

## CHAPTER 1

# Getting Started

During our negotiations, Roger Grier promised an increase of four or five to the editorial roster of 140. This was the opening of a constant game of push and pull between editor and publisher. As the bloom quickly faded, the pressure to hold down costs, which invariably meant staff, became the norm with occasional respites.

From the first, my task was to motivate the staff and stiffen performance standards. As I had done when I became the *Post's* Metro editor, I met with reporters, editors, and photographers to get acquainted. I went around the two newspapers' newsrooms, shaking hands and speaking with every person in sight. The middle-level managers of both papers—to my mind, the key element to mold a successful news operation—were called to a meeting in the large second-floor conference room. Their welcome was hesitant at best, if not bordering on hostile, the latter personified by Joann Crupi, who asked barbed questions. These I considered a reflection of the anxiety of the group about what the new guy had in mind for them. Over the years, Crupi rose in the editorial hierarchy, and in time I promoted her to managing editor, the first woman to hold that rank at the *Times Union*. We developed a strong friendly relationship well into my retirement, when I continued to serve on the editorial board, of which she was then the editor in charge.

The two newspapers occupied separate sides of the first floor. The copy desk was located between the two city rooms and occupied by morning and afternoon staffs at different parts of the workday. The papers shared photo, art, features, and sports departments but maintained competing news staffs. Their rivalry was intense and unrelenting. Each

paper had an executive editor, with a managing editor as second in command. The retirement of John Leary, the executive editor of the *Times Union*, gave Grier the opening to create my new post. *Knickerbocker News* Executive Editor Robert Fichenberg had wanted the top job so much that when he was passed over he began to look for another. Fichenberg transparently was disheartened by my arrival. Whenever I walked into his office he looked up at me, almost startled to see me on his turf, and quickly slid shut a desk drawer. It was a doomed relationship. His departure within my first years was good for him. He did very well as Washington bureau chief for the Newhouse newspapers. For us, it was beneficial because his discontent would not have made for an effective collaboration.

The two managing editors, William Dowd at the *Knick* and Bernard Zovistoski at the *TU*, remained in place. In the first weeks, I knew heavy lifting was to be our lot. A woeful lack of quality in the stories reflected a deficiency in curiosity. Poor work habits demanded fixing.

The *Times Union* published seven days a week. The *Knickerbocker News* did not have a Sunday edition. My strategy was to strengthen the Sunday *Times Union*, which had the larger circulation, and use it as a wedge to acquire more readers for the dailies. Easier said than done. There was little evidence among the *TU* editors about what should differentiate a Sunday story from a breaking-news story, fodder for the weekday editions. Breaking news was scarce on a weekend day while the ampler Sunday paper offered a forum for enterprise stories, those that go beyond reporting the surface of events. Attempts to reach out on topics that would display sweep and analysis mostly fell short; few reporters demonstrated they understood the concept. In the early weeks, Judy Shepard was the reporter who produced the kind of copy I sought.

Part of the problem was how the senior editors regarded their responsibilities. They worked five-day weeks, taking weekends off, not being there for the most important Sunday edition. They gave key section editors the same arrangement whenever possible. When I came on board, the Sunday paper's city desk, the hub of the operation, was in the hands of a part-timer who worked weekends. He was an experienced, old-fashioned Albany newspaperman who in retirement was doing public relations for the region's largest medical complex. Albany Medical

Center was a frequent subject of our coverage. Those in charge had overlooked the glaring incompatibility of interests implicit in the two roles.

For my office furniture, I specified a drafting table on which I marked up the papers every day in red crayon, citing the good points to be emulated and the more frequent shortcomings to be forever shunned. The markups unsettled the recipients, which was the point.

I ran into a problem that resembled what Ben Bradlee faced when he took over the *Washington Post*. The staff he found on arrival needed severe shaking up, which he did over many years. It resulted in resentment from the old-timers against the many recently enlisted. Bradlee was empowered by the *carte blanche* he had to hire the best people he could persuade to join him. As his regime took hold, it became evident that a lot of the existing staffers were up to the new demanding standards. They required only the leadership to free them to fully put their talents to use.

Bradlee painted on a wide canvas with a spectrum of colors. I had nothing equivalent on my palette. For practical purposes, I had to make do with the staff in place. I did not have the power to hire at will, and growth was strictly limited.

A new boss's incorrigible inclination is to move the furniture around, if for effect alone. Given what faced me, there was greater justification for implementing changes as quickly as possible. Overcoming deeply rooted habits was not an overnight affair. The editors had a high opinion of themselves for being at the helm of the biggest publications in the Capital Region. They resented and resisted the more strenuous demands I imposed. An illustrative incident occurred during a heavy snowstorm in December of the first year. I commented the coverage was superficial. I received a self-justifying response from the managing editor. With undisguised smugness, he noted Albany had up to six big snowfalls a year and this one was nothing special. I had another perspective: "The point is whether the *Knick's* stories showed enough curiosity." The paper's coverage overlooked the difficulty of getting workers for emergency duty on Christmas Day, how many removal trucks were out on the streets and how many had to be garaged, obstacles the fire department encountered and whether firefighters refused to report to work.

Early the next year, the new regimen was put to the test with the death of Nelson Rockefeller. This was a very big story because he had been a transformative governor who imposed reform and renovation on the city and the Capital Region, as well as the state. He created the state university system (supplanting teachers colleges) and tore down a huge quadrant of a working-class neighborhood in Albany to erect a monumental government center. The Empire State Plaza was among his ambitious undertakings that made Albany stand out from even larger cities in the state of New York.

We produced comprehensive coverage for the Sunday paper. I asked one of the state Capitol reporters to write the obituary. Word came back that he did not want to do it; he had not been around during Rockefeller's terms and suggested we use the Associated Press. I thought differently. The Albany paper was not going to offer readers a news-service obit competing papers were likely to use. I instructed the reluctant writer to pull himself together and fulfill his assignment. This he did with skill. Our total presentation won praise from New York headquarters.

The self-satisfaction, alive and well at the two newspapers, mirrored the wider community. People were content with things as they were and for the most part disguised unhappiness. Albany labored under the heavy-handed administration of a long-entrenched Democratic machine, whose pervasive corruption attained the status of folklore, something to chuckle about while shaking one's head. That was simply the way it worked in Albany. Civic reform movements found their voice from time to time, inevitably to fall short. Discontent was expressed in whispers and, when probed for details, those purveying it rapidly backed off. Their tax assessments or business interests were understood to be at risk.

Under the leadership of a previous publisher, Gene Robb, twice removed from my time, the papers took on the machine, headed by political boss Dan O'Connell and Mayor Erastus Corning 2nd. As a consequence, the papers suffered legal and other harassment, all of which did not deter them from vigorous pursuit of the machine's wrongdoing. It also resulted in the newspapers shutting their offices and plant downtown to relocate to the suburb of Colonie. The immediate spur for this drastic move was the refusal of City Hall to approve acquisition of a

sliver of land the papers needed to accommodate new printing presses. Corning and his minions no doubt savored the little victory for which in the not-so-long run they and the city paid a steep price. The new newspaper building anchored one end of a major suburban thoroughfare, accelerating its development as a vibrant business district, which sucked trade out of downtown. Big retailers like Macy's and Sears in the Colonie Center mall, along with other businesses on Wolf Road, sounded the knell for the family-owned department stores, downtown's major draw for decades. Not for the last time, politicians had outsmarted themselves.

Albany in 1978 had a population of 100,000-plus set in a metropolitan region of about a million. Its attractive attributes included rush-hour traffic, a pale copy of what plagued larger cities. It was easy to get around town and the surrounding communities. Lovely countryside was close by and driving there took only twenty minutes or so.

My thought on arriving was that our papers, although regional, found most readers in the city and county of Albany and should have a visible presence in the city. At first, I explored moving the newsroom operation back downtown, possibly into the long-shuttered yet still architecturally elegant Union Station. Production would remain in Colonie along with whatever business departments were more suitably located there. The idea was too much of a reach, but we did open a street-level office at the intersection of State and Pearl Streets, the crossroads of downtown.

The growth in staff was less than first promised. More than a year after my start, I finally wangled agreement for the slots for my confidential secretary and the downtown office manager not to count against reporter or editor allotments. My first reporter hire turned out a winner. Alan Miller interned in the Tokyo bureau of the *Washington Post* after earning a graduate degree and was recommended by former colleagues at the *Post*. From the time he started in 1978, he provided the kind of ambitious enterprise coverage I aspired to cultivate. His stay with us was predictably too brief—three years—as his portfolio helped him to move up to ever-larger papers. He won a Pulitzer Prize along with a colleague as a member of the *Los Angeles Times* Washington bureau.

With Miller on board, joined by other hires in the months ahead, steady insistence on hard reporting raised standards. The staff began to

show a better side that indifferent leadership failed to nourish. By the spring, it was clear the two managing editors would not suffice to implement the range of changes I envisioned. An experienced topline editor was needed, and I created the position of managing editor for the Sunday *Times Union*, carving it out of Bern Zovistoski's jurisdiction.

On a visit to New York in May 1979, I met with a candidate found by a headhunter for breakfast in Peacock Alley at the Waldorf Astoria. Dan Lynch was then an editor at *Newsday*, the growing Long Island newspaper. We were there to look each other over as we weighed a decision crucial to us both. I wanted a senior editor to help elevate the quality of our paper. I was looking for someone who shared my view that a newspaper's obligation to its readership and community was to provide incisive local reporting about important matters without kowtowing to sacred cows. The new ME, along with talent and leadership skills, would need the facility to work alongside senior news executives in place.

Before becoming an editor at *Newsday*, Dan Lynch was a political writer for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and strong recommendations accompanied him. I liked what I saw and heard and concluded at the end of breakfast that he was the right choice. Even so, I traveled to Washington, D.C., to meet with two other prospects. They did not change my mind. Dan decided to leave his solid editor's assignment at *Newsday*, a much larger paper where his prospects were good, for wider immediate responsibilities at the *Times Union*.

His hiring made for resentment and stress I would have preferred to avoid, remembering the counterproductive aspects of Bradlee's creative tension that pitted one editor against another. Yet if we were to grow the quality of the Sunday paper, it needed the hands of an editor with broader and higher-level experience. Inescapably, Dan's hire put the two managing editors into competition, and the good and the bad of it.