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# Connecting

March 14, 2014



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## The passing of an AP legend



(2009 photo by AP photographer Nick Ut)

**By JOHN ROGERS**

LOS ANGELES (AP) - **Bob Thomas**, the longtime Associated Press writer and dean of Hollywood reporters who covered a record 66 Oscar ceremonies, reported on the biggest stars, from Clark Gable to Tom Cruise, and filed AP's bulletin that Robert F. Kennedy had been shot, died Friday. He was 92.

Thomas, a last link to Hollywood's studio age who retired in 2010, died of age-related illnesses at his longtime Encino, Calif., home, his daughter Janet Thomas said.

A room filled with his interview subjects would have made for the most glittering of ceremonies: Elizabeth Taylor and Marilyn Monroe, Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy, Groucho Marx and Marlon Brando, Walt Disney and Fred Astaire. He interviewed rising stars (James Dean), middle-aged legends (Humphrey Bogart, Jack Nicholson) and elder institutions (Bob Hope).

Thomas' career began in 1944, when Hollywood was still a small, centralized community, tightly controlled by a handful of studios, and continued well into the 21st century. During his nearly seven decades writing for the AP, Thomas reviewed hundreds of films and television shows, compiled hundreds of celebrity obituaries and wrote numerous retrospective pieces on Hollywood and how it had changed.

He was the author of nearly three dozen books, including biographies of Disney, Brando

and Crawford and an acclaimed portrait of studio mogul Harry Cohn, "King Cohn." He wrote, produced and appeared in a handful of television specials on the Academy Awards and was a guest on numerous television programs including "The Tonight Show," "Good Morning America" and "Nightline." His biographies of reclusive billionaire Howard Hughes and the comedy team of Abbott and Costello were made into television movies.

He is listed twice in Guinness World Records, for most consecutive Academy Awards shows covered by an entertainment reporter and for longest career as an entertainment reporter (1944-2010).

In 1988, he became the first reporter-author awarded a star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame.

But one of his biggest stories had nothing to do with entertainment.

Helping out during the 1968 presidential election, Thomas had been assigned to cover Sen. Kennedy on the night the New York Democrat won the California primary. Minutes after declaring victory, Kennedy was shot to death in the kitchen of Los Angeles' Ambassador Hotel.

"I was waiting in the press room for Kennedy to arrive when I heard what sounded like the popping of balloons in the hotel kitchen," Thomas would recount years later.

"I rushed into the kitchen where men were screaming and women sobbing," he recalled. "I jumped onto a pile of kitchen trays and saw Kennedy lying on the floor, his head bloody."

He ran to a phone and delivered the bulletin to The Associated Press.

As the son of a newspaper editor turned Hollywood press agent, Robert Joseph Thomas seemed destined to become an entertainment writer from his earliest days. In junior high school and high school he wrote entertainment columns for the campus newspaper, and in college his favorite reading was the industry trade paper Daily Variety.

But when he joined the AP in Los Angeles in 1943, it was with aspirations of becoming a war correspondent. The closest he got to that was when the wire service named him its Fresno, Calif., correspondent, a job he gave up after little more than a year.

"It gets so damn hot in Fresno in the summer and nothing much ever happens there," he once told a colleague.

He returned to the AP's LA bureau in 1944 and was soon named its entertainment reporter. He was also told that the byline he'd been using - Robert J. Thomas - had to go.

"Too formal for a young guy who's going to work the Hollywood beat," he said the AP's bureau chief told him. "From now on your byline is 'Bob Thomas.'"

Soon he would become a ubiquitous presence in Hollywood, attending awards shows, wandering studio back lots or going from table to table at the Polo Lounge, Musso and

Frank and other favored Hollywood hangouts of the day. The gentlemanly, soft-spoken reporter with the wry sense of humor rarely had trouble getting people to talk to him and enjoyed access to the stars that modern journalists rarely attain, whether visiting with Nicholson at his home or chatting on the set with Tracy and Hepburn.

Although he insisted he never became friends with the people he covered, Thomas did strike up close, long-lasting acquaintanceships with many, and he had the anecdotes to prove it.

There was the time he tried, unsuccessfully, to match the hard-drinking Richard Burton drink for drink on the set of the 1964 film "Night of the Iguana."

Another time, he showed up for an interview with Betty Grable armed with a tape measure. He had been sent, he told the actress, to determine if her figure had suffered during her recent pregnancy. Grable good naturedly let him measure her.

"Can you imagine doing that with Michelle Pfeiffer today?" he once asked. "In those days, it really seemed like a playground."

Thomas even received fan mail from the stars. Soon after her marriage to actor John Agar in 1950, Shirley Temple wrote: "John and I want you to know that we are very grateful to you for the manner in which you handled the story on our wedding."

Some sent telegrams: "Thanks for sending the article to me; I got a kick out of reading it," Jimmy Durante wrote via Western Union in 1951. "Boy, you're great."

But Thomas also had his share of run-ins.

Doris Day and Frank Sinatra went months without talking to him after he quoted them candidly in stories, and Tracy cut off contact for years when something Thomas said about him offended the Oscar-winning actor. The fiercely private Brando never spoke with him again after Thomas published the biography "Marlon."

His encyclopedic knowledge of the industry was well appreciated by his colleagues. A former AP editor, Jim Lagier, would recall that Thomas had a filing system at his home that rivaled that of any news bureau.

"Because if you call Bob Thomas at two o'clock in the morning and say, 'Bob, Mary Smith has died,' he would say, 'Mary Smith,' and then, suddenly you could hear the filing cabinets were opening. He would start dictating the lead," Lagier told the AP in 2008 during an oral history interview.

Kathleen Carroll, executive editor of the AP, worked with Thomas in the Los Angeles bureau in the early 1980s.

"Bob was an old-fashioned Hollywood reporter and he knew absolutely everyone," she said. "He had a double-helping of impish charm with the stars, but back at the office, he was the quiet guy who slipped into a desk at the back and poked at the keyboard for a

while, then handed in a crisp and knowing story soon delivered to movie fans around the world.

"Some days, you'd even get a smile out of him before he headed out the door again." Through the years, Thomas' enthusiasm for his profession never waned.

"I get to interview some of the most beautiful people in the world," he said in 1999. "It's what I always wanted to do, and I just can't stop doing it."

Thomas is survived by his wife of 67 years, Patricia; daughters Nancy Thomas, Janet Thomas and Caroline Thomas; and three grandchildren.

**CONNECTING colleagues: If you have a memory of Bob that you would like to share, send along to me at [stevenspl@live.com](mailto:stevenspl@live.com)**

## **Alberto Arce honored by ASNE**

**Alberto Arce**, AP's Honduras correspondent, has won the Batten Award from the American Society of News Editors, which announced Thursday the winners of this year's awards for distinguished writing and photography.

Alberto, who won a Gramling Journalism Award in 2013, will receive \$2,500 for winning the Batten Medal, which honors the memory of revered reporter, editor and newspaper executive **James K. Batten**. The medal is intended to celebrate the journalistic values Batten stood for: compassion, courage, humanity and a deep concern for the underdog. The award is sponsored by a group of editors from the former Knight Ridder company. From the judges:



"Alberto Arce writes with stunning power and pace. Under the most difficult circumstances, he tells stories from violence-torn Honduras with an authenticity that reveals to readers terrible realities and the victims but with an elegance that suggests there are no false notes. We are brought into Honduras by a journalist who seems fearless but not reckless. That lends an elegance to the work. His work in recent years and the quality of his dispatches are very much in the spirit of the work championed by Jim Batten."

Batten was a member of the AP board of directors from 1984 to 1993 and vice chairman from 1992 to 1993.

Click [here](#) for a complete list of the ASNE winners.

## **New LinkedIn group: Former Journalists**

Former AP newswoman - and new Connecting member - **Emily Fredrix Goodman** has

started a LinkedIn group called Former Journalists, and she invites members of Connecting to join.

Emily joined the AP in St. Louis after graduating from Washington University in St. Louis in 2002. She went from a relief stint there to working at the Topeka bureau as a legislative reliefer, and then to Washington, managing the AP Politics Website during the 2004 election. She also worked in Omaha and Milwaukee as a business reporter before transferring to New York to work in business in 2010. She finished her AP career as a news producer at the Nerve Center. In September 2012, she left AP to become a manager of corporate communications and social media at McGraw Hill Financial in New York.

Here's her invitation to those of you who are LinkedIn members, or who plan to be:

We invite you to join discussions about what it's like to be on the 'outside' of journalism at a new LinkedIn group for former journalists. Many of the people in this still new group are former AP staffers. Discussions so far include what you miss - and don't - about being in the news business. Follow this link to sign up:

<https://www.linkedin.com/groups?home=&gid=7474582&trk=anet ug hm>

## Welcome to Connecting

**Dennis Brack** - Former Time-Life photographer and past president of the White House News Photographers Association. He is still active covering the White House as the senior photographer on the beat.



**Connecting wishes Happy Birthday**  
to

**Pat Milton**

**Stories of interest...**

**Digital Life in 2025: Experts predict the Internet will become 'like electricity' - less visible, yet more deeply embedded in people's lives for good and ill**

-0-

**Sulzberger: The family won't sell the Times**

-0-

**Times reporter Joel Brinkley remembered**(Valerie Komor)

-0-

**How The Truth Is Made At Russia Today**

-0-

**Russian editor replaced with pro-Kremlin journalist**

-0-

**Questions About News Photographers in Syria Arise After Freelancer's Death**

-0-

**No increase in women's sport coverage since the 2012 Olympics**

-0-

**Connecticut paper to charge journalists \$15 for errors that require a press plate change**  
(Bob Daugherty)

-0-

**Neil DeGrasse Tyson: Media Should Stop Giving Space To Climate Change And Science Deniers** (Latrice Davis)

-0-

**Inside the Texas Tribune model of sustainable journalism**

-0-

**Calumet Photographic abruptly shuts down, files for bankruptcy**(Doug Pizac)

-0-

## This is what happens when your publisher is on the United Way board

-0-

### **AP Best of the States** (Valerie Komor)

Colleagues,

The noted California correspondent Mark Twain is credited with popularizing the adage "There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics."

The quote has provided words to live by for journalists, as **Don Thompson**, Sacramento newsperson, proved once again last week with a scoop tied to his ongoing coverage of California Gov. Jerry Brown's high-profile efforts to reduce the state's prison population.

Releasing inmates early always gets attention, and the so-called realignment effort has grabbed headlines nationwide. But until Thompson spotted one fact in a lengthy state report, it wasn't widely known that California actually is on track for incarcerating more inmates, not fewer, even as the state grapples with a federal court mandate to reduce crowding.

He reported exclusively that county prosecutors across the state are confounding the court-ordered efforts by sending far more convicts than anticipated to state prisons, including a record number of people with second felony convictions (<http://goo.gl/YpxZVQ>). This will put the state's prison population on the rise just as Brown is trying to reduce overcrowding by directing those convicted of less serious crimes to county jails.

Thompson spotted a reference to the "second-striker" data in a lengthy and routine report about the state's prison population. The trend line caught his eye: If the recent rise in second-strike prosecutions continued, it would undermine all of the efforts the governor has taken to comply with the courts. The nut of the story was Thompson's ferreting out an astonishing trend, one that has become so pronounced that a state judicial panel is investigating.

By surfacing the trend, Thompson was able to report with authority and garner telling interviews with key players: The projected state inmate population increase "basically doubles the hurdle that the state has to get over," said Rebekah Evenson, an attorney with the nonprofit Prison Law Office, which sued over prison crowding.

The new information gained wide resonance with California members when the bureau took the story a step further.

Administrative Correspondent **Tom Verdin** worked to provide the second-striker statistics for all 58 counties to members several days before publication and even emailed a draft of the story to editors so they could localize it for their audiences. That

was a hit, with the entire Los Angeles News Group, the Bakersfield Californian, The Fresno Bee and the Stockton Record among those using the template provided by AP to craft their own packages for Sunday editions. It also received wide play among broadcasters.

The story ran with a table giving the relevant statistics for all counties and fresh art from SAC photographer **Rich Pedroncelli**, who made shots of new inmates being processed at a state prison after working his own connections in the corrections department to secure access into a prison. (<http://goo.gl/wzB8qX>)

The realignment law has been one of the most important criminal justice stories in California for nearly three years, with competitive statewide coverage by the LA Times and others, and nearly all AP members writing aggressively about it on the local level. Thompson's exclusive was a major beat for the AP, and the sharing of data and the story draft ahead of time strengthened our relationship with members.

For finding a key, news-breaking detail and using it as the foundation for a striking piece of explanatory journalism, Thompson is awarded this week's \$300 Best of the States prize.

**Brian Carovillano**

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**APME UPDATE - March 13, 2014**

(Mark Mittelstadt)

**March 31**, Deadline for APME Journalism Excellence Awards

**April 25-26**, NewsTrain, Vancouver

**Sept. 15-17**, ASNE-APME Conference, Chicago

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**TODAY FROM APME**

**JOIN US IN MARKING SUNSHINE WEEK**

Sunshine Week is next week and APME has a special page devoted to stories and editorials contributed by member newspapers about efforts to gain access to government at all levels in their communities.

Read here for the roundup: <http://www.apme.com/?page=Sunshine>

APME is also offering a forum to share FOI challenges and ideas on the Sunshine Week: <https://apme.site-ym.com/forums/Topics.aspx?forum=166403&>

## **Don't Wait: Enter APME's Journalism Excellence Awards**

The deadline to enter APME's awards is **Monday, March 31**.

A new category has been added: Best Mobile Platform to honor a news organization that produced or made significant improvements to a mobile application or platform in 2013.

Four of the categories in the contest offer monetary awards: the Seventh Annual Innovator of the Year Award for newspapers, the Best of Show in the Public Service Awards, the Fourth Annual Gannett Foundation Award for Innovation in Watchdog Journalism and the Tom Curley Sweepstakes Award in the First Amendment Awards.

The awards will be presented at the ASNE/APME Conference Sept. 15-17 in Chicago.

To enter, go to: [https://www.omnicontests4.com/Default.aspx?comp\\_id=1265](https://www.omnicontests4.com/Default.aspx?comp_id=1265)

## **APME Career Center for Job Postings and Job-Seekers**

The APME Career Center is free and focused on journalism.

Visit [www.apme.com/networking](http://www.apme.com/networking) to post open positions. No login is required. APME will help drive traffic to your listings through social media, our weekly APME Update email and more.

If you are looking for a new career opportunity, get a free Job Seeker account or login with your APME member account, fill out your profile and upload your resume. You can also sign up for notifications of relevant new positions in your areas of interest.

This is a new feature for [apme.com](http://apme.com), so if you have suggestions or encounter trouble, please contact Laura Sellers at [lsellers@eomediagroup.com](mailto:lsellers@eomediagroup.com).

**SAVE THE DATE**

**FROM AP**

**Beat of the Week:** Wong

**Best of the States:** Pritchard

## **WATCHDOG REPORTING**

**Portland Press Herald:** Maine overhauling child care licensing

**The Gazette:** Costs, doubts rise at power plant

**Rochester Democrat and Chronicle:** Audits slam oversight of school renovation

**Columbus Dispatch:** Reading test not needed for third graders with vouchers

[Read more Watchdog Reporting](#)

## **INDUSTRY NEWS**

Black Twitter growing into online force

Nashville schools to lift social media ban

Newspaper sued over rental ad prohibiting children

Kunerth leaves as Fairbanks News-Miner publisher

At 50, landmark libel case relevant in digital age

Controversy marks Newsweek's comeback

Award-winning editor to lead UT journalism school

Bill Whitaker joins '60 Minutes' cast

Arizona House kills public notice newspaper bill

3 Oregon TV stations sold to Atlanta partnership

Dave Hedge stepping down as Abilene publisher

Rebekah Brooks denies covering up tabloid hacking

Riley named new publisher of Spartanburg newspaper

Newsweek to use Slovak Piano paywall

Fusion cuts Ramos' nightly newscast to weekly

Court: LA judge wrong to open juvenile hearings

Walker retires as publisher of Daily Southerner

Groton Connecticut schools chief restricts media access

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**EDITORS IN THE NEWS:** Johnson, Klepper, Bhatia

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**IN MEMORIAM:** Fowler, Whorton

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[Great Ideas book available for download](#)

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