

## THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

# Ringwald introduced honest journalism to the desert

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As it was about journalists themselves, an unusual (for the time) United Press International story appeared in newspapers all over the country in May of 1968. It began: "Riverside, Calif. (UPI) — A newspaper whose editor once faced arrest because of its investigation of alleged mishandling of the property and estates of Indians is the recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for meritorious public service."

"This kind of thing doesn't happen very often in the life of a non-metropolitan newspaper" said Howard H. Hays, Jr. of the Riverside Press-Enterprise. "Naturally, we're delighted."

The newspaper had begun an investigation just one year before over reputed irregularities in the handling of property and estates of the Agua Caliente Indians by the Indio judges charged with overseeing the matters. Hays was summoned by Superior Court Judge Merrill Brown after an editorial criticized the business dealings of Merrill and his colleagues, Hilton McCabe and Eugene Theriau. Hay refused to comply, risking arrest and incarceration.

The UPI story recounted that "Brown then issued a bench warrant for Hays' arrest for 'flagrant violation' of the court order. The judge said he then would set bail for Hays at 25 cents because he did not think the publisher was worth more than that." Tellingly, the county clerk and county counsel sensibly refused to issue the warrant.

Hay had first offended the judge by publishing the series of articles by reporter George Ringwald in 1967 exposing the exploitation of the Agua Caliente tribal members under the system of guardianship and conservatorships administered by moonlighting judges.

The system was conceived by the Bureau of Indian Affairs as a replacement for the proposals of the Odlum Committee after the successful passage of the Equalization Act of 1959 signed by President Eisenhower, whose administration then asked Odlum and his committee of prominent businessmen to tackle the problem of the checkerboard reservation in Palm Springs.



**George Ringwald, ace reporter usually behind the camera, is captured in a rare photograph with fellow journalist Hildy Crawford, circa 1955.**

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Odlum's committee had multiple recommendations — among them, liquidating land on behalf of Indian owners. The tribal members vehemently objected, saying it would destroy their identity. The failure of Odlum to fully appreciate the nuances of the circumstances was perhaps the first failure he'd had in a spectacular career and would mark the start of a precipitous fall in his own circumstances. From the heights of business and wealth, Odlum's career did not end well as he continued down several ruinous paths, squandering his prodigious wealth.

The Indians he was supposed to help into prosperity did not fare much better, being subsequently subjected to further indignities through the very system that replaced Odlum's suggestions. They would continue to fight for another decade to dismantle the unjust program. That fight was championed by George Ringwald in his series of articles.

Born in St. Louis and educated at Colorado State University, Ringwald served as a messenger in the Army infantry during World War II. After unsuccessfully trying to be a stage actor in New

York, he joined the Riverside paper in 1948 and happily found his calling.

Ringwald was highly esteemed by his colleagues, even before the Pulitzer for his tenacity and courage, for his joyousness and curiosity. In 2007 the Press-Enterprise paid tribute to him 40 years after his original stories brought accolades for the paper.

The paper remembered Ringwald as a "man of the world, a dogged reporter with insatiable curiosity." Richard Coyle, a former reporter for the New York Daily News who worked alongside Ringwald in a Stanford University fellowship program, said he wasn't just a friend but a comrade because "comrades are joyous." Adding, "I loved the guy. He was a swell, swell man, filled with a sense of integrity and fairness."

Hays, the brave publisher and owner who was threatened by Judge Brown, said Ringwald quickly earned a reputation as a "star" reporter. Gordon Wilson, then the newspaper's assistant managing editor, who previously served in the same infantry division as Ringwald, noted of Ringwald's extensive newspaper work, that Ringwald did not merely observe events; he was "moved by a sense of justice."

Former Press-Enterprise editor and publisher Marcia McQuern (then a reporter) said the day the Pulitzer announcement was made that Ringwald was busy digging up documents at the Indio courthouse, unaware of the honor. When he returned to the newsroom, everyone cheered, she recalled. "The brass had champagne in the newsroom, which is normally verboten. He was kind of embarrassed."

But the most poignant tribute came from award-winning journalist Ken Reich, who paused in gratitude to remember Ringwald's impressive career. "I knew Ringwald well. In fact, he was responsible for giving me my first real job in journalism, as a vacation-relief reporter for him when he worked as the Press-Enterprise reporter in Palm Springs in 1955."

"Ringwald was in his late 20s when he took the Palm Springs assignment, introducing honest journalism and a skeptical mind to a town that saw little of it up to that time. Not only did he pro-

tect the Indians, but he went after gambling proposals in the nearby town of Cabazon and investigated a controversial city councilman in Palm Springs ..."

In 1969 Ringwald spent a year in fellowship at Stanford followed by work for BusinessWeek as a reporter and then as Tokyo Bureau Chief. After retirement, Ringwald relocated to Northern California. He remained active in his community, teaching English to adults and participating in the local theater company. His friend Stephen Wilson wrote a remembrance at his passing in 2005: "I met George in the mid-80s in a psychology of prejudice class at Humboldt State and we quickly became friends and corresponded throughout our lives. What a wonderful spirit he had. He was a funny, witty, and a free thinker who valued the written word more than most — and was a wonderful writer himself who valued the quality of a well-spun yarn."

But Ringwald's seminal work remained the prize-winning stories about the unscrupulous judges and attorneys who were responsible for robbing the Agua Caliente Indians by charging exorbitant and unwarranted fees.

Ringwald's articles galvanized the change in laws governing the administration of Indian estates by exposing the Indian plight and illustrating the assault on their dignity.

Years later, Ringwald continued to presciently push for positive change, even if tilting at windmills. In an essay published in 1991, Ringwald suggested that the world should just slow down in order to save itself.

"Why couldn't we just call a halt for a while — stop making those chlorofluorocarbons that are destroying the ozone layer, halt the auto assembly lines and see if we can't come up with viable alternative transportation, halt the arms production and the arms sales, maybe even consider ending wars? A radical thought, of course, but who knows? It just might work. What's the point of all this hurrying, after all, if we can't stop to smell the roses?"

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