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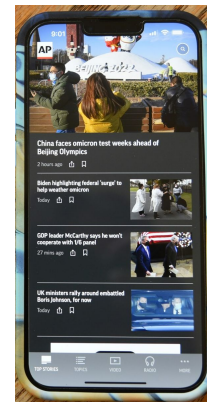
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Connecting

March 5, 2022

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Farewell to an AP legend Walter R. Mears, 1935-2022

Colleagues,

What's the lead, Walter?

Well, today, sadly, it's you and it comes through the eyes of his loving daughters who were with their dad to the very end - and then let the world know about the death of a man who was one of the greatest political journalists in history.

It was the night before **Walter Mears** died, they told me in a phone call Friday with first word of his death, when Methodist Pastor **Steve McElroy** came to his apartment for what both men realized would likely be their last visit. Politics was among the

topics of their discussion, naturally, and Walter recalled in the conversation a detail of a presidential campaign that occurred a year after his birth.

"It was amazing. They were talking and my dad remembered who ran against FDR in the 1936 presidential race, less than 24 hours before he passed," said **Susan Mears**, who with her sister **Stephanie Mears Stich** were present for their conversation at the Cedars of Chapel Hill (N.C.). (It was Alf Landon.) "Dad's brain was still brilliant to the very end. Right to the very end, he was as sharp a political mind as you can imagine."

Mears died the next morning – Thursday, March 3 – with Susan and Stephanie and a nurse at his bedside.

Mears loved his daughters and their children, his grandchildren: Nathaniel Stich and his spouse Madison West of New York City; Madeline Stich of Thornton, Colo.; and Aidan, Tristan and Brynne-Adelaide Wiemer of Boulder, Colo.

He loved his wife **Fran Richardson Mears**, who died three years ago, also of cancer, after a great but too-brief life together in the Chapel Hill area. His daughters were grateful that they met at an AP function - a Kansas-Missouri state meeting where Walter was guest speaker (politics, of course) and Fran was assistant bureau chief.

As noted in the [wire story below](#), Mears directed that a portion of his ashes be strewn at his wife Fran's ashes in Chapel Hill and the rest at the gravesite in Massachusetts of his first wife, Sally Ann Mears and their children Pamela and Walter Jr., who died in a 1962 house fire.

He is survived by brother William Campbell Mears of Naples, Fla., and his former wife Joyce Lund Mears of LeClaire, Iowa, mother of Susan and Stephanie. He was preceded in death by his sister Carolyn Long and his parents and his former wife CarrollAnn Rambo Mears.

Lou Boccardi, who served as AP's president and CEO from 1985 to 2003, shared these thoughts with Connecting:

Words like "legend," "giant", "one of a kind" will properly flood reminiscences about Walter. He deserves them all. And he did it with an easy grace that hid the intensity of his focus. He was a genius at his craft.

Daisy Veerasingham, who became AP president and CEO on Jan. 1, told Connecting the words of Executive Editor **Julie Pace** about Mears in the wire story "do indeed capture the feeling of the entire organization. Walter inspired so many people with his ability to get right to the very heart of a story. What a legacy indeed."

Connecting welcomes your favorite story or memory about Walter – for our Monday edition...and maybe beyond. Include a photo if you wish.

Here in this special edition of Connecting is the remarkable wire story on Walter's death written by **Mike Feinsilber**, longtime UPI and AP writer and editor who served as assistant chief of the Washington AP bureau for news before his retirement as writing coach in 2011, and Washington writer **Calvin Woodward**.

Be safe, stay healthy,

Paul

Pulitzer winner Walter Mears dies, AP's 'Boy on the Bus'



By MIKE FEINSILBER and CALVIN WOODWARD

WASHINGTON (AP) — Walter R. Mears, who for 45 years fluidly and speedily wrote the news about presidential campaigns for The Associated Press and won a Pulitzer Prize doing it, has died. He was 87.

“I could produce a story as fast as I could type,” Mears once acknowledged — and he was a fast typist. He became the AP’s Washington bureau chief and the wire service’s executive editor and vice president, but he always returned to the keyboard, and to covering politics.

Mears died Thursday at his apartment in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, eight days after being diagnosed with multiple forms of cancer, said his daughters Susan Mears of Boulder, Colorado, and Stephanie Mears of Austin, Texas, who were with him.

They said he was visited on his last night by a minister, with whom he discussed Alf Landon, the losing Republican presidential candidate in 1936, a year after his birth.

Mears’ ability to find the essence of a story while it was still going on and to get it to the wire — and to newspapers and broadcasters around the world — became legend among peers. In 1972, Timothy Crouse featured Mears in “The Boys on the Bus,” a book chronicling the efforts and antics of reporters covering that year’s presidential campaign.

Crouse recounted how, immediately after a political debate, a reporter from The Boston Globe called out to the man from AP: “Walter, what’s our lead? What’s the lead, Walter?” The question became a catchphrase among political reporters to describe the search for the most newsworthy aspect of an event — the lead. “Made me moderately famous,” Mears cracked in 2005.

It was a natural question. Mears had to bang out stories about campaign debates while they were still underway. Newspaper editors would see his lead on the wire before their own reporters filed their stories. So it was defensive for others on the press bus to wonder what Mears was leading with, and to ask him.



FILE - Walter R. Mears of the Associated Press, is shown, April 3, 1969 at the Capitol in Washington. The Washington Monument is in the background. (AP Photo/Charles

Tasnadi, File)

Early in his Washington career, he was assigned to write updates on the 1962 congressional elections. His bureau chief asked a senior colleague to size up how Mears worked under pressure and report back. "Mears writes faster than most people think," the evaluator wrote, then, tongue in cheek, "and sometimes faster than he thinks."

"Walter's impact at the AP, and in the journalism industry as a whole, is hard to overstate," said Julie Pace, AP executive editor and senior vice president. "He was a champion for a free and fair press, a dogged reporter, an elegant chronicler of history and an inspiration to countless journalists, including myself."

Kathleen Carroll, a former AP executive editor, said he taught generations of journalists "how to watch and listen and ask and explain."

"Walter was also a wonderful human being," she said. "He loved his family — being a grandfather was one of the great joys of his life. He loved golf and the Red Sox, in that order. He loved politics and he loved the AP."



FILE - In this 1976 file photo, Associated Press Special Correspondent Walter R. Mears, right, talks with presidential candidate Jimmy Carter in Concord, N.H., before the New Hampshire Primary. (AP Photo, File)



FILE - President Bill Clinton is interviewed by Associated Press reporters, White House correspondent Terry Hunt, second from right and AP special correspondent Walter Mears, aboard Air Force One en route to Brunei, on Nov. 14, 2000. (AP Photo/Rick Bowmer, File)

Mears didn't seem to mind being known as a pacesetter. "I came away with a slogan not of my making, but one that stuck for the rest of my career," he recalled in his 2003 memoir, "Deadlines Past." Over four decades, Mears covered 11 presidential campaigns, from Kennedy-Nixon in 1960 to Bush-Gore in 2000, as well as the political conventions, the campaigns, debates, the elections and, finally, the pomp and promise of the inaugurations.

In tribute, Jules Witcover, who covered politics for The Sun in Baltimore, said Mears combined speed and accuracy with an eye for the telling detail.

"His uncanny ability to cut to the heart of any story and relate it in spare, lively prose showed the way for a generation of wire service disciples, and he did so with a zest for the nomad's life on the campaign trail," Witcover said.

At other times in his career, Mears served AP as Washington bureau chief and as the wire service's primary news executive, the executive editor in the New York headquarters. But he missed writing and went back to it.

He left once, to be Washington bureau chief for The Detroit News, but returned to AP nine months later. "I couldn't take the pace," he said. "It was too slow."

In 1977 he was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for his work covering the election in which Democrat Jimmy Carter defeated a sitting president, Gerald R. Ford, who had inherited his office through the resignation in disgrace of Richard M. Nixon.



File - Walter R. Mears, chief political writer for The Associated Press in Washington, receives a congratulatory telephone call after he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of the 1976 Presidential primaries, campaign, and election, April 19, 1977. (AP Photo/Jeff Taylor, File)

It was the Pulitzer, not the Crouse catchphrase, for which Mears thought he would be remembered. Asked to address a later crop of Pulitzer winners, he told them they would never have to wonder what would be the first words of their obituaries: They would be, he said, “Pulitzer-prize winning.”

Winning his Pulitzer, Mears said, was “the sweetest moment in a career that is like no other line of work.”

In his lead paragraphs, Mears captured the essence of events, not just the words but the music.

—When the 1968 Democrats, in a convention held in the midst of antiwar rioting on the streets of Chicago, finally chose their nominee, he wrote: “Hubert H. Humphrey, apostle of the politics of joy, won the Democratic presidential nomination tonight under armed guard.”

—When, earlier that year, a gunman slew John Kennedy’s brother: “Robert F. Kennedy died of gunshot wounds early today, prey like his president brother to the savagery of an assassin.”

—And, in 1976, when former peanut farmer Carter took the presidency from its accidental occupant: “In the end, the improbable Democrat beat the unelected Republican.”



FILE - Associated Press Pulitzer Prize-winning political journalist Walter R. Mears discusses voting results for a television feed, Tuesday evening Nov. 2, 2004, in New York. (AP Photo/Diane Bondareff, File)

Said Terry Hunt, former AP White House correspondent and deputy bureau chief in Washington: “You can’t talk about Walter without using the word legendary. He was a

brilliant writer, astonishingly fast, colorful and compelling.”

Agreed David Espo, former special correspondent and assistant Washington bureau chief, “No one ever wrote faster or with more clarity, nor worked harder and made it look easier than Walter did.” And: “He took care to mentor those less talented than he, in other words, all of us.”

Mears was born in Lynn, Massachusetts, and grew up in Lexington, the son of an executive of a chemical company. He graduated, Phi Beta Kappa, from Middlebury College in Vermont in 1956 and within a week joined the AP in Boston.

In those days, news was written on typewriters and transmitted on teletypes. “They were slow and they clattered,” Mears once wrote, “but the din was music to me.”

His first assignment was far from the din. He single-handedly covered the Vermont Legislature. “It was fun covering a citizen legislature with a representative from every hamlet in the state” — 276 of them, he recalled years later, including one elected by his townspeople to keep the fellow from being eligible for welfare.

Mears covered John F. Kennedy in 1960 whenever Kennedy campaigned in New England and covered Barry Goldwater’s hapless race against Lyndon Johnson four years later. He was back at it every presidential year, even after he retired in 2001.

On election night, 2008, he wrote an analysis of Barack Obama’s victory, and the challenge before him.

“Obama is the future,” he wrote, “and it begins now, in troubled times, for a president-elect with a costly agenda of promises that would be difficult to deliver in far better economic circumstances.”

No cheerleading from Mears there. He didn’t believe in reporters expressing political opinions and he kept his own to himself. Although he got to know the candidates he covered, sometimes shared after-hour drinks and played golf with them, he always addressed them by their titles.

He considered a distance between newsperson and newsmaker to be appropriate. He once explained: “I can’t really say I ever felt close to any of them, maybe because I always felt that there’s a line there, there’s sort of a reserve that I think needs to be maintained because you’re not covering a friend. You’re covering somebody who’s trying to convince the American people to give him the most important job they’ve got at their command.”



Walter and Fran Mears were featured in 2017 in Chapel Hill Magazine in a story headlined [“Why We Retired in Chapel Hill.”](#) Fran died of cancer in 2019 and Walter died of the same disease two years later. Photo by Dick Knapp, Chapel Hill Magazine

After retiring, Mears taught journalism for a time at the University of North Carolina and made his home there, in Chapel Hill.

His wife, Frances, died in January 2019. His first wife and their two children were killed in a house fire in 1962. Mears directed that a portion of his ashes be distributed with Frances’ remains and the rest in Massachusetts with those of his first wife and two children lost in the fire.

Mike Feinsilber is a longtime UPI and AP writer and editor who served as assistant chief of the Washington AP bureau for news before his retirement as writing coach in 2011. Paul Stevens, a retired AP bureau chief and regional vice president who publishes a daily AP retiree newsletter, contributed to this story.

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Today in History - March 5, 2022



By The Associated Press

Today is Saturday, March 5, the 64th day of 2022. There are 301 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On March 5, 1770, the Boston Massacre took place as British soldiers who'd been taunted by a crowd of colonists opened fire, killing five people.

On this date:

In 1849, Zachary Taylor was inaugurated as the 12th president of the United States. (The swearing-in was delayed by a day because March 4 fell on a Sunday.)

In 1868, the impeachment trial of President Andrew Johnson began in the U.S. Senate, with Chief Justice Salmon P. Chase presiding. Johnson, the first U.S. president to be impeached, was accused of "high crimes and misdemeanors" stemming from his attempt to fire Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton; the trial ended on May 26 with Johnson's acquittal.

In 1933, in German parliamentary elections, the Nazi Party won 44 percent of the vote; the Nazis joined with a conservative nationalist party to gain a slender majority in the Reichstag.

In 1946, Winston Churchill delivered his "Iron Curtain" speech at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, in which he said: "From Stettin in the Baltic, to Trieste in the Adriatic, an 'iron curtain' has descended across the continent, allowing police governments to rule Eastern Europe."

In 1963, country music performers Patsy Cline, Cowboy Copas and Hawkshaw Hawkins died in the crash of their plane, a Piper Comanche, near Camden, Tennessee, along with pilot Randy Hughes (Cline's manager).

In 1970, the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons went into effect after 43 nations ratified it.

In 1979, NASA's Voyager 1 space probe flew past Jupiter, sending back photographs of the planet and its moons.

In 1982, comedian John Belushi was found dead of a drug overdose in a rented bungalow in Hollywood; he was 33.

In 1998, NASA scientists said enough water was frozen in the loose soil of the moon to support a lunar base and perhaps, one day, a human colony.

In 2004, Martha Stewart was convicted in New York of obstructing justice and lying to the government about why she'd unloaded her Imclone stock just before the price plummeted; her ex-stockbroker, Peter Bacanovic, also was found guilty in the stock scandal. (Each later received a five-month prison sentence.)

In 2020, Palestinian officials closed the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem over fears of the coronavirus. Officials ordered a cruise ship with 3,500 people aboard to stay back from the California coast until passengers and crew could be tested; a traveler from its previous voyage died of the coronavirus.

Ten years ago: President Barack Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (neh-ten-YAH'-hoo) met at the White House, where Obama urged pressure and diplomacy to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear bomb while Netanyahu emphasized his nation's right to a pre-emptive attack.

Five years ago: Throngs of people converged in the city of Selma, Alabama, for the annual re-enactment of a key event in the civil rights movement: the 1965 march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge by demonstrators seeking voting rights.

One year ago: New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo's health department confirmed that members of his COVID-19 task force altered a state Health Department report to omit the full number of nursing home patients killed by the coronavirus, but insisted the changes were made because of concerns about the data's accuracy. California relaxed guidelines for reopening outdoor venues, clearing the way for fans to attend opening-day baseball games and return to Disneyland nearly a year after coronavirus restrictions shut down major entertainment spots. Movie theaters in New York City reopened, operating at only 25% capacity. Pope Francis began the first-ever papal visit to Iraq with an appeal for Iraqis to protect the country's diversity, and for the country's embattled and dwindling Christian community to persevere.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Paul Sand is 90. Actor James B. Sikking is 88. Actor Fred Williamson is 84. Actor Samantha Eggar is 83. Actor Michael Warren is 76. Actor Eddie Hodges is 75. Singer Eddy Grant is 74. Rock musician Alan Clark (Dire Straits) is 70. Actor-comedian Marsha Warfield is 68. Magician Penn Jillette is 67. Actor Adriana Barraza is 66. Actor Talia Balsam is 63. Rock singers Charlie and Craig Reid (The Proclaimers) are 60. Pro Football Hall of Famer Michael Irvin is 56. Actor Paul Blackthorne is 53. Rock musician John Frusciante (froo-SHAN'-tee) is 52. Singer Rome is 52. Actor Kevin Connolly is 48. Actor Eva Mendes is 48. Actor Jill Ritchie is 48. Actor Jolene Blalock is 47. Model Niki Taylor is 47. Actor Kimberly McCullough is 44. Actor Karolina Wydra is 41. Singer-songwriter Amanda Shires is 40. Actor Dominique McElligott is 36. Actor Sterling Knight is 33. Actor Jake Lloyd is 33. Actor Micah Fowler is 24.

Got a story or photos to share?

Connecting is a daily newsletter published Monday through Friday that focuses on retired and former Associated Press employees, present-day employees, and news industry and journalism school colleagues. It began in 2013 and past issues can be found by clicking Connecting Archive in the masthead. Its author, Paul Stevens, retired from the AP in 2009 after a 36-year career as a newsman in Albany and St. Louis, correspondent in Wichita, chief of bureau in Albuquerque, Indianapolis and Kansas City, and Midwest vice president based in Kansas City.



Got a story to share? A favorite memory of your AP days? Don't keep them to yourself. Share with your colleagues by sending to Ye Olde Connecting Editor. And don't forget to include photos!

Here are some suggestions:

- **Connecting "selfies"** - a word and photo self-profile of you and your career, and what you are doing today. Both for new members and those who have been with us a while.
- **Second chapters** - You finished a great career. Now tell us about your second (and third and fourth?) chapters of life.
- **Spousal support** - How your spouse helped in supporting your work during your AP career.
- **My most unusual story** - tell us about an unusual, off the wall story that you covered.
- **"A silly mistake that you make"** - a chance to 'fess up with a memorable mistake in your journalistic career.
- **Multigenerational AP families** - profiles of families whose service spanned two or more generations.
- **Volunteering** - benefit your colleagues by sharing volunteer stories - with ideas on such work they can do themselves.
- **First job** - How did you get your first job in journalism?
- **Most unusual place a story assignment took you.**

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Editor, Connecting newsletter

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