**2. Learning on many fronts**

In April 1917 the United States entered World War I. A month later Mark took leave from the Telegraph and joined the navy. He went to boot camp in Newport, Rhode Island, and from there to the Brooklyn Navy Yard; soon after he joined the USS Nebraska in Norfolk. As he boarded, he was received by Lieutenant Commander Butler Young Rhodes, his first cousin, but he was so indoctrinated with the notion that a seaman doesn’t speak to an officer, he didn’t say a word. A few days later when the Nebraska had put to sea, Rhodes sent for him and asked why he hadn’t acknowledged their relationship when he came aboard. Mark explained that he ahd been taugh not to speak to an officer unless the officer spoke first. Lieutenant Commander Rhodes was as much kin to him as he was to the Lieutenant Commander. Rhodes laughed, and he and Mark eventually established a close relationship.

Rhodes put a Blue Jacket’s Manual; in Mark’s hands and said, “Learn the first sixty pages of this manual and report on them in the morning to the ship’s quartermaster.” It was the beginning of an enlisted man’s route to becoming an officer. The quartermaster continued giving him assignments until he had gone through the entire manual.

Another sailor, named Martin, went through it with him. It was a thick manual, so it took them about seven months. Then they were called up for an examination to be an officer by an officer who came on-board for that purpose.

While Mark was waiting to hear the outcome of the exam that might send him to Annapolis for officer training, orders came for the Nebraska to be ready by the next morning to receive the body of the Uruguayan ambassador for the return home. Mark was elated. He had never been to a foreign country. But before the Nebraska could sail, it had to be coaled and repainted. Mark coaled and painted far into the night. He was bone weary, yet buoyed at the prospect of sailing outside the coastal waters of the United States. Just when he was ready for bed, a telegram arrived, signed by Josephus Daniels, Secretary of the Navy: “Detach Ethridge and Martin and send them to New York…”

Many years later, Mark had to introduce Secretary Daniels to an audience in Atlanta. He told about the dirty trick Secretary Daniels had played on him “when I was a lowly plebe and wanted so terribly to go to Uruguay, but instead he sent me to New York.” When he had finished, the Secretary got up, walked slowly to the rostrum, put his arm around Mark, and said in the most benign manner, “Son, why didn’t you call me up and tell me you wanted to go to Uruguay?”

From New York Mark was sent to the Naval Academy at Annapolis for sixteen weeks, then was commissioned an ensign and assigned to the USS Huron, which the United States had seized from the Germans as the Hindenburg.

Mark made three trips, carrying troops across the Atlantic to Brest and St. Nazaire. On one trip he stood watch in the crow’s nest as the Huron went into St. Nazaire. From his perch he witnessed the sinking of a German submarine by the USS Fairfax, one of the Huron’s escorts. In addition, he served as a junior officer of the deck.

When the war ended, he returned to the Macon Telegraph as city editor. On his first night back he got into a crap game with reporters from the paper and lost sixty dollars separation pay the Navy had given him, earmarked for a suit. So he worked in his ensign’s uniform until he could persuade the Joseph N. Neal clothing store to sell him a suit on credit. Some years later when Time printed this crap-game story in connection with Mark’s promotion to an important new job, his mother, instead of congratulating him, wired, “Son, I didn’t know you shot craps.”

To his horror Mark found four women on the city staff. I was one of them. After all, male reporters had been powerfully scarce during the war. I was going to Wesleyan College in Macon and doing reportorial work on the Telegraph afternoons and Saturdays. In telling of this “impossible situation” on the paper,

Taking over the city desk, Mark faced a problem. He told about it frequently, his delpmium? blue eyes twinkling mightily. He even wrote about it once when I was to address the North Carolina Press Association meeting in Chapel Hill, and the publicity chairman asked him for an advance story.

“When I went back to the Telegraph after the war was over,” he wrote, “I found five women on a staff of eight reporters, and I had to do something about them. I made one woman’s editor. I married one, I fired two, and kept one. Willie was the one I married. You might say she married brilliantly shortly after leaving college.”

Carried away now by his own humor and having my very informal essay-type books about the family as the basis for his remark, he continued, “Her books are as libelous as they can be as far as I’m concerned…I’d sue her for libel except that she hasn’t got a damned cent I don’t give her.”

I suppose I should be grateful he didn’t write I had a PhD in Ignorance, which was his very favorite gibe, usually adding, “And it’s not an honorary degree either; she earned it.”

It’s true. He did marry me, but not until I finished my senior year. We were married on October 12, 1921.

During his years as city editor, Mark witnessed two more lynchings. One was of a negro who was alleged to have assaulted a white woman as she walked through a negro settlement on her way home from church, and the other one was also of a negro. He had been in a pool room and shot a deputy sheriff who wanted to arrest him. He managed to get out of town and catch a train, but a spotter for the sheriff saw him and sent word back to the sheriff that he was on-board. The sheriff, by phoning ahead, got officers in Griffin to meet the train and take him off and head back with him toward Macon. A deputation of officers and citizens met them. They shot the negro and then hung him from a pole.

Mark agonized over both lynchings. He made a solemn oath that he would do all in his power to put an end to such barbarity.

Early in 1923 Mark and the opportunity to go with the Consolidated Press in Washington under the management of David Lawrence, and jumped at it. Bob Small was also with the Consolidated Press, and Mark wanted experience working under him. Small had been the star reporter for the AP and was the first ever given a byline—for his account of the homecoming of the Great White Fleet that Teddy Roosevelt had sent around the world.

Mark covered all kinds of stories for Consolidated, but what he remembered best has nothing to do with reporting. One Sunday afternoon he went to the Keith Theatre, and former President Woodrow Wilson , with his wife, shuffled in the back door and took a seat in front of him. The audience broke into spontaneous applause. And Mark was deeply moved. Mr. Wilson was a hero to him; he considered him the greatest president since Lincoln. When Wilson was dying on February 3, 1924, Mark stood in the snow, outside the house on S Street, until word came that the President was dead.

After less than a year with the Consolidated Press, Mark determined to go to the New York Sun, where Keats Speed, the nephew of John Keats, the British novelist, was managing editor. He resigned from Consolidated Press, and Small gave him a letter of reference to Speed, who read it and said, “Mr. Ethridge, you can’t come to work until tomorrow. So the next day Mark went to work as a reporter and rewriter-man for the Sun.

Mark had stayed in Washington such a short time, I hadn’t had the chance to join him. He had gone there soon after the birth of our first child Mary Snow, so I had stayed in Macon with my mother until I was stronger. Now Mary Snow and I joined him in New York, and we settled into an apartment in Washington Heights, at the very end of 181 Street overlooking the Hudson.

One of Mark’s first assignments on the Sun was the Sun-Roxy campaign to raise money to buy radios for the world war veterans in United States hospitals. Roxy was the nickname of S.L. Rothafel, manager of the Roxy movie theater. The great success of the drive helped both Mark’s reputation as a reporter and his salary.

Mark covered a wide variety of stories, including two sensation murder trials. One was in Pelham, where the son of the president of the Ward Baking Company was accused of killing a homosexual who had made a pass at him. The other was the Webb murder case. Webb, a prominent New Yorker who married one of the Vanderbilt girls, was accused of giving her an overdose of bichloride of mercury in a douche.

But mostly Mark reported on politics. He was sent to interview Calvin Coolidge when he succeeded to the presidency in August 1923, upon the death of Warren Harding. Coolidge was visiting his home in Plymouth, Vermont, when he receive word of President Harding’s death. Immediately he had himself sworn in by his father, a notary public. Mark went to Harriman Junction, north of New York, boarded Coolidge’s train, and rode with him into New York.

“Coolidge didn’t have a goddamned thing to say,” Mark told me that evening in disgust. “He didn’t know a goddamned thing to say. It was the most difficult story I’ve ever tried to write.”

In July 1924 Mark was assigned to report on the Democratic National Convention in the old Madison Square Garden. He covered the resolution committee, which had a heated fight over a resolution denouncing the Ku Klux Klan. Reporters weren’t allowed in the committee room; they had to pick up what they could on the outside. On the day of the vote, Judge Newt Morris, the Georgia delegate on the resolution committee, came out and, as he passed Mark on his way to the Men’s room, gave him a wink. Mark followed to hear him say to another member of the committee, “That was a damned close vote, wasn’t it, a mere one and a half votes for denunciation?” With that tip Mark scored a scoop.

He also covered some of the Democratic big wheels andn wrote an unflattering profile of William Jennings Bryan, who nominated the president of the University of Florida for president. Bryan at the time was acting as a real-estate agent for Florida. He wore a large pendant, advertising the state, and the Sun photographer took a picture of him to go with the article. The next morning Mark met a group of his colleagues who warned, “You’d better watch out for Bryan. He’s looking for you.” Mark figured Bryan wanted to kill him, so he tried to stay out of his way. But Bryan finally caught up with him and to his amazement said, “Mr. Ethridge, can you get me some copies of your paper?” Mark gave him a dozen.

The high point of that convention was Franklin D. Roosevelt’s speech nominating New York Governor Al Smith for the presidency. Mr. Roosevelt had already been stricken with polio. He sat in an old-fashioned carpeted chair in front of the platform and had to be carried down the aisle and lifted to the platform. He made a rousing speech, coining the phrase “the happy warrior”. The label quickly caught on, but it wasn’t enough. After 103 exhausting ballots, the nomination went to John W. Davis of West Virginia as a compromise candidate.

I attended the convention too, though I was eight-and-a-half months pregnant. Mark had been able to get me a ticket in the top balcony in that cavernous structure, and every morning I climbed dozens and dozens of stairs without anything happening to me. But a week or so later, on July 29, our second child, Mark Jr., was born.

That autumn of 1924 Mark covered Theodore Roosevelt Jr.’s campaign against Al Smith for the governorship of New York. Mr. Roosevelt threw himself wholeheartedly into the campaign and was doing well, so Mark thought, until he reached Ithaca. Speaking to a large crowd, made up largely of Cornell students, Roosevelt said, “I want to congratulate Cornell on its glorious victory yesterday over Williams.” But Cornell had lost the game 7 to 14, its first loss after a winning streak of 27 straight games.

Al Smith, who had the gout and made only four or five speeches during the campaign, gleefully picked up Mr. Roosevelt’s faux pas. At the beginning of every one of those four or five speeches, he asked, “Who told my opponent of Cornell’s glorious victory?” Teddy Roosevelt Jr. was badly defeated.

In addition to Mark’s job at the Sun, he wrote a full-page article every week for the Atlanta Journal Sunday Magazine. He also wrote occasional feature articles for other New York papers on W.L. Stribling, a Macon boy who was coming up then as a boxer. With his weekly check from the Sun, $125, which was good pay for a reporter in those days, and the checks he got on the side, we managed, even with two babies, to live quite comfortably.