

A Texas Newsman

My dad, Raymond B. Holbrook was – first and foremost – a newsman in an era when the word “newsman” summoned up visions of a crusader, a truth seeker, and a hero. He lived and breathed the news business until his last headline on Friday, August 10, 1984: Veteran Texas Newsman and Educator Dies.

His 50-year career in journalism covered it all – writing, editing, managing newspapers, and teaching journalism. Dad got his start in college on the Daily Texan newspaper at the University of Texas, when his name first appears as a Day Reporter. In 1946 at age 32, he founded and published Texas Week, a weekly newsmagazine about the state of Texas. It got high marks for journalism and then ran out of money after seven months, a blip in publishing history but a ripple in our family culture. For the last 25 years of his career, he worked for the Associated Press in Dallas and was known as the “go-to guy” in the journalism community.

But for a man who dedicated his life to reporting the news, Dad revealed very little about himself to his family or friends. Perhaps it was his West Texas upbringing where people don’t toot their own horn. Perhaps he thought his bylines would speak for themselves, although they only lasted a day in the newspaper, unlike a book on the shelf. Most likely, he didn’t see himself as part of the story – he was a newsman on the story to find out about others with his reporter’s mantra: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?

I was 40 when Dad died, so I did get to know him well adult-to-adult, but he didn’t talk much about his past. Out of respect or habit, I didn’t even ask him many of the questions I would have asked a first date. So, I was fascinated when I started piecing together the breadth of his career.

When I first searched the internet, I didn’t find much information about Dad. Then my husband Jim told me about the digitized newspaper sites, and I got a big surprise – 4,300 hits for “Raymond Holbrook” on NewspaperArchive.com. Even if I cut that number in half because the stories often appeared in multiple newspapers, Dad had accumulated quite a body of work over 50 years. Suddenly, I had a much richer picture of who he was: his life did not begin with my first memory of him, nor did it end when I left home after college. I was instantly grateful that

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his legacy was not just anchored by a good obituary, and I could now expand my incomplete picture of him.

Texas Week Newsmagazine

This story really begins with the discovery of Dad's Texas Week magazine in 2012 when I started the long, overdue task of cleaning out my garage, going through boxes accumulated from both sides of my family. As I sorted through an old trunk, I found 21 issues of Texas Week wrapped in a blanket. They were still in pristine condition after 65 years.

I was vaguely aware of the magazine, but had never seen it. Dad had never mentioned the magazine in all the time I knew him. As a child, I had overheard my Mom tell a friend that the magazine had been a failure and that Dad had never been the same since.

I was thrilled with the discovery but then panicked. What if the only existing copies in the world were in my hands? I put the magazines in a plastic box in my bedroom closet and started researching what to do with them. I called the Harry Ransom Center on the UT-Austin campus. As a premier collector of literary manuscripts, books, and photographs, including a copy of the Gutenberg Bible, surely, they would want Texas Week. The Ransom people were honest and said they would take the magazines but would have to put them in the archives in the basement. The magazine would never see the light of day unless someone specifically asked for it. But how would anyone know to ask for a magazine they had never heard of? There was the dilemma...

I kept looking for a "forever" home for the magazine. In 2014, Jim spotted an article that the University of North Texas Libraries in Denton had an online history collection called "The Portal to Texas History: A gateway to rare, historical, and primary source materials from or about Texas."

The online part was especially appealing to me. Someone could now randomly search the internet for "Texas history," and Texas Week could appear in the hit list. You didn't have to already know the magazine existed to find it.

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The Portal had been around for 10 years and already had acquired an international reputation as a repository for Texas history. I sent them some scanned pages from the magazine and an inspirational description that Jim wrote capturing Dad's ambitious effort.

The Portal responded immediately. They definitely wanted the magazine in their collection. They also discovered that full sets of the magazine – 28 issues – existed at a few Texas universities, including their own library, so I was not the only keeper of Dad's treasure much to my relief.

The staff wanted to use my copies, because the library copies were bound and harder to scan. They had a methodical process for handling treasures that was reassuring. However, I was on edge until they returned the originals to me for safekeeping in the box in my bedroom closet.

The magazine wasn't just good Texas history, it was impressive journalism. The format was similar to Time magazine – the writing style was hard-hitting, sassy, and easy to grasp, and there were pictures on every page. The cover featured a full-page picture of a real Texan under a splashy red banner. Dad was an avid photographer and believed the adage, "A picture is worth a thousand words."

Even with the magazine in hand, I still had questions. When I found NewspaperArchive.com, I finally got some answers.

Dad had been ideally suited for his Marine Corps job of analyzing pictures of enemy movement and writing reports. He was an experienced small-plane pilot and used to analyzing the ground from the air. As a journalist for ten years, he was skilled at reporting what he observed.

I could now actually reconstruct the entire history of Texas Week by reading stories about the magazine as it was created, published, struggled, and folded. One writer called Texas Week "a newsman's dream."

I learned that Dad had developed a wide network of experienced news people. They had all seen

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war firsthand, were proud that their generation had risen to the challenge, and embodied the “can do” spirit that swept postwar America.

Dad and his colleagues were determined to make their lives count. Texas Week became a rallying point – a way to change Texas by reporting everything that touched the “political, economic, cultural, and spiritual life” of the state. They wanted to publicize the state’s exploding opportunities and to shine a bright light on things that hindered Texas – like corruption, segregation, and poverty.

Sixty people were listed on the masthead, including correspondents from all over Texas and one outlier from Washington, D.C. They located the magazine in Austin, the capital of Texas, so they could be within walking distance of the heart of Texas politics.

Dad and his friends had pooled their money to get started and had planned for advertising and subscriptions to pay the way. The magazine launched in August 1946, but four months later it was already struggling for money. Mom was now pregnant with my brother, so she packed up my sister and me to go live with her supportive family in Chicago.

Advertising revenues and subscriptions didn’t meet expectations, so Dad was searching desperately everywhere for more financing. At the same time, he drove between Austin and Dallas twice a week to coordinate publishing. The magazine ran out of money with the February 22, 1947 issue. Although Dad continued to look for financing for several more months, he finally had to give up and close down the magazine that summer.

I was amazed at the audacity of Dad’s vision and commitment at the age of only 32. In my view, Texas Week was not a misstep or a mistake but a bold and ambitious project that had succeeded in all ways except financial – although, I’m sure it did not seem that way to Dad at the time.

Dad and his buddies had simply run out of money. They all seemed to take the magazine’s demise in stride, because they remained friends and colleagues the rest of their lives.

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The Turning Point

I was four when Texas Week collapsed, so I have no memory of the tough times that followed. When Dad got a job as managing editor of the Tyler Courier-Times, Mom moved us back to Texas. After eighteen months in Tyler, Dad got a better offer to be managing editor of the Denton Record-Chronicle, and we stayed there for two years.

In 1951, Dad was recruited by the Dallas Associated Press. The AP offered our family financial security and offered Dad unlimited opportunity in one of the fastest-growing, most exciting cities in Texas. We crowded into a small, two-bedroom apartment, and then Mom went back to work full time so we could rent a house.

My parents seemed to roll with these upheavals, but I had apparently turned into an eight-year-old juvenile delinquent. I don't remember being unhappy, but my progressive mother took me to a child psychologist. At that time, therapy was a whispered treatment, usually reserved for drastic cases and exorcisms.

I went once and I guess I was cured. Today, I can only imagine the psychologist's consultation with my parents: "Your daughter is the canary in your coal mine. You have lived in eight places in eight years. Dad has had four jobs in five years. Mom now works full time with three kids at home with a maid. You were separated for a year, living in different cities. You are in debt and angry with each other. Your canary is now in her third school, and she's only in the third grade."

The stress level at home also improved with two incomes. We did move four more times before I graduated from high school, but the moves no longer seemed to bother me. In fact, the moves proved to be good training. When I went to college, my adjustment from home to campus lasted seven minutes – as long as it took to lug my trunk from the car to the second-floor dorm room.

Life in a Newsman's Family

There were some negatives to being the child of a newsman, but those drawbacks seemed normal

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at the time – Dad worked at night for years and was often tense. Also, I told my husband that I sometimes found Dad a bit bossy for my taste. However, Jim pointed out that we were talking about a man in the patriarchal era of the 1950s, who had gone to military school, was a Marine in WWII, had managed three news organizations, and most importantly, was wired to meet daily newspaper deadlines – every hour of every day since he was 20 years old.

Overall, there were HUGE benefits to being the child of a newsmen. Here are a few headlines of stories from my life with Dad from 1953-1963.

Davy Crockett Artifact Comes Home to Texas – August, 1953

Paul Crume had a popular daily column on the front page of the Dallas Morning News. His stories were optimistic and usually tied to the names of local contributors. He and Dad were friends from the Daily Texan in college and Dad's Texas Week. Both my Dad and Mom had an eye for funny stories, so somebody in our family was often featured in Paul's column. One story read: "Coals to Newcastle – Nine-year old Marion Holbrook spent the summer in Chicago with her grandparents. She won a paint-by-the-numbers contest and her prize was a Davy Crockett tent – a full-sized tent that cost a fortune to ship back to Dallas. She's a big Texas history fan and insisted on bringing her prize home."

Child Prodigy Attends Journalism Class – September, 1954

Soon after we moved to Dallas, Dad started teaching journalism at night once a week at North Texas State in Denton. Although he was working full time at the AP, he would drive 80 miles round trip every Thursday night for his 3-hour lecture. He said he did it for the money, but I think he did it for the prestige and for the opportunity to perform. Mom was a nervous wreck as he drove our junker car at night, especially on the icy roads in the dead of winter. So was I. We waited up together until he returned safely about 11:00 p.m.

In 1954 at the start of the Fall semester, Dad decided to demonstrate a journalism axiom to his students the first night of class. I was to show up in class as a 10-year-old prodigy, who would

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challenge the instructor.

The class was already seated when I entered my first college classroom and sat on the back row. Dad looked important at the front of the room and like he was having a good time.

He said, “Oh, hello! Are you the new student from TCU? Miss Thompson?” I said, “Yes. I wanted to hear your lectures.” He asked, “Do you have your transfer paper?”

I jumped up, walked to the front of the room, handed him a blank piece of paper, and walked back. The class stared at this chunky kid about five feet tall, wearing horned-rim glasses that matched the instructor’s glasses, except mine were clear glass. Dad had coached me to ignore their reactions and stick to the script. We had been rehearsing for a week.

About ten minutes into his lecture, I heard my first cue and said, “Mr. Holbrook.” He ignored me. I spoke up again louder. “Mr. Holbrook. Peter Zenger became the symbol for freedom of the press when he was arrested for printing criticisms of the Governor of New York in 1734. He was acquitted on grounds that truth is a defense against charges of libel. How well do you think that decision holds up in these troubled times?”

Twenty heads spun around and glared. I could not smile or laugh, so I clenched my teeth together in the mode of serious journalism. What a lead-in! What a mouthful! The formula was, “Make a statement. Ask a question.”

On my next cue, I said, “Mr. Holbrook. The recent Supreme Court decision on Brown versus the Board of Education of Topeka ruled that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional, even if the segregated schools are otherwise equal in quality. What role did the press play in this decision?”

The students were very quiet. How were they supposed to know all this on the first night of class? Dad appeared very thoughtful and said, “Good question.”

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At 9 p.m., Dad invited the class to the student center for a beer. As the students walked across the greens with him, I ran to catch up to them, yelling, “Mr. Holbrook! Mr. Holbrook!” My classmates turned around, and I could feel their annoyance. When I got alongside him, I said in a loud voice, per the script, “Dad! Can I have a beer too?”

I could hear the relief in their laughter – the prodigy was gone and the kid belonged. Over beers and a glass of milk, Dad used our stunt to discuss the importance of the newsman’s axiom, “Always check the background of your source to validate your impressions.”

Grass Roots Politicking – January, 1955

In the sixth grade, I ran for President of the Student Council, so Dad wrote a wordy, patriotic speech for me about education, freedom of the press, and equal opportunity. I wasn’t sure what all of it meant, but I said it anyway. I lost. None of the other sixth graders knew what I was talking about either. Dad must have thought his audience was in the eighth grade.

A couple of months later, I did manage to get elected Vice President of the Girls Organization. To commemorate this most important election in this most important elementary school in the Dallas Independent School District, Dad contacted a photographer friend at the Dallas Times Herald. The next day, there was a picture in the newspaper of the most important people in my school: our two organization sponsors, plus Miss President, and Miss Holbrook.

Breakfast with Truman – February, 1956

Early one school morning, Dad took us kids to see President Harry S. Truman speak – living history was more important than class. Dad briefed us as he drove, “Truman was the president who ended World War II. I was in the war when Marion was born. After the war, Truman helped save the world. Barbara and Winfield, you were born after the war was over.” I was only vaguely aware of this war, and I was sure my sister and brother knew even less than I did.

We were late when we arrived at the Adolphus Hotel about 7:15 a.m. and went through a back

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door and sat at the far edge of the big ice rink in the ballroom. Truman was a long way off, so I couldn't see him very well because the lights were low, except for a spotlight on him. I couldn't hear him very well either or maybe I didn't understand what he was saying in my 12-year-old worldview. My sister and brother were getting restless.

When Truman's speech was over, the lights came up, and the crowd started leaving through the front doors. Truman was shaking hands as his security directed him past us toward the back exit.

My father yelled out, "Associated Press! Raymond Holbrook! Associated Press!"

Truman paused. Dad stuck out his hand and said, "It is an honor to meet you." Truman shook his hand, nodded, and started to move.

Suddenly, Dad grew six inches taller and snapped a salute, "Sir. Captain Raymond B. Holbrook, United States Marine Corps 1942-1945, Solomon Islands." Dad was instantly transformed into a Marine, meeting his Commander-In-Chief.

Truman and Dad held each other's gaze. There was a second when nobody said anything. I was afraid my father had forgotten his script. Dad broke the spell when he pointed to us and said, "My children." He called out our names in the same formal way he had said his name – "Marion Diane Holbrook. Barbara Lynn Holbrook. Winfield Raymond Holbrook."

Truman shook our hands one-by-one. I stared into a kind face with warm eyes. He was shorter than Dad and very calm, but he didn't look like a President to me. He nodded and smiled without speaking. Then, he and his entourage were gone.

We were the last to leave the ballroom. Dad turned to us, with tears in his eyes, "You have just met a great man." Today, I realize this outing wasn't just a history lesson, Raymond B. Holbrook had wanted to personally thank Harry S. Truman, man-to-man. Harry had dropped the bomb on Japan to end World War II on behalf of the free world. If the U.S. had decided on a land invasion instead of the bomb, it was estimated 500,000 Allied troops would have died. Dad had been

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stationed in the Solomons, at the tip of the arrow, awaiting orders for the land invasion. Without the bomb, there probably would not have been a Barbara Lynn or a Winfield Raymond.

When Dad parked at our elementary school, he pulled a piece of paper out of my notebook and wrote a tardy note for the principal. I handed the note to the office assistant. She read it and rolled her eyes. Dad could have said anything, but he wrote, “The Holbrook children are late because they had breakfast with President Harry S. Truman.”

Walk the Talk, Adlai – 1952, 1956

When I was growing up, most newsmen were liberals and Democrats. Dad spent his time at the Dallas Press Club surrounded by like-minded crusaders in the media. On Sundays, we attended the Unitarian church, a non-denominational church with a history of questioning everything and enthusiastic political activism. The church’s motto was “Walk the talk.”

Dad was a fourth generation Unitarian, and he helped start the Denton Fellowship when we lived there. Dallas had just one Unitarian church with only 350 members, compared to the local competition, reportedly the largest Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches in the United States. I worried about being part of a minority, because no kids from my school or any of our neighbors were Unitarian. With an eye for future networking, Dad said, “You will get to know Unitarians from all the high schools in Dallas, because they have nowhere else to go.”

When Adlai Stevenson ran for president in 1952 and 1956, Dad pointed out each time that Adlai was a Unitarian. In fact, Presidents John Adams, John Q. Adams, Millard Fillmore, and William Taft were all Unitarians. However, Dad predicted that Stevenson would lose each time because he was “more talk than walk.”

From the Halls of Montezuma – September, 1959 and Forward

Dad usually had lots of ideas about everything and liked to share them, but he had nothing to offer when his two daughters started dating. He gave us no guidelines, warnings, or curfews,

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although he did have his own way of letting The Dates know who they were dealing with.

Dad was a talented pianist, and we had a fancy Conn electric organ in our living room, the finest piece of furniture in our house. As The Date would approach the front door, Dad would play the Marine Corps Hymn a little too loud, like an ominous sound track in a movie. This was the era when The Girl would linger getting ready, so The Parents and The Date could get to know each other. Not at my house – my sister and I raced to meet The Date at the front door and get out on the sidewalk before Dad got to the final thunderous refrain, “The U-ni-ted States Ma-riiiiines.”

While Dad no longer looked like a Marine, he was a handsome mix of Walter Cronkite and Edward R. Morrow – horned-rim glasses, a knowing stare, an inquiring forward stance, a ready cigarette, and a glint of mischief in his eye. He knew how to protect his daughters.

If we were late getting to the living room, Dad would switch intimidation tactics and play Jerry Lee Lewis’s greatest hits. His favorite was “Great Balls of Fire,” which he would play standing up, raking his fingers across the keyboard. The Date was usually cowed by the time we went out the door or thought he was dealing with a crazy man. Either way, The Date knew he was answering to Mr. Holbrook, who had never said an intimidating word.

I should have been embarrassed by Dad’s meet-and-greet routine, but I thought he was funny.

A Gala with the Nixons – April, 1960

In 1960, Richard and Pat Nixon were campaigning for the Presidency in Dallas. My friend Martha’s dad was Chairman of the Dallas County Republican Party, and she invited me to a gala fundraiser, a dazzling event with Republican luminaries. We went through the long reception line and shook hands with Dick and then Pat. When we got to the end of the line, one of Dad’s photographer friends spotted me and said, “Go back through the line. I’ll get your picture.”

We reintroduced ourselves in the reception line and were graciously welcomed by each luminary, although we had just shaken their hands ten minutes before. Martha and I should have

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stood out in the well-dressed crowd, but no one seemed to notice – we were high school juniors, dressed casually with bobby socks and loafers. Dick was genuinely happy to meet me, but Pat held onto my hand as if I were an old friend, laughed out loud, and said, “You’re back!” The flashbulb went off and I was immortalized laughing and shaking hands with the lovely Pat Nixon in her dark brocade suit and orchid corsage.

Press Club Gridiron Shows – May 1960, 1961

Dad was very active in the Press Club, holding a different office every year, including President in 1961-1962, and he was always on the Gridiron Show committee to help raise scholarship money. The Show honored and roasted the city’s political and business leaders in a boisterous musical comedy with a full orchestra. Friday night was a dress rehearsal for 1,000 friends and family, and Saturday night was the big show for 1,000 “movers and shakers.”

The club members wrote elaborate parody skits and songs, releasing their pent-up talents and sarcastic opinions about the news they had to report with a straight face. The shows had clever titles like “Dallas in Blunderland.”

The key to the show’s overwhelming success was its director Charlie Meeker, Jr. He directed the Dallas Summer Musicals and was known for “bringing the best of Broadway to North Texas” for decades. He would whip 100 club members into a professional frenzy, rehearsing three hours a night, two nights a week, for four months, as if Broadway bound.

Dad stayed on the administrative side of the show – he did not write, sing, dance or act. He liked to perform when he taught journalism or intimidated my dates, but he stayed in professional mode for the Gridiron shows. He knew he would have to work with the “roastees” and his colleagues the next day.

Because of Dad, I could be in the show when I was a junior and senior in high school, but 99% of the participants were adults. Mom was also in the cast and a very attentive chaperone. I was an extra in many skits and even had a few lines – my most notable performance was as Lynda Bird

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Johnson. I was intoxicated by show business and stayed fired up for months. I would have been lured away from high school to Broadway, except I discovered I could not sing, or dance, or remember dialogue.

I loved mixing with Dad's colleagues during rehearsals and greeting them as pals for the rest of the year at Press Club events. They were gregarious, charismatic, hard-charging people who liked to party. I could see why Dad enjoyed "his people" so much.

Kennedy Has Been Shot – November 22, 1963

On Friday, November 22, 1963, John F. Kennedy was assassinated. The Dallas Associated Press became the center for disseminating wire-service news to the world. Dad was in the thick of the action and did not go home for days at a time. I was in college and tried to call him for the inside scoop, but I couldn't get through even playing the daughter card.

Forty-eight hours later, Jack Ruby shot Lee Harvey Oswald dead in the basement of the Dallas Police Department. I couldn't see Dad in the roiling mass of newsmen in the TV video, but I could spot his horned-rim glasses in the newspaper photos.

The AP received international recognition for their coverage of the story. Dad was a key player in the AP coverage – he had been at Love Field when the Kennedys arrived, had secured the identity of Lee Harvey Oswald, had gotten Officer McDonald's account of his struggle with Oswald at the Texas Theatre, and had covered Oswald's murder in the basement. Many of his stories were under the anonymous AP byline but many were under Dad's own byline. The news business is much like ice hockey, the writer gets credit for assists as well as scoring a goal.

In early 1964, the AP rushed to publish their book on the JFK assassination, *The Torch is Passed*. Dad ordered four copies, one for himself and each of us kids. When the books arrived, Dad discovered the Credits page listed only 25 of the 150 Dallas AP personnel involved, excluding Dad and 125 others. He gave us the books and told us he had written a letter to AP headquarters about their mistake. By now, Headquarters was used to getting critiques from Dad, and they were also

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used to sending him responses and giving him awards.

A month later, Dad handed us kids a personal letter from the General Manager of the AP in New York. It was addressed to the three of us, apologizing for the oversight of omitting our Dad's name in the book and expressing appreciation for him as a newsman and his role in the JFK coverage.

Recently, I found the original of Dad's thoughtful letter to the General Manager, written on behalf of the working press, journalism professors, the Dallas AP office, and himself. I was proud of him for gently chastising the AP for failing "Scrupulous Accreditation 101" – a missed opportunity to recognize the very people who had brought such honor to the AP in one of the most important news stories of the century. Dad also said he could provide the full list of AP personnel, because he had everyone in the office document their actions at the time. He knew how important their contributions would be to their careers.

Over the years, I had asked Dad many times if there had been a JFK conspiracy. I said, "You can tell me straight. I won't tell anyone." He would put on his most thoughtful look and say, "Some people think it was Oswald alone. Some people think it was the Communists or Cuba or the CIA or the Mafia or the right-wing radicals of Dallas." His final answer though was always, "Time will tell."

Today...

I have come away with the feeling that Dad was in full ownership of his newsman's persona. I think Dad always conducted himself as if he WERE the publisher of his own magazine, just operating surreptitiously out of the Dallas AP office.

Of course, I still don't know what Dad really thought about Texas Week. The magazine is at the top of my list of questions if I could spend one more day with him.

I actually have a thousand questions for him, not just about his career, but about him – what had inspired him? What made his life worthwhile? And what made him the happiest?

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But, before I started bombarding him with questions, I would probably just hug him, and hold onto him, and introduce him to Jim. I would want Dad to know that I was happy, so he could rest easy. And, I would want him to know that he had shown me that life was to be enjoyed.