

“The Newspaper”

What did a typical North Carolina newspaper newsroom look like 80 years ago?

The best description is in a work of fiction, a short story by North Carolina's most famous author, Thomas Wolfe (1900-1938).

Titled “The Newspaper,” the story undoubtedly describes the office of the Asheville Citizen. As a teen-ager, Wolfe delivered the newspaper. His brother briefly worked as a reporter.

Wolfe sets the scene of his story with a passage in the form of stage directions for a play:

“The time: A hot night in June 1916.

The place: The city room of a small town newspaper.

The room has three or four flat-topped desks, typewriters, green-shaded lights hanging from the ceiling by long cords, some filing cabinets. Upon the wall, a large map of the United States. Upon the desks, newspaper clippings, sheets of yellow flimsy, paste pots, pencils, etc. Overall, a warm smell of ink, a not unpleasant air of use and weariness.

To the right, a door opening into a small room which houses the A.P. man, his typewriter, and his instruments. To the left, a glass partition and a door into the compositor's room. The door stands open and the compositor can be seen at work before the linotype machines, which make a quiet slotting sound. The A.P. man's door is also open, and he can be seen within, typing rapidly, to the accompaniment of the clattering telegraph instrument on the table beside him.

In the outer room, Theodore Willis, a reporter, sits at his desk, banging away at a typewriter. He is about 28 years old, consumptive, very dark of feature, with oval-shaped brown eyes, jet black hair, thin hands, and a face full of dark intelligence, humor, sensitivity.

At another desk, his back toward Willis, sits another reporter - young, red-headed, red-necked, stocky - also typing.

All the men wear green eye-shades. Theodore Willis is smoking a cigarette which hangs from the corner of his mouth and which he inhales from time to time, narrowing his eyes to keep the smoke out.

Harry Tugman, the chief pressman, enters at this moment with a bundle tied in a newspaper under his arm. He is a powerful man, brutally built, with the neck, shoulders, and battered features of a prize fighter. His strong, pitted face is colorless, and pocked heavily with ink marks."

Wolfe's classic picture could serve as the introduction to the working environment of North Carolina daily journalism for at least another 50 years.

By Roy Parker Jr.
January 1998