

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2000

OBITUARIES

Paul Avery, Longtime Newspaper Reporter

Bay Area newsman Paul Avery, a veteran police reporter best known for his trailblazing stories on the infamous serial killer known as the Zodiac, and later for his work on the Patricia Hearst kidnapping, died Sunday on Orcas Island, Wash.



Avery

Mr. Avery, who was 66, died of pulmonary emphysema, according to his wife, Margo St. James, at the West Sound home of her grandfather.

Long a colorful fixture in Bay Area journalism, Mr. Avery came to The Chronicle in 1959, and in the mid-1980s, after working for the Sacramento Bee and writing a book about the Hearst kidnapping, he signed up with the then-Hearst-owned San Francisco Examiner, where he stayed until his retirement in August 1994.

Even then, he couldn't stay away from the news business: Although stricken with emphysema, he would frequently wander down to the

M&M, a nearby newspaper saloon. Dragging his oxygen tank after him, he would join his newsroom buddies during the lunch hour or have a few cocktails after work, talking about murders old and not so old, a subject with which he was intimately familiar, having once been personally threatened by the Zodiac killer.

"With Paul, you knew there was nothing he wouldn't do — and hadn't done — that was interesting and provocative in his long career," Chronicle Executive Editor Phil Bronstein, who was Mr. Avery's editor at the Examiner for years, said yesterday. "He was one of the great characters, but also a journalist of profound substance. The image that I'll keep forever is of Paul, police radio attached to one ear, cigarette in his hand, oxygen supply hooked up to his nose, arm around my shoulder, sharing the scandalous details of the latest story he'd broken."

Perhaps the most intense story of Mr. Avery's career was the Zodiac case, a series of killings — unsolved to this day — that began in October 1966 and ostensibly ended with the death of a San Francisco cab driver in October 1969. At the time, Mr. Avery was a police reporter at The Chronicle.

The Zodiac became infamous because of the letters, riddled with

cryptograms, that he would send to Bay Area newspapers. For a long time, it was thought that the Zodiac's activities were limited to the Bay Area, but Mr. Avery discovered a 1966 murder in Riverside that he linked to the Zodiac.

The Zodiac soon wrote Mr. Avery a letter, warning, "You are doomed." Just as quickly, someone made up hundreds of campaign-style buttons, worn by nearly everyone on The Chronicle staff, including Mr. Avery, that said, "I Am Not Paul Avery."

When Patricia Hearst was kidnapped in February 1974, Mr. Avery joined forces with Chronicle reporter Tim Findley to produce a series of stories detailing the kidnapping and writing about the members of the little-known band of revolutionaries called the Symbionese Liberation Army.

Mr. Avery covered the Hearst case until the newspaper heiress-turned-bank robber was arrested in September 1975. Mr. Avery then holed up on his houseboat at Gate 5 in Sausalito with Boston writer Vin McLellan to write "The Voices of Guns," a book on the SLA and the Hearst kidnapping.

"Paul lived a rich and tumultuous life," McLellan said yesterday. What McLellan learned about Mr. Avery during that spell on the houseboat

was that Mr. Avery "had a real genius for opening up enough about himself to people, so they, in turn, would open up themselves. It's not an approach that many reporters dare take."

In fact, Mr. Avery sometimes got so caught up in his stories he would follow them for years, developing deep personal connections to the people involved in them, whether they were cops or convicted felons.

"Paul was from the old breed of reporters," said Frank McCulloch, who hired Mr. Avery three times — when McCulloch was Time-Life's bureau chief in Saigon in 1967 (Mr. Avery was on leave from The Chronicle) and later when McCulloch was managing editor of the Sacramento Bee and, finally, at the Examiner. "The guy was never happier, never complete as a human being until he was on a big, tough, long story. He lived for that, and he did them superbly."

McCulloch said Mr. Avery, after joining the Bee in 1976, had been instrumental in getting authorities to drop murder charges leveled against a man whom Mr. Avery found had nothing to do with the murder.

Mr. Avery was born in Honolulu and raised in a military family — his father was a career naval officer. He was educated in Honolulu, Oakland

and Washington, D.C., as his father was periodically reassigned by the Navy.

Mr. Avery began his career as an itinerant newspaperman in 1955, three months before his 21st birthday, at the Vicksburg (Miss.) Post-Herald, and later worked for the Victoria (Texas) Advocate, the Anchorage Daily Times, the Honolulu Advertiser and the San Luis Obispo Telegram before coming to San Francisco in 1959.

In addition to his wife, who is the founder of the San Francisco prostitutes' civil rights organization, COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics), Mr. Avery is survived by two daughters, Charlé Avery, of Dallas, and Cristin Moak of McComb, Miss.

Memorial services will be held in San Francisco sometime in the summer, St. James said.

— Michael Taylor

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