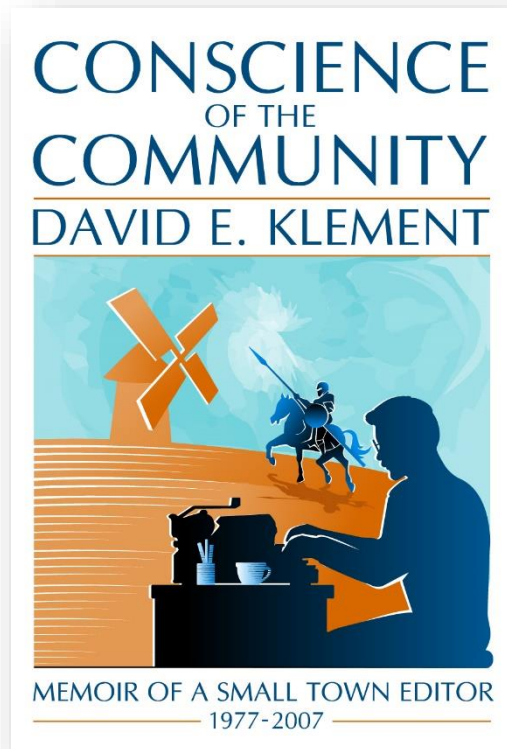


CONSCIENCE OF THE COMMUNITY: MEMOIR OF A SMALL-TOWN EDITOR – 1977-2007



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Chapter One

Introduction

Conscience (noun): the sense or consciousness of the moral goodness or blameworthiness of one's own conduct, intentions, or character together with a feeling of obligation to do right or be good. –Merriam-Webster

How naïve I still was as I began what would become a 32-year career at the *Bradenton Herald* in fall of 1975. Sure, I was a lot more worldly-wise than the 18-year-old who had struck out for college 17

years earlier. I had faced the prospect of dying in a nuclear war. I had seen a city burn. I had covered horrible crimes and accidents with tragic loss of life. I had sent reporters out to do the same and directed the publication of their accounts. I had been part of exposing dirty cops and corrupt politicians. I had done my share of carousing in high- and low-life joints from New York to Oklahoma City to Detroit to Chicago to Sarasota. I was a carefree bachelor moving from job to job in pursuit of wealth, fame and happiness.

But I still wasn't a cynical, jaded know-it-all, the stereotype of a hard-bitten journalist. I took people at their word, and for the most part I trusted them to do the right thing. When they didn't, I felt it was my job as Bradenton's conscience to tell them where they were wrong, and what they needed to do to shape up.

Bradenton's conscience? Yes, that is exactly how I thought of my role as Editorial Page Editor. That was not something I invented for myself. It was the role that newspaper journalism universally applied to the Editorial Page, which was considered the voice of

the newspaper. And as the sole person on the editorial staff, I *was* that voice for the *Bradenton Herald*.

I learned of that heavy responsibility from the National Conference of Editorial Writers, the professional organization to which most opinion writers and editors in the U.S. belonged and one I quickly joined in spring 1977 upon accepting the job of editing the paper's opinion pages. That fraternity – and it was mostly male, but women were accepted and treated as equals – provided me much professional guidance in the early days of my opinion-writing career. I learned of their standards for fair and constructive criticism and tried my best to put them into practice as I set about righting the wrongs of the world on a daily basis.

Naïve? Ho, boy, was I! But that didn't stop me from sticking my neck out day after day, telling our readers what the newspaper thought was the best course of action for any given problem or situation. Now, I wasn't doing this in a vacuum, with free rein to say anything I felt like saying about anything I felt like addressing. My editorials – as well as the topics to be taken up in them – were subject to approval by the publisher. Each week I submitted a list of potential topics I expected to address as well as the argument I planned to make for our position. Later there would be an Editorial Board that included the top two editors plus the publisher, and the position to be taken was decided by consensus of the board. But, as at most newspapers, the publisher always had the final word.

My first publisher – I would work under six during my 30 years in that role – was a man a few years older than me who had been sent to the *Bradenton Herald* by the Knight News organization to modernize its newest acquisition. Though from somewhere Up North, he was right at home in the good-old-boy culture of Bradenton. And like most of the community, he saw things from a conservative perspective, while I came from a liberal one. Yet we had few differences of opinion during his tenure. I didn't go all radical on him, and he wasn't a right-wing fanatic.

But we did butt heads early in my career as an opinion writer. Early in 1977, the U.S. Supreme Court had ended a 10-year moratorium on imposition of the death penalty, and states – including Florida – were gearing up for a spate of executions. I proposed an editorial opposing the death penalty. The publisher advocated for the death penalty. We debated back and forth for quite a while, until I came up with what I thought was a brilliant compromise. “How about if the newspaper's editorial position comes out against and you publish a personal column stating your support for the death penalty? Your name and photo will be in the article.” An unspoken understanding: *I* would write both of the pieces, as he was not a writer.

He bought it. I had no trouble playing devil's advocate to make his case; a good journalist, like a good lawyer, can argue forcefully for a position whether he believes in it or not. The paper's position opposing reinstatement of the death penalty drew a good deal of opposition from readers, but its impact was softened by the publisher's personal viewpoint published right beside it. He had saved face, and I had established myself as a voice to be reckoned with at the *Bradenton Herald*.

I loved my new job. And I continued exercising my editorial influence to advocate for progressive causes as news developments put them in the spotlight. Gay rights soon became an issue. Abortion remained a perpetual one. Race, criminal justice, public prayer all made their way into the headlines and onto the opinion pages. And like Don Quixote, I naively kept raising my editorial lance and tilting at windmills. Then I decided to offer my opinions in a more personal way. The editorials were, by nature, anonymous – the viewpoint of the newspaper, not the individual writer. But in personal columns on the op-ed (opposite editorial) page I could let readers know what was on my mind and sign my name. It put my personal stamp on the opinion pages and established my reputation as a crusader.

Did any of it matter? Did all of my naïve do-gooderism make a dent? Why don't I let you decide? Herewith, a compilation of the best of my columns, published in the *Bradenton Herald* from 1977 to 2007. They are not in chronological order but rather are sorted by categories of issues. The dates of publication are highlighted in boldface in the writer's comments preceding each.

How did we get here? Is there anything we could have done that would have prevented this outcome? Maybe looking back at where we came from will provide clues.