
Ad Astra

with Michael Shonrock



How a \$3 bonus formed a career

He was a college dropout and a part-time drummer for local dance bands, and he began his career in newspapers with a camera, after having taken a correspondence course in journalism while still with the Air Force.

He had enlisted before being drafted for the Korean War, but he never saw action because the war ended and he spent most of his enlistment in Alaska. It must have been about as different as one could imagine from the Kansas home he knew so well, near Sedan, just above the Oklahoma line.

His name was Everett Ray Call — but he only allowed his wife, Helen, and relatives to call him Everett. To everybody else he was just Ray. I never met him, but I know his story because of an interview published in 2010 in “Kansas History,” edited by Loren Pennington, professor emeritus of history at Emporia State.

When Ray mustered out of the Air Force and came home to Kansas, he decided that newspaper work really wasn't for him, so he decided to go back to college and become what then was called a teacher of typing and shorthand. In high school, he'd been to band camp at Kansas State Teachers College in Emporia, and liked it, so he decided to come here. He rented a second-story apartment on West Street, and when supporting a family on the GI bill proved challenging, he applied for and got a job as an editor on the KSTC campus newspaper, the Bulletin.

One of Ray's colleagues on the student newspaper (and later, the Gazette) was Del Brinkman, the sports editor, and Brinkman — who would go on to become dean of the William Allen White School of Journalism and Mass Communications at The University of Kansas for many years — remembers him well.

“He was one of my closest friends,” Brinkman, now 77 and retired, said in a telephone conversation recently from his home in Bloomington, Ind. “We shared a common bond ... in education, and Kansas, and newspapers. He was really one of the last real editorial writers in the state. There just isn't that kind of thing anymore. It was a different era.”

Brinkman recalled with fondness their time on the student newspaper.

“It brought me in touch with all the coaches and the top administrators at the university, and it kept my interest in journalism — really, it created more interest,” Brinkman said. “It was a small group of people that worked well together and we got the atmosphere of a real newspaper.”

But Ray didn't hold the job at the Bulletin for long, because halfway through the semester the Emporia Gazette offered him a job as a photographer that paid more money, so he quit school and became a full-time journalist.

For the next 40 years, Ray became an icon of Kansas journalism.

He went from photographer to reporter to wire editor and finally started writing editorials, because each published editorial paid a bonus of \$3. Even though he started as an editorial writer because he needed the money (after all, he and Helen had three children to feed), it was his opinion editorial work in which he found his true calling.

Ray was the last of a breed of Kansas editorial writers. He regularly traded barbs with Clyde Reed down in Parsons and Frank Brinkerhoff over in Pittsburg — names which mean little to most people now, but who for decades shook the ground with their thundering pronouncements. Ray started in journalism about 10 years too late to meet William Allen White, because White — the sage of Emporia, the friend of presidents and the hometown editor that was a household name across America — had died in 1944.

Although always in the shadow of the White legacy, Ray made his own ink-stained mark on Kansas newspapers. He railed against long-bedded pickup trucks as being traffic menaces, took Bob Dole to task for supporting Oliver North who had clandestinely sold arms to Iran and published a list of salaries of Emporia State professors to show how unequal the pay was across campus.

Ray's genius lay in his unshakeable sense of right and wrong, his self-effacing Midwest manner and a no-nonsense conservative Republican bent that most Kansans could relate to.

“He was not afraid to criticize the governor of the state, or state leaders, which is similar to William Allen White,” Brinkman said. “They (Call and Brinkerhoff and others) got into confrontations and wrote to each other at times in their editorials. The Gazette readers who followed him got a real bang out of that, because they were all good writers.”

As a university president, I find Ray's story encouraging. While the goal of actually graduating from college is a cherished goal for most students — and I urge all students to work hard to make that goal a reality — sometimes not finishing isn't the worst that can happen. Everett Ray Call was an original, and he made his own way.

He was news editor of the campus newspaper here from September 1955 to January 1956, according to information from the university archives. He was editor-in-chief of the Bulletin for just a month, in February 1956, and we could find just one student editorial attributed to him. In it, he talks about being courteous to ground and building crews during the bad weather and snow.

Everett Ray Call died Feb. 14 of this year, at the age of 82. And Emporia State is proud to call him one of our own.

Michael Shonrock is the 16th president of Emporia State University, an undying optimist, and self-described futurist. He welcomes reader comments at adastra@emporia.edu
