

Willard Cole and Horace Carter

When Willard Cole (1906-1965) and Horace Carter took on the Ku Klux Klan in Columbus and Robeson counties, they had to keep a loaded shotgun by the front door. But tenacity and courage eventually won them the 1953 Pulitzer Prize, the first ever awarded to weekly newspaper journalists.

Cole was a Wilkes County native who edited the Whiteville News-Reporter. The younger Carter was editor under Cole of the associated Tabor City Tribune.

The two began editorializing against the resurgent Klan as early as 1950, when night-riders, many from South Carolina, began holding cross-burning rallies in the rural countryside along the Pee Dee River, and harassing families in the area.

Week after week, Cole hammered the KKK activities, ran names of Klan leaders, interviewed people who said they had been terrorized, and prodded law enforcement officers to take action.

Cole had been in Columbus County for 20 years, first as head of the Tabor City Chamber of Commerce, and newspaper editor in Whiteville since 1948, so he was personally familiar with many of the people he attacked. A Klan leader said, "I guess we despised the editor of the News-Reporter most."

Klan violence reported by the newspapers led to arrest over 80 men on kidnapping and assault charges, and all were convicted.

The Klan in the Pee Dee region made journalism history again

in 1958, when a nighttime Klan rally near Maxton was broken up by hundreds of angry Lumbee Indians, who poured out of the woods on a cold January night to chase two dozen robed participants to their cars.

In the melee, a reporter and a photographer for the Fayetteville Observer were slightly wounded by the birdshot flying through the darkness. Reporter Pat Reese and photographer Bill Shaw had to stop by the hospital before heading back to their newsroom to report the night's events.

Shaw's photos, taken just before the shooting began, were the best visual record of the event, which made national headlines and eventually led to congressional hearings that exposed 20th-century Klan activity throughout the South.

By Roy Parker Jr.
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