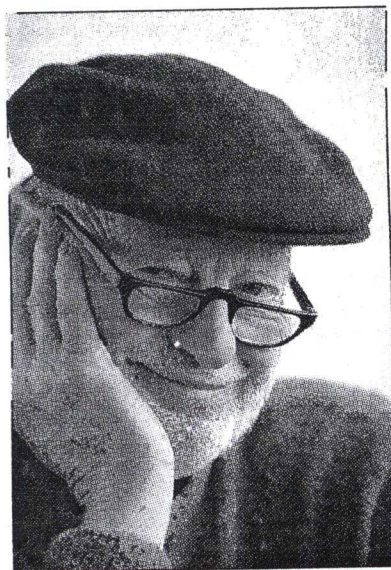


The way of Wally



DAN COYRO / SENTINEL FILE

Wally Trabling wrote his 'Mostly About People' column for the Sentinel for more than 30 years

Iconic Sentinel columnist dies at 90

By WALLACE BAINE

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Wally Trabling, known for his wry, witty and warm newspaper columns and as the public face of the Santa Cruz Sentinel for more than 40 years, died Friday at his Santa Cruz home. He was 90.

After nine years as a feature writer at the Sentinel, Trabling took on the job of daily columnist at the Sentinel in 1962, producing his "Mostly About People" column five days a week until his retirement in 1994. By Trabling's count, that amounted to around 7,000 published columns — that's 7,000 stories of chance encounters, of historically significant experiences, of conversations with intriguing people, of humor and pathos.

In case you're wondering, in terms of column inches, that's more than

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two miles of prose.

To take but just a few examples from Trabling's staggering body of work, in September 1965, he wrote a vivid account of Beatlemania after having seen the Beatles perform live at the Cow Palace in San Francisco. It was a bewildered story of witnessing a battalion of screaming girls — "Police on stage began dragging their limp forms off stage" — and ended with a wistful note: "I felt sad that I was here and my kids were at home. It should have been the other way around."

During the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, Trabling's column was filled with stories of loss, survival and rebuilding. He managed to find a local woman who had also survived two monster quakes in Chile, including the biggest earthquake in recorded history, according to the Guinness Book of World Records.

He watched a condemned killer die in the gas chamber. He worked a shift as a clown for the Ringling Bros. circus. He bungee-jumped off a bridge in New Zealand to celebrate his 70th birthday.

"Most people may remember Wally as a columnist," said John Lindsay, a friend of Trabling for many years who served as the Sentinel's editor during much of Trabling's tenure there. "But he was also a talented and dedicated reporter during the early years. His vivid reporting of the 1955 flood comes to mind. He told the story in personal terms, and it was his storytelling that also made his columns so delightful."

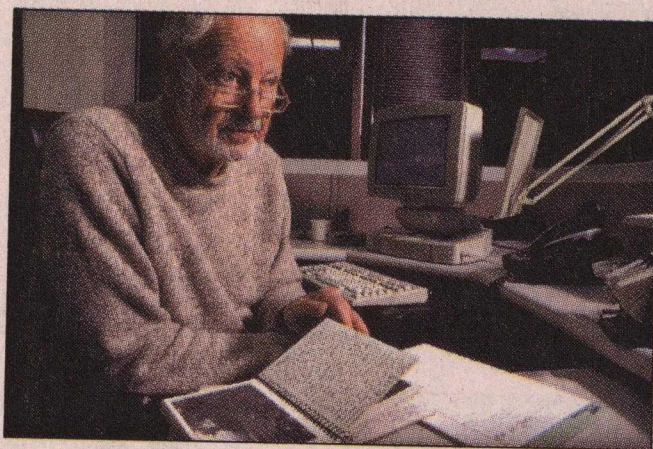
"Wally was the one person I knew who would listen to anybody, talk to anybody and find something interesting in anybody," said Mary Kate Lezin, whose friendship with Trabling and his wife Lois goes back almost 60 years. "He had the greatest tolerance of listening to other people and their stories of anyone I've ever known."

Trabling grew up in Kingsburg, a Central Valley town 20 miles south of Fresno once known for its high concentration of Swedish immigrants. He did, however, have family in the Santa Cruz area. His grandmother, whom he often wrote about, lived in the Santa Cruz Mountains near Corralitos, where young Wally would often visit as a child.

He served in the Army Air Corps during World War II and earned a degree in journalism from San Jose State just after the war. He and Lois traveled and worked in Europe before settling down in Santa Cruz in 1953, when he first began with the Sentinel.

Trabling was a product of a different newsroom culture than today's. The Sentinel, an afternoon paper until the early 1980s, was full of eccentric characters on the news side and Trabling deftly worked both sides of the street, as the symbol and touchstone of the newspaper in the community and as the hardboiled reporter in the newsroom.

"I looked at him as the Mark Twain of community newspapers," said Bruce McPherson, who served as the paper's editor in the 1980s before going on to serve as a Republican state senator and California secretary of state. "I remember seeing people laughing out loud reading 'Mostly About People.' Many people took the Sentinel



BILL LOVEJOY / SENTINEL FILE

Former Sentinel columnist Wally Trabling, shown at his desk in the newsroom in 1994, died Friday. He was 90.

BIOGRAPHY

WALLY TRABING

BORN: June 23, 1921, in Kingsburg, Calif.

DIED: Jan. 13, 2012, Santa Cruz

OCCUPATION: Journalist for the Santa Cruz Sentinel, author of the daily column 'Mostly About People' 1962 to 1994.

COMMUNITY: Longtime member of First Congregational Church in Santa Cruz, co-founded Senior Citizens Opportunities, volunteered at the March of Dimes and Long Marine Laboratories

SERVICES: 2 p.m. Jan. 28 at the First Congregational Church, 900 High St., Santa Cruz

CONTRIBUTIONS: First Congregational Church or Hospice of Santa Cruz County

just because of Wally."

"He reminded me a lot of Herb Caen and Art Buchwald," said longtime friend Grant Erickson, who knew Trabling's mother back in Kingsburg. "He was a really funny guy, but he never seemed to laugh at his own jokes."

Trabling was an example of the columnist as a surrogate for the reader in a wide variety of experiences, whether it was travel, adventure or food. He hung out with political comic Mort Sahl, sat with a 7-year-old boy dying of leukemia, pondered the universe at Lick Observatory atop Mount Hamilton, and ate snails and spoke French with the president of the Monterey Institute of International Studies.

When former President George H.W. Bush gave his infamous "read my lips" speech, Trabling contacted a lip-reading specialist to see how difficult it would be to actually read Bush's lips. He shared toilet-training tips with readers — he had two sons, Mark and Kent, and one daughter, Mily.

"I'm always wondering about things," Trabling said on the occasion of his retirement in 1994. "Eighty percent of the time, I never get the answer, but I'm still wondering."

Current Sentinel Editor Don Miller knew and worked with Trabling for more than a decade. He remembered how Wally and Lois always invited new reporters and editors over to the Trabling household for a get-acquainted dinner. Trabling, he said, was a wonderful example of what newspaper columnists once were — quirky and hometown, sentimental and sometimes hard-boiled as well.

"Wally was a throwback, one of a kind," Miller said. "He loved writing his column, even if his creative wanderings would sometimes per-

plex editors. But more than a few times, he'd reach a place of poetry and beauty in his descriptions of his boyhood home, or of people and places who were outside the norm."

Miller also recalled how people wanting a little bit of fame would often seek out Trabling for inclusion in his column — and in the rush to make deadline, it could get a little wild, especially in the case of a man passing through town in the 1980s who told the Sentinel columnist he was existing only on air for nourishment. He described himself as a "breatharian" — a tag that would certainly resonate in Santa Cruz with its host of offbeat characters. But after the breatharian column appeared, the man was seen around town wolfing down a hamburger. The episode became part of newsroom lore for years at the Sentinel.

From the outside of the newsroom, Trabling often had a profound influence on readers. Tom Graves, who works for the city of Santa Cruz, grew up in the Happy Valley area and, as a teen, was a devoted reader of Trabling's column to get a sense of what was going on in Santa Cruz. Living in a remote setting, he said, he often felt isolated and Trabling served as a remedy to his loneliness.

"His columns were a testimony to the human spirit," said Graves, "witness to our suffering, chronicle of our activities, memorial to our dead, and happy harbinger of our beginnings." When Trabling retired, Graves said, "I felt the loss of his column, missed it like a love letter, for years afterward."

Trabling was known for his love of art and performance. He was an accomplished banjo picker, painted watercolors, played with the Santa Cruz Symphony and guest-starred in various theater productions. At the first meeting of the school trustees of the new community college that would become Cabrillo College, it was Trabling who suggested that the school be named for the Portuguese explorer Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo.

Trabling was also a longtime member of the First Congregational Church in Santa Cruz, where he and Lois gave much of their time and energy. In his later years, before his health began to decline, Trabling served as the coordinator of the interfaith dinner to feed the homeless for 10 years.

"He was everyone's friend," said Dave Dodson, who knew Trabling in his later years through the church. "There were no distinctions of status or wealth or anything else with him."

"He loved meeting someone new," said Mary Kate Lezin. "I think that's one of the things he lived for, meeting new people and hearing their stories."