

"THE NEEDLE OF TRUTH"

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Possessing aspirations and convictions incompatible with life in a prussianized state, Henry Baldowski booked passage on a steamer bound for America. A wife and five sons would accompany him on an uncertain journey to the New World. Gaining entrance to the United States was a calculated risk since there would be no relatives or sponsors waiting at dockside to greet the family once it traversed the Atlantic. Yet, the promise of a fresh beginning in land fabled for its freedom and opportunity made the gamble worth taking.¹

Baldowski left Germany for material reasons and to spare his sons the prospect of mandatory military service to the Fatherland. Once processing at New York's Ellis Island was finished, immigration officials directed him to the east-central Georgia town of Augusta. Little more than a sleepy mill village just across the South Carolina state line, the environs did contain an identifiable German-born community. This was an attraction, but once in Augusta Henry made a concerted effort to become Americanized—even to the point of abandoning his mother tongue. Bystanders found it humorous to overhear the father address his offspring in English, while the children responded in German.

As the patriarch toiled in a cotton factory, his sons entered manhood and became farmers, merchants, bookkeepers, and teamsters. The most successful sibling was George Herman Baldowski, who worked for the *Augusta Herald*. A natural flair for layout design work made him an asset in the paper's advertising department. When not in the composing room, George augmented his income by selling ads.

George and wife Marian produced three sons. First-born Clifford Herman Baldowski entered the world on December 27, 1917. Certain of Cliff's childhood memories are insightful. At the age of ten, for instance, he was given the chance to earn his first spending money (the grand sum of ten dollars) by assisting in his father's work. The son's responsibility was to color or fill in outlines and shade parallaxes. Noting the length of time his dad spent on the job, which often meant laboring until the wee hours of the morning so that a mock-up would be ready to show a customer by 10 a.m., the boy was convinced that he "never wanted to be a newspaperman." A later paper route was the closest he got to printer's ink for a long time.

Additional adolescent anecdotes are equally prophetic, such as Cliff's fondness for Saturday matinee movies. Feature-length cowboy shows were his first love, but that changed when serials were added to the bill. The pictures starting and flickering across the silent screen thrilled the youngster immensely and fired his imagination more than anyone realized at the time. The moment the projector stopped, Clifford would dash home, grab paper and crayons, climb

up on the dining room table where he was safely out of reach of his brothers' (Billy and Julian) curious hands, and proceed to sketch an actor or scene that had caught his fancy. A rendition of the next week's serial episode also was drawn. The same thing transpired whenever a circus or fair came to town. When not sketching, the youngster used watercolors to paint faces on his mother's wooden clothespins. Except for maternal grandmother Nannie, no one took his "diddling" very seriously. But she offered praise and encouragement, saying: You might make a living doing that someday."

The gift or portrayal saw little refinement during his teenage years. Instead, Tip (a nickname) spent his time alternating between sports and puppylove, with the former having priority. Football and baseball were his co-favorites and participation in city or school recreation programs manifested an athletic prowess. His lack of height was a slight drawback, however, a disadvantage which was offset through rigorous body building.

The academic side of Baldowski's life was one of summits and slumps. Student days at Richmond Academy found him recording respectable grades in English and history classes, but "French was better the second time around." Less to his liking than foreign language were math and all science subjects, save biology, which afforded him an artistic outlet. "I could dissect a frog or a crayfish," he recalled, "and turn out the sexiest drawings in class. I often did enlargements for the teacher, but the only way he could pay me was not to flunk me."

If traditional courses held only fleeting attraction, Richmond's military science curriculum had greater appeal. By the time Tip graduated in 1935, he had achieved the rank of battalion commander and was giving serious thought to an armed forces career. He even spent one summer in the government's Civilian Military Training Corps hoping to earn credits toward a commission. But the Great Depression forced him to leave the program.

After high school, Baldowski entered Augusta Junior College, which shared its campus with Richmond Academy. In an intellectual atmosphere approximating that of secondary school, collegiate studies were less than exhilarating. Clifford subsequently withdrew from classes and went to work as a \$20-a-week landscape draftsman for Fruitland Nursery. Despite his absence of horticultural knowledge, the company wanted the young man's artistic skills more than a green thumb and it became Tip's assignment to visit sites, note driveways and large trees, obtain measurements, and make renderings.

In spite of enjoying the work and garnering praise from supervisors, reprimands from nursery owners were in the offing. While probably deserved, such rebukes had nothing to do with his employment; rather, it was outside activities that caused problems because Cliff began playing outfield for the Louisville, Georgia, team in the semi-pro Ogeechee Baseball League. To

someone who felt he had a shot at the big leagues, the experience and a sawbuck-per-game pocket money seemed too good to pass up. The trouble was, however, that the team's schedule took it as far south as Valdosta. Long bus rides, coupled with an assortment of injuries, kept him off the job every now and then, much to the chagrin of company managers. Dreams of a possible stint in the major leagues remained in the back of Tip's mind until later that year when he went to West Palm Beach and tried out for the St. Louis Cardinals. "I never saw a ball coming toward home plate so fast in my life," he said when describing the calibre of pitching he faced during spring training camp.

When his aspirations of a sports career evaporated, Cliff reentered junior college in 1937. Fall of the following year found him transferring to Georgia Military College to play varsity football and enroll in the school's Reserve Officers Training Corps program. But tuition money ran out and he returned to Augusta and reacquired his nursery job. Over the next two years there would also be work as a brickyard laborer and as a traveling salesman for the Castleberry food company.²

Clifford Baldowski's life reached an accidental turning point one afternoon in 1940 as he talked with *Augusta Herald* sportswriter Rut Samuel about not having chosen a career. After listening sympathetically to Cliff's story, the reporter arranged a tryout for the baseball scholarship at the Citadel. Tip impressed the coaches and entered the institution that fall. What made things even sweeter was that the college had an Army Air Corps training program and, due to the beginning of the European War, the government had lowered its academic entrance requirement to two years of post-secondary study.

Once the flying cadet examinations were passed in the spring of 1941, Cliff was called to active duty and sent to Spencer Field in Moultrie, Georgia, for primary pilot training. But a hitch developed when a physical examination detected red-green color blindness. "Well, Hell!" was the response to the news that dashed all hopes of becoming an aviator. Rather than be discharged from the service at a time when the United States' involvement in the Second World War appeared imminent, Baldowski elected to attend Officers Training School in Miami. After commissioning, he was sent to Air Corps Intelligence School in Pennsylvania to study photo-interpretation and aircraft recognition. This was followed by a six-month tour in Mississippi as a squadron intelligence officer; then came transfer to Virginia in the capacity of an air liaison captain with the joint task force signal company of the 77th Infantry Division. A whirlwind courtship at Norfolk culminated in marriage to Sylvia (Chris) Christianson nine weeks prior to being shipped out to the South Pacific in March, 1944. One of the first letters to reach him overseas was from Chris, who wanted to know the owner of the boxes of sketches she had discovered in the trunk of the family car. Out of modesty and embarrassment because none

of his illustrations ever had been purchased by the newspapers or magazines he sent them to, Clifford had neglected to mention anything about his cartooning to Sylvia. Now all he could do was confess his secret "hobby" and dismiss it as mere "trifling."

Cliff's first test of arms came at Guam while coordinating shipboard artillery bombardment toward the island from a position on the beach. After dark, as he huddled low in a foxhole near water's edge, a jittery GI commenced what was to become a nightlong practice of shooting at shadows. The sporadic rifle bursts needlessly aroused everyone and kept the entire command on pins and needles. Although no sign of the enemy was visible at daylight, the more Baldowski thought about the trigger-happy trooper's antics the funnier the incident became. When he withdrew to safer surroundings a couple of days later, Cliff ended an eight-month hiatus from cartooning by satirizing the episode using Walt Disney's "Goofy" character as a focal point. The handiwork was surreptitiously tacked to a bulletin board. Response was immediate and positive. "My comrades got a kick out of it," Cliff reflected, "and I got rid of a first-class jerk." From then on impromptu cartoons came regularly, with the guys in the outfit looking forward to a bit of levity in an otherwise dismal setting.

Once Guam was pacified, Baldowski participated in the Philippines campaign. Next, he was sent to Ie Shima, a tiny atoll a few miles off-shore from Okinawa. On Ie Shima, Baldy met Pulitzer-Prize-winning war correspondent Ernie Pyle. Early on the morning of April 18, 1945, Pyle, a seasoned journalist who thrived on being in the thick of combat, decided to join a three-jeep convoy headed to a forward observation post from which Cliff and his mobile radio crew were scheduled to direct air strikes against the enemy. Before departing, a superior officer requested that Baldowski swap places with Ernie so that the commander could have the privilege of riding with the distinguished visitor. As they were exchanging seats, Cliff recalled that he "stuck a piece of paper in front of Pyle and asked for his autograph. Less than five minutes out of camp a machine gun opened up on the right side of our column. When the shooting stopped, Ernie was dead. He was the only one hit."

A few weeks later, while Cliff was accompanying a naval officer on an observer mission over Okinawa, anti-aircraft fire hit their plane, thus necessitating an emergency landing. Miraculously, a makeshift enemy airstrip was sighted. Although the dirt runway was short, anything seemed better than plunging into the jungle. Despite a rough touchdown, the pilot was able to bring the craft in without exploding any of the bombs on board. The aviator was severely shaken and Baldy sustained neck and head injuries.

Aside from a Purple Heart, Baldowski's ordeal earned him an Air Medal and a Clustered Bronze Star. A medical examination determined that his injuries were serious enough to send him to a Coral Gables, Florida, hospital in

August 1945.

Learning of her husband's return to the States, Chris took the first train south. "The day arrived," Clifford offered timidly, "I must admit I wasn't too sure what she looked like. After all, I had known her only three months. She accused me of hiding behind a pillar at the railroad station until I found out. But I was luckier than many fellows who were in a similar situation. I fell in love with my wife for the first time . . . two years and four months after we were married."

Cliff remained at the facility for approximately nine months, primarily as an out-patient. In a way, he was fortunate to be there at that particular time for in those days greater Miami was awash with artists, writers, entertainers, and assorted celebrities who visited recuperating veterans in an effort to cheer them up. One caller whom Baldy chanced to meet was Glenn Bretthauer, a political cartoonist for the *Miami Herald*. After discovering their mutual interest in drawing, Glenn told the captain to drop by the paper and bring along some of his sketches. He did, and for the first time Cliff took an interest in editorial illustrations. Heretofore, any serious thought of commercial art came in reference to comic strips. Brett liked what he saw in the Georgian's work and in short order had Baldy a part-time job tracing local political and sports stories. None of these efforts made the editorial page, however.

Following release from active duty, Baldowski used his GI Bill benefits to enroll at New York's renown Art Students League. Doubting that there was a future for him in cartooning, he studied layout and advertising--areas for which he had "no patience or feel for at all." But just as he was on the verge of seeking a different line of work, his father telephoned and said the *Augusta Chronicle* might be in the market for someone with his adroitness because the paper's publisher, Bill Morris, intended to run for the legislature against House Speaker, Roy V. Harris. The latter, an avid racist and long-time power in Georgia politics, had grown dictatorial over the years and many voters were calling for change. Morris, realizing the uphill struggle he was facing, and believing that a sharp ink-filled pen could help his cause, hired Clifford.

While there was no promise of further employment once the election was over, Baldowski plunged into the thick of things with great trenchancy. Cliff went after the opposition pictorially and narratively, even managing to write a handful of editorials. So intense did the mudslinging of the bitter campaign become, that the cartoonist himself was verbally attacked. Shortly before the canvass closed in July of 1946, he started signing his name to compositions. This brought forth derogatory charges that the *Chronicle* had imported some foreigner to do its dirty work.

After the Augusta election, which Morris won, the young delineator remained on the payroll and permanently adopted the "Baldy" trademark.

During the next few years, Cliff honed his skills and before long a widening reputation caught the eye of *Atlanta Constitution* editor Jack Tarver, who called Baldy in the spring of 1950 about the possibility of affiliating with the Cox newspaper chain. When Bill Morris learned of the overture, Cliff was taken aside, given an immediate \$5 raise, and promised faithfully that he "would never make less than \$55 a week for the rest of his life."

Not wanting hastily to forgo such a flattering offer, Baldy went to Atlanta for an interview with the *Constitution's* top brass. He liked what he saw and heard at the paper, but "the capital was not much to write home about," he recalled. "In those days Augusta had more of a skyline than Atlanta." Still, to be on the safe side, both parties agreed to a trial run, and on Friday, August 18, 1950, his work debuted on the editorial page.

Morris graciously allowed Cliff to take a leave-of-absence while he wrestled with alternative career opportunities. There was much apprehension about permanently changing employers and uprooting his family. The indecision lasted nearly a month. Each Sunday Cliff would stuff his belongings into a suitcase, drive to Atlanta, and procure a room at the YMCA. On weekends, he returned to Augusta. Growing weary of traveling, Baldowski finally cast his lot with the *Constitution*. The newspaper's four hundred dollar monthly remuneration no doubt helped sway the decision.

By the mid-1950s, Baldy had found his niche. His role would be analogous to that of the annoying gadfly. He, like the insect, would "circle and stab and sting until an important subject was brought squarely to public attention." An unofficial motto was borrowed from famous *New York Tribune* cartoonist Jay "Ding" Darling: "You can let the air out of a balloon as easy with a pen as you can with a meat axe." In this spirit, Cliff plied his trade with the credo that it was more important "to impress the fellow next door than the *New York Times*."

After joining the Cox group, several months elapsed before Clifford's handicraft appeared in the prestigious *Journal-Constitution* Sunday edition (December 10, 1950), and it would be spring of 1951 before he contributed regularly. One reason for this was that Ann Mergen of the *Atlanta Journal* staff had cartooning priority. A rarity in the field because of gender, Mergen was also a personal favorite of owner and unsuccessful 1920 Democratic presidential nominee, James M. Cox.

Another reason for Baldy's infrequent Sunday appearances had nothing to do with seniority. In those days, staff assignments were not always doled out according to one's specialty and Cliff was sometimes sent to sketch Saturday afternoon football games. Afterward, he raced back to the office and burned the midnight oil in order to meet Sunday's press deadline.

Even a cursory review of Baldowski's labors over the years will reveal

noticeable alterations in style, technique, and quality; beyond a doubt there was greater and greater sophistication and succinctness to his work. While never quite a pure caricaturist, his compositions usually featured people. He preferred it that way, believing that readers could more easily understand person-oriented cartoons than if symbols, animality, or abstractions were employed. "Faces say things to me," he asserted. This influence came from sports cartoonist Willard Mullen of the *New York Telegraph*. "That man had a tremendous feel for anatomy," Clifford said matter-of-factly, "and I admired the detail in his drawings, especially the fingers. A lot of people like little rubbery hands, but not me. They just don't seem real." Equally, Baldowski was indebted to Mullen for specificity of background composition.

Another technique tried, then abandoned, in the preliminary stages of his career was using "balloons" or "loops" to incorporate narratives. Since the procedure was often associated with comic books or funny papers, it was discarded and replaced with captioning. While label line content was always his own, the actual lettering process was done in the composing room. "We always had trouble with Cliff's grammar," Jack Tarver dryly recalled. "He misspelled one syllable words. So we got an engraver who had a dictionary and let him do the writing." Some misspellings got through nonetheless.

Of the infinite variety of styles available within the medium, Baldy preferred caricature laced with heavy doses of satire, ridicule, and humor. First and foremost he considered himself an editorialist who seldom handed out plaudits. "Praiseworthy cartoons and the holiday stuff I have to do are pretty bland and simply no damn good," ran the thinking. Pen portraits, he insisted, are "one-sided graphic expressions of opinion about issues that are white hot in the general news. They are useful as long as there is some urgency about them. Their value resides in immediate impact. A cartoonist practices visual journalism and uses pictures to stimulate emotion. A columnist's words generally appeal to reason, but drawings hit a lot harder and have more effect." Differences between writers and sketchers are "strictly superficial" because, in his view, both "are trying to find the needle of truth in a haystack of information." Cliff was pragmatic in quest of this goal and availed himself of numerous thematic treatments and artistic variations to reach it, including: zany, symbolism, grotesque, visual pun, dark humor, parody, animalism, and satire.

The nature of the news business being what it is, coupled with the expectation that he meet a seven-day-a-week quota, the "idea well" sometimes ran dry. Sustaining a high level of humor, originality, and timeliness presented problems. The only cartoon that could be safely prepared a day or two in advance was Sunday's, which he never liked to do because it got lost in a quagmire of supermarket ads, sports scores, and "jovial junk." Therefore, when the cartoonist's version of writer's block descended, Cliff took a walk in hope

of a brainstorm, or consulted a file consisting of general theatrical and topical layouts clipped from the pages of magazines and newspapers. Often a glance at a house, forest, town, or other universal scene produced an embryo of an idea and sparked the imagination. If the creative juices still refused to flow, he resorted to recycling previously printed material, although he might update the label line.

Certainly one of the deepest and most lasting influences on Clifford Baldowski's philosophy--especially in relation to human rights--came from Ralph McGill. He fondly remembered McGill's high shrill voice verbally pointing out glaring injustices heaped upon southern blacks. Baldy had grown up playing with Negro children and accepting the status quo; he never thought much about Jim Crowism or second-class citizenship. McGill forced the truth on him and Cliff began seeing unequal schools, riding in the back of the bus, separate drinking fountains, and the like in a different light. "I never realized that things I always took for granted were so wrong," the cartoonist said.

In 1954, when the Supreme Court's *Brown* decision mandated an end to dual school systems, Cliff began championing compliance with the dictum. In the South, with racial tensions running high, this was hardly the popular thing to do. Being one of a comparatively few white newspapermen on the cutting edge of desegregation issues took backbone and brought him plenty of hate mail and obscene telephone calls. But bigotry and vilification only served to make him more determined in his quest to promote justice and equality. He did not mind being referred to as "that nigger-loving foreigner" because he knew his efforts were making headway. In fact, he considered such abuse "flattering" and took pride in *Time* magazine's reference to him as "one of the South's leading appeals to reason."

If Baldy was seldom honored on his own ground during the fifties and sixties for his anti-mainstream stand on race matters, there was praise for his work outside the region. In 1959, he received the 1958 National Sigma Delta Chi Award for distinguished service in journalism for a rendering depicting the effect that closing public schools (a plan put forth by demagogic leaders) would have upon the South.

A liberal for his place and time (he called himself a moderate), it was preordained that Baldowski would lend editorial endorsement to the ever-widening spectrum of civil, social, and consumer issues that dominated the domestic scene during the 1960s and 1970s. His growing notoriety in the newspaper field led the International Council on Human Relations (ICHR) to commission him to compile a book of cartoons illustrating the evolution of the Civil Rights movement. A tentative mock-up was as far as the project got, however, because a snag developed when he wanted incorporate drawings of "black power" advocates who promoted militancy as a tactic to effect change.

This was not the image the Council desired, fearing that reference to a minority of extremists would only serve to legitimize such attitudes and unnecessarily tarnish the movement as a whole. Baldy stubbornly disagreed, contending that to ignore radical fringe elements made for naivete and historic inaccuracy. Opposing positions could not be reconciled and the volume never materialized.

The ICHR episode was not the only time that Baldy's inflexible ideals caused problems. After leaving active duty in 1945, he joined the Air Force Reserves and wound up a full colonel before retiring in 1975. During that period, he spent eight years as an Information Flight Commander arranging VIP visits and publishing a monthly newsletter for Georgia reservists. Governor Carl Sanders even offered him the assistant air adjutant generalship in 1963, a position he had to decline to avoid obvious conflict of interest. When the Vietnam war grew disillusioning, Baldy began producing negative illustrations. This point of view made summer reserve camp less than enjoyable. Superior officers were cryptic, wanting to know why a soldier could be so unpatriotic. Cliff was not an anti-war activist by any means, but simply believed that the conflict had degenerated to a point where politicians were making battlefield decisions that rightfully should have been the province of military commanders."

Baldowski had a recipe for his success and longevity with the Cox chain. "Keeping in step with the times was very important," he maintained. He did so during daily bus rides to work by reading major periodicals such as the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News* magazines. Additionally, he listened to what *Journal* and *Constitution* correspondents had to say about state and local affairs. Conversing with fellow editors afforded other opportunities for insight and cartoon angle. "The trouble is," he confided, "modern editors do not drive as hard on a single issue as they once did. Instead, there is too much bouncing around and not enough tenacity. Everyone wants to be an entertainer and not be criticized. I like it the other way. Cartoonists should supply the punch on the editorial page. Current cartoonists do not take forceful stands and randomly flutter from subject to subject without following through."

Equally responsible for Cliff's staying-power was his ability to change with the times, whether it meant modifying label line vernacular or altering artistic style to fit shifting circumstances. When blacks assumed control of Atlanta's City Hall, for example, he was just as critical as during previous white administrations. "I treated everyone the same," he flatly asserted. "Because of my asseveration of equal minority rights a lot of people figured I would be real lenient on black politicians. Hell, to do that would have been counter-productive and journalistically dishonest. Imbecility, impropriety, and criminality are not restricted to any one skin color."

Despite somewhat limited national exposure, Baldowski's graphics received a bountiful array of public and private accolades over the years.

Representative cartoons found their way into the Library of Congress; major universities featured him in symposia series, and national conventions gave him standing ovations. His products were annually included in the pages of the *Best Editorial Cartoons of the Year* publication and often turned up in scholarly monographs to drive home a point visually. With the notable exceptions of George Wallace and Lester Maddox, numerous political personalities, whose foibles and follies Cliff so cleverly lanced with surgeon-like precision, have requested original drawings. Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, Carl Sanders, and Marvin Griffin are among those who did.

The editorialist's career harvested even loftier commendations. In 1965, the National Council of Parents and Teachers honored him for work concerning the student dropout problem. Four Freedom Foundations medals likewise were garnered, although it always puzzled him as to why a conservative group would be so generous in praise of a liberal.

The highest award to which any cartoonist can aspire--a Pulitzer--came within reach in 1965 as a result of a rendering of Republican presidential nominee Barry Goldwater's resounding defeat in the 1964 general election. Two other cartoonists also reached the final stages of judging, but the jury panel (which included Ralph McGill) was unable to determine a winner. Consequently, no award was given. Later, McGill told Cliff that his cartoon would have won had it not been quite so historically incorrect. McGill did not elaborate on what he meant, and Baldy never inquired. While no one will ever know what defects were thought to exist, McGill might possibly have been referring to the fact that Goldwater carried the electoral vote of six states; only five were illustrated, with the nominee's native Arizona being left out. More than likely, however, the parallel between Napoleon Bonaparte's misfortunes and those of Goldwater was technically invalid. Baldy's comparison was to Napoleon's 1812 retreat from Moscow; whereas, the label line indicated reference to the Battle of Waterloo (Belgium, 1815).

During the three-decade span, Cliff and his newspaper not only covered the local environment with great effectiveness, but went on to become strong regional voices as well. By 1980, the *Atlanta Constitution's* daily circulation exceeded a quarter of a million (it was two or three times that on Sundays). Numbers alone made the paper a force to be reckoned with, both statewide and throughout Dixie. Statistics aside, the *Constitution's* reputation mattered more. Such recognition did not transpire overnight and much of the credit for making the organ a Deep South standard of excellence came from the collective professional talents of feature writers, columnists, and editors such as Tarver, McGill, Gene Patterson, Furman Bisher, Clestine Sibley, and Reg Murphy.

But of the host of prestigious journalists, few could match Cliff Baldowski's topflight comprehension of unfolding history or his timing, wit, and

feel for the essential--that special ability to depict place, mood, and moment. In a way, his cartoons were poetic mental photographs of the seen and the unseen. He reduced complex subjects to intelligible terms and personified American pragmatism in its truest tradition--one frame at a time.

NOTES

¹The information in this article is based on a series of interviews the author conducted with Clifford Henry Baldowski between early 1984 and early 1987.

²The Castleberry position, which was both profitable and satisfying, had to be relinquished because of an extended stay in Augusta following the death of brother Julian, who was killed in an automobile accident. The company wanted its employee back on the road too quickly. Younger brother Billy, it should be added, had died a few years earlier at the age of ten, having been struck by a car on the way to school.