

Story No Secret

(A reporter sometimes must combine the talents of a detective, accountant and auditor. The following report explains the work behind November's series on the taxpayer's tab.)

By David Goeller
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In preparing the 11-part series on expense account spending by the Mandel administration, it would be fun to be able to write about secret midnight meetings with informers, tipsters and disgruntled bureaucrats ready to spill the goods on the boss.

Unfortunately for story-telling and much romanticism, gathering the material on the Mandel series was a task far closer to accounting and auditing than cloak-and-dagger reporting.

Virtually every fact in the Taxpayers' tab series was available to anyone asking for them at the office of the Maryland comptroller. The receipts, bills and spending records of the governor's office--as is the case with every state agency--are a matter of public record, open for inspection by anyone during normal state business hours.

I just happened to be the first reporter during the Mandel administration to walk two blocks from the State House to review the records.

It's a walk reporters ought to take more often, both at the state and local governmental levels.

The research itself took about six working days, off and on over a two-week period. The analyzing and collating of the data took about another week, again off and on as the coverage of spot news permitted.

Writing the 9,000-word series took

about four days after Spiro Agnew resigned as vice president.

The Agnew story was related to the Mandel expense account research. For weeks, I was detached from the Annapolis bureau to cover the Agnew story at the federal court house in Baltimore. News leaks were not abundant in Baltimore and working the Agnew story there amounted to sitting outside the office of U.S. Atty. George Ball waiting for statements that were never made and watching people troop in and out of Beall's office.

Finally after weeks of nothingness, an open court hearing was scheduled in connection with the Agnew grand jury probe. Finally, I thought, there could be a story to cover, some news to write.

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Unfortunately, the hearing came the week Annapolis Correspondent Tom Stuckey was on vacation and I was confined to Annapolis while Bureau staffers covered the court hearing.

I can't say I was happy about having spent weeks being inactive in the court house and then having to miss the first real for-the-record Agnew story to emerge from that phase of the investigation.

While in Annapolis that day, I decided to do what I had planned for months: check out the Mandel administration expense accounts.

As I began gathering the material, the Agnew case began snowballing and I found myself working one day on the Agnew story and the next on expense accounts.

The greatest concern during this time was completing the expense account research, analysis and writing before any other newsmen would find out what I was doing and decide to deal themselves in on the

