**3. Second go-round in Macon**

In late 1924 W.T. Anderson, the publisher and owner of the Macon Telegraph, asked Mark to return to the Telegraph as managing and associate editor. Though W.T. kept the title of editor for himself, Mark was to write practically all the editorials as well as edit the whole editorial page. The editorial page was and remained his first love.

In those early years of Mark’s newspapering career, the vast majority of newspapers were family-owned, and the owners were both the publishers and editors. “They were great people and they spoke out boldly.”

Charles Landon Knight, the publisher/editor of the Akron Beacon Journal (Ohio), was known all over the United States for speaking out for what he believed. So were William Allen White of the Emporia Gazette (Kansas), Clark Howell of the Atlanta Constitution, Adolph Ochs of the New York Times, Joseph Pulitzer of the St. Louis Post Dispatch, Victor Hanson of the Birmingham News, and a few others.

Mark believed all his life that newspapers should be family-owned,, in spite of the strong and alarming tide toward monopolies and chains. He felt editorials of chain newspapers didn’t mean nearly so much as they did when they spoke with a single voice. Their voices, he once said “have been neutralized, and they no longer blast like a trumpet.”

Another tragic result of chain ownership of papers is to deprive the community in which such a paper was published of the vital and primary interest of the publisher. The though it equivalent to the absentee landlord system in agriculture, which has given rise to share-cropping and tenancy.

However, the most tragic aspect of the development of these great monopolies and ever-spreading chains was what they have done to the publishers themselves. Newspapers have become huge business enterprises to make money for their stockholders instead of purveyors of unbiased, uncolored news and editorial guides with policies based on a conception of public service.

“Now, I hold no grudge against the business side of publishing,” Mark was very careful to explain. “I realize a newspaper is a dual entity under the necessity, on the one hand, of operating its business soundly and making a profit, and, on the other, performing the functions of an institution dedicated to public good and public service and to the preservation of real democracy in this country. Obviously, it can perform neither function well unless it performs both well, but there must be the consciousness that even as a business a newspaper is not sound unless it regards its editorial function as paramount.”

“I object to these great monopolies and chains that have changed publishers from editors to business executives. They buying and selling and merging of newspapers have had the stultifying effect of throwing publishers into association with other men whose primary interests are financial, rather than intellectual and social. They have lost contact with a newspaper’s greatest strength—the people themselves, the mass of everyday people.”

But that was years later. He didn’t foresee any of these dire developments when W.T. gave him the chance to be the editor of the Telegraph. He saw only the challenging opportunity ahead. Early in 1925 Mark, the two children, and I went back to Georgia. For the next eight years Mark worked an average of ninety-six hours a week. Every morning, except Sunday, he left home around 11 o’clock and returned between two and three the next morning. Usually he brought a quart of ice cream for us to share as he told me the day’s news. Even on Sunday he frequently went to the office for a few hours.

At the beginning he plunged into the twin tasks of building a news staff and improving the content of the editorial page. He was convinced that producing a good newspaper required good reporters. The days of the brilliant drunks in newspapers were past. Reporters had to be professional, journalists: sober, reliable, enthusiastic about their work, intelligent, and curious. They needed to understand what was happening in the world and be able to judge the significance of the event they were called upon to cover. Mark felt university graduates were preferable, but if a you man—or woman—had the proper attitude toward the job and an open and probing mind, he could be trained.

In a very short while he had five exceptionally bright reporters as the nucleus of his staff—Leon Dure, who later became executive editor of the Winston-Salem (NC) papers before retiring at 40 to the life of a Virginia gentleman farmer; Edwin Tribble, who became Sunday editor of the Washington Star; George Burt, who became editor of the Louisville Times (KY); Mike Johnson, who became a star reporter for the New York Sun and won a Pulitzer Prize (his son, Haynes Johnson of the Washington Post, also won a Pulitzer); and Jimmy Jones, a remarkable sports editor. Mark bragged he had enough talent on the staff for several papers.

For the next eight years the Telegraph crusaded on many social, economic and educational fronts, but it focused most intently on the Ku Klux Klan; the living conditions of the mill workers, especially those in the Bibb Mills, then the third largest in the United States; and the Georgia university system.

When we returned to Georgia he found the Klan had become much more active than it was when we left, along with a neo-Fascist organization called the Silver Shirts.

For the next eight years the Telegraph crusaded on many social, economic and educational fronts, but its major efforts were aimed in three directions: at the higher education system of the state of Georgia; at the Ku Klux Klan, reaching in the twenties what was probably the apex of its power; and, undoubtedly of greatest concern to the paper’s readers, the living conditions of mill workers, especially those in Macon’s Bibb Mills, then the third largest in the United States.

When we returned to Georgia, Mark found the Klan had become far more active than it had been just a few years earlier, and it had been joined by still another group very much like the Klan, organized by John Roach Straton, a famous New York Baptist minister and a graduate of Mercer University. Both considered blacks, Jews, and Catholics alien, inferior and subversive. The Telegraph fought them hard. The bright young reporters showed the reader what they were through the news column, and W.T. and Mark hit them as forcefully as they knew how in the editorial columns. The fight went on for more than two years.

The confrontation was often so tense and the letters to the paper so threatening, W.T. carried a sawed-off shotgun wherever he went. Mark took a trained German shepherd to the office with him every night after supper.

The Klan finally fell when the sheriff found the local leader, a married man, in the woods with a woman, not his wife. The sheriff arrested him and booked on morals charges. As far as the paper could detect, this seemed to end the Klan’s activities in Middle Georgia.

Second to the Klan in the list of abominations were the low wages paid by the cotton mills and the feudal system the mills enforced, made even harsher when the crash of 1929 came, followed by the Great Depression. The mills operated “cotton-mill villages”. They graduated young people from their own schools at fifteen, enabling them to go to work in the mills. They ran their own commissaries where the workers bought their groceries and other necessities with script. Their wages amounted to $2.50 a week.

W.D. Anderson, the president of Bibb Mills and no kin of W.T., took the Telegraph’s arrows of criticism as long as he could; then, in the spring of 1932, he struck back. Choosing the Rotary Club, the largest and most prestigious businessmen’s organization in town for his audience, with W.T. at the speaker’s table and Mark, an invited guest only a few tables away, he spoke his piece:

“The average newspaper editor, whose knowledge and experience in banking is chiefly derived from depositing his weekly paycheck and trying to have it stretched over the checks he draws to cover the outstanding bills, seems to be able to settle the abstruse economy and money question with one editorial and finds no difficulty in offering the formula for straightening out all questions pertaining to our international relations as he pounds away on his typewriter in a finish race with the copy boy and the deadline.

“The grave problems of unemployment and industrial relations are settled daily by men whose widest experience in dealing with labor in their daily contacts with the office boy or with the janitor in an effort to get him to do a better job in cleaning the office spittoon or in attempting to settle with the wash lady over the loss of a sock from the weekly laundry basket.

“Unfortunately too many of us who are busy with our own immediate tasks have an idea that these chaps know it all, and we are impressed with the words and phrases they pick up from here and yonder and string together in a connected article which we accept as the gospel.”

Mark answered the next day. Under the heading “Returning the Compliment”, his reply spread over almost three of the six columns of the editorial page.

Mark began by saying: “It ought to be made clear that Mr. Anderson’s contempt for newspaper editors is not without exception. He has often referred in kindly fashion to David Clark, editor of the Southern Textile Bulletin, and the late Richard Edmonds, editor of Manufacturer’s Record, whose editorials expounded his own ideas on economics and the tariff and the relations between capital and labor. The fact that they were editors did not mitigate against their right to exercise their minds in the solution of distressing problems as long as their conclusions were in the same general location as Mr. Anderson’s.

“We repeat that his contempt for editors is not without its exception. If memory serves us correctly, Mr. Anderson has expressed admiration in the past for Benito Mussilini, the Italian dictator, who was an editor until he marched on Rome and still conducts his own newspaper. Incidentally, by virture of his power he conducts all the other newspapers in Italy and tells them what they can print. This may be the reason Mr. Anderson admires him so much…”

Then Mark took a new tact. “We must plead guilty to the indictment of our poverty. As Mr. Anderson said, the clothes problem is such that it is necessary to haggle with the washer women if a sock is missing out of the laundry. And as he says further, a great deal of our time is spent trying to make the weekly paycheck spread out to cover the outstanding bills. We have no disposition to deny that.

“Our only plea in extenuation is that our business-leadership genius which is typified by such industrial leaders as Mr. Anderson has led us into the most violent depression in the world’s history. By following their leadership we have come to such depths of human suffering and privation as the world seldom sees. All these leaders are able to prescribe are hard work, courage and character. Hard work is followed by further reductions in employment and wages and courage and character do a lot of good to an empty stomach.

“The particular cause of Mr. Anderson’s irritation with editors…is that they occasionally espouse doctrines which Mr. Anderson describes as socialistic and communistic…

“The only thing that society has not endeavored to regulate, considering all the peoples of the world as organized society, is the accumulation of wealth. In the world as a whole, men may still accumulate wealth without regard to the general welfare of others. They may still indulge in extravagance while others are at the verge of starvation. They may still fatten inordinately while civilization decays…

“For the good of society as a whole, there must be a limit to the wealth one man may accumulate, and there must be a better distribution of the earnings of the people of the earth if civilization is to survive.

“The Telegraph does not hesitate to say that its intellectual compass and its sympathies both point in the direction of the greater recognition of all members of society. We do not advocate any such foolish doctrine as the expropriation of estates or the even distribution of wealth. What we advocate is the removal of escalators of wealth that carry some men to wealth without volition of their own and the hurdles that stand in the way of most men getting even a decent opportunity to support themselves whenever industry finds it convenient to through them out of work.”

Then Mark denounced the feudalism of Bibb and other textiles mills. “They still conceive it to be their duty to look after their hands, to send the doctor around, to regulate their morals, to prescribe rules for their entertainment, such as…what card games shall be engaged in and which may not, direct their finances and look after their spiritual well fair, even to pointing out the path to heaven and insisting that they stay in it…”

There was considerably more, but in conclusion Mark said that, while thrift was a fine doctrine for some, it “is not a fine doctrine for the Negro tenant farmer, who is paid 40 cents a day in the cotton fields of Georgia, nor for the white farmer who plows wearily under a midday sun to cultivate cotton that sells for 5 cents a pound so that Mr. Anderson’s mills may run. Thrift as a prescription now is a mockery; there is only one greater mockery, and that is Mr. Anderson’s prescription: economy.

“The man who gets flour out of the government’s breadline—a disgraceful form of the dole—is to make it go a little further. The person who draws groceries out of an Organized Service Commissary is to make the turnips go one meal more. Editors who have one pair of socks are to go on with one hereafter…

“Thrift is a great doctrine for empty bellies and empty pocketbooks.”

The next day a subscriber sent Mark a pair of socks.

When Mark’s editorial mind was not taken up with the Bib Mills or the Klan, it was more than likely pondering Georgia’s educational system. In fact the very first editorial Mark wrote on his return to the paper was one protesting the appointment of Judge Wikey Russell, father of the future Senator Richard Russell, as chancellor of the University of Georgia. To Mark, the appointment epitomized the weakness of the university system, a system dominated by Georgia political sachems, not by educators.

“Judge Russell,” he wrote, “is a politician, not an educator.”

A few days later he advocated the reorganization of the university system. Instead of the university and other state-supported schools being under separate boards of trustees, each fighting before the legislature for what it needed and wanted, he argued, they should all be under one head—the chancellor of the university.

The editorial created such a favorable impression that Mark was asked to write the education plank for the platform to be presented to the next Georgia Democratic Convention. It passed the convention intact but was sorely weakened in the legislature, where special interests whittled away at it.

As the prestige of the paper increased, Mark was in considerable demand as a speaker. He accepted every invitation he could, always without a fee. Never in his life did he accept money or any other honorarium for speaking. He felt it was part of his job as an editor. The speaking on top of his work wore him down. A letter to his mother expressed his mood.

“Willie and I are infinitely happy, but the job—or two jobs, for I took over two jobs when I came back—is pressing down on me…I get to see so little of the family now because I go to work at 11 in the morning and work until 1 the next morning. The family (we had a third child by now, Georgia) is getting to the interesting age and besides that, I’d like to have more home life…In New York we were ideally happy. I worked all day and had the evenings for reading or work or recreation. The paper is making gains in circulation, but I actually believe I’m shortening my life with the long hours I put into the paper. Yet it is a satisfaction that the paper is frequently quoted in the Literary Digest and references to it were recently made in the American Mercury, in the National Geographic and in Dr. Nim’s book The Advancing South…” We have gained national recognition, and that is some compensation. But it is not compensation enough for the slow grinding out of all the enjoyment of life.”

These were the years Franklin Roosevelt was at Warm Springs, recuperating from his crippling attack of polio. On the first night he came to Georgia, after our return, he invited W.T. and Mark to dinner with him and his daughter Anna. They spent a long evening with him and felt they really got to know him.

Mr. Roosevelt had begun coming to Georgia in the fall of 1924, three years after the polio attack. A letter from the philanthropist George Foster Peabody had brought him to Warm Springs. Mr. Peabody had written him of a young man stricken with infantile paralysis who had been helped by swimming in the Warm Springs pool. On his arrival Mr. Roosevelt found a run-down summer resort where people, mostly from Columbus (Georgia) spent their weekends and holidays. But he found, too, an extraordinary spring that pours 2000 gallons of water a minute at a temperature of 89 degrees. It is the largest warm-water spring east of the Rocky Mountains. He planned to swim in it daily.

Some time after that first meeting, Tom Loyless, who wrote a daily column for the Telegraph, wanted some relief from the constant pressure, and Mark asked Mr. Roosevelt if he would write some columns. Mr. Roosevelt agreed, and for a good many months he wrote columns about soil erosion, reforestation, the necessity of planting trees for wind breaks, conversation, Muscle Shoals, and other subjects. He forecast in those columns many things he later put into his national program for recovery.

Some Sunday afternoons Mark and I, with Mary Snow, Mark Jr., and Georgia, rode over to Warm Springs to see him. One afternoon, when he was quite relaxed and jovial, he peeled sugar cane for the children.

In November 1928 Mr. Roosevelt was elected governor of New York, but he didn’t desert Georgia. Frequently he stole away from his gubernatorial duties to return to Warm Springs to swim in its hot poo and relax.

The years of the late twenties and early thirties were hard, but not as hard for us as for others. After the crash Mark’s salary was cut ten percent, but since neither we nor any of our close friends were in the stock market, we weren’t seriously affected by the crash itself.

Our manner of living was quite simple. If the twenties were “roaring”, we missed them in Macon. Mark drank very, very little and I not at all. Maybe once or twice a month Mark had a drink or two of bootlegged white lighting at a party hosted by W.T. or some other affluent, older friend. For our social group it was Coca-Cola, Dr. Pepper, and fruit punch. And we played games and charades and had scavenger hunts. With the children we enjoyed riding around Macon and the countryside on Sunday afternoons in our first car, a used Buick that Mark had bought from W.T.

The pace of those years is more vivid in Mark’s memory than the hard times or our social doings. He was active in the Georgia Press Institute, which met every February at the University of Georgia in Athens. Just about two years after it was started in 1927 by Miss Emily Woodward, publisher of the newspaper in Vienna (Georgia), she persuaded Mark to take the chairmanship, which he kept for five years. Each of the big papers in the state sent its stars—reporters, columnists, correspondents, cartoonists—to speak at the meetings. As a result the Institute had some of the best speeches about newspapers Georgia ever heard. In addition to the newspaper celebrities, the University always furnished an outstanding public figure to give the Washington Day address.

It was at the Press Institute meetings and at the Georgia Press Association summer conventions that Mark and I became close friends of Margaret Mitchell, whom we called Peggy, the soon-to-be-author of Gone with the Wind, and her husband, John Marsh. Though they lived in Atlanta, they sometimes came to Macon for a visit and drove with us to the meetings. They attended because John was the public-relations man for the Georgia Power Company, and part of his job was to make friends with the publishers and editors.

“You would never have looked at Peggy twice,” I overheard Mark tell a friend. “She wasn’t big as a minute, with straight red hear, cut in a short bob; full, dead-pan face; sheet-white complexion generously sprinkled with freckles, and high-top shoes to protect her weak ankles. She spent a lot of time in bed with broken bones. Once a car hit, fairly gently, the back of a parked car in which she was sitting and snapped her back.

“While the meetings were goin on, she sat on her folded legs in the middle of a bed, surrounded by as many newspaper women and men as could crowd on the bed with her, and told off-color stories. For a girl who looked so innocent, she had as wicked a mind as it has ever been my pleasure to know. She was a born teller of tales. She could regale a crowd for two hours and more.

“When she talked about he book she was writing, which wasn’t very often, I thought to myself it would make a good article for the Atlanta Journal Magazine, for which she was then working. So much for the soundness of my critical judgment.”

Mark could have added he failed several times to recognize first-rate literary talent. He fired Roark Bradford, who wrote that magnificent play Green Pastures. He was one of Mark’s reporters on the Telegraph when he was city editor. Roark had the courthouse beat, including the city jail. Every day he’d spend hours at the jail, then come back to the paper, slump down in his chair, prop his feet on the typewriter and remain immobile all night. Once in a while he’s write a news story of two or three paragraphs; but usually he’d just sit there. Mark thought he was the laziest man living. Finally he fired him. When he saw Green Pastures on the New York state he realized, of course, that Roark had just stored away all those stories he had gathered at the Bibb County jail to use later.

And Mark refused to give a job to Erskine Caldwell, who became famous with this play Tobacco Road. Caldwell’s father, the Reverend Mr. Caldwell, came to see Mark at the Telegraph and asked him to give Erskine a job. Mr. Caldwell said Erskine had all the qualifications for becoming an excellent reporter. But Mark had no place for him.