

Remarks by John Seigenthaler, Tom and Pat Gish Award Dinner, presentation to the Ezzell family of Canadian, Tex., for the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues, Lexington, Ky., April 20, 2007

. . . I have never been among friends, among journalists, when I have felt more deeply touched by the emotion of being in the presence of people who have . . . committed their lives to tenacity, courage and integrity. . . .

I want to pay a great tribute to Al [Smith] and Al [Cross] and Rudy [Abramson] and the others who have made such a marvelous enterprise of this institute. . . . This institute recognizes that the heart and soul of American journalism, the legacy of American journalism, the tradition of the American Journalist, began with the weekly. . . . (stories of Benjamin Harris, *Publick Occurrences*, 1690; next paper, 1704; John Peter Zenger, *New-York Weekly Journal*, 1733)

I say to Pat [Gish], and to Nancy [Ezzell], Anna Katerina [Zenger] got that paper out on time every edition, and some people said it was a better paper with John Peter in jail and Nancy as the editor! . . . After the Revolution, truth as a defense against libel became the law. It didn't stop Tom and Pat, nor Ben and Nancy, from being faced with threats of libel suits and possible damages and constant legal fees. It doesn't protect any weekly newspaper editor today. But that tradition is so precious to us. It comes to us from a background of weekly editors who cared enough to confront authority and to make a case against authority in the face of loss of liberty. . . .

(Alien and Sedition Acts) "24 editors suffered punishment or persecution during that period; some of them went out of business; some died; a number of them were convicted and went to prison . . . There was a massive wave of resentment against Adams. Some historians think it elected Jefferson. . . . Weekly journalism is what this country was about at the beginning. Weekly publishers were people of courage, of integrity, and tenacity stood against authority, stood against community evils, against national evils, international problems, took strong positions, and that's our legacy. That's MY legacy, and I never worked for a weekly. . . .

(spoke at Nebraska Press Association the night before) I know journalists are concerned about the future of this business, but I found very little concern, particularly among the weekly editors and publishers. They are thinking, as the Gishes did and the Ezzells did, about leaving their weekly newspapers to their children, to carry on this tradition of weekly journalism. . . . One place young journalists should be looking for employment, for jobs where there is confidence about a future, is in rural America, where I find less concern about the future than in daily journalism. . . .

I think about Ben [Ezzell] driving 100 miles to attend a meeting of the John Birch Society, and to come back to that community and write about that meeting and warn citizens of that community that this is a danger that's creeping and capturing the minds and souls of many people, turning one group against another – how often Pat looked beyond these borders, of Letcher County, [Kentucky,] and how often they looked beyond the borders of Hemphill County[, Texas] . . .

They want their points of view known to their readers about the issues that are of local concern, but of national and international concern as well – and whether it's the War in Vietnam or the War on Poverty, you read the works of rural editors and they try hard. Nancy, you still do Petticoat Patter. That's not the war, but it reaches out to the community and touches them in a way I don't think I touched the readers of *The Tennessean* in all the 30 years I was editor and publisher. So I'm very proud tonight to come. . . .

It's much easier for me, as a daily editor in a major city. There is much less danger of threat, much more chance that I have lawyers to protect me. There is much less likelihood that somebody will explode a bomb beneath my window or shoot into my plate-glass window or burn down our building, than for those who are in rural communities. And when I say I hope I have shown tenacity and courage and integrity, I can't think of anything in my career that matches what must be those lonely days and nights when a lawsuit is threatened or danger is threatened, when life is threatened, in a rural community.

You know, we laugh when we think of the fellow with cauliflower ears standing before Ben – "I drove 100 miles to whip your ass" – never happened. They couldn't have gotten by the security gate. I think the tradition, the legacy, is best reflected today in rural journalism, and for all this business has meant to my life, and it's meant a great deal, I cannot but recognize that those who stand for problems in their community and their nation and around the world, and reflect for the readers in rural communities the truth that was once published by Zenger, I have the greatest admiration, and I deeply appreciate the opportunity tonight to come and talk about it.