



DENNIS BRITTON SPECIAL TO THE DESERT SUN

Roy J. Harris Jr.

Author strikes gold with Pulitzer book

BY DENNIS A. BRITTON

Special to The Desert Sun

Roy J. Harris Jr. had special motivation to write "Pulitzer's Gold: Behind the Prize for Public Service Journalism."

His father was on teams that won four of the coveted awards while a journeyman reporter for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

Since there only have been 96 of journalism's most coveted awards given since 1918, to be associated with four remains a signal honor for the senior Harris, who was a journalist for 42 years.

It was while preparing a presentation to honor his father on what would have been his 100th birthday in 2002 that Harris said he realized the winning stories had never really been told as riveting snapshots of U.S. history.

Harris, a seasoned journalist with tours at the Wall St. Journal and CFO magazine, launched a nearly five-year research journey that led to the 2007 publication.

In doing his research, Harris writes that "the deeper I dug, the more I was moved by these often overlooked stories that demonstrated how basic journalism practices, and even reporting and newsroom management techniques, remained the same over the years — despite technological evolution and ever deepening newsroom economic pressures."

About Roy J. Harris Jr.

Author: "Pulitzer's Gold: Behind the Prize for Public Service Journalism."

Available Amazon.com for \$24.95

Career: Reporter and editor for the Wall St. Journal, 1971-1994; senior editor, CFO magazine, 1994-2007; currently a freelance writer

Education: Bachelor of science in journalism from Northwestern University

Home: Hingham, Mass.

Family: Wife Eileen Carol McIntyre, sons David McKenna Harris and R.J. Harris III, and stepson Jesse D. Layman.

Next book project: Do third update on "Pulitzer's Gold."

Last book read: "Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln" by Doris Kearns Goodwin

Favorite author: Michael Connelly, former Los Angeles Times reporter and Edgar Award-winning mystery writer

Next Coachella Valley appearance: 2 p.m. Oct. 6 Rancho Mirage Public Library

The prizes were established in the 1904 will of Joseph Pulitzer, a New York and Missouri publisher known as "a passionate crusader against dishonest government," according to a history of the awards by Seymour Topping. The first Pulitzers were awarded in 1917 and the first gold medal issued the next year.

Since its inception, the number of awards each year has grown to 21 in the fields of journalism, literature, music and drama. The Joseph Pulitzer Gold Medal is awarded to a newspaper rather than individuals.

"I approached this project as a journalist historian," said Harris in an interview at the Rancho Mirage Public Library. "I wanted this to be a useful book for journalism students, but I also wanted it to be a compelling read for history buffs."

The stories range from The New York Times coverage of World War I and the Washington Post on Watergate to The Los Angeles Times expose of the deadly medical and racial problems at King/Drew Medical Center. It also includes the muckraking efforts of tiny papers like the Point Reyes Light.

"It struck me that this one prize was really a gift to America," said Harris. "I wanted this to be a U.S. history told through the front pages of the newspapers."

He started the book while working as senior editor of CFO in Boston but did the bulk of the writing after taking a seven-month leave from the magazine.

"I did the same thing as I used to do at the Wall St. Journal to try to make the stories come alive, to make them human and capture that aha moment," he said. "I wanted to find that point when a reporter took an everyday, humdrum story and turned it into a story of a lifetime."

Harris said he interviewed reporters and editors across the country who had been involved in the award-winning stories, including a 1936 winner. He also read all the entries on microfilm in the archives at Columbia University.

"I was able to find the dynamic of how news is made, how long-form, investigative, public-service journalism has been done," he said.

One of his models sprang from the book "All the President's Men" by Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward on how they uncovered the Watergate scandal. Harris said that other than this work, "there were very few instances of behind-the-scenes looks at all these wonderful stories, of what was happening in the newsrooms."

Harris said his idea in the book was "to do mini-'All the President's Men' treatment" ... to pick what not only were good stories but also typified what was going on at the time they were written. When you look at these winning stories, they really tell American history pretty well."