in as classified advertising manager. "I doubled [classified] business the first year," says Tom, a man of easy self-assurance, "and I doubled it again the second year." Bill joined Tom and their father in Casper, starting as a summer replacement reporter and filling in on several different assignments. Eventually both of the brothers were promoted to the Howard-owned *Hammond Times* in Indiana, just across the state line from East Chicago. Tom was twenty-three, and his ambition to be a publisher was well known. Bill was twenty-four, and he immediately became the fair-haired boy of the newsroom. He was a rewrite man, an investigative reporter, and a feature writer under city editor Clint Wilkinson, a veteran of Chicago and Detroit metropolitan journalism, who became Bill's mentor. Hammond is where Bill developed his taste for aggressive reporting. "The wild lawlessness of Lake County was incredible," he recalls. "This is where John Dillinger made the gun out of soap and faked his way out of jail . . .

There was so much crime that the Republican party hired a former FBI agent as a private eye to expose political corruption. You paid your city councilman \$500 and you got to be a fireman; \$1500 and you got to be a policeman." Missett worked as a sidekick to the private eye for months, under cover, using rifle microphones and telephone lenses to expose drug, betting, and numbers rackets. "This was a real kick-ass paper," Missett beams.

In April of 1967 Tom was elevated by Bob Howard from his position as advertising manager at the *Hammond Times* to publisher of the 7000-circulation *Blade-Tribune* in Ocean-side. He was only twenty-six and had never been west of Wyoming, but already he had about eighteen years of newspaper experience. "I'll tell you what kind of guy Bob Howard is," says Tom. "I come out here and meet with him the first part of April. He says, 'I just bought this paper, and I want you to build a new building, convert to offset cold type, and, uh, you handle it besides running the business.' That was in April. I spent another fifteen minutes with him in July, and I'd been in this building five months before I ever saw him again. He gives all his publishers total autonomy. . . . He's got newspapers he hasn't been in for twelve years. He's got publishers that forgot what he looks like. He's never called me up and said, 'I'd like you to endorse this or that.'" Howard, an intensely private person, declined to be interviewed for this story. But according to publisher John Armstrong of the rival

Escondido *Times-Advocate* (which is owned by the Chicago Tribune Company), Howard "is a very astute businessman known for keeping tight tabs on the finances" of his newspapers.

Tom Missett has obviously pleased Howard with his ambitious marketing plans. Says fellow publisher Armstrong, "Tom Missett has been a leader of the pack in creating advertising vehicles. . . . *La Costa, This Week* [a mailer that goes to every area household not subscribing to one of the newspapers], the *Citizen*, the *Scout*." Armstrong visited the *Blade* two years ago and had Missett show him the paper's computerized mailing system. Tom Missett is a nationally recognized authority on marketing newspapers through the mail. He established a computerized system that includes every address in coastal North County, a system which constantly updates subscriber/non-subscriber lists, and allows the paper to target particular households in complex newspaper marketing schemes. Armstrong says Missett allowed him to borrow some of the *Blade*'s best mail-marketing ideas.

When Tom came to Ocean-side in 1967, Bill was back at the Casper *Star-Tribune* working as state editor. He'd established a state-wide system of community news reporters and was beginning to hanker for more action. "I missed the excitement, the raw sort of quality of Hammond-area news," he says. "Deep down, I was itching to sink my teeth into a good expose. A year after Tom took over the *Blade-Tribune*, he asked Bill to become managing editor. Though he had

qualms about working directly for his younger brother, "I jumped at the chance," recalls Bill. As a sailor he'd loved Southern California and had longed to return. One of the first things to greet him in Ocean-side was the spectacle of two prominent local families, having battled unsatisfactorily in a political forum, standing in front of city hall, literally spitting on each other. He knew immediately it was a town for his kind of journalism.

Though Tom is younger by eighteen months, he's technically Bill's boss. "There's a lot of negatives about having your brother work for you, or working for your brother," Tom explains, "but one of the positives is that I can scream at him and kick his ass and he won't quit or take me to court. And he can do the same with me." As is common with brothers, there are vast differences between the two men. Tom is a Republican, Bill is a registered Independent. Tom thought the bullet train would have been the best thing that could happen to Ocean-side (where it would make its only beachfront stop between Los Angeles and San Diego), Bill was opposed to it on environmental grounds. Tom favors the use of nuclear energy, Bill harbors deep misgivings. Tom is a past president of the chamber of commerce, Bill is a champion body surfer whose favorite chums are fellow beach nuts. "We balance each other out real well," says Bill. "He keeps me in check, and I keep him plugged into reality." The brothers say that Tom's only power in the newsroom, aside from helping to set policy, is final say over the editorials.

"That editorial, I have to believe in it," Tom explains. "And I have to defend it. See, most of my news people put in a long hard day, and are probably the hardest-working news people that I know of, and at the end of the day they go home or wherever, Bill included. But when I take my hat off and leave here, not so much now as in the old days, I'm going to a chamber of commerce luncheon or a civic event, this or that, and I'm talking to people who read the newspaper. And I have to be able to stand up and say, 'Yeah, that's exactly how I feel.' I don't want to go out and represent Bill's idea of what should be what. But as a consequence, the editorials are a compromise. He'll write it first, and I'll edit it, and sometimes we'll sit in here and just bang heads. But as a consequence of it the reader gets a damn good, well-balanced editorial."

Former reporters and critics of the paper say that Bill's anti-nuclear sentiments have colored the paper's news coverage of San Onofre. "Bill was basically out to get the goods on San Onofre," says Larry Parsons, a reporter who, until his departure in 1981, covered the utility companies for the *Blade*. (Parsons now works for a newspaper in Salinas, California.) "The city editor also made it clear that San Onofre was her major target. They ran everything about SDGE big — every rate hike." Missett freely states his deep suspicion of the plant. "The thing that turned my head around was when we found out that they'd installed the 420-ton reactor vessel 180 degrees out of true, and didn't discover it for a year,"

he says. When the *Blade* first published this story in 1978, it made national headlines. "I said, 'What the hell is going on up there?' It really pushed my antinuclear buttons."

The *Blade* employed a reporter named Gil Davis, who developed excellent contacts at San Onofre, and who was able to produce a series of important stories about the plant. The previously unknown (and potentially active) Christians fault just off the coast from the plant was first reported in the *Blade*, as was the discovery of huge hollow caverns directly beneath Unit II. Davis's coverage of San Onofre and other environmental issues eventually landed him a job in 1980 as Sacramento lobbyist for a coalition of environmental groups. "Anybody can look at their gas bill and see the folly of San Onofre," says Missett.

Like most small-town papers, the *Blade* has hired, fired, burned out, or been raided (by the metropolitan dailies) for dozens upon dozens of reporters. In the last three years, since city editor Biederman moved over to Ocean-side from the *Times-Advocate*, the reportorial staff has completely turned over three times. "A lot of people have quit, and a lot have been fired," says Biederman. "I wanted to turn this into a stepping stone to the dailies." In that he has succeeded. Though Biederman, unlike a previous city editor, doesn't demand five stories a day from his small staff of reporters, the paper is still referred to as a "sweet shop" and the "Marine Corps of newspapers" by former reporters. Biederman describes his tenure as Sunday editor at

the more sedate *Times-Advocate* as "the most miserable fourteen months of my life." *Times-Advocate* editor Will Corbin calls Biederman "everybody's quintessential first city editor, and he thinks we're a bunch of quiche eaters."

One former *Blade* reporter, Bill Olsen, says he resigned from the paper last November because Biederman forced him to compromise his ethical standards regarding a story on alleged sex abuse at South Ocean-side Elementary School. Ocean-side police had investigated a mother's contention that her girl had been fondled by a teacher, and the cops had asked the district attorney to consider filing charges against the school's principal for not properly reporting the incident to authorities. But the police would not tell *Blade* reporter Olsen specific details about the alleged sexual abuse, because the cops felt the teacher had not really committed a crime. Still, Olsen was able to get details of the incident, on an "off the record" basis, from an anonymous source. "Off the record" to Olsen in this case meant that the information was not to be published. (There exists within journalism today divergent opinions regarding the meaning of "off the record.") Some reporters and editors consider it to mean the information will not be published; others believe it means the information can be published, but not attributed to named sources.)

On deadline last November 14, Olsen was writing the story about the district attorney entering the case, and he says he was told by Biederman that

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I have found this to be a most positive aid in helping people stop smoking. One thing that must be considered prior to beginning any smoking cessation program is the motivation of the patient. Without this motivation, nothing will work. It is up to the physician to help motivate the patient and to spend time and give effort to this endeavor. Obviously, the long-term, positive effects are tremendous both in the patient's health as well as the general cost of medical care.

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Dig for Dirt

continued from page 1

"there's no way we're not going to print that [information about the alleged fondling]," Olsen says he quickly called all his sources trying to get that information "on the record," but didn't succeed. "So I put it in the story because Earl and I had been having problems. I truly feared for my job if I'd said no." Shortly thereafter, Olsen resigned. "I decided I'd rather be poor with my scruples than drop my ethics for their paycheck," he says.

"No, I did not demand that he use information he'd felt he'd gotten off the record," replies Biederman, who otherwise praises Olsen's skills as a reporter. Biederman says he also got the same information, off the record, from the same source. "We had this question, 'Why did the mother go to the police?' The police wouldn't talk about it, but we found out from [a source]. You have to remember, there was more than one child and more than one incident and more than one year." Biederman felt the public should know that, given that the police had decided no crime had been committed. Both Biederman and Bill Missett say Olsen didn't raise objections while the story was being edited. To Biederman, it comes down to a differing definition of "off the record."

"There's ethics and then there's ethics," Biederman explains. "Some guys are just consumed by ethics, and it hampers them in doing an effective, ethical job."

According to other journalists, the

negative side of the *Blade's* bare-knuckle style in dealing with news sources, such as in the Olsen incident, is that it antagonizes relations with those sources of information. "The thing that's lacking in that approach," says editor Will Corbin of the *Times-Advocate*, "is that you can't go back [to the news source] next week."

Biederman counters that his and Missett's style doesn't necessarily mean that all bridges to sources are burned. "I tell my reporters that nothing is to deter them from doing their job: get it, check it, print it. If you get it, you win, if you don't, you lose. But you go face that [source] the next morning, go out of your way to face him, give him a crack at you. And defend your work. Some reporters are good at that, others aren't. Sure news sources get mad at you, but you have to help them get over it."

Missett has a slightly different perspective on the question of how the paper's style affects its relationship with sources. "Being nice to news sources isn't what we're about," he says. "They need us as much as we need them. . . . If you're going to be kissing somebody's ass all the time, you're never going to be able to step back and kick it."

One subject of a *Blade* news story who will never get over her run-in with the paper is Millie Hardwick, an Oceanside real estate agent who ran for city council in 1976. "It was February 17, 1976," she says, "and I'll never forget that date if I live to be a thousand." Hardwick blames the *Blade-Tribune* for causing her husband to have a massive heart attack that day, and considers the paper responsible for his subsequent open heart surgery. "If he dies as a result of that open heart surgery, I'll sue

them," she declares.

At a candidates' community forum on that February evening Hardwick says a *Blade* reporter came to her and began asking questions about an incident that occurred years earlier in which her husband evicted a young Marine and his wife and child from an apartment the Hardwicks owned. The *Blade* had sued, and won, and the Marine had written stories about the affair. "I told the reporter it had happened nine years ago, and that it was my husband who was sued," says Hardwick. "I asked, 'Please, please, most importantly, my husband has a very bad heart, please don't mention it to him.' But the reporter went right over there and asked him. It was an overt, malicious act, and it literally gave my husband a heart attack. . . . He's been invalid ever since."

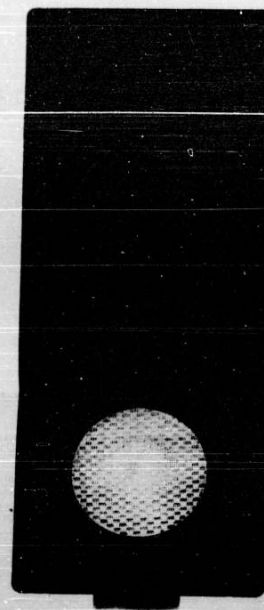
"I'm not going to cop to causing any heart attacks," says editor Bill Missett. "I don't believe that what we reported occurring had anything to do with Mr. Hardwick's state of health. It had been a real ugly eviction scene. . . . They'd put a young Marine out on the street. Any time an individual runs for office, their history should be an open book."

Blade reporter Bob McPhail says he's stayed and succeeded at the paper because "the *Blade* might not always be right, but the instincts of the editors are ninety-nine out of a hundred times correct. And the spirit of the paper is — it feels a responsibility for the public, it gets down in the dirt and does battle." The *Blade* did battle for McPhail last November when the judge in the Troiani murder-for-hire case, in which a woman and five Camp Pendleton leathernecks are accused of killing the woman's husband, ordered McPhail to reveal his news

sources for some of the information he'd reported. The newspaper spent \$6000 fighting the court's subpoena and claiming that the reporter's notes were protected by California's "shield law," which prohibits authorities from compelling news organizations to reveal unpublished information. Though the judge sentenced McPhail to jail for contempt, the sentence was overturned on appeal. "I received unqualified support from the publisher on down," says McPhail.

The scrappiness and effectiveness of the *Blade's* editorial staff is about to be tested by the northward advance of the Copley press. After two years of planning, and at a cost of several million dollars, the *San Diego Union* is doubling its North County reporter staff to ten (it will print both North County coastal and North County inland editions), and the *Tribune* is also sending up reinforcements. With the big guns massing on his southern flank, publisher Tom Missett professes to welcome the competition. He claims he has a specific plan of action, but won't say exactly how he's going to combat the invaders from the south. "Competition is always good for a newspaper," he declares. "But their ten reporters aren't going to generate ten stories a day. My ten are going to generate forty. We'll outpace 'em, out-educate 'em, and outsell 'em. . . . I've heard they're putting as much as \$30 million into north San Diego County. Hell, they should have come up here and tried to buy these newspapers. . . . How am I going to fight them?" Missett's own question brings forth a mischievous grin. "I'm hitting the streets with forty more reporters and a hundred ad salesmen, and you can quote me on that."

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