

DEAL HISTORY  
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### Legendary Newsman Albro Gregory:

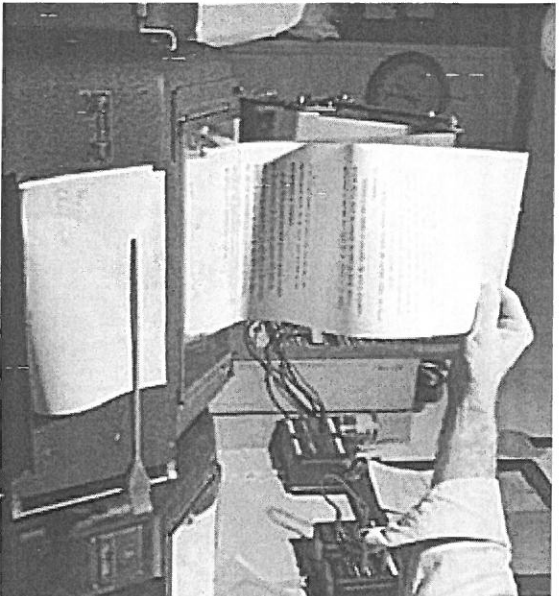
A life lived to the fullest

By June Allen

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When he died in January of 1987 at age 76, Albro Gregory, the retired publisher of the *Nome Nugget*, was described by various newspaper stories around the state as "one of the most colorful characters in Alaska journalism." In time the description subtly shifted from "colorful" to "legendary." Albro would have loved that! It wasn't that he was deliberately working toward legendhood. He simply was having one roaring good time just living out a lifetime fantasy of becoming an Alaska sourdough, even if it was his own version! He had the bushy beard, the dogged determination of a sourdough, the taste for liquor, plus the personality and profession to create that niche for himself.

He also had the rare skills, experience, and expertise of the "born reporter" that allowed him to switch into a professional work mode when called for. In addition, Albro Gregory was also a



### **Old AP wire copy machine**

Sept. 1942: Copy boy about to tear off dispatch coming over Associated Press. Wire room of the New York Times newspaper....  
Farm Security Administration - Office of War Information Photograph Collection  
*Photo Courtesy Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division Washington, DC*

The Ketchikan Daily News has one of these old AP wire copy machines on display in their front window - perhaps the very machine that was once used by Albro Gregory.

gentleman of the old school; in fact, he was surprised and shocked by the attitudes and activities of generations younger than his own. Albro drank, he smoked, he used four-letter words, but he toed the line when it came to morality and ethics.

His friend Stanton Patty, a veteran newsman with the *Seattle Times*, recalls a time in November 1974 when the *Times* received an AP bulletin that Nome was being battered and flooded by the worst storm in the town's history. The city editor shouted at Patty to phone someone in Nome and get the story! Albro answered the phone on the Nome end. "You got me just in time," Albro joked, "I haven't even had a drink yet." Patty says he knew that Albro had been a respected wire-service reporter in Washington D.C., New York and Chicago before moving to Alaska. On that stormy day in Nome, Patty recalls, "Albro Gregory dictated crisp, detailed notes to me as if he were still working for United Press." He

still had it.

"Here we go," Albro said. "The wind went up to 69 knots, blowing from the south-southwest. I went down the street toward City Hall. I could hear the roar of the sea. I hesitated. A wall of water came through the alley - my God - all the debris with it. Logs were hitting the side of City Hall and rolling across the street. I waded through. That was just the start of the night." This was Gregory at his best. He never lost his touch.

He was described at the time of his death as having worked at most of the state's newspapers. Back in the mid-1960s, Ketchikan and the *Ketchikan Daily News* were home to veteran reporter and editor Albro Gregory. He had come to Ketchikan from Fairbanks, where he had worked both for *Jessen's Weekly* and the Fairbanks *Daily News-Miner*. He and his public health nurse wife Adelaide lived in the Mary Frances apartments. Greg said he met her in Seward, so maybe he worked for paper there too? It was just a half-block walk to the newspaper office where Albro, often hungover and shaky, started his day at 5 a.m. He was never late and he never missed a day's work. He'd immediately shift into workmanlike mode, his last drink of the previous evening and the afternoon drink-to-come forgotten during the busy day and until the paper went to bed - that moment when the old flatbed press started its rhythmic groaning and grinding. The Ketchikan paper was an afternoon paper at the time, ready for paperboys just about the time school let out.

And it was at that time that Albro started his second shift of the day - visiting various bars where he had his anticipated first drink and collected news tips for the following day. Bar-to-bar, talking with bartenders, with parked cabdrivers waiting for the next trip, with waitresses and barflies - that's where Albro found his tips and leads for stories for the next day or next week. (It's still a good way to find out what's going on in town.) When Adelaide got off work at the health center she'd calmly walk downtown, greeting friends along the way, and find Albro in one of the bars. She'd have a drink with him and by then he was usually ready to be led home. Adelaide was a fantastic cook, and it may have been Albro's well balanced diet that offset his heavy drinking habits for so many years. After dinner it was

nighty-night for Albro.

In those days, drinking - heavy or light - was more or less "your own business" as long as you worked up to par at your job. There was no particular onus attached to it unless it ended in a DWI or some other criminal act, in which case the story went into the paper regardless of who the offender was! So Albro may have left each of the newspapers he worked at for reasons other than drinking. It may have been simple wanderlust. When he left Ketchikan, however, it may have been for another reason, possibly his politics!

Albro Gregory was a tried and true Democrat back in those days when most newspaper owners were *not*. Many if not most Alaskans back then, however, were Democrats. Those were the days of the popular, almost revered Governor Bill Egan, the party's standard bearer in the brand new State of Alaska. In Ketchikan at least, politics was the one area in which Albro Gregory did not necessarily play fair! Giving him a possible "out," the only other explanation would be that the Republicans were too boring to make the news. Because the Democrats surely did get coverage!

Those were also the days of Ketchikan Mayor Jim Pinkerton. Pinkerton was a character himself, a man who described his youth as a poor, cotton chopping boy in Alabama. He knew every one of those delightful southern aphorisms that can explain any and every situation. In his slightly exaggerated southern drawl they generally started out with something like, "Fixing that hole in the planks on Dunton Street would be like telling the old man settin' on a cracker barrel to..." Albro not only quoted the mayor a lot, he also made sure to include his picture on the front page, quite often.

Those were, politically, deeply divided days in Ketchikan, when no Democrat wanted to be the first of his kind to join the Ketchikan Chamber of Commerce, and the days of the heavy activity of the John Birch Society. Grant Strom, the Republican manager of the very popular Heckman's store on the corner of Main and Dock, made a bet with the Mayor Pinkerton about the outcome of a hotly contested election. And it was Strom who lost and ended up pushing a peanut down Main Street with his nose - a penance of

course appearing in an Albro Gregory photo on page one of the *Daily News*.

Albro eventually left the Ketchikan paper to try other pastures. He'd edited the Petersburg paper. He was editor of the *Juneau Empire* during Republican Wally Hicckel's first term as governor. Albro didn't like the governor or the governor's party and deliberately misspelled his name as "Gov. Hinkle" in the state capital's newspaper editorials. It may have been from there that he ended up in Nome, his final newspaper "assignment."

At Nome, he somehow managed to buy the *Nome Nugget*. The building housing the newspaper office was a small frame structure that listed sharply to the side. A pencil dropped on the linoleum would roll into the corner. Permafrost had shifted the foundation. The linotype machine had to be chained to the floor to keep it from sliding across the back shop. The *Nugget* came out three days a week, and the masthead said it "published daily except for." those four other days.

On the paper's masthead was the italicized sort-of Latin phrase "Illegitimus Non Carborundum," or, "Don't let the bastards grind you down." Albro immediately picked a fight with Nome's mayor to spark the paper's circulation. He didn't worry a lot about losing advertisers because of his often bombastic editorials. He was having the time of his life!

He'd picked up the early-century stories of every Alaska town he'd worked and lived in, and there were a lot of them. On off days at Nome he'd climb into his pickup with his fishing rod and a pint and drive down to the mining ghost town of Council. He took friends to an old house there, with peeling muslin wall covering and the stove corner of the kitchen collapsed into the ground from melted permafrost. He'd stop at the little abandoned schoolhouse and look at the large nails driven into the wainscoting, the coat room, where the children's names were still scrawled in childish handwriting, in pencil. Then he'd drive on to road's end at remote Ophir. There he fished for Dolly Varden and enjoyed where he was, when he was and how he was. It's a rare talent. He was happy in Nome.

His wife Adelaide died after a lingering illness and was buried in Nome's

cemetery. Each day he'd drive by, honk and holler, "Hi, babe!" His sorrow eventually lessened and he was back to his old ways, raising hell if he possibly could. Then he met Jane. She was the Social Security lady who visited Nome on a regular schedule. They struck up a friendship and then a romance.

In 1980 Albro decided to retire to Fairbanks with his new wife, Jane. His retirement party in that little town on Norton Sound will not soon be forgotten!

In Fairbanks, Albro Gregory planned to write his memoirs. He and Jane lived in a log cabin on Farmers Loop Road. Albro was in his comfort zone. His little black dog named Pica accompanied him wherever he went. On haircut days he was trimmed in the barbershop in the Northward Building, the "ice palace" that Edna Ferber wrote about. He then retired to the Northward Bar to recount tales of his adventures in Alaska. He was a popular man. People didn't stop him and have him pose for "old sourdough" snapshots like they did in Nome, but they knew who he was, and they enjoyed his company.

He said he planned to write his memoirs. But Albro was too private a man to do that. Even those who knew him best know little or nothing about his early days. Albro had too many stories in the present to tell. On a dark January day in 1987, Albro Gregory died. The old sourdough's heart gave out.

And as his friend Stanton Patty said, "The fun was over."



[june@sitnews.org](mailto:june@sitnews.org)