

C.A. 'Pete' McKnight

Colbert Augustus McKnight (1916-1986) seldom heard anyone call him by his full name. He was always "Pete" McKnight.

As editor of the Charlotte Observer during the roiling years of the 1950s and 1960s when the racial revolution swept the South, McKnight exercised both editorial and personal influence to move Charlotte toward peaceful acceptance of desegregation of schools and public life. It was a tough job. For a half century and more, the Observer had been a bastion of economic conservatism and racial superiority in the community and in North Carolina.

McKnight's soft-spoken style belied his tenacity in remaking the Observer. He rebuilt the newsroom, adding bureaus throughout the surrounding area and in the state capital in Raleigh. He pressed his reporters to dig critically into community problems. He used his standing as a big wheel in the chamber of commerce to rally the city's business elite behind steps to desegregate public accommodations and to back court decisions requiring extensive busing to achieve integration of schools in the fast-growing urban area.

McKnight's newspaper career started as a teenager when he worked for the hometown Shelby Star. He spent a summer in Cuba, working with an older brother who was Associated Press correspondent there. After graduation from Davidson College, he worked for the Charlotte News as a reporter and editor of feature pages. During World War II, he was editor of an English-language daily in Puerto Rico.

Back in Charlotte, he was soon editor of the News. In the early 1950s, he founded the Southern Education Reporting Service, which published a monthly journal reporting on racial developments in Southern education. The Knight newspaper chain brought him back to Charlotte as editor of the Observer in 1955.

McKnight's energy and commitment to modern journalism made him influential among his peers. He served as president of the North Carolina Press Association and the American Society of Newspaper Editors. Scores of young journalists trained under him and went on to important jobs in the Knight chain and on other newspapers.

A health problem that made him nearly blind caused McKnight to leave active editorial leadership in 1976. But his mark was on the Observer for good. Editors and publishers who followed him tended to view their role in the activist, community-oriented mold of Pete McKnight.

By Roy Parker Jr.
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