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A newspaper crumbles and dies *Oakland Tribune was the last of a bygone era*

By Jim Gogek

Newspapers take on personalities like old baseball parks. That's why the announcement last week that the Oakland Tribune will be shut down and sold to a suburban newspaper chain made me sad. I worked there once for 10 months; seemed liked 10 years. The newspaper had been in financial death throes for a decade, and that caused extreme stress for everyone who worked there. Despite that, the Oakland Tribune had a compelling spirit.

After numerous jousts with mortality, this is finally the end of the line for the Oakland Tribune. Publisher Bob Maynard said the newspaper will live on for its readers, but it will be in name only. Basically, the masthead and subscriber list were all that were sold. The ancient presses, the staff and the funky of Tribune Tower were not. But it was the Tribune employees – loyal, competent and completely jaded from years of economic struggles – and the Trib Tower that were the heart and soul of the newspaper.

In the old days, a newspaper's building used to embody the newspaper itself. The Trib Tower was such a building. A brick clock tower with a green peak and "TRIBUNE" written in neon letters on all four sides, it is the most distinctive monument of Oakland's skyline. Once a citadel of Republican power under king-maker Joe Knowland, whose son William became a California senator, the Tribune became the first African-American-owned big-city daily when Maynard took it over in 1983. But the Tribune had been in decline since the late 1960s, ever since the Knowlands made the inexplicable decision to pull back from the suburbs of the East Bay, which were growing and becoming increasingly affluent. That gave rise to the suburban newspapers which last week bought the Tribune name.

I was working at a sedate suburban newspaper six years ago when I first interviewed at the Oakland Tribune. I was hungry for big-city journalism, and the burly-burly streets of downtown Oakland looked inviting. When I first saw the Oakland Tribune newsroom, I had a romantic vision of newspapers straight out of "his Girl Friday" with Cary Grant – hard-charging, cut-throat, gritty. I thought, "This is for me."

Most modern newsrooms look like insurance offices. Not the Oakland Tribune. Stacks of yellowing newspapers filled every corner. Copy boys slammed the drawers of banged-up metal desks. Reporters with cigarettes dangling from their lips barked into old black telephones.

Nervous editors on deadline yelled across the room at each other. Inch-thick dusk caked air vents in the ceiling. Chipped, dirty white tile covered the floor. Teletype machines clacked in the background and somebody was pecking away at a manual typewriter. Trucks honking and drunks yelling on the streets below filtered up through windows that actually opened.

I was in awe. I didn't know such places still existed.

It didn't take me long working at the Tribune to figure out that the newsroom's gritty ambiance I had found so alluring was actually due to the fact that it hadn't been cleaned in a decade. And the paper's financial problems were very real.

Two months after I started working there, a 20 percent staff cut was announced. When the layoff list came out, my name was No. 1. I didn't get laid off, though, because so many people accepted a company buy-out plan that the newspaper was hiring again in a few months.

I quickly realized that I had made a mistake and got out of there. But memories stay with me.

One of my favorite things about the Oakland Tribune was its library. Newspaper libraries used to be called morgues. The Oakland Tribune's truly was a place filled with ghosts.

At today's newspaper libraries, most work is done by computer because articles from years past are all in databank. Not at the Oakland Tribune library. It was a cavernous room with a 20-foot ceiling where more than a hundred years of newspaper clippings were kept. Row after row of alphabetized filing cabinets held tens of thousands of little envelopes stuffed with clippings – names, dates places, sensational crimes, political intrigue, presidential elections back to Rutherford B. Hayes, obituaries of forgotten thousands, a century of sob stories about the mean twists of life. Great events and minutiae of Oakland and the world were all there in black and white.

To Oakland Tribune reporters, the library was a nightmare. Grumbling reporters dug through the file drawers, cursing the place because the clips there were looking for were usually missing, left on somebody's desk or buried in a return pile in the librarian's in-basket. There were only one or two librarians, who sat cutting up the day's edition, overwhelmed by an avalanche of musty newspaper.

Covering one whole wall were shelves containing bound editions of every Oakland Tribune printed since the paper opened in 1974. No one every looked at these because there were of no use except as historical curiosities. One day I got down a bound volume from the 1890s.

As I opened it up and tried to turn the pages, the ancient newsprint crumbled in my hands.

The library was like the rest of the newspaper, a place out of time. When the sale of the Oakland Tribune is completed in about a month, a bygone era of newspapers will remain only in old black-and-white movies.