

POSSUM ON TERRACE

The Southern Life and Times of Johnny Popham
and a Few of His Friends

by John Egerton

"Can you imagine Popham going one on one with Ho Chi Minh? Talk about your Pacem in Terris-- you'd have the South's top Possum taking over the terrace, and the porch, and the front room, and the kitchen, and wherever two or more were gathered. He'd sue for peace, armed with nothing more than his own perpetual oratory."

Bill Emerson

A cacophony of sound reverberates from the walls and ceiling of a too-small, too-smoky meeting room in a high-rise hotel near the Atlanta airport. More than a hundred communicants stand cheek by jowl, shoveling words and laughter into the vortex like so many firemen feeding a roaring furnace. Body heat has all but completely overcome the mechanical marvel of air conditioning, and the sultry oppressiveness of a Georgia July afternoon suffuses the room.

At one end of the makeshift bar, a young woman dressed in cool pastels stands transfixed and speechless as a short, cherubic, well-tailored man who looks to be within hailing distance of seventy nears the climax of a dramatic monolog of historical insight and personal remembrance. He speaks in staccato bursts of descriptive and intricately woven prose, but his accent is suggestive of the soft-spoken, slow-talking Tidewater region of Virginia. Animated gestures punctuate his rambling discourse. The flow of words has become a verbal Niagara, a cascading stream of consciousness that miraculously holds its shape, so that in retrospect, the story can be seen to have a beginning, a middle, and an end.

When the tour de force is finished, the dapper gentleman blinks rapidly several times and smiles warmly at his admiring listener.

"Oh, Pop, you're such a wonderful storyteller, and such a charmer," the woman exclaims with delight.

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"Aw, it's just talk, dollin," says John N. Popham III with becoming modesty, "just old-fashioned Southern talk."

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A remnant of journalists once loosely and whimsically organized under the banner of the Southern War Correspondents and Camp Followers had gathered in Atlanta for a reunion. In fellowship with them were veteran delegates of another amorphous body, an informal assembly of higher education specialists who called themselves the Popham Seminar. The date was July 28, 1985, and the two groups had chosen a very special occasion for their historic joint meeting. It was the seventy-fifth birthday of Johnny Popham--the only person, living or dead, ever to be a charter member and central figure in both ~~organizations~~ *assemblies*.

Popham had been journalism's point man in the mid-century theater of war in which the social transformation of the South was played out; in the colleges and universities, he had given voice to a new generation of leaders and provided inspiration for a regionwide educational awakening. Perhaps more than any other person, he symbolized and personified the best of the South's newspaper reporters and higher education advocates in an era of extended trial and eventual triumph.

The coming together of these two groups of Southerners to commune and reminisce with one another and with their esteemed and voluble colleague brought a rush of stories and anecdotes and humorous incidents to the minds of one and all. And as in times past, Popham was in the center, embracing everyone, laughing at them and at himself, filling the air with his own patented brand of Southern talk. It was a day and a night to remember, this time when a singular company of present and former Southerners collectively recalled an unforgettable period in their lives and the life of their homeland.

"Pop came back in 1947 to cover the South for The New York Times," recalled Harry Ashmore, the Pulitzer Prize-winning former editor of the Arkansas Gazette in Little Rock, "and that was the beginning of my acquaintance with him. I had ~~just~~ ^{come home after the war to a new job as} editor of the Charlotte News, and one day this young fellow wearing a little narrow-brim hat showed up in my office. We've been friends ever since. He performed a prodigious feat, covering the whole South, from the Potomac to Eagle Pass. He was the only correspondent for a national newspaper who was paying attention to the South at that time, and he set records that would never be touched by the platoons of correspondents who followed him. He did two really remarkable things: He covered that enormous territory all by himself, without benefit of air transport or strong drink. No one else has ever even attempted to do that."

Robert C. Anderson, a former vice president of the University of Georgia and a co-founder of the Popham Seminar, noted that in 1968, after Popham had left The New York Times to become managing editor of ~~the~~ ^{its older cousin, the} Chattanooga Times, the veteran journalist's sage advice and counsel to college and university officials, principally through the Southern Regional Education Board in Atlanta, prompted a group of them to organize a forum for continuing dialogue between higher education and the press. "Popham was the natural catalyst for such a convocation," Anderson said. "He was universally respected by white and black educators, newspaper and television journalists, Democrat and Republican public officials. Even then, twenty years ago, Pop was the first person everybody thought of when they wanted to bring different interest groups together in the South."

Ashmore and Anderson, representing the Correspondents and the Seminarists, respectively, were among the principal speakers at a banquet in Popham's honor on that July evening in 1985. Remarks by them and others in attendance, along with informal histories of the two groups, are included in a book of tributes

edited by Anderson and distributed later to the members and guests. From that collection comes an introduction of the cast of characters who made up the Correspondents and the Seminarians, and a general outline of the network that Johnny Popham was so instrumental in forging between them.

The Southern War Correspondents and Camp Followers, so named by Harold Fleming, a self-described follower, can be traced to a spring morning in 1947 when Popham, on a Southern swing for The Times, joined his boss, deputy managing editor Turner Catledge, a native Mississippian, in the Atlanta Constitution office of editor Ralph McGill. Already notorious for his outspoken views on race and other controversial matters, McGill was nearly fifty years old and clearly a wise elder in the eyes of Popham, then thirty-seven. Even so, the two men quickly took a liking to each other, and their personal and professional association became the foundation on which the larger circle of journalists was soon based.

Harry Ashmore became acquainted with both McGill and Popham shortly thereafter, and by the time the Charlotte News editor moved to the editorship of the Arkansas Gazette ~~later~~ in ^{1948,} ~~1948,~~ he had established close ties with them. Popham chose Chattanooga as the home office for his roving Times beat, but he frequently encountered McGill and Ashmore in his travels. On a visit to Atlanta in 1948, he went to hear Eleanor Roosevelt speak to a group of women convened by the Southern Regional Council. There, Popham met the young information director of the council, Harold Fleming, and an Emory University administrator named John A. Griffin, and those two men became the first camp followers (to use Fleming's term) among the small cadre of journalists.

Another writer of note to join the informal group was William C. Baggs, editor of the Miami News. It was McGill who steered Baggs away from sports writing and into more serious pursuits in the late 1940s, and their friendship enlarged

the network. So, too, did the return to Atlanta of native son Bill Emerson in 1951. Emerson and Fleming, also a Georgian, had met as students at Harvard University after the war, and when Emerson opened a Southern bureau for Collier's Magazine (and later one for Newsweek), he naturally gravitated to Fleming and his friends.

So informal was this string of acquaintances that only in retrospect did they think of themselves as a group or network of like-minded colleagues. As they moved into the 1950s and the civil rights kettle simmered toward a boil, others who established what would become a continuing association in the camp included Claude Sitton of The Times (later to be Popham's replacement as chief Southern correspondent), Eugene Patterson of the Constitution, and Hugh Patterson of the Arkansas Gazette. Others communed with them occasionally: Hodding Carter of the Delta Democrat-Times in Greenville, Mississippi, Mark Ethridge of the Courier-Journal in Louisville, Kentucky, Pete McKnight of the Charlotte Observer, Bill Minor of the New Orleans Times-Picayune, Bill Howland of Time Magazine's Southern bureau in Atlanta, *Harry Golden of the Carolina Israelite,* Leslie Dunbar and Paul Anthony of the Southern Regional Council. Long before Bob Anderson and his colleagues in higher education staged the first Popham Seminar at an Atlanta hotel in 1969, the unorganized Southern War Correspondents and Camp Followers could count perhaps two or three dozen journalists and others whose associations along the Southern network reached back a number of years-- and for a few of them, beginning with Popham and McGill, the ties were then more than twenty years old.

After Popham became managing editor of the Chattanooga Times in 1958, leaving the vast Southern beat to his young colleague Claude Sitton, he found more time to devote to his family and his primary public interests, particularly education. Through the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, the regional accrediting agency, and the Southern Regional Education Board, an interstate compact agency for higher education, he established links that helped the

institutions of education and the press discover their own mutual interests.

At numerous conferences of Southern governors and legislators, meetings of SREB and SACS, and gatherings of other regional organizations such as the Southern Regional Council and the Southern Education Reporting Service, Popham became known and respected in the 1960s as a progressive advocate of educational reform and improvement. His efforts to give widespread visibility to the 1961 report of the Commission on Goals for Higher Education in the South were recognized by staff members of SREB, the sponsoring agency--and by Ralph McGill, a member of the commission--as being central to the ultimate influence of the report itself.

By 1968, Popham was looked upon at SREB and elsewhere in higher education as the indispensable linchpin connecting colleges and universities to the press--or at least as the press figure most interested in maintaining that connection.

After a meeting in Washington that year, Tulane University public relations director Horace Renegar spent a "scotch-misty afternoon" at Dulles Airport with Bob Anderson and Ed Crawford, both former administrators at SREB in Atlanta, and it was there that the idea of a periodic higher-education-and-the-press seminar was born. (Bill Bowden, another former SREB staffer, later tied Popham's name to the first seminar, and it stuck.)

By that time, a second generation of journalists had entered the turbulent Southern arena, and the civil rights movement had broadened its focus from the South to the nation as a whole. Only Bill Emerson of the veteran war correspondents was among the journalists who attended the first seminar in 1969--he and Popham, of course. John Griffin, one of the original camp followers, was also there, in his capacity as executive director of the Southern Education Foundation. Neil Davis, editor and publisher of the Lee County (Alabama) Bulletin, and Reed Sarratt, executive director of the Southern Newspaper Publishers Association, were the only other journalists present. (In later years, Claude

Sitton, Hugh Patterson, Gene Patterson, Pete McKnight, and Robert F. Campbell, executive director of the Southern Education Reporting Service in Nashville, became regular participants, as did Joe Cumming, Emerson's successor at ^{the bureau in Atl} Newsweek.

Educators were the dominant group numerically, and SREB led the way. Among the present or former staffers of the agency who took part in the first Popham Seminar were Anderson, Crawford, Bowden, John Ivey, Winfred Godwin, John Folger, Rudy Pate, and Tex Schietinger. The only other recorded participant was Russell Thackery, executive secretary of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, whose office contributed to the cost of the meeting--presumably because Ed Crawford, one of the instigators, was by then a member of Thackery's staff.

From the first, participants in the Popham Seminars were closely divided over the format, with many wanting a **specific agenda** and formal proceedings duly recorded and an equally numerous group preferring an unstructured, unrecorded, largely social event. The latter group--inspired, perhaps, by the spectacular Southern rhetoric and verbal pyrotechnics of Popham and Emerson, **two acknowledged masters of the art**--carried the day, and from that time to the present, social interests have always outweighed topical ones at the gatherings.

The original group of so-called War Correspondents, meanwhile, had managed only sporadic meetings, also purely social, and most of them were a result of John Griffin's efforts as host and convenor. There was a session tied to a series of "school crisis" lectures at Emory University in Atlanta in the mid-1950s, another in Louisville in 1961, others in Miami and Tallahassee and back in Atlanta later in the sixties. In 1969, the year of the first Popham Seminar, the Correspondents gathered twice involuntarily--first in Miami for the funeral of Bill Baggs, and two months later in Atlanta for the funeral of Ralph McGill. Johnny Popham, Harry Ashmore, Bill Emerson, Harold Fleming, and

John Griffin were then the surviving charter members of the network that McGill and Popham had begun to establish in the 1940s.

There were times when a few of the journalists and some of the educators were together on missions of mutual interest, but the first extensive intermingling and amalgamation of Correspondents and Seminararians might be said to have occurred on January 27, 1977, when Popham, at age sixty-seven, retired from his post as managing editor of the Chattanooga Times. Ruth S. Holmberg, publisher of the Times, staged a memorable party for the honoree in the restored club car of the famed Wabash Cannonball at the Choo Choo Hilton in Chattanooga, and the assembled guests were a worthy representation of the leading figures in Southern higher education and the press.

All of these formal and informal comminglings and others as well were historical antecedents that set the stage for the 1985 Atlanta celebration marking Popham's seventy-fifth birthday. Most of the Correspondents and Seminararians were present, along with others from a newer and larger circle of friends and associates, and Popham was the cement that held them together. He was in his element that afternoon and evening, the indefatigable Pop--telling war stories and ribald tales, reconstructing history, greeting male and female alike as "dollin" or "sweetheart," quoting everyone from Snopes and Sartoris to Santayana. Near the end of the evening, as he stood at the podium responding to the accolades of his friends, Pop's rhetoric soared to oratorical heights as he delivered an unbroken string of ageless and original tales in the mellow Tidewater cadence of his long-ago youth. It was vintage Popham, and it brought back a flood of memories from four tumultuous decades of Southern change. It also reached farther back, exposing strands of personal history that helped to define the man through those who came before him.

When the Plymouth Company sent an expedition to explore the coast of what is now Maine in 1607 (the same year Jamestown was settled far to the south), the leader ^{of the party} was a fifty-seven-year-old seafaring man from Somerset County, England, named George Popham. His uncle, Sir John Popham, Lord Chief Justice of England, was a principal sponsor of the commercial ventures that ultimately established a permanent British presence in Virginia and Massachusetts. Thus, from the very beginning of European colonization on the North American continent, there were Pophams present, and to this day, there is a village called Popham Beach in Maine and a stream called Popham Run in Virginia.

After Sir John and George came Sir Francis, John's son, and he was followed later by such colorful figures as Sir Home Riggs Popham, Littlepage Popham, Colonel John Scott Popham, and Confederate Colonel John Richard Popham, a great-grandfather of the contemporary Chattanooga scribe.

"I'm not well-versed in the family history," ^{our Johnny} explained. "When you live with it, you never bother to look it up. I do know that my ancestors were very active in the colonization of this country, but I don't know the details."

Pop picks up the story with John Richard, his great-grandfather: "He became a Republican after the Civil War--a Readjuster, an old Whig--and he represented Bath and Highland counties in the Virginia House of Delegates. He also managed the successful U. S. Senate campaign of Billy Mahone, an ex-Confederate general who became the first Rebel to be elected to the Senate after the war. Mahone was later president of the Norfolk & Western Railroad.

"My great-grandfather was the editor of the Southern Intelligencer in Richmond early in the 1870s, and later he went to Washington to edit the pro-Republican Washington Intelligencer. The election of Rutherford B. Hayes and the so-called Compromise of 1877 that ended Reconstruction in the South helped to assure the success of John Richard Popham and his newspaper. He was

not a racist and a know-nothing, though; he was at heart a reconciler, a man drawn to journalism and politics and public service."

The family was by then firmly anchored in the Virginia Tidewater region, with the homeplace between the Potomac and Rappahannock rivers in Westmoreland County, east of the town of Fredericksburg. The newspaper interests of John Richard Popham kept him and his family frequently on the move between Richmond and Washington and midway places in the Fredericksburg area, and it was in that orbit that John Nicholas Popham, Richard's son, grew to adulthood.

"He was my grandfather and my namesake," said Johnny Popham. "John Nicholas I, a child of the Reconstruction South and of post-Civil War Washington, a page boy in the Senate, a bright young man who went from college straight to a State Department assignment in the Central American isthmus--now Panama, but then part of Colombia. That was in 1883, when he was just twenty-three years old, and he stayed there as a diplomat and businessman until he died in 1924. My grandmother, who was Ruth McKim Brown, kept an apartment in Washington, but she went often to stay with her husband, so the family divided its time between Central America, Washington, and Virginia--and I suppose that explains their affection for diversity and their ease of movement from one place to another. They were Episcopalians with a deep respect for the Catholic faith of Latin America. My grandfather was fluent in Spanish, warmly disposed to the Latino people and their history, a diplomat in the truest sense."

In 1887, Ruth Popham gave birth to a son, John Nicholas II, in Culpeper, Virginia, and he too divided his early years between the three focal points on the family compass. After finishing college and law school in Washington, he married Pauline Becker, a Catholic girl from Maryland's Eastern Shore, in 1907. He became a career officer in the U. S. Marines, following in the military a career similar to that of his father in the diplomatic corps.

A sense of family tradition and continuity became established. "My grandfather's family, and my father's, moved freely and easily from one culture to another," said Johnny Popham. "They had no hangups on race or class, but rather an empathy and a caring and a sense of feeling completely at home wherever they were. My father served in China, in Latin America--and wherever he was, my mother and I went to be with him as often as we could. I was born in Fredericksburg in 1910, went to school there, through high school--but I also spent time in China, in Panama, in Brooklyn. It was a very worldly childhood and youth, very unusual, very rich and diverse."

Amazingly, three generations of global living could not erase the echoes of Tidewater speech from the Pophams, and wherever he has gone, Jonn N. Popham III has sounded like his father and his father before him, saying hoose, about, fawtha, repotah, and Sooth as distinctively as the most seasoned Tidewater denizen. "That's my heritage," he explains, "and I've never felt compelled to change it."

After he finished high school in 1929, young Popham went to join his parents in New York, where his father was commandant of the Marine Barracks at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, and that fall he enrolled in Fordham University. Through his father he also met Henry Surgui, editor of the Brooklyn Standard-Union, and at the same time he began his college experience, Popham also launched his career as a reporter.

"There were fifteen or twenty daily papers in New York at that time," Popham recalled, "and that meant scores of young cub reporters like me, doing piece work, getting paid by the story--fifteen dollars a week, if you really hustled--working all hours of the day and night. It was highly competitive, but there was also a closeness, a camaraderie, almost a sense of calling. There's no way you could understand that unless you lived it. It was a long way from the innocence of Fredericksburg, but I took to it rather quickly. It was quite

fascinating, you know. There I was, a country boy, you might say, a youngster with a Southern accent, learning my way around the greatest city in the world. New York was a vast cauldron of diversity, a conglomeration of immigrants, ethnic groups, races, classes. Through the newspaper, the university, the military life of my parents, I had ties to the white, middle-class mainstream of the city, but at the same time, I was also strongly attracted to the others, the Irish and Poles and Italians, the blacks, the Orientals. Through my job, I lived their lives with them--ate in their restaurants, went into their homes, attended their weddings and funerals. All in all, it was a wonderful life for me, very exciting, and I took advantage of it and tried to make the most of it."

The Standard-Union folded in 1932--one of the many casualties of the Great Depression--and Popham managed to get hired as a crime reporter for Standard News, one of two city wire service organizations supplying copy to the local papers. He also dropped out of Fordham after a couple of years, finding the academic life a rather dull existence compared to journalism:

"I was writing crime stories from Brooklyn, Queens, Long Island, parts of Connecticut and New Jersey. I followed Meyer Berger on that beat after he went over to The Times, where he became a famous reporter. That period of the early 1930s was a hell of a time--the Wall Street collapse, the Depression, the New Deal, Prohibition and then its repeal, the criminal underworld, political corruption, the Lindbergh kidnapping, Jimmy Walker and Fiorello LaGuardia, Tammany Hall, ~~the~~ City Hall. It was a great time to be a young reporter, and I look back on it now with pleasure."

One special dimension of the pleasure was provided by baseball. "I lived in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn," Popham recalled, "just a few blocks from Ebbetts Field, and it happened that one of the daughters of Charles Ebbetts, the late owner of the Dodgers, was married to a Captain Booth, a friend of my

father's, and their son Frank was a good friend of mine. So I had easy entree to the Ebbetts box at the ballpark, and we went practically every Sunday the Dodgers were in town."

After three years at Standard News, Popham was, at the tender age of twenty-five, a seasoned New York City reporter. In 1935, without moving from his Flatbush apartment, he joined the staff of The New York Times as a reporter in Brooklyn, writing about what he called the three C's--crime, corruption, and the courts. He became close friends with William O'Dwyer, who was later to become mayor of New York City.

"O'Dwyer was a young lawyer," said Popham, "older than me, in his forties, but still young, and he served as district attorney before he was elected mayor in 1946. He and I struck up a friendship. He was an Irish immigrant--had almost been a priest, but left Ireland for New York instead--and he prided himself on the fact that as a bricklayer he had helped to build the Woolworth Building. He was also a cop before he studied law at Fordham and started his career in public office. Bill O'Dwyer loved the theater, loved literature and history. We were warm friends. He's the godfather of our son Johnny--John N. Popham IV. He was a great admirer of Andrew Jackson. One night in the winter of 1947, near the end of my residence in New York, he invited me to Gracie Mansion for dinner with Marquis James, the Jackson biographer, and we had a marvelous discussion that evening. Bill made me feel almost Irish, and in truth I could pass--until they heard my accent."

Between 1935 and 1942, when he entered the marines, Popham built a solid reputation as a skillful and knowledgable reporter. "I was a New Yorker through and through by then," he said, "and I had developed the sources, the contacts, that every good reporter must have to stay on top of his job. The accent didn't hurt at all--in fact, it was my trademark, and it helped me. I

got tips phoned to "the kid with the Southern accent." I wore a hat then, of course--practically every reporter wore a hat, and stuck his press card in the band so he could get access to crime scenes and fires and such as that. So a hat was no distinguishing feature--but an accent was, and I used it to good advantage."

Popham re-entered Fordham in the late 1930s to complete his undergraduate degree and prepare for the study of law, as his father before him had done. As a full-time reporter and a subway student, he had his hands full. His father was, at fifty-five, retired and in failing health when the United States entered World War II, and in 1942 he died, leaving his widow and son as sole survivors to care for each other. More explicitly than he had at first intended, Johnny Popham decided to follow in his father's footsteps--not to law school, but to the U. S. Marines:

"I had poor vision, but got a waiver to enter the marines, and in 1942 I was enrolled in officer training school at Camp LeJeune, North Carolina. Before the year was over, I was a first lieutenant in the Third Marine Division in the South Pacific."

Serving as a press liaison officer with war correspondents and in various other capacities, Popham remained in the Pacific for the three-year duration of the war, taking part in nine amphibious landings. "We were on Guam in 1945," he recalled, "preparing for the invasion of Japan, when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, and then on Nagasaki. I well remember the reaction of everybody there. Not horror at the thought of such massive destruction and death--we couldn't imagine the magnitude of it. Instead, there was great joy, exhilaration. All we could feel was relief: 'Thank God we don't have to go in, we won't be landing in Tokyo harbor.'"

When the war ended, Popham was one of fourteen Americans chosen for a mission to China to assist in the transition of power to the Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek following the Japanese surrender. "We were all former residents of China," Popham explained, "and our task was to be a small but visible presence on the side of Chiang in his ongoing power struggle with the Communists and Mao Tse-tung. We were supposed to stay about three months, but it was a year before I finally got back to Washington and resigned from active duty to return to The Times."

Popham's first assignment in 1946 was to join a team of Times reporters covering committee meetings of the newly established United Nations at Lake Success on Long Island. "The decision had been made to establish the UN headquarters in the eastern United States," Popham said, "and later that year the site was purchased on the East River in Manhattan with a gift of more than eight million dollars from John D. Rockefeller. But in the meantime there were meetings taking place at Lake Success, and I was one of about eight Times reporters--Abe Rosenthal, Tom Hamilton, and others--assigned to cover them. I met many world figures on that assignment, including some prominent Americans--John Foster Dulles, Ralph Bunche, Eleanor Roosevelt. Bunche had a secretary I got to know pretty well--used to ride the train out to Long Island with her--and through her I got pretty well acquainted with Bunche. He was a very intelligent, well-grounded man. I admired him very much."

By the spring of 1947, Popham was securely and comfortably re-established at The Times and in New York: "I was in the catbird seat. I had a coveted assignment, I felt at home in the city, I was close enough to look after my mother, I had friends and colleagues whose company I enjoyed. I wasn't looking for a change of scene--but the paper offered me one just the same."

Turner Catledge, an assistant managing editor for national news, called

him in to discuss a new post in the South. "Turner and I got along well," Popham said. "He was a Mississippian, a great reporter turned editor; he had gone from the Commercial-Appeal in Memphis to the Baltimore Sun and then to The Times, had moved right on up, and he retained a strong and abiding interest in the South. He wanted to open a bureau there, to have someone in residence roaming from Virginia to Texas, filing stories on a regular basis. No one else was doing that. The Times was the logical paper to do it, and Catledge wanted me to be the correspondent."

Popham was reluctant at first, but at the same time he found the idea intriguing: "I hadn't traveled all that much in the Deep South, but I thought I understood some of its complexities. Growing up as I had in northern Virginia, close to Washington and far from the die-hard fanaticism of Dixie, I had been part of a South that historically had kept a national outlook. The Union meant more to them--in fact, the whole idea of union came from ~~the~~ ^{Virginia,} and from Boston. This was the homeland of Washington and Jefferson, Madison and Monroe, and of George Mason, father of the Bill of Rights. Even Lee never wanted to destroy the Union--he never waved the bloody flag, never snouted 'nigger.' So that was my heritage, and those great figures out of our history were part of my image of a decent South. It may have been more of an ideal than a reality, but I had a positive feeling about it just the same.

"I had seen the poverty too, of course, and the racism, and I knew the South was laggard and defensive. I knew lots of people who had come pouring up to the cities of the North, fleeing hunger, chasing opportunity. The newspapers had plenty of them, and still do--bright, ambitious, dedicated people, sensitive, good writers. An awful lot of them were escaping Snopes, escaping dead-end jobs in closed societies. The South seemed so resistant to change, and yet it had promise, and the thought of returning began to interest me."

Catledge didn't rush him. When a massive explosion on a ship at Texas City, Texas, in Galveston Bay, killed nearly five hundred people ~~in~~ ⁱⁿ ~~the~~ ⁱⁿ ~~1947,~~ April ^{1947,} he sent Popham down to cover the story. A little later, he dispatched him to Greenville, South Carolina, to cover a sensational lynch trial ("Rebecca West was there for The New Yorker," Popham recalled, "and Strom Thurmond was governor--my God, I remember it so well, so well"), and slowly but surely, the long-departed native son began, as he put it, "to re-enter the Southern culture."

He went next to New Orleans, where Catledge's friend George Healy, editor of the Times-Picayune, introduced him to Owen and Ella Brennan and to the generality of French Quarter seductions. Then, in Jackson, Mississippi, he met the Picayune's new correspondent, Bill Minor, and sat in on a session or two of the Mississippi legislature, and then went on up through the delta to Memphis. He was succumbing:

"People were awfully nice, you know--it was one of those warm things, a feeling--and then Catledge met me in Atlanta, and we went around to see Ralph McGill. I had met him once before, very briefly, and I knew his reputation. He was seen even then, in some quarters, as a 'wild-eyed, nigger-loving son of a bitch,' but he seemed all right to me. We had a pleasant meeting, and then Turner and I drove up to Chattanooga, to the Ochs family paper, and he asked me what about it, and I said I'd take the job."

(Adolph S. Ochs, a printer in Knoxville, Tennessee, had purchased the Chattanooga Times in 1878 and turned it into a leading Democratic paper of the post-Civil War South. In an expansion move in 1896, Ochs paid \$75,000 for a struggling Manhattan newspaper called The New York Times, circulation 9,000. When he died in 1935, his holdings went into a family trust that still controls both the New York and Chattanooga enterprises, among many others. Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, the empire builder's grandson, now heads The New York Times, and

granddaughter Ruth Sulzberger Holmberg is publisher of the Chattanooga Times. "They don't tell that story around New York," says Popham, smiling. "Not many people know that it was a Jewish printer from the South who turned The New York Times into a great international newspaper.")

"Catledge wanted me to operate out of Chattanooga, where the Times's family ties were," Popham explained, "and that suited me just fine. I wasn't married then, and I knew I'd be on the road a lot--I enjoyed driving, taking the back roads, meeting people along the way--and Chattanooga was at least as appealing as Atlanta, which at that time seemed like ~~like~~ ^{nothing} more than a dinky little country town."

It was the summer of '47. Robert Penn Warren had won the Pulitzer Prize that year for All the King's Men, his masterful novel based on the life of Louisiana's Huey Long. At Ebbetts Field in Brooklyn, Jackie Robinson had broken the color barrier with Popham's beloved Dodgers, and that fall he led them through a seven-game donnybrook with the reviled Yankees. Everywhere, even in the South, change was in the wind. With optimism and high hopes, Popham packed his bags and left Flatbush for the land of his birth.

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More than his job and his place of residence were about to change. "I met an attractive young woman that summer," Popham recalls. "I was staying at the Hermitage Hotel in Nashville, working with Fred Travis, a marine buddy of mine who was then the capitol correspondent for the Chattanooga Times. American Airlines had an office next door to the hotel, and one day another reporter friend, Morris Cunningham of the Commercial-Appeal in Memphis, took me by and introduced me to a pretty girl named Frances Evans, who worked there. She was a Nashville girl, a Peabody College graduate, a librarian by training. Her father was Giles

Evans, an attorney, a law partner of Dan McGugin, the famous Vanderbilt football coach. Frances and I started dating, and we got married the following March. I hadn't exactly rushed into marriage--I was nearly thirty-eight years old."

They lived in a Chattanooga apartment for a while, and then bought a house on Lookout Mountain. They had a son, John Nicholas Popham IV, and a daughter, Hilary Becker Popham, the Becker name in honor of Popham's mother. (He also kept and carried on his mother's Catholic faith, and Frances, a Methodist, became a parishoner with him at Our Lady of the Mountain, the community parish.)

For a dozen years, Popham was ^{both} a Times man and a family man, ^{but it was that} ~~the~~ The Times demanded and got the most of him; more often than not, he was on the road for the newspaper, covering stories in a territory too vast for any one reporter to encompass:
 Dodge that Catledge procured for me, and then I got a
 "I started off with a ^{green} Buick--a four-door job, six cylinders-- and I had to get a new one every year or two, because I drove 50,000 to 80,000 miles a year. If you can remember what the roads were like then--no interstates, not even much four-lane--you'll know what a feat that was. No air conditioning, either, in the cars or the hotels. I generally stayed in the downtown hotels in the cities, the places where the politicians hung out--the St. Charles in New Orleans, the Peabody in Memphis, the Hermitage or the Andrew Jackson in Nashville. Lots of smaller towns had hotels too, or tourist courts, or private homes that offered room and board. I had the Duncan Hines guidebook with me, but after a while, I knew as many places as he did. I made it a point to eat and drink with the people. That's how I built my sources. I drove or rode the train almost everywhere I went, even after air travel became more common. Some people have said I was afraid to fly, but that wasn't it--I had flown all over the world, for God's sake, it didn't frighten me. It just wasn't my style to rush. My way was much more deliberate, indirect, personal. I drove so I could get behind the scenes and meet people."

To review Popham's year-by-year itinerary and the rosters of sources he maintained in every state, and to go back and read his bylined pieces in The Times, is to catch a glimpse of a journalistic experience unique for its time and unduplicated since. In politics, religion, and education, three of the pillars of Southern society, he patiently and meticulously established a visible presence as a journalist, and as the years passed, he came to be trusted and respected by contending parties in those camps. He was a regular at the Southern Governors Conference and the legislative meetings within and among the states. He spent a week or two every summer at the YMCA camp or one of the denominational church retreats in the North Carolina mountains, listening and talking and absorbing more than writing. He attended the Race Relations Institute at Fisk University in Nashville each summer, staying for the entire program. He was well connected at the Southern Regional Council, the private agency in Atlanta that carried on and expanded the work of its predecessor organization, the Council on Interracial Cooperation. He was present when the Southern governors created the Southern Regional Education Board in 1947, and was a central figure in the Southern Education Reporting Service after the Ford Foundation established it in 1954.

"My motivation was journalistic, not political or religious or educational," said Popham. "I worked hard at being a good reporter. That means being a clever detective, a street worker, and of course a quick and competent writer. But you've got to do more than that. You've got to give up stereotypes and be open and accepting and respectful of people, of mechanics and farmers and storekeepers as well as politicians and professionals. You've got to be able to **listen and talk to** religious zealots, racial bigots, poor and uneducated people, anonymous and powerless people. Most of us can't last more than a few minutes at that; I can do it all day. That's the primary art of good reporting: the gift of enjoying people, liking talk, being patient, not living by stereotypes. I despise

stereotypes."

Popham watched and reported as Strom Thurmond of South Carolina and Fielding Wright of Mississippi, two Deep South governors determined to fight for white supremacy, led others to bolt the Democratic Party and create the Dixiecrats in 1948. Countering that right-wing splinter group was Henry Wallace and the Progressive Party on the Democratic left, and Popham also followed Wallace on his campaign swing through the South. Harry Truman held the middle and won the presidency in spite of those defections, and Popham saw in Truman's civil rights initiatives the beginning of the end for segregation:

"It was increasingly clear that momentous changes were coming. McGill knew it, George Mitchell and young Harold Fleming over at the Southern Regional Council knew it, the black educators like Benjamin Mays at Morehouse College and Charles S. Johnson at Fisk knew it, and they were the ones I learned from. The pieces all added up. Black soldiers had put their lives on the line in World War II, and they weren't going to come back and accept the old injustices. Middle-class professionals--lawyers, doctors, ministers--were rising up out of the black colleges and the black churches, and they would not be denied. Blacks were locked out of politics and the press, but not forever. Change was clearly coming, and soon.

"My New York experience helped to prepare me for what I found in the South. Here was a poverty-stricken region without the economic strength to sustain one society, ^{yet it was} trying to maintain two--the 'separate but equal' myth. My God, I thought, no wonder the Yankees are ahead of the game. I could see the tremendous educational disadvantage. In this region, only 15 percent of adults, white and black combined, had finished high school. Education had to be the key, the long-term answer to inequality and injustice. I tried to look beyond the passions and prejudices of the moment and find people who could change and adapt, who were committed to education, who respected honesty and decency. Those were the people

I turned to time and time again, the ones I tried to write about."

His Southern accent helped to counterbalance his credentials as a New York reporter, but it no longer set him apart from his peers, as it had in the Northeast. Another trademark did distinguish him, though: the narrow-brim hats that he had worn habitually since his days at the Standard-Union in the early 1930s. Hats had since gone out of style, but Pop still wore one incessantly, *some wondered if he slept with it on -* and many a contact came to remember and identify him as "the guy in the hat."

The careful nurturing of contacts and sources for news and background information led Popham to the clubs, the ball games, the churches: "It was a personal thing, you see, ~~you worked at it~~ You worked at it from early morning until late at night--not looking for big headlines, for the fires and ambulances, but looking quietly behind the scenes, learning to interpret and explain the complexities, to convey the subtleties. People got to know me, and they became confident that whatever their point of view, I would treat them fairly, be honest with them, respect their trust."

An instinctive understanding that a good reporter must always know more than he can write helped Popham to become a master at cultivating well-placed sources. One illustrative example ^{was} the head waiter at Brennan's Restaurant in New Orleans:

"I met Owen Brennan and his sister Ella on my first trip to New Orleans in 1947. They had just opened their now-famous restaurant there, and they became close friends of mine. Their head waiter was an Italian fellow named Frank, and we got along very well. I recognized what a unique position he was in, serving the politicians who came there regularly for dinner. They were making deals in the proverbial smoke-filled room upstairs, and Frank was right there with them. So I cultivated him. He went on a trip to New York, and I had Mayor O'Dwyer put a car and an escort at his disposal, get him some show tickets and so forth. From

then on, Frank kept me posted on what the polls said and did at Brennan's. He was great--better than having a *mike* in the room. He knew that I wouldn't expose him, and also that I could evaluate the information he gave me, and sort out the valid news from the rest. Any good detective does that, and a reporter is no different."

Sources ^{*like*} ~~Frank~~ Frank were part of Popham's network. So, too, were the black leaders he met, mainly in the field of education. "There was Grace Hamilton of Atlanta, who ^{*later was elected to*} ~~was~~ the Georgia legislature, and Daisy Bates, the Little Rock NAACP leader who published a small newspaper; ~~but~~ they were exceptions to the rule that Southern politics and the press were overwhelmingly dominated by white males. In the black colleges and universities, though, there were some giants--Benjamin Mays and Charles S. Johnson, Luther Foster and Rufus Clement, Herman Long and Vivian Henderson and Hylan Lewis and many others, I could never name them all. They were the people who paved the way for Martin Luther King and Andy Young and John Lewis and the leaders of the civil rights movement. I got to know them in the forties and fifties, visited their campuses, wrote about them.

"And the white educators too--Howard Odum and Rupert Vance at the University of North Carolina, Truman Pierce and his colleagues at Peabody College in Nashville, the state university presidents, the men like John Ivey and Bob Anderson who launched the Southern Regional Education Board. Segregation was the hidden agenda when the Southern governors formed SREB in 1947--I was not unmindful of that--but I saw the people whose ideas contributed to that compact, and I realized that segregation was not what motivated them, but simply what the moment required. It wouldn't last, couldn't last. SREB was a wedge, a foot in the door of change. That's what I thought then, and that's the way it turned out."

When he walked on the scene in 1947, Popham was a stranger to one and all, an unknown quantity. When he began to show up at meetings around the region, he stood out conspicuously.

"The first time I saw him," recalled Harold Fleming, "was at the Wesley Memorial Methodist Church in Atlanta in September 1948. I was the information director for SRC, assigned to handle press and community relations, and I was nervous that day because Eleanor Roosevelt was there at SRC's invitation to speak to an assembly of church women about racial discrimination, and I knew that Governor Herman Talmadge and the Georgia Bureau of Investigation had agents there taking notes on our 'subversive' activities.

"When I saw a strange man slip furtively through the side door and hunker down in the back of the room, I assumed he was one of the undercover men. He was wearing an anonymous gray suit and a little porkpie hat that he didn't bother to take off once he was inside. I made my way over to where he sat, introduced myself, and asked rather coolly if I could help him. Smiling and blinking vigorously, he said, 'Hel-lo! I'm Johnny Popham of The New York Times. Maybe we can get together and talk over a cuppajoe when this is over.' I nodded in agreement, wondering what a cuppajoe might be."

John Griffin was also in the room at Wesley Memorial that day, chairing the meeting, and witnessed with some nervousness of his own the whispered challenge that Fleming delivered to Popham. For his part, Popham also remembers that first encounter with the two men who became the principal "camp followers" in the ranks of the Southern War Correspondents:

"Hal Fleming stayed at SRC and John Griffin at Emory through the fifties, as I recall, and I saw them often, and depended on them in many ways. They helped Harry Ashmore in 1953 when he put together the first research study on race and public education for the Ford Foundation. Then the Brown decision came down from the Supreme Court the following year, and from then on the Southern scene changed rapidly. Until that time, there was nobody much out there on the regional beat except me. I'd see Bill Minor and Ken Toler in Jackson, covering

Mississippi for the New Orleans and Memphis papers, and Wally Westfeldt in Nashville, and Ashmore in Little Rock, and Bill Baggs in Miami, and McGill and Bill Emerson in Atlanta, and a few others here and there, but all of them, with the exception of McGill and Emerson, kept their attention focused on one city or a single state. Television news was in its infancy, too. So I was the only traveling troubadour until '54--and after that, it was a new ball game.

"It was the friendships formed before then that established the network, and it's those same friendships that remain strong today, among those of us who survive--Ashmore and Fleming and Griffin, Emerson, Claude Sitton, a handful of others. We miss McGill, and Baggs--Billy Baggs, a Georgia poor white, the most cracker-looking man who ever lived, an orphan, a distinguished aviator in the war, a very colorful fellow, gifted, earthy, irreverent. I remember once we were at the Democratic Convention together, he and McGill and I. It was hard to get down on the floor to talk to people, but we had a chaplain's badge that we passed around the press gallery for that purpose--it gave us entree, you see--and at one point there was a commotion in the Pennsylvania delegation, and Baggs pinned on the badge and went down to see what it was all about. He looked like a Southern W. C. Fields--hung over from the previous evening, his eyes red-rimmed, his seersucker suit badly rumpled. He pressed his way into the midst of the roiling throng, and a woman there spied his badge and said, 'Well, chaplain, I suppose you've come to pray for us?' And Baggs replied, 'Yes ma'am, you're goddam right, and it's gonna be a piss-cutter!'

"It was a rough and tumble bunch, by and large, a group of hard-working, late-night, whiskey-drinking, tale-telling vagabonds. Street scramblers, for the most part. McGill was a big shot, of course, but he was the only one. We were all close to Hodding Carter in Greenville, and thought of him as a comrade in arms, but his failing eyesight confined him to Mississippi except on rare occasions.

Some of the other publishers in the region--Jonathan Daniels in Raleigh, Barry Bingham in Louisville, Silliman Evans in Nashville, Nelson Poynter in St. Petersburg, Virginius Dabney in Richmond--moved in higher circles than ours. Dabney was the quintessential Southern gentleman, a man of refinement and grace; he and most of the others no doubt looked on working reporters like us as a rowdy, boisterous gang of buccaneers."

In that time of early adventure in the South--before Brown, before the arrival of television and the national press--the reporters were mostly males, and almost all of them were white. A few black writers came from the North after Jimmy Hicks, 1954, among them Louis Lomax, Carl Rowan, and Ted Poston, and some of the regional papers had female reporters, but during most of the years that Popham reported for The Times, he worked in the exclusive company of white males.

It was in 1956 at Clinton, Tennessee, one of the early battlegrounds over school desegregation, that Popham was designated as the first president of the Southern War Correspondents. "As I remember it," he said, "the group actually decided that someone had to be offered up as a sacrifice, and I was the choice. We were working out of a little building owned by the telephone company, and a group of local tough guys protesting desegregation got in the habit of firing shots over the building. I was designated to go and talk to them. I said, 'We aren't trying to stop your protest. All we ask is your assurance that you will fire over the building, not into it.' They agreed, and that's when I got elected by my colleagues. But we were never a real organization or a group in any formal sense--we were just a network of men who shared some harrowing and some happy experiences. It was wonderful, in its way, a very strong bond, a personal thing. We were in a war, especially after 1954, and some of the younger men who came to join us, ~~like~~ ^{Southerners} like Gene Patterson and Pete McKnight, were able from their prior experience to see it in just that light."

For the Southern higher education specialists with whom Popham had allied himself, 1954 marked a sharp increase in pressure and anxiety. Forced to work for change within the existing political framework, they saw the inevitability of conflict and crisis looming. The first overt clash came at the University of Alabama in February 1956, when violence greeted the court-ordered admission of Autherine Lucy, a black student. By that time, Popham was nearing ten years of continuous travel and reporting on the Southern beat, and his time and attention had shifted more and more to education, particularly higher education, as the arena from which a resolution of the South's racial crisis was most likely to ~~be~~ ^{come.}

"There had to be political solutions, of course," he said. "Blacks had to vote, to gain public office, and whites had to respond to their numbers and their needs. But the long-term hope was going to have to ~~be~~ ^{be generated} in the colleges and universities--I was convinced of that--and by the mid-1950s I was spending a major portion of my time in that area."

In 1955, Popham directed ~~the~~ ^{and largely wrote a} Times special section on the South, with education as a major focus, and educators from SREB and various campuses in the region supplied much of the background expertise. "I saw too many good reports and studies on Southern social issues falling on deaf ears," he said. "The Race Relations Institute materials from Fisk, the Howard Odum-Rupert Vance reports from Chapel Hill, the work of Truman Pierce and others at Peabody, even the monumental study of Southern politics by V. O. Key and Alexander Heard, and then, years later, the work of Harvard's Robert Coles--all of these scholars and many others were documenting the South's deepest needs, paving the way for rational, orderly change. I did everything I could to encourage them--and that meant, more than anything else, reporting their work in the pages of The New York Times."

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When Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus precipitated a major national crisis by blocking the desegregation of Little Rock's public schools in the fall of 1957, Popham was, in the recollection of Harry Ashmore, the most influential reporter on the scene:

"It happened that Benjamin Fine, the education writer for The Times, was already there working on a story when Faubus surprised everyone by turning suddenly uncooperative with the educators and defying the federal authorities. All hell broke loose then, and Fine needed help, so Popham came in, along with Homer Bigart, the paper's chief war correspondent. Pop was the veteran Southerner, the guru, and all sorts of national press and television people looked to him for guidance and interpretation. He was very influential in providing the vital balance that a reporter needs in such a situation. In such emotional circumstances, it's easy to be used by one side or another, to accept appearances at face value and be taken in, but you've got to keep a sense of perspective--and Pop was the wise counselor whose understanding of the people and the situation was so helpful to the reporters from outside the region."

insert here → "Pop was telling the Southern story to the largest literate element in the country," said Harold Fleming. The SREB staff and others in education obviously agreed, and they constantly fed him stories.

~~the~~ the South, in the meantime, had long since become a much more active beat than one reporter could hope to cover, and Popham had very nearly burnt himself out trying to stay on top of it. At home in Chattanooga, Frances Popham was raising their two children without him.

"Claude Sitton was already coming down to cover a lot of the civil rights action," Pop said, "and I finally decided in 1958 that it was time for me to make a change. I told Catledge. The Times would have sent me anywhere--London, Tokyo, New York--but I'd never have seen Frances and the kids. And besides, the romance of reporting, living on the road, was gone for me by then. The Chattanooga Times needed a new managing editor, and I needed to be in Chattanooga with my family. So I made the change, helped Sitton phase in to replace me, and took an editor's chair at home--and I've never regretted it for a minute."

In December 1957, a few months before his departure from The Times, Popham wrote in the paper's Sunday magazine about the South of myth and reality that had consumed his time and energy for a decade. The school desegregation crisis in Little Rock, ~~was~~ *it remained* continuing, and ~~it~~ very much in the public mind. Focusing on black Southerners and their growing determination to **destroy segregation**, Pop wrote "of a society in the throes of economic and social change so far-reaching that few even among Southerners have any meaningful grasp of the transition taking place around them." There is white resistance, he noted, and some of it is violent. "But we are no longer in the nineteenth century. History clearly indicates that this is not the time to support segregation of a great part of the population of a Free World nation." Time, he concluded, "is on the side of the Southern Negro."

The magazine article was a summing up of the work of a decade by The Times's peripatetic man in the South--and a visionary preview of the revolutionary changes that would come with accelerating swiftness in the years ahead. Soon thereafter, Popham came in from the road and turned his energies to the "other" Times, the Mother Times--the venerable gray lady in Chattanooga. But the South, its educational promise, and Popham's kindred spirits in the traveling Fourth Estate remained very much in his mind.

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Like many other Southern cities in the late 1950s, Chattanooga stood out in the midst of the civil rights awakening as a study in light and shadow, a broad canvas filled with sharply *contrasting images.* ~~sharply~~ The city's economic, political, religious, and educational institutions were pulled and swayed in one direction or another by burning questions of race and class. History hovered like mountain mist--Indian history, Civil War history, Depression history, the history in yesterday's newspapers. The multiplicity of Chattanooga's contemporary perspectives--racial and social and economic, conservative and moderate and liberal, Protestant and Catholic and Jewish--were at once the city's hope and its despair. Things were happening so fast, from the courthouse to the White House, that confusion and uncertainty and fear were the dominant emotions in virtually every encounter.

The liberal Chattanooga Times and its conservative rival, the Chattanooga News-Free Press, were more than daily combatants in the local arena; they were also classic symbols of the larger social conflict that was sweeping through the South. The newspapers, like the city itself, like the South and the nation, were locked in a struggle that was certain to bring profound change, no matter which side prevailed. As a player in that drama, John N. Popham brought insight and experience with him when he came home after eleven years on the Southern road

to take up his new duties as managing editor of the Times.

He had both the background and the temperament for such a job. His Episcopalian and Catholic religious roots, his family history of military and diplomatic service, his years of living in Virginia and New York and the Deep South, and his historical and philosophical perspectives all contributed to his qualifications--and, if those assets were not enough, he could always fall back on his instincts as a street-wise reporter, his earthy sense of humor, and his ever-ready gift for gab.

Norman Bradley and Martin Ochs, two of his editorial colleagues in Chattanooga, laughingly remember Popham's frequent use of marine jargon and foxhole metaphors around the newsroom. "When does it let up?" he would ask, gazing heavenward, after a long day's night in the newspaper wars. His favorite marine slogan--"no guts, no glory"--was soon picked up by his Chattanooga associates, and it also became something of a barroom rally cry among the War Correspondents.

"I learned early how important it is to gain the respect and confidence of people on all sides of a conflict," Popham said years later. "You don't have to adopt their point of view--you can't do that with everybody--but you have to show that you're willing to listen, that you'll play straight with them, give them their say, be honest and fair. I drew on my Marine Corps tradition for some of that. People forget, or never knew, that a great many marine officers from my time and my father's time were Southerners, young men out of the military schools that used to exist in almost every state in the region. The military was a way out, a way up, another escape from Snopes. Like all white Southerners, those men had their racial prejudices--but they weren't virulent, and they had the saving virtues of education and travel to help them adjust and change. The top marine general in the Pacific for a period of time during World War II was Holland M. Smith--old 'Howlin Mad' Smith--a graduate of the University of Alabama. The

conventional wisdom was that the South's military tradition produced nothing but right-wing reactionaries, arch-conservatives, rabid racial bigots--but I had a different understanding. I saw among many of those men--and among the educators, the religious leaders, even the politicians--enough sanity and decency to convince me that the South would eventually change, that it was all going to work out for the best. That was my faith, and that was the goal we kept before us."

On the local scene, Popham was active at several levels, from the home and school and church interests of a private family man to the civic and social involvements of a public citizen. At the paper, he helped to continue and expand the tradition of progressive social responsibility and journalistic quality that Adolph Ochs and his descendants had carried on for eighty years. "There were always the extremists who screamed about 'that Jew-Commie-Nigger newspaper,' and you came to expect that crap," said Popham, "but I think Chattanoogaans in general have thought of the paper as a very positive institution and one of the city's real assets."

The prestige of the Times and its continuing ties to its nationally and internationally prominent relative in New York opened an even larger forum for the Southern education and race relations specialists who earlier had developed the habit of keeping Popham apprised of their activities. He opened the columns of his paper (and indirectly those of his former employer in New York) to dozens of academicians, researchers, and writers whose studies of the South and its problems might otherwise have received scant notice. Having given initial impetus to a weekly syndicated column on higher education produced by the Southern Regional Education Board staff, he not only published it regularly but also encouraged other editors to do the same. He also served on a variety of local and regional boards and commissions concerned with matters of race and education, and kept up his regular attendance at political party conventions,

conferences of Southern governors, and numerous other events at which the South's many social problems were painfully and passionately debated.

"Education was the only hope," said Popham. "That seemed very clear to me by the time I got to the Chattanooga paper, and I was determined to cover the education story in the South just as thoroughly and as seriously ~~there~~ as I had with The New York Times. I saw so many people in the universities who were committed to fairness and decency for blacks and the poor--the Howard Odums, the Charlie Johnsons, so many of them--and I knew I could give them the help they needed, the exposure, the forum. And so the network of journalists became a larger network that included educators--maybe fifty or sixty people, a hundred at the most, newspaper people and educators, front line people, trench fighters, a loose-knit, informal network of key people in every state."

As the swing man between the two groups, Popham kept the journalism-and-education tandem in harness^e. From his Chattanooga editor's desk, he invited the educators to continue the flow of reports, studies, and good stories. "I had a different role there," he said, "but the goals and objectives were the same, and the educators were vital to the process. I still got them into the paper, and even into my old paper in New York. Too much good work was falling on deaf ears. In the big Sunday and holiday papers we'd have page after page of seven-column ads with a single column for copy next to them, and I'd fill those holes with long one-column stories, some of them nuggets of wisdom and insight."

The associations continued and grew through the stormy decade of the 1960s. Claude Sitton, Popham's replacement as the road warrior for The New York Times, was on the scene as racial battlegrounds followed one after another: Greensboro, Birmingham, Oxford, Albany, St. Augustine, New Orleans, Selma. The earlier skirmishes of the 1950s, the ones Pop witnessed--Montgomery, Clinton, Nashville, Little Rock--slowly receded from memory and slipped into history.

The South's travail was the major domestic story of the decade. The vast territory where Popham once had roamed was now clearly too much for one reporter, and Sitton eventually got reinforcements from The Times--Martin Waldron, Roy Reed, James Wooten, Drummond Ayres, and others joined the ranks. Other papers and magazines sent reporters, and television grew to maturity in those tense times, and organizations such as the Southern Regional Council and the Southern Education Reporting Service had writers on the scene. Many more journalistic names became familiar to those who read and watched the unfolding drama: Frank Trippett, ^{Harold H. Martin} Richard Harwood, ^{Weldon James,} ^{Joseph B.} Pat Watters, Reese Cleghorn, ~~★~~ Cumming, Edwin M. Yoder, Jack Bass, Jack Nelson, H. Brandt Ayers, John Perry, Harry Golden, David Halberstam, and many others.

Popham was by then a member of the old guard, one of the grizzled veterans--he and the dean, Ralph McGill, and that handful of pioneers that included Harry Ashmore, Bill Baggs, Bill Emerson, and a few more. "That was the core group, later joined by Gene Patterson and Pete McKnight and a few others," he said, "and occasionally augmented by Hodding Carter or Bill Minor or Ken Toler, and still later by some of the younger ones. And of course Sitton was here from 1958 on, and I always think of Harold Fleming and John Griffin as charter members, though they were not newspapermen. There's no way I could name them all, no way. It was a raucous, hard-drinking, rag-tag gang of vagabonds and troubadours, for the most part--enlisted men, ^{by and large,} ^{reporters and a few editors but not many public} not officers, ~~★~~ and I remember them all with great affection. The camaraderie, the adventure, the stories, the long-winded talk--it was wonderful. Those days are gone now, and so is the momentous atmosphere, the war-like tension that built strong bonds among embattled people."

There is a certain wistfulness in Popham's voice as he recalls the names and the times. Part of it no doubt stems from the reporter's occupational disease, the firehorse yearning to get to the blaze ahead of the pack, but there is a deeper cause that comes out in his narration of remembrance:

"In the context of the times, I think it's fair to say that practically all of the people I've mentioned were pro-integrationist in spirit. We would have differed a good bit on the ways and means of bringing racial change to the South, no doubt, but I think we all felt, deep down, that in the interest of fairness and decency, black people should have the same basic rights and opportunities as white people. We were fed up with that 'nigger, nigger' stuff. We understood where bigotry and meanness came from, what caused it, and we could be sympathetic with people who were caught up in that, but we knew it couldn't go on, knew it was going to end, and we were hopeful because of that. So in a sense you could say we were not objective, if there is such a thing. We had strong feelings--a leaning, even a bias, you might say--but I think the record shows that we were very fair, and sympathetic to the plight of Southerners, white and black. I could get filled up with the segs, but I could always go spit it out, and not let it divert me from trying to get the true story of what was happening. It was a lot more complex than just a confrontation between good guys and bad guys. It was a historic time, a singular time of social transformation, and I think we realized, most of us, that it was the story of a lifetime."

People who share such dramatic and unforgettable experiences discover beneath their diversity a kinship, a common humanity. Popham and his colleagues in the press and the academy made such discoveries, and their loyalties to one another, like foxhole friendships, were deep and indelible:

"We made connections, understand? You live in the South--you know how it is. On one level, it's what we call our Southern conversation--who your father was, where you went to school or church, who taught you English in high school. Connections, strong ties, family, friends. Ralph McGill courted Mary Elizabeth Leonard in Nashville, and the little girl next door was Frances Evans, who later became my wife. We discovered that association early in our acquaintance, and

it deepened our friendship. The same with Ashmore and Fleming, Baggs and Griffin, many of the others. It's all part of the common ground on which the deeper level of friendship and devotion is built."

For their part, the others reciprocated with equally warm expressions of devotion to Pop. "His friends have said that if there were no John N. Popham it would be necessary to invent one," McGill asserted to an ~~Atlanta~~ ^{Auburn University} gathering in the 1960s. But, he added, "his friends have reluctantly concluded that it would not be possible to create another one. He is the first and last." At about the same time, Eugene Patterson, McGill's colleague at the Atlanta Constitution, wrote that Popham's gift--aside from being "one of the great talkers in the Wurlitzer tradition"--was that he went out first to the backroads South and "listened to the unheard people." Claude Sitton called him "Dixie's cracker-barrel Demosthenes," and memorably described his tidewater-soaked oratorical flourishes as being like "dollops of sorghum syrup spat from a Gatling gun." In a more serious vein, Sitton conceded that "It's not possible for a reporter to do now [in 1974] what Pop did during those years he covered the South--I certainly couldn't do it when I followed him. He just had so many contacts, he knew so many people. No reporter after him was surprised when a shadetree mechanic back in some Appalachian cove asked after Popham's health."

Although his duties in Chattanooga removed him from the cities and towns that became the war-zone datelines of the 1960s, Popham could still be seen occasionally in the teeming throng, looking, wrote Gene Patterson, "like a larcenous choirboy, a weathered cherub," talking fast, walking fast, rushing to embrace everything and everyone in his grasp. ~~He~~ ^{People always} remarked about his appearance (the neat suits, the shirts and ties, the stingy-brim Dobbs or Brooks Brothers hat with the feather in the band), his wide-ranging knowledge, his stable of famous and anonymous sources, his silver tongue, his bottomless capacity

for coffee.

Most of his colleagues sipped stronger fluids on occasion, and all of them marveled at Popham's abstinence, particularly on ceremonial occasions and after trying times when a dram of bourbon or a jigger of gin might be summoned to ease the tensions and lubricate the wheels of conversation. With Pop, though, it was always just one cuppajoe after another.

"My reputation was that I didn't drink at all," he explained later. "I had been known to drink with the boys years before, in New York and in the military, but I could always take it or leave it. Then I came South and got married and had children, and I was on the road a lot, and I worked long hours, and I needed to be at my best, to exhibit the keenest concentration and judgment. Drinking was not a problem for me, but I decided to give it up--for my health, my work, my family. It was just a discipline thing, you see. I could enjoy the company of my friends who drank just as much without drinking with them."

For twenty years, Popham never touched anything alcoholic. Then, on a February afternoon in 1969, he stood with the surviving War Correspondents in John Griffin's office in Atlanta, the remnant gathered to honor their departed friend Ralph McGill, with Bill Baggs having preceded him in death just weeks earlier, and when the others lifted a toast to Ralph, Pop calmly splashed a little bourbon over some ice cubes and raised his glass to eye level. "He looked around at each of us without saying anything," Gene Patterson recalled later, "and then he drank the whiskey. We were all speechless, astonished. Finally, Ashmore found his voice. 'Pop,' he said, 'aren't you afraid it'll make you garrulous?'"

executive vice-

Ashmore, then president of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions on the West Coast, was deeply involved during the 1960s in a number of world peace initiatives inspired by the dramatic encyclical of Pope John XXIII

known as Pacem in Terris (Peace on Earth). He directed the organization and staging of two major convocations of world figures around that theme--one in New York in 1965, the other in Geneva, Switzerland, two years later--and in 1967, Ashmore and his old friend Bill Baggs made a secret journey to North Vietnam for an audience with Ho Chi Minh in Hanoi. They returned for more talks the following year, and then co-authored a book, Mission to Hanoi, about their improbable quest for a route to peace in Southeast Asia.

That the independent diplomatic missions of Ashmore and Baggs did not bring an early end to the war was disappointing, but not surprising; they were, after all, just two men, two resourceful Southern talkers, up against the pride and fury of nations in a life-and-death conflict. Perhaps if they had taken the entire contingent of Southern War Correspondents and Camp Followers-- McGill and Emerson, Fleming and Griffin, and most of all the voluble and loquacious Popham, the warrior-diplomat, the prince of prose--the outcome might have been different. "Can you imagine Popham going one-on-one ~~against~~ ^{with} Ho Chi Minh?" ~~some~~ ^{mused Bill Emerson} ~~himself an effusive gabber.~~ "Talk about your Pacem in Terris--you'd have the South's top Possum taking over the terrace, and the porch, and the front room, and the kitchen, and wherever two or more were gathered. He'd sue for peace, armed with nothing more than his own perpetual oratory."

By the time Popham's retirement party came around in 1977, Baggs and McGill were gone and the Vietnam War was over and Jimmy Carter was in the White House. Ruth Holmberg, publisher of the Chattanooga Times throughout Pop's ^{latter-d} thirty-year sojourn in the South, staged the surprise gathering in the station-bound Wabash Cannonball, and most of the War Correspondents and Popham Seminarrians came to join the Holmbergs and Sulzbergers and Turner Catledge and Frances Popham in a toast and roast of their favorite reporter. Harold Fleming called the gathering "the confluence of two great oral tributaries, two nobly garrulous traditions,"

insert after lines
of verse on page 38:

Another of the anecdotes recalled that night by Turner Catledge and embellished by Popham himself concerned ~~the~~^{Pop's} expense account after covering the Henry Wallace presidential campaign through the South in 1948. The long and hilarious tale of a ten- to fourteen-day swing from North Carolina through Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, and Arkansas incorporated a cast of characters that included folk singer Pete Seeger, a cadre of left-wing radicals, Wallace's black secretary, assorted Southern straight men, reporters such as Edward Folliard of the Washington Post, the colorful and controversial candidate, and ~~the~~^{the} narrator, Popham. There were countless motorcades and train trips and hotel stops--sometimes as many as three registrations a day. ~~in~~ⁱⁿ the end, Popham chose to frame his expense account to The Times in the form of a long narrative that ran to about a dozen pages. "The accounting department kicked it up to me," Catledge recalled, "and I ordered them to pay it. It had everything--lunches in the woods, laundry, entertainment, even a watermelon. I sent a copy up to the Neiman Foundation at Harvard and they printed it in their house organ. It was a rare document."

and the journalists and educators, as if to prove the observation, proceeded to fill the old railway club car and diner to overflowing with laughter and cheer and torrents of high-octane Southern talk.

One after another, his contemporaries rose to lift Popham up and do him in--Gene Patterson, Harry Ashmore, Harold Fleming, Bill Emerson, each striving to accomplish Ruth Holmberg's stated purpose: "to make Pop speechless." Fleming's ode to the honoree ("To a Popham: Retiring but Never Shy") contained these lilted verses:

Deck the lodge with persiflage,
Popham's stepping down.
His peer for sheerest verbiage
Never will be found.

With white and black, with bad and good,
Popham's stock stayed high,
For when they asked him where he stood,
He just said, "Semper fi!"

If at the pearly gates some day
St. Peter bids me, "Stop!"
I'll only need to smile and say,
"I'm a friend of Pop."

insert here →

For delightful and outrageous excess, Emerson, as usual, took the *evening's* prize. He asserted that Popham had "talked the South through the crisis of the sixties," and that his rambling dissertations on Sartre and Camus were sometimes so stupefying to his Dixie audiences that "it made you want to lay on your back, put your feet up in the air, and lose your will to live." Patterson had already described how "caffeine ignited Pop," but Emerson claimed it was all a camouflage. "When coffee got up to the price of booze," he said, "Pop switched. All along, the sneaky little devil was saving his liver for his twilight years."

Finally, the man himself was invited to respond, and it was clear that Holmberg's goal of rendering him speechless had almost been achieved. "There's very little I can say here tonight," he began, "except to express my gratitude

and surprise and thanks to all." He told how he had first met ~~Sam~~ Catledge in a bar across the street from The New York Times offices in Manhattan: "It was a favorite after-hours watering hole for newspaper people, and I was there with some colleagues, and Catledge, standing nearby, heard me talking. We had not met at the time--that's a big newspaper, you know--and he came up to me and said, 'Are you from the South?' And that was the beginning of a long journey that now, thirty years later, has brought me here tonight."

Popham said a little more about his friends: "I owe so much to all of you, more than I could ever repay. The knowledge, the wisdom, the traveling, the great stories--so many lovely hours together . . ." And then, uncharacteristically, he stopped, and sat down. And all the others rose as one and applauded him for a long time.

*

The passing of Baggs and McGill marked the end of an era for the little band of Southern War Correspondents and Camp Followers, and in that same spring of 1969, another era began when Bob Anderson, Ed Crawford, Horace Renegar and a small coterie of higher education specialists staged the first Popham Seminar at an Atlanta hotel. The objective of the assembly was to keep alive the dialog that had started between higher education and the press during the tense decade of the 1960s, but only four of the fifteen people who attended the first gathering represented the press--Popham and Bill Emerson among them--and only two of the four were actively engaged in the practice of journalism in the South. (Emerson was actually between jobs, having had his editorial horse shot out from under him at the Saturday Evening Post a short time before. The Post's death throes had caused Emerson to miss Baggs's funeral, prompting his irreverent friend Ashmore and television newsman Sander Vanocur to send him a telegram from Miami. "Sorry

I can't make it to yours, either," it said. It was signed "Bill Baggs.")

Those who wanted a formal, agenda-based seminar argued their case early, but lost; what evolved was, in Anderson's descriptive phrase, "an informal bull session, unstructured^d, unrecorded, and unreported," and that first meeting in Atlanta set the pattern for all the others to come.

"People have asked me if I feel complimented to have these affairs named for me," Popham once said to the group. "I said no, not at all. I don't take it as an honor. It was a very pragmatic choice, you see. It's called the Popham Unstructured Seminar because it's meaningless, misdirected, and meandering-- just like me."

Subsequent seminars were held in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 1971, New Orleans in 1972, Raleigh in 1974, Atlanta in 1975, and Washington in 1976, before the memorable Chattanooga retirement party in 1977. The pre-retirement gatherings brought together an ever-expanding and rotating roster of educators and journalists, veterans and newcomers alike, as well as a scattering of politicians and a few women. The standing agenda was identified by Ed Crawford as "the human condition." Joe Cumming of Newsweek described the seminars as "a conspiracy to mythologize the de-mythologizing [of the South]." He marveled that "so many good and gamey stories and ideas were piled and flung."

Former Southern Regional Education Board staff members Ruth Smith and Jean Johnson took part in the discussions at the Atlanta meeting in 1975, and after that the gatherings routinely included female participants. Politicians who joined in from time to time included Senator Bill Brock of Tennessee, former Governors Sid McMath of Arkansas and LeRoy Collins of Florida and Linwood Holton of Virginia, and former Congressman Brooks Hays of Arkansas. To the regret of many at these periodic assemblies, black guests have been even more conspicuously absent than women and politicians; only John Lewis, now the

congressman from Atlanta, has ever joined in any of the War Correspondent or Seminar activities, and he only once. "I think," said one old-timer, "this is just too disreputable a group to attract a higher class of inmates." Efforts to persuade non-whites to participate are continuing.

Most of the seminars since 1977 have been held in the Atlanta area, the most notable exception being a 1982 retreat at Sapelo Island on the Georgia coast. The 1984 session, back in Atlanta, paid honor to Claude Sitton, whose writing and editorial work at the Raleigh News and Observer had ~~been~~ ^{won for him} a Pulitzer Prize. Seminararians Ed Crawford, Rudy Pate, and Bob Anderson subsequently have been singled out for recognition at the meetings, not so much for prize-winning as for what Bill Faulkner, another Southerner of note, valued most: endurance.

After the Sapelo adventure, charter Seminararian John Folger, a former Southern Regional Education Board staffer since gone on to higher fields of service in Florida, Tennessee, and Colorado, made one more attempt to harness the extemporaneous oral energies of Popham and the other veteran verbalists. "It was a great opportunity to visit with old friends, and to revive our 'bonding' to the flowing cultural traditions of the new South," he wrote in a post-session critique, and he added: "I suggest a heretical thought: that we select a theme of a more current nature which the Seminararians might discuss after the usual obeisance to Clinton, Little Rock, the U. S. Marines and other milestones of regional progress. There are some very bright people who assemble at these meetings, and I feel a little cheated if they only tell Southern war stories." Folger was not proposing anything so formal as an organization, or officers, or even advance planning. "You wouldn't need an agenda," he wrote, "just a couple of people who might put out a few ideas for discussion."

The modest suggestion never reached the trial stage. Good intentions notwithstanding, the preponderance of gathered journalists and educators seemed

content to leave the daily imperatives of their work behind and to enjoy the "seminars" as a day or two of social and cultural and even spiritual renewal unmarred by so much as a hint of seriousness or formality. These were times to eat, drink, chat, chuckle, and perhaps most of all to listen as Popham and the other spellbinding Southern orators held forth in what Harold Fleming called "the twilight of the oral tradition."

There was much of historical importance imbedded in the stories, and although separating the ore from the slag could sometimes be tedious and time-consuming, the effort was often rewarding. Fleming, for example, has on occasion given a vivid and thorough account of the circumstances that led to the publication in 1954 of The Negro and the Schools, a pathfinding survey and report on segregation in public education on the eve of the U. S. Supreme Court's momentous Brown decision, and so has Harry Ashmore, who directed the study, and John Griffin, who worked with Fleming and others on the project staff. Ashmore took leave from the Arkansas Gazette to complete the massive job in less than a year. The Ford Foundation's Fund for the Advancement of Education financed the project, and Southerners carried it out--Ashmore, Fleming, Griffin, staff director Philip Hammer, Mozell Hill, Ruth Morton, Guy Johnson, Robert Leflar, Ernst Swanson, John Maclachlan, Truman Pierce, Hylan Lewis, and about two dozen others, men and women, white and black.

The Negro and the Schools was not only the first responsible word from the South on the issue of school desegregation; it also served as the basis for a continuing study by journalists and educators of the South's response to revolutionary social change. The Southern Education Reporting Service and its successor organization, the Race Relations Information Center, ~~operated in~~ *conducted this work for* Nashville with support from the Ford Foundation and other philanthropic groups from 1954 to 1973.

some time off

"When I took ~~leave~~ from the Gazette in 1953 to start that project," said Ashmore, "I remember telling a veteran Arkansas politician about it, and he said, 'Son, it sounds to me like you've got yourself in the position of a man running for sonofabitch without opposition.' I also remember asking Pop for advice. 'You've got to do it, of course,' he said. 'It's vital, the time is right, and you're the man for the job.' Ashmore's incisive and excellent book on American racism, Hearts and Minds, published in 1982, gives a general account of the 1953-54 study--with somewhat less detail and color than has been heard in the rambling, anecdotal versions at the Popham Seminars.

Other war stories, more humorous and probably less historically significant, linger pleasantly in the minds of veteran Seminararians. There was the time at Clinton ^{in 1956} when Ted Poston, a black reporter from the New York Post, ventured onto the street during a lull in the action. Murray Kempton, another Northern reporter, may have been with him. "They were wearing walking shorts," said Popham, "the sort of attire you might see on a British field officer in the tropics, but not what men in east Tennessee wore in those days. I feared for their lives. At about that time, word came to us of a new disturbance up in Kentucky, and I suggested to Poston and Kempton that they hurry up there to check it out. I didn't breathe easy until they were safely out of town."

And then there was the time, very early in Popham's return to the South, when he found himself in jail in Jackson, Mississippi. "I had been covering the governors conference at Wakulla Springs, Florida," he said. "This was in the spring of 1948, after the Dixiecrats had organized their exodus from the Democratic Party. They walked out of the convention in Philadelphia later that summer, and they ran Governor Strom Thurmond of South Carolina and Governor Fielding Wright of Mississippi as a presidential ticket that fall. I had managed to get myself on speaking terms with those gentlemen at the conference in Florida,

and then I had gone on up to Jackson to work on another story. I went to a meeting at a black church there, and while it was in progress, two white men who turned out to be plainclothes policemen walked in and invited me outside. 'Are you white?' one of them said to me. I acknowledged that I was, and they took me downtown and locked me up. I stayed in jail for four hours. Word of my plight reached Percy Green, a writer for the black paper in Jackson, and he called Ken Toler in the capital press corps, and Ken called Governor Wright, and the governor, remembering our conversation a few days earlier, called up the mayor of Jackson and told him to turn me loose. It was the only time I ever got taken out of the game, and it reinforced my determination to keep the lines open to all sides as I moved about trying to cover this great story of the South's transformation."

And so he did. With the Dixiecrat supersegs and old-guard Populists, the bourbons and buffoons, the courtly Old South aristocrats and the comely New South progressives, Popham talked and listened morning, noon, and night-- and whatever their ideological position on the monumental issues of the time, they all came to regard him as an honest scrivener trying to do his job in a professional manner, and they respected him for that. Some on the liberal side of the scale, feeling an instinctive kinship, came to value him as a personal friend.

One of the latter was LeRoy Collins, Florida's governor from 1955 to 1961. "John Popham was not a politician, not in the front rank of conspicuous reform organizations" in those years, Collins wrote in 1985. "Nevertheless, he came to know more about the South, its people, its pride, its limitations, its potential" than anyone else the governor could call to mind. He added:

"Pop was far more than a fine reporter. While he probably would never admit it, I think he was a missionary, saving souls as well as a region and

nation. He believed in a future for the South that would bring out the best in our people of all races, religions and callings. . . . He shared his insights with mayors, governors and members of Congress. Every time he came my way, he did more talking than I did. And the knowledge I gained from him, I shared with others. He was a man I could understand, admire, and a veritable wellspring of information that was loaded with important meaning for the South."

Keeping the lines open--that was Pop's trademark. "The man has no known enemies," one of his colleagues explained, and Pop himself, in one of his stream-of-consciousness soliloquies, made the same point:

"Race was clearly the overriding issue in the South, but there was so much more: the cities, rural people, local governments, county agents and experiment stations, the pulpwood industry--it goes on and on, and it all ties together. My God, what happened to all those kids I went to high school with? Hi-Y, reading the Bible, clean living, plain middle class people who have made nice anonymous lives for themselves. They're not wild men--they're ordinary people. I knew that world existed, and somehow it had to be part of the change, along with the politicians and the ^{corporations like} blacks and duPont. Fifty percent of duPont's investments were in six Southern states, and they were passing the word to their managers: 'You're going to have to accommodate.' The power shifts, the voting shifts, the money shifts--you had to know all of that to understand what was happening on the surface, with the governors and all. In the universities there were some rising young administrators, operators, people who could work with the politicians. I didn't just cover Talmadge--I also covered the Southern Regional Council, and the black colleges. Most reporters followed a white habit--they didn't see anything happening at the black colleges, so they stayed away. But I went to their meetings and conferences, and I stayed around afterward for bull sessions, and I wrote about them. The Southern Regional Education Board, the

Race Relations Institute at Fisk, Charles S. Johnson, Thurgood Marshall, Ruby Hurley, Harold Fleming at SRC, journalists, professors--hell, they were all important, key people, and most of them unknown. The governors conferences-- I covered so many of them, I could just about run them. I covered the Henry Wallace campaign in 1948, and the Dixiecrats that same year, and the state delegations at the national conventions. I had a gift of gab--plus I truly think I never hurt anybody. They hurt themselves sometimes, but I went at it straight--there's a way to do it--so when I wrote stories quoting them on the race issue, they'd usually remember that I'd also written about their other efforts, the good things they were doing, and that governor would usually say, 'Well, this story makes me look like a fool, but old Pop's fair.' I was fair-- fair to his life, to him as a person. It helped me, whereas it hurt some others who began to cover the South later on, who got identified as the guy who only sticks his head in the door when you're being called a sonofabitch, and he wants to know how do you spell your name with sonofabitch. I got acquainted, I found out where the good restaurants were, I got to know the bartenders and the waiters. I knew enough to cover all the bases, to call a governor or be seen out on the street with the local power figure--eating, drinking, being seen around, checking with lawyers, learning about families, old military connections. It's buying a little protection, it's knowing what to say, it's finding out where to be the next day. I never ran from anybody, but I never was in serious trouble. It's a sense of security--I knew who I was. The South has a lot of that--a closeness, a family thing: 'I knew your daddy,' or 'We fought in the marines together.' Growing up feeling it's a warm world. Blacks--how swiftly they can give their love to a child, a niece, a cousin. In the North, in the cities, it can be that way within a small family circle, or on one floor of a tenement building, but the circle is very small. I was willing to learn from other people, all kinds

of people. They had wisdom. I owe them a great debt. If I did anything useful, it was discovering how many really good people there were in the South, people who had no other way to be known, to be heard, except through a story in The New York Times. So many people would come from up East, and they couldn't get through that mask the Southerner had on. You had to take pains to understand and report. All those great black and white people with tremendous talents and abilities, and the great affection some of them had built together, working to transform the South--and you couldn't find many people in the North who knew that any such thing existed. They saw the South as a monolith. I knew better. And underneath it all there was so much humor, even though you were dealing with a tragic story. It was the saving grace, it was what sustained people, what allowed them to keep their sanity. It was a time of great events, and people were excited by the venture. There was a closeness, almost like in wartime--and it was a war. There were tacticians as brilliant as Lee, as adroit, as misunderstood. And there was the growing realization that by God, it was going to work this time. The South couldn't keep on saying, 'Never!' There would be some lost skirmishes, but not the battle, not the war. The South was going to change. It was a great time, a great time--and a great beat on which to practice the skills of journalism."

Vintage Popham, non-stop Popham. It was monologues such as this that inspired the formation of the Popham Seminars in the first place, and it was the amazing ability of Popham, Ashmore, Emerson, and the other War Correspondents and Camp Followers to sustain the level of rhetoric that doomed all efforts to structure the meetings. As a warm-up for the 1979 seminar, Popham stood before a group of university science writers *at a meeting in Atlanta* and talked for an hour without glancing at a note, roaming through time from the Dark Ages to the Space Age, through geography from ancient China to modern Chattanooga.

"Fifty years ago I was a cub reporter in New York," he began, "and that

was in Prohibition times--speakeasies and so forth. And at that particular time there was a very popular place for newspapermen to hang out in the Brooklyn Heights section. The Brooklyn Heights section is a very famous old part of America. It is where Tallyrand walked with a gold-headed cane when he was a refugee from France. It's where Eamon DeValera was born, who later went to Ireland to lead that particular revolution. It's where Count Svorsa was living after Mussolini had driven him out of Italy. It's where Walt Whitman, as editor of the Brooklyn Eagle, used to walk the streets and spout his poetry. And there was a beer garden there in the basement of a house, run by a man named Haggerty. We would drink there at night--you could get a large pitcher of home brew for a dollar. The bricklayers and plasterers and latherers who worked on the buildings were Irish, and they would come there. But you see, they weren't just bricklayers and plasterers and latherers--they were the first urban guerrillas in modern history. They had all fought with the Irish Republican Army. Many of them had been at Phoenix Park in Dublin in 1916, and they had had to flee Ireland when their cause crumbled in about 1922. . . ."

On the story went, through the Bolshevik Revolution, through Andre Malraux and Man's Fate, back to Prince Henry the Navigator in the sixteenth century, forward to Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson serving successively as early American envoys to France, backward and forward, up and down, in and out, weaving a tapestry of history and human comedy. The audience was mesmerized, beguiled, held in thrall. Finally, appropriately, miraculously, Popham tied the long discourse into a single soaring structure with a verbal portrait of a great scientist, Christopher Wren, an astronomer, an architect, a Renaissance Man, who designed forty of the great cathedrals and churches of London in the seventeenth century, and whose body is buried in the walls of St. Paul's Cathedral,

" . . . and over his tomb is a motto which says in Latin si monumentum

requis circumspice--which translates, 'If you seek his monument, look around you.' And I submit to you this evening that if you seek our monument, look around you on this university--vibrancy, freedom, belief, confidence, fascination with the human mind, lifting yourselves to a common purpose. We all function so much better when we have a sense of meaning for all the peoples of the world that we can share with. An open and free society. Many flaws, many flaws--I don't question that. But nevertheless, it's still a grand design, and still a great adventure. Not some pyramids left by an aristocrat, not some great land holdings in the hands of some majesty, not great arches and triumphal Caesars and soldiers--but vibrant, living, democratic institutions that every single one of us can share in and do something about. We are involved in probably the greatest adventure that man has ever had in the Western world. We are the unquestioned shapers of the whole thing. And I suggest to you that if you go back home and see it that way, we may endure."

The science writers exploded in applause and cheers. They had just been sent on a noble mission, and they charged from the room like the Gipper's gladiators. The smiling, sagacious Possum had taken the terrace by charm.

Not long after his retirement from the Chattanooga Times, Johnny Popham turned his restless energy to an unfinished endeavor that he had laid aside more than thirty years before--the study of law. Several days each week for six months, he commuted between Chattanooga and Nashville--a 270-mile round trip--to attend classes. The great distance and the restrictions of winter weather finally stopped him. Living as he and Frances did on the Georgia side of Lookout Mountain, he then decided that as a resident of Georgia he should go instead to school in Atlanta--and so, for more than three years, he drove the round-trip distance (a mere 220 miles) three or four times a week. Finally, in 1982, the vigorous and indomitable John Nicholas Popham III, seventy-two years young,

marched in a solemn procession with about forty other men and women to receive the Doctor of Jurisprudence degree from the John Marshall Law School of Atlanta.

It would be hard to imagine a man more suited--by experience as well as training, by philosophical bent, by character--to the majesty of the law, and to its foundations of truth, justice, and fairness. But sometimes the law, as a Dickens character once said, is an ass; in its mindless obsession with institutional self-preservation, it may lose the ability to distinguish between what is correct and proper, in a narrow sense, and what is true and wise, in a universal sense. *In the case of Popham, the institution of lawyers has clung to the narrow.*

Several times since his graduation, Popham has taken the Georgia Bar Exam and failed to get enough correct answers. A man of some pride, he is unwilling to pursue cram courses and intensive coaching in preparation for the test--and without such artificial instruction, he is not likely ever to succeed. He is not bitter about his failure, or the system's; on the contrary, he is quietly proud of having survived the rigorous discipline of learning the law, even though he is technically prohibited from practicing it.

The law is the loser, it and the people it protects. Imagine the sight and sound of John N. Popham, counsel for the defense, delivering the closing argument in a courtroom!

*

In the post-noon lull, before the crowd gathered for cocktails and dinner and the celebration of his seventy-fifth birthday, Popham was ensconced in the hotel bar with a little clutch of early arrivals. A renovation of the lobby was in progress, and the intrusions of noise and dust and Georgia heat seeped under the barroom doors, but the man of the hour paid them no mind. He removed his stinky-brim straw hat and blotted the sweat around his thatch of

thinning gray hair. He wore a hearing aid in each ear--and, with those as his badges of entitlement, he was entertaining the group with a "deaf" joke. The punch line was coming:

"'What'd he say?' the woman asked, and her husband replied, 'He said he thinks he knows you from somewhere else.'"

The table erupted in gales of laughter as Popham blinked and smiled. He seemed his usual ebullient self--energetic, loquacious, earthy and irreverent, laughing hardest at his own foibles, greeting and embracing one and all with merry delight. As the afternoon progressed, a few of his closest friends may have detected a little age in his eyes. Perhaps the years had slowed him by a half-step, by a few RPMs; he somehow seemed more relaxed, maybe quieter, at moments almost subdued--or was it just a mellowness? Whatever it was, you had to look closely to see it. He was, as always, still stimulated and animated and energized by the give and take of good conversation, good Southern talk, and when sufficiently provoked, he could still deliver an elegant and eloquent extemporaneous soliloquy, whether the audience was a single person or a huge throng.

He demonstrated the gift over beer and hamburgers at his favorite Chattanooga lunch spot one afternoon ^{later in the summer.} At a corner table for two, the talk ranged over numerous subjects before it finally turned, as it often does, to the once and future South. A jukebox delivered country music in the background. Leaning forward on his elbows, Popham was deep in thought, turning a question over in his mind, then talking rapidly, his voice gradually rising over the music. In the cool semi-darkness, he was addressing the continuing identity, for better or worse, of the South as a separate place:

"There's change, plenty of it, and some of it is regrettable, disappointing. The sameness, the TV, the fast food, all of that. There's no magnolia heaven here, there never was. But the character of the South at its best is still here, and

it will linger, I think it will survive. It's always been there, you know-- the feeling for history, for family, the closeness, the sincerity. There will always be an element of decency here, leading as well as following. We've got some good people in congress now, and in the statehouses--including many blacks-- and I really believe they'll preserve those things we know that make us Southerners. Shed the negative stuff, the bad stuff, the show biz, and retain our best. We'll be an identifiable region, in the best sense, for a long time to come. You know the qualities--the families, the feelings, the food, the oral traditions, the humor, the eccentricities. We'll still have an identity, and it'll be a positive one.

"But will we in our lifetime see the end of racism, and of the problems it causes? I don't think so. There have been many good changes, of course, but we have done so much wrong all over the country, down through history. The terrible heritage of debasement of blacks goes back to our beginning, and we haven't corrected all the problems yet. We don't understand history. Look at Latin America now, vis a vis the United States. Out of ignorance, we are repeating the sins of our ancestors. The Latino today can't look at us and say, 'My God, that's my friend, I can depend on him, he knows, he understands.' This is the great challenge of our time. Western civilization, Western materialism is not enough; the challenge is the whole planet, the relationships, the interdependence. That's our duty, our historic responsibility, our mission. I think we'll do it, we'll make it--I'm a very optimistic person by nature--but it's going to be very hard. Let me tell you, the challenge is so great, calling for all kinds of knowledge and wisdom and love and understanding. The Serbs, the Hungarians, the Asians, the Third World, all of that--my God, they've done it alone, without the Western nations. The Huns, the Mohammedans, the people of history, the great diverse human parade. We call them Spics, Chinks, Niggers--we know nothing, nothing.

We expect everybody to understand what Washington meant, what Jefferson meant, but what do we know about the other great figures of history? What do we know about the Long March in China in 1934 and '35? Not ancient history, but recent, in our time. It was like crossing this continent twice--over mountains and rivers, through snow and rain and heat, a hundred thousand men, women, and children following Mao Tse-tung, and only ten thousand surviving. Forget ideology. Imagine what that story means to the people of China--women carrying children, men carrying their few possessions, people dying in gorges, drowning, toppling over mountains--and we don't even know it happened! To us, they're just a bunch of communists--but to them, that was a great moment in history. We grew up in this little isolated corner of the globe, and we've never learned to appreciate diversity, to take the broad view. We've said to every culture that has come to this country, the only way you can be a full-fledged American is to lose your accent, deny your culture, surrender your foreignness. We've got all the cultures of the world in this country, and that's our greatest asset, yet we seem intent on destroying it for the sake of nationalism. My God--it's a profound irony, isn't it? We don't have any leader, Republican or Democrat, who can make a Latino say, 'My God, that's my friend.' We're only at the very beginning of our awareness of the rest of the world, yet we are the most multicultural nation on earth.

"Still, I'm not pessimistic. We're gradually learning. We have better schools, better media. We're inching ahead, and moving in the right direction. The denied and deprived people are coming in, and that means moving a larger base than before, so we'll have to work harder. But we'll do the decent thing. I believe that, I really do."

It was Popham's rock, his firm foundation--a basic and unshakable faith that people, when properly informed and motivated and challenged, will do the decent thing.

In the hotel ballroom after dinner, the guest of honor listened as his old cronies answered the roll call once again. "Pop's coronation alone is sufficient evidence that we're up to no good," said Bill Emerson. John Griffin and Harold Fleming, Harry Ashmore and Gene Patterson, Bob Anderson and Horace Renegar and Ed Crawford and dozens more laughed and applauded and got in a few thorns and roses of their own. Frances Evans Popham took it all in, and so did Hillary Becker Popham, a social worker and family advocate in the cancer unit of the Duke University Hospital, and John Nicholas Popham IV, a Nashville attorney.

Ruth Holmberg, his longtime friend and publisher in Chattanooga, could say with some assurance that she had known Johnny Popham longer than anyone in the room ("our friendship goes back to about 1939"). She lauded "his inherent belief in the worth of every individual," his generosity of spirit, his graciousness.

At length, Popham was allowed the last word. He said a few humorous, self-mocking things about the Southern War Correspondents and Camp Followers, and about the Popham Seminars. He talked about the warmth of his friendship with those gathered, and those departed. He expressed his admiration for "Southerners and their rhetoric, their command of the language," and for the journalists and educators and politicians "who had a wisdom, a knowledge, a calling to do the decent thing." And then he concluded with a story:

"When I was a young reporter in New York, I was very much taken by the writing of George Santayana, who was a philosopher at Harvard in those days. There were several reporters on The Times who were great admirers of Santayana, and we used to sit up late at night in deep philosophical discussions largely inspired by his writing. It meant a great deal to me then, when I was also studying philosophy in a Jesuit school, and I have carried that love with me throughout my life. There is a passage from Santayana that I have often quoted, and I would like to apply it to all of us here tonight. He said:

The world is not respectable; it is mortal, tormented, confused, and deluded forever. But it is shot through with beauty, with love, and with glints of courage and laughter, and in these the spirit blooms timidly and struggles to the light among the thorns.

"I want to say that in my life, you have been the glints of courage and laughter and love that have allowed me to see some light--and all of us together, those of us here and those no longer with us, have done our best to help the spirit bloom and struggle to the light amid the thorns. And I thank all of you for what you have done for the South, and what you have meant to me."

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