Beleaguered Bill Minor

By James S. Featherston

It is a lazy Saturday morning in Mississippi, and normally it would be a day of much needed rest for Bill Minor, but instead he is driving to his small newspaper shop in a deteriorating warehouse district of Jackson. The reason for coming to the office this day is that Minor is to have done to him what he has so often done to others — Minor is to be interviewed. It is something that has happened quite frequently in recent months because Minor, a dedicated, crusading newspaperman, is becoming rather famous, though not rich, in his chosen profession.

As Minor parks his car, his clear blue eyes sweep the exterior of his small brick building. The windows, three times the targets of flying bricks, are boarded up, and the bricks at one corner of the building are charred, the result of a flaming cross. Minor, a trimly built man with salt-and-pepper hair, enters his cluttered office, takes his seat behind a desk that is buried under several inches of paper, and talks about his triumphs (some) and tribulations (many).

Wilson F. "Bill" Minor, who was the Mississippi correspondent for the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* for 29 years, has been for the past two years the full-time editor and publisher of the *Capital Reporter,* which, as he puts it, comes out "weekly but never weakly" in Jackson. A gaudy newspaper typographically, it features big, bold headlines and generous splashes of often lurid color. Usually the contents are just as sensational.

The 56-year-old Minor specializes in hard-hitting investigative reporting, and his brand of journalism has

doubled the newspaper's circulation, from 3,000 to 6,000 in the past two years. Wrong-doing "sacred cows" go through the wringer that is Minor's typewriter and come out looking like hamburger meat. Corrupt politicians, indiscreet businessmen, Ku Kluxers, underworld figures and assorted other miscreants are similarly treated.

Inevitably, Minor has accumulated powerful enemies, some of whom control advertising now denied him. Investigative journalism, Minor has found out the hard way, may be soul-satisfying, but it can also be physically dangerous and financially disastrous. Minor, however, has managed to survive despite threats, advertising boycotts, smashed windows, and the burning cross that damaged his shop and almost set it on fire.

Minor's work and woes have attracted national and even some international attention. Last March Minor received the Elijah Lovejoy Award for journalistic coverage from Southern Illinois University. This complements the Louis Lyons Award presented to him by the Nieman Fellows at Harvard in 1966 for "conscience and integrity" in covering the civil rights struggle. He has been featured in articles in Time, several other magazines, and a number of newspapers, including the *Manchester Guardian* in England. He and his newspaper also have been spotlighted on the NBC "Today" show and "NBC Nightly News."

"Mississippi is a better state and Jackson a better city because Wilson F. 'Bill' Minor has been socking it to fast-and-loose bankers, crooked politicians, the Ku Klux Klan and others," wrote syndicated columnist Carl T. Rowan. And Jack Anderson put it this way: "Thomas Jefferson had men like Bill Minor in mind when he declared that if he had to choose between a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, he would take his morning paper."

Awards and praise, unfortunately, are like by-lines. They are nice to have, but they do not pay the overhead, and this is a nagging concern for Minor. He is steadily losing money.

His investigative articles have cost him lucrative advertising accounts. Mississippi Power & Light Company, for instance, which advertises in every other weekly in the state, stopped buying space in the *Capital Reporter* when Minor revealed that the utility company had entertained members of the regulatory Public Service Commission on a duck-hunting trip.

Minor lost the account of one leading bank when he linked its board chairman to a federal jury-fixing case that resulted in the indictment of a court clerk. He lost the advertising of another big bank, in a case that was covered up by authorities, when he revealed that police had confiscated several pounds of marijuana at the home of the bank president. Other stories have drawn considerable heat, including one in which a state judge was forced to resign after Minor revealed that the official had been illegally practicing law on the side. Minor also wrote about the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan in Jackson.

As a result of Minor's vigilant reporting, the windows of his building have been smashed three times in the past year. Because he cannot afford to replace them, he has simply boarded them up. During one of the brick-throwing incidents, a typesetter was stolen. The burning cross set up outside his building ignited some exterior wiring, and this cost Minor $360 in repairs. If an off-duty fireman had not spotted the flames in passing, and reported the fire, the damage would have been extensive.

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A child of the Depression, Minor grew up in a succession of small South Louisiana towns including Hammond, where he was born, and Bogalusa, where he finished high school. His father, a linotype operator, worked at various newspaper and printing shops, and was frequently unemployed.

"It was a struggle, a bad struggle," recalls Minor. "If it hadn't been for the WPA, we wouldn't have made it."

By the time Minor reached high school, journalism as a career was the farthest thing from his mind. Because of his father's difficulty in finding steady employment, Minor was disenchanted.

"I had really been turned off of newspapers by my father's experiences," he says. "For one thing, he had the curse of many printers — he was addicted to the bottle. And he was out of work an awful lot. But what did turn me on to journalism was an English teacher at Bogalusa High School named Eleanor Ott. She made the greatest impact on my life, professionally, of anyone."

After graduating from high school in 1939, Minor got his first newspaper job that summer as a cub reporter with the *Bogalusa Enterprise.*

"I covered my first assignments on a bicycle. Bogalusa is a hilly town and if I didn't develop anything else, I developed a good set of legs," he grins. "But I got some good experience. I learned how to cover political meetings and governmental bodies."

Minor worked his way through Tulane University, which at that time had a journalism department. He first worked for the old *Item* as a night watchman and ad taker, and later became a part-time reporter for the *Times-Picayune*. He graduated from Tulane in 1943 and received a commission in the Navy. During some of the bloodiest battles of World War II, he served as gunnery officer on a destroyer.

After the war, in January 1946, Minor returned to the *Times-Picayune* as a full-time reporter, working nights off the city desk. In the summer of 1947, he was sent to Mississippi to man the newspaper's one-man bureau in Jackson. Soon Mississippi politicians and others discovered that Minor was not a gentle house cat but rather a fierce journalistic watchdog. One of the articles focused national attention on a secret police organization called the Mississippi Bureau of Investigation, and caused its demise. After Minor wrote a series about shocking conditions in the state's mental institutions, legislation was enacted to improve them. Another of Minor's articles revealed that a black man had been wrongly convicted of a crime.

An underworld source once told him that a 'contract' was out on his life.

"The man had already served three years of his prison term when I found out about it. I dug into the case and came up with evidence proving his innocence," Minor recalls. "The governor let the man out of the penitentiary, and the legislature even appropriated $2,500 for the wrongful conviction. They had never done that before, and haven't since, as far as I know."

During the long, hot civil rights battles in Mississippi, Minor wrote many other stories of significance.

"I reported the small number of blacks who were registered to vote in Mississippi, and the way they were treated when they did attempt to register," he says. "I spent years collecting information on black registration, and I was able to compile a statewide figure which, incidentally, was used by the Justice Department, the Southern Regional Council, and others working on voter registration.

"I also did stories on the great disparity between the money allocated to black teachers as compared to white teachers," Minor adds. "The articles showed that whites were getting from four to one times the funds, and that in the distribution of funds for libraries, the ratio was something like 10 to one. These figures were later used in the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act."

As chairman of the Freedom of Information Committees of the Louisiana-Mississippi Associated Press Association and the Society of Professional Journalists — Sigma Delta Chi, Minor's efforts helped pass an open meetings law in Mississippi. "There is nothing to compare with the satisfaction of writing a story that has an impact on society and results in changes being made," he beams.

In 1973 Minor purchased the *Northside Reporter*, an ailing neighborhood newspaper with approximately 120 subscribers. He altered its direction and changed its name to the *Capital Reporter*.

"The idea was to develop this into a citywide newspaper, an alternative to the monopoly-run Jackson dailies," Minor says. (The Hederman family owns the only two dailies in the city.)

Minor hired others to run his newspaper for the first three years. Then, when the *Times-Picayune* closed its Jackson bureau in 1976, he elected to stay in the city and devote himself full-time to the *Capital Reporter*. Since then, he and his small staff have been coming up with sensational investigative articles weekly. On occasion Minor has rushed into print with poorly researched articles that have misfired, but he has been on target more often than not.

Minor is keeping his newspaper afloat with money he receives from his column, "Eyes on Mississippi" (see page 23 for sample column), which is syndicated to 16 newspapers, from a weekly commentary he writes for a television station, and for work he does as a stringer for *The New York Times* and Newsweek. His wife, Gloria, who went back to college after their three sons were grown, helps out with her salary as a researcher.

Financial assistance also comes from unexpected sources. A businessman in Defiance, Ohio, who said he did "not like to see anyone picked on," sent Minor $1,000. "Friends of Bill Minor" raised about $500 for him at a wine-and-cheese party. The staffs of two newspapers, one on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, and one in South Florida, collected money for him.

So, even though Minor has received numerous telephone threats, his home has occasionally been put under police surveillance, and an underworld source once told him that a "contract" was out on his life, he remains a true Mississippi muckraker, and continues to do what he has always done — print the truth as he sees it.

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"Eyes on Mississippi" — from the Capital Reporter, *October 6, 1977*

Getting Rid of Bad Officials Tough Job Here

By Wilson F. Minor

What can citizens in Mississippi stuck with a bad public official expect in the way of help from the state in getting rid of him? Very little, it seems.

That point was demonstrated once again the past week when Gov. Cliff Finch refused to suspend Pearl River County Tax Collector-Assessor Hal Breland from office because of a $20,500 shortage in his accounts.

The request for suspending Breland had come jointly from Atty. Gen. A.F. Summer and State Auditor Hamp King under a provision of the 1890 constitution about defaulting tax collectors.

Finch's reason that "it had never been done before" by any governor in the 87 years existence of that power seems rather shallow. No president of the United States had ever resigned before under threat of impeachment until Richard M. Nixon stepped out of the most powerful office in the world in 1974.

NO NEWCOMER

Breland is no newcomer to the art of discrepancies and shortages in office revealed by state audits. His record goes back to 1972 when he came up $13,771.89 short. A cash count the next year showed him $15,614 short. Again, in 1975, a $24,953 shortage.

Yet with all of this information before them, the citizens of Pearl River County re-elected Breland in 1975, and although he was delayed for a while taking office, he went back into his job.

Finch's side-stepping of the request to put Breland on the shelf pending a further investigation of his accounts stems from the time-honored code in Mississippi that an official once elected cannot be removed no matter what he has done.

The biggest surprise of the Breland affair is that Summer and King stuck their necks out to the extent of seeking the suspension of a county official. For many years, they have treated county officials with so much deference that it has become a joke around the state.

(Some say Summer and King have been like the two skeletons in a closet . . . one said to the other "if either of us had any guts, we would get out of here.")

King, who apparently is not running for re-election in 1979, has been trying to get a little tougher the past couple of years by sending his meager staff of field investigators into a few counties to mount information against miscreants in county offices. His policy has been to turn the information over to local district attorneys to prosecute.

BARE OF CONVICTIONS

So far, the record has been bare of any convictions, the latest setback coming in Wayne County where an ex-supervisor and a wheeler-dealer culvert salesman went scot-free despite the impressive amount of evidence gathered by King's investigators.

The attorney general has the power to step into local prosecutions if he really wants to, but Summer has consistently shied away from that. Strangely, the only time Summer has turned loose his big battery of assistants to prosecute a public official was in the case of former Highway Commissioner E.L. Boteler.

Citizens in Mississippi can't lay all the blame on their state officials for failing to help them get rid of malevolent public officials.

There is a remedy which they can use at home — a public officials recall law that was pushed through by Gov. J.P. Coleman with much fanfare back in 1956.

Coleman had staked his administration program on passage of the recall law, contending that the people had no protection locally against corrupt officials once they were elected.

NEVER USED

The recall law says that the governor can remove from office any elective county official if petitioned by 30 percent of the qualified voters of the county demanding the official's removal. In the case of state or district officials, the petition must be signed by 51 percent of the qualified voters. A recall council would then be formed to determine if the official will be removed.

Those are pretty tough requirements to be met, but aroused citizens shouldn't find it insurmountable if they have courageous leadership.

But the great irony is that although the law has been in effect for more than 20 years, it has never been used successfully by any county or local district in the state.