

**FNP 21 SUM Ricky Edward Bragg**

This oral history of Ricky Bragg, newspaper writer, was conducted by Kelley Benham. Bragg described the path that led to his career in journalism, talked about major stories he wrote, and offered opinions on the quality and role of newspapers today. Born in 1959 in rural Alabama, Bragg grew up in little communities of the Appalachian foothills with names such as Possum Trot, Roy Webb, and Williams. His first newspaper position was at age eighteen, and by age twenty he began winning national journalism awards. His accomplishments at the time of this interview include forty national awards, twice as a Pulitzer Prize finalist, a Distinguished Writing Award, and a Neiman fellowship to Harvard.

Bragg began the interview with a summary of his childhood, beginning with his entry into the world during *The Ten Commandments* at the local drive in theater. He remembered one of the towns in which he grew up, Possum Trot, was distinguished as a place where people went to drop off unwanted dogs. During childhood, his father's boisterous stories narrated on the porch with drinking buddies contrasted with the nicer ones of his mother, sisters, and grandmother in the kitchen and provided a rich basis for his later writing style. When Bragg was in the tenth grade, his father died of alcoholism. He rated his father's influence as largely bad, except for his encouragement of reading. At the mercy of his father's tendency to buy books by the pound, Bragg encountered such diverse titles as *Young Surgeons in Love* along with books by Edgar Allen Poe.

Bragg remembered hearing George Wallace's speeches in the 1960s declaring to "protect their way of life" when most people he knew lived in a shack, drove a raggedy car, and had cast-off dogs. For his first six years he was mostly segregated from blacks until his father rented a tumble-down main house of a former large farm. A small community of blacks lived in share cropper houses about a mile away. First encounters between he and the children of these black families did not go well (they threw rocks at one another). Gradually curiosity overcame their differences and they became friends. These same families brought gifts of food after his father took every penny in the house and then abandoned the family.

Bragg talked about what he believed were dismal educational opportunities afforded by the elementary and secondary schools he attended in Alabama. Bragg stated his initial interest in journalism was triggered by advantages of being the school newspaper editor in high school; he found journalism class was easy and the school permitted students to cut class to work on a story. With no plans for college and thinking a UPS job was pretty good, his future seemed uneventful until he decided to take one feature-writing course at nearby Jacksonville State University. He

credits the class with changing his life. Offered a full-time job with the *Talladega Daily Home* as a sports writer, he dropped out of college, but returned after a year and became editor-in-chief for the college newspaper. Six months later he again dropped out of college. He worked ten years for various Alabama newspapers working as sportswriter before he moved to Florida. Bragg believed his time as sportswriter made him a better writer because he was allowed to write with imagination and color.

Moving up from 30,000-circulation newspapers, he worked for the *Birmingham News* in the mid 1980s and described several stories of his. Citing differences of opinion, he left to work for *The St. Petersburg Times*, but was delayed by his mother's illness. Upon her recovery, he left for Florida to work for *The St. Petersburg Times*, eventually becoming its state reporter. He believed Florida's diversity of people and geography presented many opportunities to write good stories. He was later assigned to be the paper's only representative in Miami. Bragg lists a variety of stories he covered while working with *The St. Petersburg Times*, including covering the killings in Haiti and traveling to Saudi Arabia for a piece on the Gulf War. Bragg considers the series he did in Haiti to be among his best and talks at length about this assignment. Notably, President Clinton quoted from his Haiti series in a State of the Union address, although Bragg also received criticism from Pat Buchanan who said he had exaggerated the Haiti killings.

Bragg regretted a lack of a more complete formal education, a factor in his decision to return a completed application for the Neiman Foundation program at Harvard for a one-year fellowship (1992-1993). Following his return to *The St. Petersburg Times*, he was made national roving reporter. In this capacity he covered such stories as a hantavirus outbreak on a Navaho Indian reservation and floods in the Midwest.

Deciding between positions offered by both *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times*, he chose Los Angeles. Three weeks later he decided to leave *The Los Angeles Times*, appealed for the job he had passed up at *The New York Times*, and moved to New York in January, 1994. He described his job at *The New York Times* as a dream come true because he was allowed to chase his own stories, including such topics as the homeless and inner city killings. In his first nine months he had stories nominated for Pulitzer Prizes in several categories. At this point in his life Bragg believed he would feel more personal satisfaction from writing stories that positively affect lives than from winning a Pulitzer Prize.

A concern Bragg talked about is the effect TV has had on newspapers that feel compelled to compete. He feels stories have lost quality because they try to copy the way television news is

presented by turning out short, cute articles. Another reason he believes newspapers are failing today is because, "they're being run by people without imagination, with an eye only on profits..." His advice for writers was to take chances with their writing, not with their reporting. Bragg said his plans for the future do not include management. The story is really all he cares about.