



Latitudes

LATITUDES

SUMMER, 1967
volume one, number two

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LATITUDES is published quarterly
by Latitudes Press, 6102 Sherwood,
Houston, Texas 77021

SUBSCRIPTION RATES: 75¢ per copy;
\$3 a year. Please write for Ad Rates.

All Correspondence and subscriptions
must be sent to above address. All
manuscripts must be forwarded with a
self-addressed, stamped envelope for
return.

Stranger in Town

by ROBERT BONAZZI

in the densest cities
love keeps a counsel
unknown to mayors
-Harry Nash

Penn Jones has been fighting City Hall all his life without winning very often. "I have often thought of myself as being about as ridiculous as Cervantes' famed Don Quixote," he says of his attempts to budge the little town of Midlothian, Texas a few degrees to the left of the John Birch Society. His wife L.A. has gone farther by suggesting "The Windmill Fighter" as the title for his unpublished autobiography.

Midlothian (population 1521 for the longest time) is 35 miles south of Dallas and known as the "Cement Capital of Texas." Its people (whose ideas certainly are as solidified as the town's famous product) know Penn Jones as the editor of their town's newspaper, *The Midlothian Mirror*. But since he stands miles to the left of their political and social views, they know little else about him.

Without being melodramatic, it can be said that Penn Jones is a stranger in his own town. His ideas do not mix well with the town's ideas: for years the newspaper in Midlothian had no editorial policy. When Jones took over the weekly in 1945, it became more

than a tablet of marriages and obituaries: It became a voice. At first the voice startled the slumbering citizens, but soon, after they realized that this strange sound called dissent would not stop, they took measures to silence it. Subscriptions were cancelled and advertising was withdrawn. Threats by mail and by phone (mostly anonymous) were issued. Still others openly threatened him with beatings. At a city council meeting, a councilman whom the editor had criticized in the *Mirror*, interrupted the proceedings and walked over to where Jones was sitting. "Jones, if you ever put my name in the paper again, I'll give you the damndest beating you ever got in your life." Next issue of the *Mirror* quoted the councilman verbatim and nothing more has been heard from him.

During the McCarthy era, Jones was constantly called a Communist. (The FBI has given him "top-secret" clearance and he was recently made a brevet brigadier general in the Texas National Guard.) Since no one could make "Communist" stick, the editor was called a Catholic or a Jew, depending on which rumor one believes.

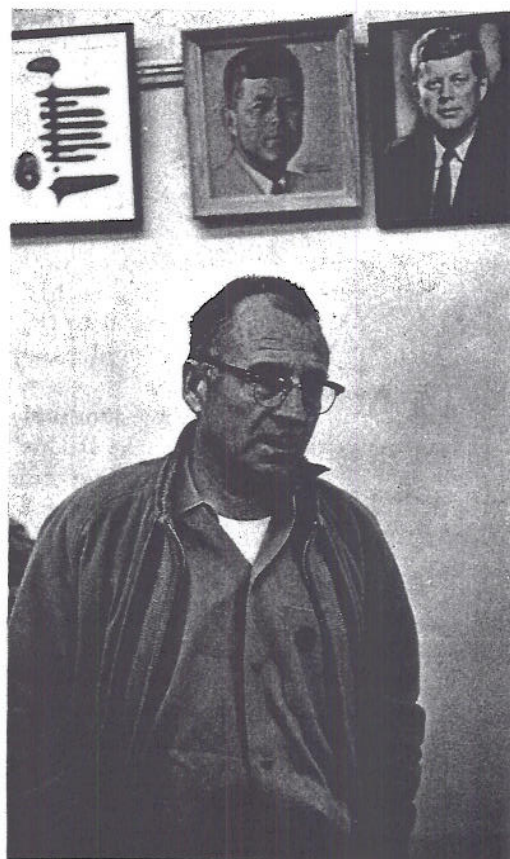
In 1962, after intense battle for 17 years with the City Council, with Lemuel Mills, the then 73-year-old school board president, and the Midlothian "philosophy" in general, Penn Jones could take no more. The event of Edgar W. Seay, a John Birch Society lecturer, speaking to a *cumprulsory assembly* at the Midlothian high school, brought Jones into Mills' office. Seay had called former President Harry S. Truman "a cold-blooded murderer" for sending troops to Korea and hinted that Franklin D. Roosevelt was a Communist. Jones responded first by calling District Judge Sarah T. Hughes in Dallas to ask her to rebut Seay's statements in another assembly at the high school, but she she could only come by invitation of the schoolboard. Jones asked Mills to allow Judge Hughes to speak. Mills asked the school principal, Roy Irvin, to come in since he had heard Seay before and had asked him to speak. Irvin informed the editor it was none of his business and Jones said something like, "The hell it isn't", and a silence held them all for a moment. Then Irvin erupted: "You son of a bitch," he said and started pounding the top of the editor's head. Jones, who is 5' 2", made an inviting target for the frustrated Irvin who, Jones says, is "...Mills' whipping boy. Everything that goes well is credited to Mills and when something goes wrong, Irvin is blamed."

This same concern and fairness has pervaded everything Penn Jones has tried to do in Midlothian. It was not until 1959 that the *Mirror* editorials finally got

the school system's 200 Negro children (there are about 600 white children in a new high school built that year) out of a two-room building with outdoor privvies. Still the schools are segregated, and it will take more than one honest editor to change the situation.

After the caper in the principal's office in 1962, Jones had a fight with Seay in the *Mirror* office that same week.

"When I was trying to get into my lecture to Edgar Seay in the *Mirror* office, he stopped to ask me if I considered myself a loyal American." With a return remark from Jones, the fight got under way. Seay, who is six feet two, two hundred pounds, found himself pushed through the glass door of the newspaper office



and out onto the sidewalk. There the diminutive editor reached down and pulled Seay's legs from under him. His huge hulk crashed to the sidewalk and he started screaming for help. "All right, Penn," said the constable, "he's had enough."

"I will admit," Jones says, "that I lost my temper." But it was really one of the first times he had lost his temper and it was only his second fight since the war--both in the same week over the same issue! Three days later his office was firebombed.

II

"A fire siren at night is always frightening to me," he says. "It recalls North Africa, Naples and other long-remembered sounds of unpleasant experiences. At 2:30 on the morning of April 30, 1962, the siren sounded more insistent, more determined to get quick help on the scene." His own newspaper suffered intensive damage. The fire was so large that he tried to make entrance from both the front and back to no avail. When the fire was extinguished, arson experts from Dallas determined the cause to have been a "Molotov cocktail" thrown through the front door window. Insurance covered much of the damage but the *Mirror* office had to be completely remodelled and all the machines had to be thoroughly cleaned. In Jones' opinion the arson was the work of the right wing, but no convictions have been made. He offered \$1,000 to anyone leading to the arrest and conviction of the arsonist, but there has been little interest in his search. "Some mighty bad things have happened to Mr. Jones," said one spinster, "and he deserved every one of them."

The bombing made national news. Ironically, when Jones phoned the bombing story to the Dallas and Fort Worth newspapers, they refused it. They said it was "too local." This did not really surprise him: "I've been jumping all over Dallas since we came here. I have worked hard for my enemies and I guess I deserve every one of them." Penn Jones and his sons and his few friends in Midlothian started cleaning up that very day and in the face of jeers: "Gonna get out a paper this week Jones?"

"Why hell yes, man." And he did.

In 1963 Southern Illinois University awarded him the Elijah Parish Lovejoy Award for Courage in Journalism and he is this year's President of the International Conference of Weekly Newspaper Editors. His courage has never been doubted but one might question his undying faith in the people of the United States, even those in Midlothian. "Years ago," he recalls this in response to the bombing which surprises him, "when our oldest boy was four (the Jones' have two sons), he was digging in a big honeysuckle vine in our back yard. It was just about dusk and in seconds he was attacked

by a large nest of yellow jackets. He came in screaming. When medication had been applied, and he finally settled down, we deciphered what he was trying to say: 'But I thought they liked me.' Well, I wasn't quite that naive about being editor in Midlothian, but I wasn't much better. My wife has always been more realistic." The bombing came as no real surprise to L.A. Jones. She said: "I always thought it would be our house."

III

Since the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, Penn Jones has virtually renounced his fight with the aristocracy of Midlothian. For a town that has elected a dead man to office and refused Jones' offer of \$2,000 and 2000 books to start a town library, its conscience is gone. Penn Jones has attached his values and energies to a larger evil: he wants to find the real murderers of a President he loved very deeply.

For over a year after the assassination he did investigative work in Dallas and wrote editorials in the *Mirror* which culminated in his book, *Forgive My Grief*. He is one of the most important critics of the Warren Report and the man who discovered the series of strange deaths surrounding the assassination. His work has been instrumental to the successes of Mark Lane, New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison and Ramparts magazine.

Jones' work on the assassination continues in the pages of the *Mirror* every week. Volume II of *Forgive My Grief* will appear this summer and a third book, *The Making of A Patsy*. 1963 will appear later.

In the meantime Penn Jones is traveling all over Texas making speeches on the assassination. In 1966 he spoke in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and London on the radio and TV shows of Mort Sahl, Merv Griffin, Louis Lomax and others.

It is a lonely time in his life because every day is spent buried in the Warren Commission's 26 volumes of Hearings (he has purchased 15 sets at \$76 a set) and just "breathing at Mexican Joe's", his farm, where he gets away, relieves the frustrating work. But he is convinced that his work and the work of Lane, Sylvia Meagher, Harold Weisberg, Vincent Salandria and Garrison will eventually reveal the truth of November 22, 1963.

SOCIALISM IN DALLAS

We have been caught going the wrong way on a one way street with a cop right behind us. We have been caught flat footed between first and second base. We have been caught fishing without a license. We never seem able to make the changes in line with the big boys of Dallas.

While in Dallas recently, someone whispered to us that Dallas was going to have a municipal bus system. "Sure," we sneeringly answered, "With H. L. Hunt driving bus number one."

Later in the same day, another fellow told us out loud that Dallas was considering a government owned bus system instead of the present private ownership system. "Dr. W. A. Criswell believes in evolution." was our only reply.

Again someone told us of the impending change in the thinking in this Republican stronghold of the nation. This time, we really had a sharp and cutting comment. With a face full of sarcasm we said: "Poucher is suing Hunt for union wages." That really grabbed em.

Now, are we embarrassed!

We will never, never learn when the big boys are planning to switch their philosophy. It has taken us years to understand it is socialism for a town to own the electric system or gas or phone company in its area, but it is not socialism for the city to own and operate the water works. We have worked hard, and have mastered this mental block.

Dallas Republicans have been shouting about how government ownership ruins initiative, how it is cruel, unfair, dictatorial, socialistic, sinful, and unpatriotic!

Apparently Dallas now admits it has been outsmarted. Instead of paying the man off, and getting an honest fellow like H. L. Hunt to own and operate the system for the benefit of all the people, they surrender to the communistic and socialistic line and want a municipal system! Unbelievable how soft people can become.

It won't work, we have been crying. It is sinful, we said. We predicted loud and clear to all of our three friends in Dallas that Dallas would not do it, and again we have been double crossed by the communist sympathizers.

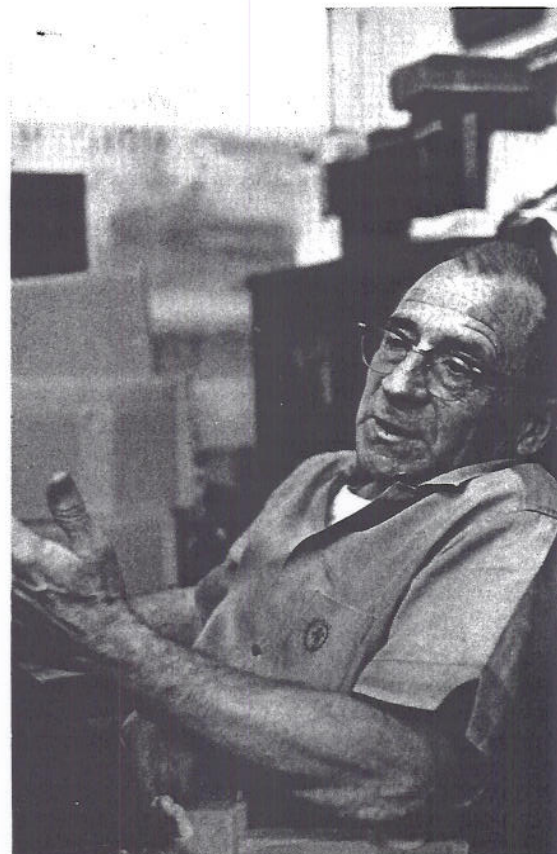
In one week, Wayne Poucher sues Hunt for \$30,000 because Poucher had been working for Hunt at below the union scale. Poucher just hates unions. We have heard him say a hundred time how sinful and how evil unions are. He almost had us convinced of the evils of unions. Now, Poucher wants union benefits!

In the same week as the Poucher suit, The Dallas Times Herald comes right out in a front page editorial in big words in black and white and recommend a municipal bus system!

Just our luck for Criswell to come out now in favor of evolution.

We are slow down here in Midlothian. We pride ourselves on learning slow, but learning it well. You gotta give us signals many blocks ahead if you plan for us to make a turn the same time you do. We just can't seem to keep up with the high level philosophical changes in the thinking of the intellectual leaders in Dallas. Makes you feel so silly going the wrong way on a one way street!

Now, we got to go apologize to our friends. Guess we ought to say something to Hunt, Poucher & Co. Trouble is the leaders in Dallas simply have no consideration for the conscientious weekly editors striving to keep up with the big boys.



*Editorial by Penn Jones
from The Mirror (left)*