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William E. Blake

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ORAL HISTORY

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I, WILLIAM E. BLAKE, the undersigned, of
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Date APRIL 15, 1974

William E. Blake
(Signature - Interviewee)

2322 23rd STREET
Address

NITRO, WEST VIRGINIA 25143

Date April 16, 1974

M. K. Buster
(Signature - Witness)



I am William E. Blake, Editor and Publisher of the Kanawha Valley Leader weekly newspaper published in Nitro, West Virginia. This tape is being recorded in the solitude of my modest office at First Avenue and 35th Street in Nitro on a serene Sunday afternoon of April 7, 1974--Palm Sunday this year. Any background noises which may be detected come from either the automobile traffic on First Avenue, which doubles as West Virginia State Highway Route 25 or from the sniffting of Penn Central railroad cars on the tracks just across the street which serve the chemical plants and the large warehouse complex which makes up the economy of Nitro.

For the record, this tape is being recorded for the oral library at Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia, at the request of Mrs. Evelyn Maddox of Nitro, West Virginia, a warm family friend, who is pursuing a Masters degree. I am inclined to believe that she may be a bit prejudiced in selecting me for her particular assignment and in thinking that I might have something worthwhile to say to generations yet unborn. I am under the assumption that this undertaking is to be autobiographical in nature but that I do have the editorial prerogative of discoursing some on the historical background of West Virginia and commenting on politics. Mrs. Maddox, of course, is aware of my own fierce pride in West Virginia and my strong political beliefs. I have sufficient faith and confidence in Mrs. Maddox's own intelligence and her unrelenting pursuit of further knowledge to think that if she believes I may have something worthwhile to add to a permanent oral library at an outstanding institution of higher learning...

well, maybe I have.

There is something awesome in the very thought that you may be recording a declamation to be preserved for posterity. Most of my writing over a period of neigh onto a half century is preserved in the bound volumes or microfilm libraries of half a dozen newspapers in West Virginia, some in the Congressional Record, a few lines in William S. white's book the "Making of a President", 1960, and in Harry Ernst's book of the primary political campaigns of John F. Kennedy and Hubert H. Humphrey in West Virginia - "The Primary That Made a President." Generous excerpts of my literary efforts will be found in the State Papers of West virginia's 25th Governor - Cecil H. Underwood. It should be added here in all honesty that contradictory and uncomplimentary editorial and column comment on my writings can also be found in the libraries of some of West Virginia's outstanding daily and weekly newspapers. Controversy has been a part of my career, not by chance...but by choice---which probably will become more apparent as we progress with this oral editorial.

What is most difficult to reconcile now is that this transcription is being recorded in the present. If or when it is used from the permanent oral library it will be the past. However, I will try to keep in mind that this fact of life will be your problem... not mine...and if I can help to achieve a respectable grade for my student sponsor in 1974, I will have accomplished my objective. So...from here on you are on your own, whatever the digits of your class in old M.U.

The great Will Rogers once said when he was required to produce a birth certificate to be issued a passport..."I thought the

very fact that I was here proves that I was born."

Well, I was born in Ronceverte, Greenbrier County, West Virginia, on September 8, 1910 which makes my age at the time of this dissertation 63 years old plus. I was christened William Edwards Blake - with the "s" on the middle name, Edwards, for my mother's maiden family name. My father was the late William B. Blake, Jr., Editor and Publisher of the West Virginia News, a weekly Republican newspaper in strong Democratic Greenbrier County.

I point out the political party affiliation because of its relevancy to the circumstances of the times and its impact on my own career to date.

That I should follow the newspaper profession for the most of my life was almost inescapable from the time that I knicked off the end of the middle finger of my right hand in the cog wheels of an old printing press in the West Virginia News office at the age of five. There can be no doubt but that this minor accident, a helluva wailing and bloody tragedy at the time - intermingled the printer's ink into my blood stream creating a malady from which I was never to recover. Thus I reflect here today at the age of retirement that a full life has actually completed a full cycle from a weekly newspaper in Greenbrier County to a weekly newspaper in Kanawha and Putnam counties.

Interestingly enough this full life cycle of my career covered three different professions but all of them related and integrated by the circumstances of the time - news media, political and military. In all, I believe I have accomplished a small measure of success but, if not, certainly a full measure of satisfaction and, thankfully, only a few regrets.

Any autobiography of myself would not be complete without some reference to my ancestral background of which I am exceedingly proud but may be helpful in explaining my own later exploits and escapades.

My paternal grandfather, William Burdine Blake, was born on January 21, 1852. It was the great frustration in an otherwise unfrustrated life that he was never allowed to tell freely just where he was born. According to my father in his eulogy when my grandfather was inducted into the West Virginia Journalism Hall of Fame, the blessed event took place on an Ohio River steamboat somewhere in the vicinity of Ironton, Ohio. My grandmother, who lived to be 92, would never let my grandfather tell the story because her own Victorian upbringing taught her that a lady should not have been travelling in that delicate condition. My father added that he had assurances that my grandfather's birth was legitimate, natural and with the benefit of medical aid. Since this revelation was not made by my father until 1951, I have been unable to find out for my own satisfaction just what kind of a steamboat my great grandparents were travelling on. I have an inkling that it may have been a gospel singing and evangelist troupe because my grandfather became a music composer, arranger and publisher of hymns. But, then again, it could have been a minstrel showboat.

But whatever the reasons of my grandfather's birthplace being an Ohio River boat, his musical talents later prevailed which by fate established him as a publisher and a newspaperman in west Virginia.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, my grandfather at the true

age of 13 advanced his age to 16 and accompanied his father into the service of the Union with the 15th Ohio Regiment. He was a messenger and a "drummer boy" and was wounded in the hand in the skirmishing around Antietam and would proudly display the scar at later reunions of the Grand Army of the Republic.

At the close of the hostilities between the states, my grandfather was mustered out of the Union Army in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. He became affiliated with the Solomon Funk Music Publishing Company and its successor the Rubush-Keiffer Music Publishing Company at Singers Glen, Virginia. The companies were engaged in the publication of hymn books, church music books and music textbooks. It was here that my grandfather met and married a pretty Southern lass from Mount Solon, Virginia, who worked in the bindery of the publishing company, Mary Alice Horne, a strong willed young lady who in her earliest teens had maintained the family farm and homeplace while her father and brothers went off to the war and weathered the scourges of many battles fought up and down the Shenandoan Valley.

The music publishing companies prospered and incident to the music publishing business, the Shenandoan Collegiate Institute was established in Dayton, Virginia. The Institute remains today in Dayton as the Shenandoan Conservatory of Music.

The music publishing company moved to Dayton and embarked on a new venture, a portable organ factory, to make four-octave organs which could be carried on horseback like saddle bags by circuit riding preachers of the era. My father was born in Dayton, Virginia in 1883.

Just shortly after the organ factory had commenced production

it was completely destroyed by fire in 1884. My grandfather moved his family, bag and baggage, including one of the portable organs, some of the music engraving plates salvaged from the fire and an old proof press from the Valley of Virginia, across the Allegheny Mountains into the fertile and beautiful Greenbrier Valley of West Virginia.

He took up residence in Ronceverte, a booming lumber mill and railroad town on the Greenbrier River. He purchased an interest in the already established weekly newspaper, The Valley Messenger, along with the printing plant. Still a musician and music publisher at heart, in 1886, William B. Blake, Publisher, in conjunction with his former partner in Virginia, Aldine S. Kieffer, issued the "sacred and social" song book titled "The Royal Proclamation."

My grandfather was also a composer. He wrote many hymns, some of which are still in Methodist Hymnals under his own name, but many more under various pseudonyms of friends or acquaintances. He had a penchant for this sort of thing as a way of honoring others. This is most forcefully expressed by the fact that my father was named "William Bradbury" after the foremost hymn composer of the time.

What made the "Royal Proclamation" an outstanding music publication was that it introduced to West Virginia and the rest of the nation that grand old song which first extolled the magnificance and the majesty of West Virginia. It was "The West Virginia Hills."

Mrs. Ellen King, a young lady of poetic talent had expressed her feelings for her native state of West Virginia. Her beautiful words and elegant language had been set to music by H. E. Engle. Upon publication by William B. Blake it was arranged into the four-

part harmony and it is believed that the chorus "Oh the Hills, Beautiful Hills" with the rich, rolling bass was added to the song at the time of its first publication by my grandfather.

Although the "Royal Proclamation" was designated as a "sacred and social" songbook and did contain music other than those which would be considered standard hymns, I have always held the belief that the "West Virginia Hills" should be considered a State hymn rather than a State song. It's lyrical references to the "summits bathed in glory like the Prince Immanuel's Land", the "summits pointed skyward to the Great Almighty's land" and "in the evening time of life if my Father only wills" certainly the reverence which Ellen King held for her native State is apparent.

In recalling the early days of the Valley Messenger, my father often told of how "when the spirit moved him as it often did" my grandfather would sit down at the organ and accompany his own rich, bass voice in some familiar hymn and that even the typesetters and the printers devils would join in harmony. My father remarked that he was well into his teens before he realized that an organ was not a standard piece of printing equipment in a newspaper office.

Although my grandfather was a staunch Abraham Lincoln Republican, the Valley Messenger, was considered an independent newspaper. However, sadly outnumbered in Greenbrier County, the Republican Party Leadership prevailed upon my grandfather and my father to establish a Republican newspaper voice in the county.

In 1897, the Valley Messenger became the West Virginia News-- The Paper Everybody Reads--a Republican newspaper published by William B. Blake and Son. In less than 2 years and just before the turn of the century, my father William B. Blake, Jr. became the

Editor of the West Virginia News at age 16 - a mere young whipper-snapper to the older and more wise editor and publisher of the county's Democratic voice the Greenbrier Independent in Lewisburg, Col. Thomas H. Dennis, a full fledged Colonel in the Army of the Confederate States of America.

My father had no formal education. As a child he had been susceptible to most of the childhood diseases and had suffered a severe bout with pneumonia, which in those days, if not fatal left lasting debillitating effects. My father described his own physique as "puny." He never weighed over 130 pounds in his life. The public schools of Ronceverte would not be considered of the best by today's standards for the dispensing of education. Besides that, the school yards of Ronceverte at recess with the sons of railroad engineers, section hands, loggers and mill workers was not exactly the place for any "puny" kid - especially a Republican, puny or not.

My father learned his ABC's, reading and writing from my grandmother. He was tutored in arithmetic by a Robert L. "Uncle Bob" Kramer, a school teacher, a newspaperman and printer in his own right who had been lured into the News office to add his baritone voice to the harmony of the singing sessions. Bob Kramer had been educated in Pennsylvania and he wound up his own newspaper career as the editor of the Marlinton Journal in Pocahontas County.

To get the West Virginia News off to as rousing a start as possible under the circumstances, the paper initiated a subscription campaign offer in which the bonus was a set of illustrated encyclopedias. Since they were available in the news office, my father quinched his thirst for knowledge by reading each volume from cover to cover - from "abdication to zulu."

In addition, my father was an avid reader of the then called "pulp magazines" from the newstand at the corner drug store and from the school history books of his brothers who did attend the public schools. You see, there were no distractions and not much other recreational activity at that time. There was no radio or television and even the phonograph was still just a novelty. His printing and publishing was learned strictly by apprenticeship and experience from song publishing to becoming a cartoonist by etching on a piece of linoleum.

Anyway, this was pretty much the circumstances, the situation and the setting when the West Virginia News was established in Ronceverte, Greenbrier County, West Virginia, as a Republican newspaper. This in itself again sort of sub-divided the loyalties of both Ronceverte and Greenbrier County. The division now became not only political but provincial. The people of Ronceverte - Democrats and Republicans - developed a new pride in their own newspaper as opposed to the newspaper in their community arch rival, Lewisburg, just four miles away. Some Ronceverte die-hard Democrats would cancel their subscriptions to the news in an election year but would renew again once the political campaign was over.

The West Virginia News prospered and in 1909 moved into an imposing new, 3-story brick building of its own on Ronceverte's main Street. In that same year, as the saying goes, my father took unto himself a bride. Following in the tradition of Grandfather Blake, he selected a beautiful Southern belle from deep in the heart of Texas with all of the blueblood lines, the credentials and the qualifications for the Daughters of the American Revolution... and for the United Daughters of the Confederacy...Lena Lee Edwards.

The "Lee" was a family name directly from the Lee's of Virginia. They were married in November 1909. I came along a discreet 11 months later as the first son of a family of four children - William Edwards, Norman Bradbury, Majorie Alice and Robert Lee.

My recollections of the Edwards side of my family are mostly obscure since I was raised as a Blake in Ronceverte. It seems that my great grandfather Edwards had gone to Texas in his youth with the same group of volunteers with Sam Houston, Jim Bowie and the other assorted rowdies of the time. Whether his roots were in Virginia or Tennessee, I have never been quite certain. My father would never let my mother regale us too much with the exploits of my grandfather Joe Edwards, but her family relationship to the Lees, the MacIntoshes, the Hoods and the Southern aristocracy was at least tolerated as a subject of family history.

I do know that my grandfather Edwards was in Texas during the early days of the development of the oilfields. He was a "wild-catter", and a promoter and a real estate speculator. From bits and pieces I could put together, Grandfather Edwards was a rounder and possibly a gambler since it was feast or famine, steak or hamburger, rich or broke from one day to the next. He did strike it rich in the "sooner" race into Oklahoma and in one of his times of affluence donated the land for the present Southern Methodist University. He also promoted the Rio Grande Railroad.

My maternal grandmother whom I knew only as "Mamma Rose" from my mother, died when my mother was just six years old. While my grandfather Edwards was off on some of his promotions, my mother was raised and schooled in a convent school in Fort Worth, Texas. When she had achieved the equivalent of a high school education,

she came to Richmond, Virginia to attend the Richmond Women's College, which was the ^{female} branch of the University of Richmond. Virginia law forbade co-educational schools at that time. After her graduation in Richmond, she taught school for a time back in Fort Worth.

It was this school teaching experience of my mother's which launched my own career.

I could read, write and knew my multiplication tables before I was old enough to go to school. It was my mother's way of entertaining me as well as keeping me out of mischief. That educational advantage became quite a disadvantage to my teachers who had to find other activities to keep me busy nor was it too popular with my classmates who figured that I was just some "smart" kid which caused me some anguish--mental and physical.

It must have been about this time that I figured out for myself that it wasn't too smart to be different from the other kids... even if you were. I had to apply this new found knowledge myself for I wasn't going to get any help at home.

my father had never attended the Ronceverte Grade School so had no knowledge of the problems which can be encountered. My mother was intent on raising a "perfect little gentleman" of the "Little Lord Fountleroy" style. I had to be immacuately dressed for school even to having my hair combed and my "cowlick" slicked down by my mother spitting on her hand and smoothing it down just as I left the door every morning.

At that time all boys wore short pants, knickers, with buckles around the bottom and stockings. My mother was certain that the knickers were to be worn buckled above the knees and bloused.

Most of the kids at school had a different idea and just left them unbuckled and hang down. Them that buckled up their britches were sissies.

There was an old house, a haunted house we told the girls in the neighborhood, just over the hill between my home and school. It had sort of a dugout basement which I used to perform my Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hide act. The minute I hit the old house down came my pants legs, off with the tie, muss up my hair and change my books from a neat store-bought book bag to an old leather strap. The old house also served for some years to hide my contraband such as cigarettes and a dirty cartoon book or two.

There was also a gravel pile near the old house and I would fill up my pockets with rocks just in case anyone along the route to school still maintained the idea that I was some sort of a sissy.

Of course, the reverse procedure had to be accomplished each day on my way home from school. This took some doing since the Grade School was at least a mile or so from home and I had to come home for lunch each day. There was no free lunch program at school and only those kids who came in from the country were allowed to bring their own lunches to school.

I had heard politics talked at home...breakfast, dinner, and supper...so was really no novice at school. My father, however, was an ethical politician and believed in the strict observance of the rules and the election laws. But, it was in the third grade that I learned my first lesson in practical politics. I was a candidate for president of the class along with another fellow named Jim Miller. Somewhere I had gotten the idea, I'm not sure

whether it was from my mother or my father or maybe the teacher, that the polite and proper thing to do was to be modest and not vote for yourself but vote for your opponent. Well, I lost that election by just one vote - mine. It would have been a tie but one kid who voted for me couldn't spell worth a damn and wrote on his ballot -- Bally Black instead of Billy Blake and the kid who was on the counting board threw that ballot out. I learned later that his father was the Democrat Committeeman for Fort Spring District and that my opponent Jim Miller's father was the Democrat County Assessor. You know, I wonder to this day if my old man didn't set me up for that lesson by giving me that business about being modest and not voting for yourself. And, incidentally that nickname "Bally" hung with me all through grade school.

My grammar schools days in Ronceverte lasted until I completed the fifth grade and my escapades and vagaries in discipline had become well known to my parents. There wasn't really a communications gap between myself and my parents--some old biddy was always willing to communicate to my father what I had done...but we had different philosophies about my selection of companions and just what activities I should participate in.

I started smoking when I was 9 yearsold and by the time I was ten I was chasing little girls although I wasn't sure why. I went barefoot in the summer, played baseball, with a chew of tobacco in my mouth, on a vacant lot just out of the range of the house and went swimming in the favorite spot of all the kids just above second dam on the Greenbrier River. My mother was afraid for me to go swimming and one time offered a neighbor boy several years older

than I was and reputed to be the best swimmer in town five dollars to teach me to swim. Hell...I could already swim better than he could.

Needless to say that it was at this point in time that my father and mother had decided that there would have to be a whole new approach to my upbringing. By this time I had a brother and sister of school age who were model pupils and needed the full attention of their parents without the influence of my escapades and antics.

My mother had been schooled in private schools and had prevailed upon my father for some time that I should be sent to a private school and away from the environment of Ronceverte. The school selected was considered one of the best from the catalogs and recommendations--Todd School for Boys at Woodstock, Illinois.

Well, at Todd School I was some sort of a foreigner and a freak...but no more than the rest of those younguns were to me. I was the farthest away from home and from somewhere "down South." I talked funny and it wasn't unusual for not only the other kids but for the members of the staff and faculty to mock me or try to imitate me. I got so that I would throw in a few extra things just to throw them...including some pretty tall tales without a word of truth in them. I learned a lot at Todd and I think Todd learned a lot from me. It took a little while and some doing but I knew when I was in and accepted when I picked up a nickname..."Wop." Most of the boys were from Chicago or Milwaukee and I didn't know that "Wop" was the nickname for an Italian. In fact, I had never seen an Italian that I know of. But my swarthy complexion and big Blake nose somehow identified me as Italian to them and besides...

it wasn't "Bally" anymore. I didn't know anything about ethnic or racial slurs or overtones. I don't recognize them now.

I have a few vivid memories of Todd School...good and some not so good. One of the first was that when I received my copy of The West Virginia News it was some sort of an oddity. Most of those guys had never seen any newspaper but the Chicago Tribune. But they had a class in printing and a printing plant. Now there I was a whiz because I could hand set type, make up, lock up a chaise and run the job press better than the professor.

I think the "hillbilly" business because I was from West Virginia had preceeded me and made its rounds among the faculty. We had a school period in which we had to write letters home and, of course, they were censored by the headmaster. I don't think I was out of line in addressing my letters "Dear Mom:" or referring to my father as "Daddy" but when I wrote a letter to my grandmother and grandfather with the salutation "Dear Maw and Paw;" and spelled it "MAW" and "PAW" and handed it to the headmaster, he couldn't conceal his mirth. I snatched the letter back and proceeded to tell him in railroad yardmaster language that it would be a "cold day in hell before any son-of-a-bitch read anymore of my letters."

That evening both the headmaster and I were called into the home of the principal and the owner of the school, Nobel Hill. We were invited to sit in front of an open fireplace in his living room. He was good, in fact, he was as good as his name, Noble. He carefully explained the differences in the geography and the customs of our different areas and deftly led us into a bull session where we could swap yarns about our own home towns. The headmaster was from Sheboygan, Wisconsin. We became fast friends and it wasn't

much more than a couple of weeks later that the headmaster was able to get me out of another embarrassing jam.

One of the cultural advantages of attending Todd School was a "Music Memory" course in which the students learned to recognize, identify and appreciate the classical selections. I can still recognize the "William Tell Overture", "Peer Gynt Suite", "Swan Lake", and many of the other standard classics...and a smattering of the strains from the operas. In one segment of the course we were going to learn band music and marches. Somewhere in a medley of march music or war songs, the band on that old phonograph struck up "Dixie."

Well, I jumped to my feet, clapped my hands and let out a blood curdling "rebel yell." It was spontaneous, automatic, a reflex action which I was actually not aware of. You see, back in Greenbrier County that's what everybody did when they heard "Dixie" and I can recall my mother standing up, singing and clapping her hands and tapping her foot when a band played Dixie at a concert of the Ronceverte Citizens Band, at a circus or at any public entertainment.

I want to tell you that I really created some commotion. Kids cleared the aisles for four rows on each side of me, some ducked under their seats and others headed for the doors and windows. They were certain that I had been taken with some sort of fit and had gone completely berserk. The headmaster, a Mr. Johnson, stopped the phonograph. I slid back down in my seat with my head in my hands on the desk and a sort of weak, sheepish grin on my face to hide my embarrassment.

Once order was restored in the classroom, Mr. Johnson explained

much in the same manner as Noble Hill had done a few weeks before that it was a custom where I came from to stand up and cheer when they played Dixie and added that out of respect for me and my part of the country they should do the same.

He started the record again and when the band came to "Dixie" every kid in the room jumped to his feet, clapped and cheered. I joined them.

To this day I have stood for the state song of any State when it is played, the national anthem of any country or the alma mater for every school in every stadium I was ever in. I have stood and applauded every Governor of West Virginia regardless of his politics and every president of the United States when I have had the opportunity.

Todd School lasted just two years. I am sure that my father and Todd came to a mutual agreement that it would be beneficial to both if I did not return.

I went back to the eighth grade at Ronceverte Grade School and was soon accepted again by my old companions and cronies. It was then that I started my real apprenticeship on the West Virginia News, on-the-job training, I believe it is called now. The News was printed and mailed on Friday's then and by some special dispensation I was given each Friday afternoon off from school to help with the mailing. Mostly my responsibility was to hand-feed the folder and to deliver the mail sacks to the post office or directly to the trains. I had the use of a big, two-wheeled push cart which was in general use by the Post offices at the time with U. S. Mail stenciled on the side. This gave me some prestige and since I took the slogan "The mail must go through" quite seriously,

on occasions I made myself a real hazard to even the sparse traffic on Ronceverte's brick streets and some snocked pedestrians by pushing the cart at top speed and yelling "Gangway, the mail must go through."

Possibly one of the reasons I did not return to Todd School was financial since my father had just purchased the largest and finest home in Ronceverte. It had been built less than 10 years before by a wealthy family who had a lumber mill and furniture factory in Ronceverte but were returning to live in Charleston. It was a beautiful 3-story frame house with 20-rooms and a full basement. The third floor boasted a ballroom. It had more than 2 acres of lawn with three sets of terraces. Now the full basement was not for any game room, recreation room or family room. It was for West Virginia's great natural resource, coal...40 tons of it every year to fire a monster of a furnace. Although my father never let me fool much with the complicated damper system, it did become mostly my job to feed that iron monster, shovel by shovel...bank the fire at night and shake down the ashes and fire it up again in the early morning. My mother explained that this was "to earn my board and keep." I earned it. Summers were delightful times in Ronceverte in Greenbrier County, for that matter all up and down the Greenbrier River. I have fished and and camped along the Greenbrier from Buckeye in Pocahontas County to Talcott in Summers County. There were two favorite camping spots. One was at the mouth of Anthony's Creek north of Ronceverte and the other at the mouth of Second Creek below Ronceverte and which was in commuting distance of town. But, wherever we could pitch a tent and set up a camp it was home for the summer "however so humble."

One of the grandest ladies of all times, Mrs. John B. Harris, would take her own two sons, the eldest John, Jr. my own age, and round up all of the strays in our teenage bracket to Anthony the camp. It could last from two weeks to as many as six weeks at a time. She also had two daughters just a shade older and many times the camp at Anthony was co-educational.

Anthony was a station on the Greenbrier Division of the C & O Railroad and consisted of the depot and the country store which was the post office. Two trains made the run "up the Greenbrier" each day both ways. The station was across the river from where the creek flowed into the river and there was a bridge a ways upriver but we could meet the train, pick up supplies and mail by boating or canoeing across the river. The mistress of the country store was Grace Sands and she would understandingly sell us a nickle bag of Bull Durham tobacco, complete with cigarette papers, or a plug of chewing tobacco along with pop and candy and our staple order of a sack of navy beans and a big piece of fat back meat.

We swam, fished, hiked, played some games or just loafed all day long. At night it was the campfire with singing to the accompaniment of a ukelle or a banjo, story telling, games, swapping lies or vying with each other for some impromptu entertainment we could present. Mrs. Harris ruled the camp and presided over the campfire. Her monarchy of the mountains was absolute. Her royal robe was an old brown shawl in the day time and a patchwork quilt around her shoulders in the chilly evenings at the campfire. Mrs. Rebecca Harris was truly West Virginia's original queen Sylvia.

Anthony's Creek just had to be one of the coldest, clearest streams in the country. It's source was somewhere in the vicinity

of Alvon and it cut a rugged narrow gorge through the mountain to the Greenbrier River. At the mouth of the creek near to where it entered the river was a fine swimming hole. It was rugged and there was a peculiar rock formation under the water with sort of a narrow hole through the rock. You were really not initiated into the camp crowd until you were daring enough to swim underwater through that hole. You could reach another swimming hole the other side of the mountain, Blue Bend, by either hiking across the top of the mountain or making your way along the cliffs of the canyon formed by the creek. The cliff-hanging route was the most hazardous mainly because one could encounter a copperhead or a rattlesnake. But, big brown and speckled trout could be seen in the clear water but the problem was they could see you too and it was seldom that one of them could be snagged. Few fishermen were smarter than those trout.

The Greenbrier River had plenty of bass, pike and perch for catching on a pole or fly rod but a trot line across the river would provide real eating with a big blue or channel catfish and occasionally an unwary mud turtle. But, Mrs. Harris could take one turtle and make up enough turtle stew to last the whole camp a week.

This era of the wilderness is gone now, of course. It's demise commenced with the creation of the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930's to create jobs during the depression for the boys from Brooklyn. The destruction has been completed by the conservationists, the college educated foresters, the environmentalists and the ecologists. State built cabins have replaced the tents and any summer day will find the area packed with campers, trailers or motor homes complete with television, refrigerators and air

conditioning. It's just as well, I guess, but I wouldn't have wanted Mrs. Rebecca Harris to see her realm in ruins.

It is needless to say, I suppose, that my Freshman year at Greenbrier High School was a complete educational and disciplinary bust. I passed only one subject, 1/3 of a credit, in music. Besides that the new era of prohibition had ushered in new challenges for me to test to the complete frustration and anguish of my already distraught parents...homemade wine in the garage or cellar, setting home brew and experimenting with bootleg moonshine whiskey. Too, my folks were parents again with the birth of my youngest brother.

Mom started collecting school catalogs again, this time of military academies. My father handed me a batch and served the ultimatum that I could select any military school I wanted. The alternative was Pruntytown...now known by the polite name of the West Virginia Industrial School for Boys, but then it was point blank the "reform school."

I selected Augusta Military Academy at Fort Defiance, Virginia. It was not particularly from the catalog but I knew a couple of fellows who were going there for the same reason I was and an older friend of mine who had attended Augusta and who had interested me in building homemade radio sets by letting me help him with the putting up of an aerial and listening over the headphones. Broadcasting stations were very few then but my folks would let me stay up to see how many we could pickup in an evening, KDKA - Pittsburgh, KYW - Chicago, a Shreveport, Louisiana station, and a convict named Harry Snodgrass who played a mean piano broadcasting from a penitentiary in Texas.

Now, Augusta Military Academy was operated by the Roller Brothers,

Colonels Thomas and Charles, VMI graduates and most of the staff and faculty were VMI. It was operated on the plebe system like both VMI and West Point. Freshmen were "rats". We had to cut square corners in the barracks in a stiff and ridiculous posture called "finning out." You had to stand at attention for any upper classmen at anytime and really "hop to" when they came in your room. You were called "Mister" and for any or no reason at all were "gross."

One of the forms of harassment of "rats" by the "old men" may be what got me off to a reasonably good start at Augusta and at least gave me the incentive to complete a respectable four years of military academy...a way of life which had been completely foreign to my nature.

Each of the barracks rooms for two cadets - sometimes three to a room - had glass panes at the top so anyone could look in at anytime. All freshmen were given a card to stick in that window for your name and where you were from. Any jerk could read it before he came into your room but the favorite of the upper classmen was to stand a rat at attention and make him answer questions like "What's yo' name, Mistah? Wha' ya from, Mista?" Most of them being from Virginia or No'th Ca'lina. The North Carolinians were the worst.

After a full day of answering the same damned silly questions, I had had enough. That evening I fixed my own name card from the door. In big, block letters it said: Bill Blake, I'm from West "By God" Virginia and damned glad of it." When the cadet officer-of-the-day in making his after taps rounds shined his flashlight on that sign, he wailed like a banshee. The Commandant Colonel

Roller, Brassie by nickname, came into the courtyard and I was hauled out of bed and down to his office with the OD carrying my identification card. I think old "Brassie" kinda liked my brass. At least we compromised. I took out the profanity but the rest of it went back on the door. By the time I got back to my room everybody in the barracks knew what had gone on. Several times that same night the OD would hear a voice in the courtyard yelling from a far corner "I'm from West "By God" Virginia and damned glad of it"...It became sort of a rallying yell for West Virginians - freshmen and upper classmen, and all of those Southern drawls began to respect a good, hillbilly accent.

I took a liking to the military way of life, not the spit and polish business, but military science and tactics, military history, the rifle range and even the drilling and formations. I think the crusty, old regular Army Sargeant who was the professor of Military Science recognized that my incorrigibility could be an asset to the military establishment. He encouraged me to continue a military career.

I graduated from Augusta in 1929. I was the editor of the school newspaper for my Junior and Senior years and Editor of the annual my senior year. I was a senior Cadet First Lieutenant and had earned my certificate to be commissioned a Second Lientenant in the U.S. Army Reserve when I reached 21 years of age.

Followingmy graduation from Augusta, I went to Hampden-Sydney College, at Hampden-Sydney near Farmville, Virginia. Again my college choice was prompted by a friend and classmate at Augusta who was going to Hampden-Sydney and by one of the faculty members at Augusta whom I particularly admired and was a Hampden-Sydney

graduate. I was of the class of 1933, but was able to attend only my freshman year. The year 1930 was the beginning of the great depression. It was apparent that I had had all of the formal education I was going to absorb and, besides, my brother Norman, who had been a good high school student was of college age. I remained in Ronceverte and Norman entered West Virginia University to study journalism. He assisted in his own education by working on the Morgantown newspapers as a proofreader and a linotype operator.

I lived at home and worked on the West Virginia News. I did almost any of the chores to be done in the News office. At this time my uncle Edward L. Blake had become the partner in the news with my father and the News was the Blake Brothers Publishers with my grandfather assuming the senior title Editor Emeritis. Job printing contributed much of the income of a weekly newspaper and I set jobs as well as ads for the paper. I set type on the linotype and did some writing specializing in a sports column each week plus a feature story now and then.

My income from the News was meager and I supplemented it by other odd jobs; clerking in grocery and clothing stores on Saturdays, catching tickets, operating the projector and changing the marquee at the Grand Theatre. Two years before I was eligible to be commissioned in the reserve, I enlisted as a buck private in the Ronceverte National Guard Company. I attended summer camp in 1931 at Camp Conley at Point Pleasant as a private and 2 years later as a Second Lieutenant assigned to the National Guard Company in Beckley as my first tour of duty as an officer.

Again in 1935 I was assigned a tour of duty with the reserves at Fort Hayes in Columbus, Ohio. While there I was given assurances of a job as a linotype operator on the Columbus Dispatch. After my military duty, I returned to Columbus, but the newspaper job did not materialize. I searched the Help Wanted Ads, which were mostly some sales gimmick and called on employment agencies; I joined a crew sampling Kellogg's Rice Krispies and practically lived on Rice Krispies for a couple of weeks. I washed windows, worked as a short order cook and finally did some publicity blurbs for dance bands appearing at Olentangy Park. I did get in a couple of nights of linotype setting with the Columbus Citizen after joining the International Typographical Union but it was hit and miss at the most.

I returned to Ronceverte. In 1936, my brother Norman had graduated in journalism at West Virginia University and was ready to move into the West Virginia News. I wrote a letter of application for a job to the late H. C. Ogden, Publisher of the Ogden Newspapers with 16 daily newspapers in West Virginia at the time. I received an immediate reply telling me to report to the Parkersburg News. My father drove me to Parkersburg and checked me into the YMCA. I reported to the Parkersburg News the next day.

I know that my father had not interceded in my half with Mr. Ogden. It just wasn't his way but I know he indirectly influenced the decision of Mr. Ogden to put me on the News. It was several years later at Wheeling that Mr. Ogden told me that I should be a good newspaperman because of my father. It seems that H. C. Ogden had run for the United States Senate in a **Republican** Primary some years before. He had been supported by only his own newspapers and the West Virginia News.

Actually at this time I had very little actual newspaper writing experience. I had plenty of confidence but in some ways was awed to be going to work on a daily newspaper. My first assignments were with the other staff members on their jobs or beats to get acquainted. I was then given the "swing shift" to work the other staff assignments on their days off. I filled in on Sports, covered baseball games. I covered the police and city hall beat in Parkersburg when the regular police reporter was off and had two assignments of covering town council meetings at Vienna and Belpre, Ohio. I still did not have a full schedule or a regular beat. I was then assigned to do a feature story each week... no particular assignment, just go out and dig one up.

My mind was blank. I couldn't come up with an idea. I wondered around town and finally walked out on the Parkersburg-Belpre Bridge across the Ohio River. I hadn't fully made up my mind whether I was going to try to write something about it or jump off of it when I struck up a conversation with the toll taker. He started telling me how he could tell a person's character and personality or how he was feeling just by the way he handed his toll. I listened...and I had my first feature story. Well, when I had turned it in and it ran in the paper, I knew then that "somebody up there likes me" because it was a hit. From then on I was assigned some and others were suggested.

A short time later one of my assignments was to do a story on a WPA project at the local airport. The story I wrote wasn't too sympathetic to the job being done and at one point indicated that the painters on the job sounded like they were trying to nail the paint on the tin hanger.

I have never been certain but I feel sure that is the line that got me to the Wheeling Intelligencer, the State's oldest newspaper, Republican and right under the personal attention of H. C. Ogden. Just a week after the WPA story, Gene Ingersoll, General Manager at Parkersburg, called me in and said that Mr. Ogden wanted me on the Intelligencer to start right away. He didn't even say what the job was to be, I didn't have any idea and I didn't care. I knew it was a promotion and I had my confidence bolstered to where I figured I could handle anything they handed me.

I was assigned to the Telegraph Desk, the editing of the Associated Press wire service, writing headlines and layout and makeup of the front page. I had just two days with the fellow I was replacing but what I didn't know was that he had either been fired or was leaving under some pressure. He had been a popular member of the staff and my showing up was resented. Editor Thomas O'Brien Flynn did come down from his office on the floor above the newsroom and introduced himself, adding that he knew my father well and that he was a great writer and editorialist so I should have a good background. Other than that I was ignored in the newsroom except when it was necessary for the City Editor to confer with me on a local story he might want on the front page.

I had to establish communication with a pretty, blonde girl who worked in the morgue, that's newspaper lingo for the library where cuts, mats, engravings, pictures and clippings are filed. It was necessary from time to time to have a picture from the morgue for the front page. In fact it became more frequent as time went along to the extent that Charlotte Eleanor Gehring and William E. Blake were married on Thanksgiving Day 1937. By this time I had become accepted on the staff of the Intelligencer as well as

members of the staff of the afternoon newspaper, the News Register.

Now Charlotte and I were married on a holiday because we could only get one day off--Friday, and had to be back at work on Sunday afternoon. We rode a train from Wheeling to Pittsburgh for a honeymoon at the William Penn Hotel.

Now in reflection I wonder if Charlotte would have honeymooned anywhere with Bill Blake if she had foreseen the hectic life which was in store. Although our marriage is now in its 37th year, I can recall occasions when she has indicated that she wished she had married a shoe clerk or the Kroger butcher. But then my grandmother was in her 80's when she confided in me once that she would never marry another newspaperman.

During more than three years on the Telegraph Desk, I read every story and dispatch that came over the Associated Press wire service. The rise of Hitler, the grabbing of power and territory, Munich and Chamberlain all massed into the thunderheads of war. I had the headline "War In Europe" in type along with columns of background material already for the fateful day. There was nothing in current events I was not up on.

That was not all of the news, however. In 1938 a radio dramatist, Orson Wells, panicked the nation with his realistic accounts of an invasion of the U. S. by men from Mars in the program "War of the Worlds." I found out in the followup stories that I had something in common with the "War of the Worlds." Orson Wells had also attended Todd School at Woodstock, Illinois.

Two other events helped to chart a new course for my career. The Intelligencer political columnist from Charleston had taken a new job with the Plymouth Oil Company and the late Walter S.

hallanan in Pittsburgh. Mr. Ogden asked me if I would like to do a political column twice a week for the Intell. When I accepted he gave me the option of a \$2 a week raise or my by-line. I took the by-line. Also that same year, the West Virginia Young Republicans elected Russell G. Nesbitt of Wheeling President and thus I was soon prevailed upon to be the Publicity Director for the West Virginia Young Republican League. Not only was I now caught up on politics but politics was catching up to me.

In my activities with the Young Republicans I became acquainted with Charleston Mayor D. Boone Dawson who was being touted as a Republican Candidate for Governor in 1940. In fact, I became one of the chief touters in my column from Wheeling.

I had known Jim Shott of Bluefield for some time. The Shott family and the Blake family had been friends, personal, political and of the newspaper fraternity. Hugh Ike Shott, Sr. was the publisher of the Bluefield Daily Telegraph and the Republican Congressman from the 5th Congressional District. Hugh Ike, Jr. ran the newspaper and the Radio Station while Jim practiced politics most of the time.

It had to be a Saturday afternoon in December of 1939 that D. Boone Dawson and Jim Shott showed up at our apartment in Wheeling. When they came in the door, the first thing Jim Shott said was: "Charlotte, fix me a half-a-cup of coffee and where's the telephone. I'd better call Martha and tell her where I am. I left the house three days ago to get her a loaf of bread and she must be wondering where I am."

That was Jim Shott who became our closest, greatest and dearest friend. A great story teller, an entertainer, a character of

unequaled honesty and by far and away one of the greatest politicians of our times.

After everybody had made their phone calls, gone to the bathroom and were around the kitchen table drinking half-cups of coffee, the nitty-gritty was that Jim Shott was going to manage Boone Dawson's campaign for Governor and they wanted me for his publicity man. It was a hell of a decision but I accepted. Naturally, I had to get permission from Mr. Goden who agreed.

When I arrived in Charleston at the headquarters in the Daniel Boone Hotel, my first assignment was to prepare a press release announcing Boone's candidacy. It was to be made on January 1st. I wrote what I thought was a good announcement and took it into the other room for Jim and Boone to OK. There were a couple of lawyers of the campaign staff also in the room. Boone also was a lawyer but as he used to laugh and say "not enough to hurt."