

Assignment: Politics

By Evelyn Theiss

There's nothing like starting at the bottom in a reporting career. Actually, I think it's the best place to start.

My first foray into political reporting, what I am referring to as "the bottom," purely on the basis of their small populations, was covering the townships of Shalersville and Windham, and the Windham local schools, in Portage County, while I was a reporter for the Record-Courier.

I felt pretty special. Township trustee meetings were attended by three trustees and a clerk; I was generally the sole member of the audience. The trustees smoked cigars as they talked about the latest doings; sometimes the bulk of the meeting would be a comparison of the kinds of arrowheads one of them had found in his field that afternoon.

The biggest challenge was, "How do I get a story out of this?" Many times I didn't—but I had to be there in case something dramatic happened. Unlikely, but as one editor liked to say about the importance of covering every governmental meeting, "What if someone shoots the mayor?"

The Windham schools were another matter. People often ask me if covering Cleveland school board meetings, quite ugly in the early 1990s, when that was my beat, was an eye-opener. Actually, the meetings were tame compared to those in Windham, where board members had police escorts to the dais. A member of the audience was just as likely to publicly accuse a woman board member of sleeping with the superintendent as a board member was to accuse someone in the audience of making obscene phone calls to their home.

The political always turned personal.

Forget what you've heard about charming small towns. They are placid, until there's some kind of controversy. Then there is nothing as vicious as rural small-town politics can get. But it isn't dull.

Elsewhere, though, politics isn't as interesting as it used to be. For one thing, there don't seem to be as many colorful characters as there once were. Where are the Jack Russells and Jim Stantons and George Forbeses of City Council? You don't see the wheeling and dealing and the power plays you used to, like in the old fights for leadership of Cleveland City Council.

Also, newspapers don't cover fights over committee assignments and other such minutiae anymore. Few readers seem to miss them.

There's not much mystery about what's going to happen. Even nationally, we know who a party's nominee will be months before the convention. Public interest in politics wanes as a result.

Everything is highly orchestrated. People don't divulge their political plans to a reporter, not on the record anyway. They want the control of making their announcement at a news conference, one of the most boring inventions known to man.

Then too, gutsy and colorful quotes are a lot harder to get in these times of political correctness, and stories aren't as snappy as a result. Politicians choose their words very carefully so as not to offend. (That's why the always candid Tim Hagan got a lot of ink. Example: "If Rabin can sit down with Arafat, I can sit down with Lee Weingart.")

So mostly we get rhetoric like: "Criminals are bad and should be locked up." "Children are our most important resource."

Are you asleep yet?

One of the things that remains satisfying: when you see a candidate who truly is the hardest worker, the most passionate campaigner—the one who does not find it distasteful to "press the flesh" of the regular folks he will represent—win.

Then too, it really is true that the measure of the man or woman is seen when they lose, and how they react to that. That's when someone's "true colors" emerge.

And boy, that is something to see.