

THREE WEEKS IN FOGGY BOTTOM

By Fred Hobbs

The 1970s provided interesting times for people of my generation. My job as a television reporter covering Colorado state government at the time put me in daily touch with much of the political activity locally, but for three weeks during that time I had the eye-opening experience of working in Washington, D.C., often irreverently referred to as Foggy Bottom, the historic name of one its neighborhoods.

This is how it happened. The station I worked for then (Denver's Channel 7) was owned by Time-Life Broadcast, the broadcasting division of Time, Inc. A small group of journalists worked on the broadcasting side in Washington covering the congressional delegations of the states, including Colorado, represented in Time-Life's station ownership. The reporter assigned to cover Colorado-oriented news in Washington had never even been here. I was sent to take his place for three weeks while he came to Denver to assume my duties. He could observe a few sites and happenings around and about Denver while I was in the midst of the nation's newsmakers and news chroniclers.

I kept a diary of sorts. Looking over my notes now so many years later and presumably with more knowledge and maturity, I still am astonished at the fact that despite being thought of as "the news capitol of the world", Washington then and now, is really a small town. I found its inhabitants to be remarkably provincial.

The biggest shock of all as recorded in my notebook was how the media operated then. In the first few days in Washington I learned that typically there was a "national story of the day" whether the latest political scandal or some tale a White House reporter was chasing. That story most often appeared first on the front page of the New York Times, or possibly the Washington Post. It then was picked up by the wire services, the Associated Press and the now-defunct United Press International. Other lesser news outlets tagged along. One story generated by one reporter or at best, a team of reporters and sent all over the world.

One of my diary entries contained details of a personal experience I encountered. In covering the Colorado delegation, the Time-Life bureau naturally almost daily reported on the activities of the Senators and House members from our state. I was assigned to interview Senator Peter Dominick on the steps of the Capitol building. Our Time-Life TV photographer had set up his camera and I had microphone in hand. I was understandably a little nervous in this august setting and not paying particular attention to the surroundings. Suddenly, though I saw a second microphone being thrust in front of Senator Dominick.

Upon finishing the interview I turned and saw a little man holding the mike, a portable tape recorder on his shoulder. He was dressed very casually in an open-collar shirt with his sleeves rolled up. Not my vision of a powerful, sophisticated Washington journalist. And then he turned to me without introducing himself and said: "Say, can you tell me, is Dominick a Republican or a Democrat?" It turns out the interloper was not a reporter at all, but an audio tape editor from the Mutual Radio Network which at the time boasted more than 400 radio stations with some six million listeners nationwide.

I scribbled in my notes something about "they'll never believe this back home." But, in today's atmosphere of distrust, if not disgust, with cable TV and radio talk show yakkers, maybe the little man from Mutual wasn't the worst example of shoddy American media we could find.

And by the way, my diary notes reminded me that Dominick was a Republican.