
South Bay Historical Society Bulletin

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Lowell Blankfort, center, and Rowland Rebele, left, receive awards from Sen. Alan Cranston in 1978.

Meet Lowell Blankfort

When Ray Coyle died in early 1961, no one knew what would happen to his newspaper. He had come from Iowa in 1944 and took over the small *Chula Vista Star*. Ten years later he merged with Larry Freeman's *National City News* to create the *Star-News*, absorbing several other smaller papers from Imperial Beach and San Ysidro. Larry had left the paper in 1958, and Ray's widow, Blanche Coyle, was not willing to carry on alone. In June 1961 she sold her Bay Cities Publishing Company that included the *Star-News* to Lowell Blankfort and Rowland Rebele for \$500,000. The two new owners only put down

\$25,000 each of their own money, borrowing the rest and persuading Blanche to carry \$400,000 as debt for a number of years.

Born in New York City in 1926, Lowell graduated from Rutgers University in 1946. Between 1946 and 1954 he worked as a reporter, feature writer and editor on the *Long Island Star-Journal*; as a writer and editor on the *Wall Street Journal* in New York; as a columnist on the *London Daily Mail's* Continental Edition in Paris; and as an editor on the *Stars & Stripes* in Germany. He also was business editor of the former *Quick Magazine*. Between 1954 and 1959 he was publisher of the *Pacifica Tribune* in the San

Francisco Bay area. He was a founder and charter director of the Pacifica Chamber of Commerce and active in incorporating seven separate communities into a City of Pacifica.

Blankfort and his wife Alice moved to Chula Vista in 1961 and bought a house at 347 Del Mar Avenue. He threw himself completely into his new community, learning about its history and politics and geography. One Sunday afternoon, on a drive with Alice and 7-year-old Jonathon, he found a hole in the border fence east of San Ysidro in Spring Canyon. He noticed that there were no Border Patrol in sight, and that children from Mexico came through the hole to play on the American side, setting up two goal posts for a soccer game. Over several months, the hole got larger, and Blankfort twice drove his car through to the Mexican side without seeing any Border agents. His front page story was headlined, "Attention All Spies: Proceed to Hole in Tijuana Fence. The Border Patrol Will Never Know You Were There."

It was his editorials that brought him the most attention. He was not afraid to speak out on any issue or to "shy away from a fight." He was a liberal New Yorker in the middle of conservative Southern California. "When I came here the town was being run by the Chamber of Commerce and Rotary Club." He believed a "good old boy syndrome" led to a lack of sensitivity toward ethnic minorities and the disadvantaged. His editorials needled the power structure, uncovered the use of tax monies by the private Chamber of Commerce. "We haven't been afraid to stick our necks out; not very many newspapers will take on a Chamber, but we did and were successful." He was a Democrat in a bastion of Republicanism. His first editorial in 1961 declared that he would no longer print the ultra-conservative columns of Rep. James Utt. He wrote often against the beliefs of Barry Goldwater, Richard Nixon, the John Birch Society, Jack Schrade and Bob Wilson. He was among the first publishers to take a stand against the Vietnam war, based not only on political and moral reasons but also on his personal observations on a visit to Vietnam in 1960. When the war was over, he defended the rights of the Vietnam refugees who came to California. "We believe that most of the irritation of Americans about the Vietnamese refugees is not because these citizens

lack compassion, but because the refugees' presence serves as a reminder of a tragic chapter in American history they would prefer to forget."

He supported unpopular causes on fair-housing laws, school integration, the environment, campaign disclosure laws, bilingual education. He demanded the local Elks Lodge open its doors to blacks, pushed the City Council to adopt a code of ethics, exposed the "trigger-happy" police in National City and the discontent in local high schools with a growing Mexican-American population. His editorials annually won awards from local and state journalism organizations. He won first place awards for his editorials on San Diego's neglect of Otay Mesa (1973), for opposing Leonard Bloom's high-density Sports World (1974), on poor conditions in the county Jail (1976), and on the need for a public water utility (1978). His editorial page design also won awards, including pictures as well as words. His first cartoonist was Kay Everitt, then Jim "Seamus" Memenway after 1964, and William "Zee" Zellar after 1968.

In October 1972, Blankfort and Rebele sold the Star-News to a Texas company for \$3.2 million. That same year, Lowell and his wife Alice were divorced. Two years later he married April Falconi and they have been together ever since. Blankfort stayed on with the Star-News as editor until 1978 and continued to be involved in the community from his home on Old Orchard Lane in Bonita. He was a consultant to the Bonita Style newspaper, was a director of the Sweetwater Valley Civic Association and a founding member of Crossroads. With Rebele he bought control of other small newspapers, including four weeklies in southern Colorado and two Northern California papers, the Butte County Paradise Coast and the North County News in Monterey County. He invested in a motel and racquetball club in Amarillo, Texas, and a warehouse in El Monte. In addition to investments, he and April loved to travel. He has been to 83 countries and taken round-the-world trips, adding to his knowledge of world events. He was president of the San Diego Chapter of the World Federalist Association, treasurer of the San Diego World Affairs Council and a director of the International Center for Development Policy.

He never gave up his crusading zeal. In 1986 while writing for the Bonita Style, he took on Arizona millionaire Bob Gosnell who planned to build a Pointe resort that would shrink the Sweetwater Reservoir, taking 500 acres of public land to provide "a luxury playground for the rich, and traffic jams for South Bay." He always believed his editorials and the Star-News served the public interest. "It wasn't just

my editorials. A lot of it was simply being a good newspaper. It covered the town. We really knew how to cover the city council. We did in-depth articles on what was going on in the community. We exposed a school board member, who was a builder, who had some earth taken off the school property and used it as top soil on one of his developments. You know, that kind of thing."



Two editorial cartoons in 1971 by William "Zee" Zellar illustrate two different editorials by Lowell Blankfort. On the left is a critical image of National City police in June when an officer was suspended after shooting and wounding a 15-year old boy. It was the 4th time in 3 years for a questionable shooting: "trigger-happy police can represent as much of a threat to society as trigger-happy criminals," wrote Blankfort. On the right, police who have started walking beats on Palm Ave and along the beach in Imperial Beach in December are praised. "There was a time when the neighborhood cop was a friendly figure; he knew everybody and anybody; he was there to help if needed, and to chastise if needed. Today the policeman is strictly an authority figure. This has been a particular problem among the 'beach people' of Imperial Beach, young people whose life style has irked some residents and met an unfriendly reception from some officers. Hopefully, the new men on the walking beat will be able to relate to those young people better than some of the car-borne officers who would swoop down on that area in the past."

The Editorials . . .

For 17 years Lowell Blankfort wrote an average of 100 editorials per year in his Star-News weekly paper. Here is a selection of some of the most notable.

1961

"Goodbye to Mr. Utt" was the first editorial by the new owners of the Star-News. "The new editors and publishers of this newspaper take pleasure in announcing that, effective immediately, our readers no longer will be subjected to the weekly mouthings of Rep. James V. Utt. His so-called 'column' from Washington, or weekly political diatribe, is being dropped, pronto. Mr. Utt is the Republican congressman from Santa Ana who, due to some deft GOP gerrymandering 10 years ago, also has been foisted on National City and Bonita." His extremist record has been "against a minimum wage, against a politically independent Supreme Court, against labor, against the income tax, against adequate pay for postal employees, against the United Nations, against the separation of church and state, against (verbally) the so-called Reds." (June 8)

1962

"South of the Border" - "There have been new opportunities to build friendship with Mexico. First, the 24-hour rule is to be ended, a good thing to remove this barrier to trade. Before, duty-free imports from Baja were limited to \$10 if the American visitor was there fewer than 24 hours. Also, last week National City and Tecate agreed to join in celebrating each other's anniversaries. And, the Chula Vista Kiwanis gave a flag to the new Tijuana Kiwanis, the first such club chartered outside the U.S. and Canada." (Aug. 9)

1963

Unlike the ultra-conservative "Daily Monopoly" in San Diego, the Star-News "is a true home town paper that does not blindly defend the status quo but feels change is necessary to meet the challenges of the times. The Star-News made a difference by helping achieve voter approval of a Unified Port District, by helping change National City's government last year, and by helping dispel an air of complacency in the South Bay that was partly responsible for the area's economic problems." (Oct. 17)

1964

"Law of the Land" - Although the Civil Rights Bill "is now law of the land," the "battle against intolerance in our society is far from won." Barry Goldwater voted against new Civil Rights Bill, as did Rep. Bob Wilson. Also opposed to the bill was State Senator Jack Schrade. (July 9)

1965

"Border fences will never stop illegal immigration, but it is wrong that the federal Public Health service opposes the border fence proposed by Lionel Van Deerlin to keep out rabid dogs, a threat that has been going on for 2 years. Such a fence is needed to protect the health of San Diego residents." (May 20)

1966

"A Great Triumph" - "Otay Mesa has been picked for the new state prison with a \$10 million payroll expected." The site was first suggested by newly-elected State Assemblyman Richard Donovan in 1963. It was located on 320 acres of pioneer rancher Fritz Roll whose father George Roll came from Germany in 1885 and settled with other German immigrants on the mesa. (Jan. 20) [The prison opened in 1987]

1967

"Invitation to Death" - "Last December, after an irate husband had shot to death his wife and her lover in a Chula Vista rendezvous, we commented on how such crimes of passion are fostered by the easy access to firearms. Last week, Chula Vista had a tragedy of even more staggering dimensions. Found shot to death in her tenderly cared-for home was a 33-year-old mother and her 10-year-old son. Also shot, and miraculously now recovering, were two tiny daughters, 2-1/2 and 1. The mother obviously went berserk, killed herself and tried to kill all her children. She and her husband had a family fight. Found in the house was a veritable arsenal, two revolvers she had used in the killings, plus two other pistols, three rifles and several knives (also used). Would this terrible tragedy have taken place if the firearms hadn't been so near at hand? . . . One thing we don't doubt: that the failure of our state and federal governments to adopt far more severe gun restrictions is taking an increasing mounting toll of lives. The figures are plain: states and countries with the tightest gun restrictions are also those with the fewest number of homicides and suicides." (Apr. 23)



1968

“Wadie Deddeh was elected to the state Assembly two years ago, an immigrant from the Middle East, a Catholic in a district largely Protestant, and the only Democrat in the entire state of California to win office in a Republican landslide election. In his two years in Sacramento, he has achieved a distinguished record. He gave San Diego its first night court so workingmen accused of traffic offenses would not have to forfeit a day's pay in order to have their day in court. He obtained funding for the South Bay Guidance Clinic and the Otay Mesa prison. He co-authored a tough anti-smog bill, programs to help school dropouts, improved school safety crossings, changed formula on distributing cigarette taxes to bring more money to Chula Vista and Imperial Beach, and coordinated flood control projects with freeway development. We strongly urge his re-election.” (Oct. 20)

1969

"Protest" - Last month "25 Mexican-American students walked out of Castle Park in the first student strike in the history of the Sweetwater Union High School District." After 2 days, the strike ended and the principal acknowledged he was wrong in banning buttons. Last year an editorial noted that "this newspaper has been warning for several years that our school district has been derelict in its responsibilities to our Mexican-American community, and the chickens have finally come home to roost." (May 29)

1970

Mayor Tom Hamilton was Newsmaker of 1970. The "lanky, soft-spoken Texas-born pharmacist and Navy veteran is a new face" that brought a "new attitude, new harmony, new accord and a new sense of teamwork." He created two new commissions, the Environmental Control Commission and the Youth Advisory Commission, and was the "prime mover" in creating parks and city recreational facilities. He offered annexation to Bonita to stop developers and LAFCO from carving up of the valley. "He has stood 10 feet tall in resistance to special interests who would raid the municipal treasury or misuse the city's most precious asset, its land, for their own benefit." (Dec. 27)

1971

"The Farm Strike" - "Today is the day when Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers Organizing Committee is supposed to start a strike at the Egger-Ghio farms in Imperial Beach and Otay Mesa. We don't like strikes because the public gets caught in the middle. Particularly, we don't like farm strikes, because food is what keeps human beings alive." But "it is socially repugnant for any industry to wax rich on low wages paid an under-class of hapless and helpless workers, whether foreign or domestic." (May 20)

1972

"Insult to Mexicans" - "The Chula Vista Chamber of Commerce has made a flyer that includes a lazy sleeping figure in sombrero (the caricature is reproduced here). This caricature of the lazy Mexican is an insult to Chula Vista's sister city of Irapuato, Mexico, and such stereotypes are responsible for much of the discrimination that minorities have suffered in the United States." (Mar. 2)



1973

"Mike Heck is a hero." Chula Vista pilot Michael Heck flew 175 bombing missions in seven years, but in Dec. refused to fly any more B-52 bombing raids on North Vietnam. He made national news "by focusing the attention of the public and our political leaders on the insanity and barbarism of American intervention in Vietnam." He wanted to be on record that he had "had it with the war" and that, as he told newsmen, "any war creates an evil far greater than anything it is trying to prevent." Even Barry Goldwater supported Heck's decision on national TV. (Jan. 18)

1974

The Star-News investigated reasons for the high cost of hospital care in the South Bay. For many years the paper argued for a single public hospital system, but it was rejected by voters 6 years ago. As a result, "there has been a proliferation of private medical groups and plans in the South Bay, hustling the poor and being investigated by the state for fraud, medical malpractice, negligence and breach of contract." Star-News investigative report Alice Blankfort was honored in 1972 as Suburban Journalist of the Year for her series on "Medi-Cal foul-ups." (Apr. 11)

1975

Among all the suburban newspapers in the entire United States, The Star-News was No. 1 this year in women's interest writing by the Suburban Newspapers of America. Becky Bartindale won the top award for her writing on women's issues, including a series on the Equal Rights Amendment. "1975 has been prophesied the year of the woman - in politics, in the struggle for priesthood, in athletics business and other spheres, women continue to make inroads. The United Nations has declared it International Women's Year, with goals of equality and peace." Bartindale was recognized for her article on the "joys and sorrows of Cherri Thompkins of Chula Vista, wife of former major minor league pitcher Ron Tompkins." Stories on women included Rosanne Holiday, "the celebrated and embattled Southwestern College child development instructor," who was suspended for bringing her infant daughter to campus. Jennie Fulasz was nominated for Woman of the Year as the first woman to fill the city clerk's position in the 64-year history of Chula Vista. (Nov. 11)

1976

The new \$2.5 million Chula Vista library was dedicated as the city's bicentennial project on July 4, "a magnificent new city library which drew nationwide acclaim for its design." The Chamber of Commerce had objected to the use of federal revenue-sharing funds in 1973 to build the library, but the Star-News condemned the "stubborn conservatism" of the pro-business Chamber and praised the bold leadership of the City Council to seek new solutions to urban finance. (July 4)

1977

The Sweetwater Authority defeated the California American water company in its final court case, believed to have been the "biggest water utilities case ever tried in California courts . . . and the biggest single property condemnation suit in county history." Of all his editorial campaigns, Lowell Blankfort was most proud of this victory for a public water utility, something he had called for in many editorials since he took over the paper in 1961. (Sept. 1)

1978

"A Last Hurrah" was the last editorial of Lowell Blankfort. He wrote over 1700 editorials in 17 years and followed the credo "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." The farewell cartoon was drawn by Joe Schmidt, art teacher at Montgomery Junior High School. (Nov. 12)



LEARN MORE

More history of South Bay newspapers can be found on our web page at <http://sunnycv.com/southbay/exhibits/>. The first newspaper in the South Bay was the *National City Record*, founded by William Burgess in 1882. Frank Kimball had persuaded the Santa Fe Railroad to build a terminal in National City, and he believed his town would soon outgrow San Diego, which had the only other newspaper in the county, the *Union*. The railroad boom of the 1880s gave birth to new cities and newspapers, including the *Otay Press* in 1888. The *National City Record* became the *National City News* in 1903 and merged in 1954 with the *Chula Vista Star* that had been founded by Herbert Crooks in 1919.



This merger that created the *Star-News* was the result of the efforts of Ray Coyle, who had taken over the *Chula Vista Star* in 1944, and

Larry Freeman, who had taken over the *National City News* in 1950. This merger also included the *San Ysidro Border Press* that had been founded in 1946 and purchased by Freeman in 1950. The merger also included the *Bay Cities Press*, which was renamed the *Imperial Beach Star* in 1960, and then the *Imperial Beach Star-News* in 1968. After Ray Coyle died in 1961, the *Star-News* was taken over by Lowell Blankfort and Rowland Rebele. In 1972 the *Star-News* was sold to Harte-Hanks Newspapers of Texas and became part of the six-paper San Diego Urban Newspaper Group that included the *Imperial Beach-San Ysidro Reminder*. Blankfort and Rebele stayed on as editors until resigning in 1978. The *Star-News* was sold in 1986 to Worrell Enterprises.

EVENTS

We have planned the following dates for the rest of 2014. This year, all meetings will be held in the Auditorium of the Chula Vista Main Library, Monday evenings at 6:00.

May 19. Speaker: Lowell Blankfort. Topic: His experiences as editor of the *Star-News*.

July 27. Field trip to National City Train Depot, Sunday 2 pm.

September 29. Speaker: TBA

November 17. Speaker: TBA

We hope you will arrive a little earlier to visit! The Auditorium will be open by 5:30. We hope you will give us your comments and questions at the meeting.

DEPOT VISIT



We have planned a field trip to the National City Railroad Depot on Sunday, July 27, at 2 pm. The depot is located at 922 W. 23rd Street, the same building and location when it was built in 1882. It is the oldest original train depot on the West Coast, and a California State Historic Landmark. For those interested in having lunch, we will meet at 12:30 pm at the nearby Pier 32 Waterfront Grill, 3201 Marina Way in National City.

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