

SEEING IDEAS HAPPEN

THOMAS J. LASSITER, JR.

1911 – 2000

The John Tyler Caldwell Award in the Humanities
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*...and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice,
to love kindness and walk humbly with your God.*

Micah 6:8

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NORTH CAROLINA
HUMANITIES COUNCIL

2000

*We need only to face reality, to be honest and to be courageously
fair in all human relations.*

Thomas J. Lassiter, Jr., 1966

Besides [Tom's] consistently thoughtful and courageous editorials, his...initiating and supporting the Johnston County Forum rank among my greatest pleasures in life in Johnston County. The same can be said by many other people who attended regularly and eagerly. Those sessions were uplifting and exciting, a breath of university life brought to the community.

Frances Woodard

"IT'S REALLY EXCITING WHEN YOU SEE SOMETHING LIKE THAT," Elizabeth Lassiter says, "seeing ideas happen." In every way, Thomas Lassiter contributed excitement to the town of Smithfield by making ideas happen. Teacher, writer, citizen and artist, Tom was "the centerpiece in the liberal intellectual life of the town," as his good friend McLeod Bryan wrote in nominating Tom to the North Carolina Committee for Continuing Education in the Humanities, now the North Carolina Humanities Council.

What might it mean to be "the centerpiece in the liberal intellectual life" of a small Southern town? Perhaps the most significant characteristic was that Tom Lassiter's mind, heart and spirit were large and generous. Tom saw and understood the world in the broadest context possible. With remarkable ease, he was able to see past culturally defined categories that limited who people were and could be; he saw them too as being – or having the potential to be – large and generous. People were not fixed and under the right circumstances, their hearts and

minds could change. Furthermore, Tom took people in as being whole humans; people were not just the sum of an intellectual position with which he agreed or disagreed.

Tom brought this largeness of mind and spirit to all of his work at *The Smithfield Herald*. He used that paper as teaching materials in the classroom of Johnston County. His articles and editorials were meant to inspire local citizens to think and reflect beyond their personal boundaries. Lassiter's idea of teaching was to lead people to discuss together some topic without imposing his own views or assuming that as a teacher, he was presenting the truth to a passive listener. Wingate Lassiter believes his father always was teaching, always was pressing people to see a larger perspective that connected them to each other and to history. Tom wrote, "Through the years, our newspaper has sought... to encourage the people of Johnston County to enlarge their knowledge of local, regional and cultural history – not for the purpose of living in the past but rather for the purpose of understanding what is happening in today's swiftly changing world."

Anchoring Tom Lassiter's mind, heart and spirit were his family, his deep belief in Christian principles and democratic processes and his wide-ranging appreciation of world history. Tom's parents had a profound shaping influence on him. This was true of his father, who died when Tom was only nine. In particular, his parents conveyed their love of learning and education and their belief in the importance of public responsibility.

They raised Tom to assume he had an obligation to serve the public good.

Both Thomas J. Lassiter, Sr. and Rena Bingham Lassiter served as editors of *The Smithfield Herald* before their son. Moreover, Mr. Lassiter served as president of the North Carolina Press Association and was regarded highly as a journalist. After his father's death in 1920, his mother ran the paper until 1933, when Tom returned to Smithfield to work with her. By the end of World War II, Tom had taken over primary responsibility for the paper. Rena Bingham Lassiter continued working with the paper until her death in 1960. Tom's older brother William Lassiter also appreciated the importance of learning and public service: an expert on newspaper law, William was the general counsel of the Press Association and over the years represented many of North Carolina's newspapers.

Equally significant was that Tom Lassiter was firmly within the tradition of being a Southern gentleman. Family and friends all point toward his civility as one reason he was able to advocate ideas that often were not accepted by his readers, let alone many Southerners. His friend and colleague, Dean Richard Cole of the UNC School of Journalism, observed, "Tom was one of the most courageous yet gentlemanly individuals I had ever met." Both qualities – courage and civility – served Lassiter well.

Tom believed that to be religious meant an appreciation of "a wholesome relation of religious faith to social life" that

emphasized doing good acts in daily life. Lib Lassiter says he was distinguished less by doctrinaire piety than by a practical application of decency. “He was more ecumenical,” Lib says, “than just being a Baptist.” That fact didn’t prevent him from being very active in Smithfield’s First Baptist Church, where he served as Superintendent of Sunday School and led a discussion class of adults in what was more like an ongoing seminar.

Being religious for Tom also demanded the courage to grasp someone else’s point of view opposite to one’s own and still respect that person’s essential dignity and humanity. He wrote in 1945 as World War II was ending:

...if peace is to remain secure we cannot neglect practice of the Golden Rule and the unselfish spirit in our relations with and our attitudes toward each other, both as individuals and as nations. That means we as individuals must fight to conquer our prejudices against races, against classes, against changes. It means constant practice of the rule of putting yourself in the other man’s shoes and seeking to find out his viewpoint on questions that arise. It means the exercise of tolerance toward religious, political and economic beliefs different from our own. It means using our influence to eliminate the injustices that we find in our home communities, the state and nation, and in the world.

Tom nurtured the possibility of democracy as it might become in America. Democracy was both a process and the form of social organization wrought through that process. First, democracy demanded inclusion of all peoples, Tom wrote, “especially...[those] who used to be excluded from the community

mainstream, in the decision-making processes that affect their daily lives.” Second, democracy involved accepting the Constitution as the guiding document and law of the land. Yet, he understood that as a firm guidepost for human relations, the Constitution also, paradoxically, must be flexible and open to the interpretation of people within the context of their time, place and circumstance. This was why, Tom believed, the United States had been so stable for so long.

History and world affairs were among Tom’s great passions, and he used every opportunity to bring this broad knowledge to bear on his columns and editorials. He constantly read what he called “the scholarly journals” – *The Nation*, *The New Republic* and *The Christian Century*. He also enjoyed discussing important current issues and did so vigorously, unafraid to tackle any subject matter, even communism at a time America was frightened by even the mention of the word. From the mid 1930s to the early 1940s, Lassiter was part of “the group,” six to ten men who met every week to discuss some article or book.

The circumstances for learning, Tom Lassiter understood, would have a major impact on future citizens. He was fortunate to have attended Duke University from 1928-1932, an experience that had a tremendous influence on this young man from a small, rural town. It was, his son notes, “a huge eye opener for him.” As both a student and a member of an orchestra that traveled, Tom was given opportunities to see worlds different from

his, and seizing these experiences he shaped and reshaped his early perspectives about life at home and abroad.

Because his own knowledge was wide and deep, Lassiter insisted on the highest quality liberal arts education for future citizens of Johnston County. He believed strongly that schooling must include more than vocational training, that it must include an emphasis on science, math, English and history. Tom Lassiter's parents both had been teachers before they worked at *The Herald*. It was their passion for education that led them to work hard in behalf of Smithfield public schools; his mother was a school board member and helped found the local library.

Lassiter was concerned that North Carolina's education system was stifling the intellectual life of the citizens it was supposed to serve. A half-century ago, in 1954, Tom criticized education that put "too much stress on teaching how to make a living" and that placed "too much concern with teaching teachers how to teach." Lassiter bemoaned an educational system "so obsessed with standards and accreditation that...[it] has lost sight of the heart of education." And, as if out of today's newspapers, Tom wondered loudly in 1946 about the shortage of qualified teachers who were not receiving adequate pay.

Embracing the New Deal programs and ethos of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Lassiter remained a steadfast advocate of projects that utilized government to improve the daily lives of all peoples by creating opportunities for them to

take charge of their own destiny. It is why he worked so hard throughout his life for improved race relations, “sounder agriculture, solid growth of business and industry, improved employment conditions, better schools, greater opportunity for higher education, better library service, better housing, better health, stronger law enforcement, improved recreational facilities, and higher moral, religious and cultural standards.”

Not only was Tom Lassiter an intellectual light in the community, he was one of the town’s central cultural activists. An accomplished trombone player, Tom just as easily could have been a professional musician. He loved music including classical and jazz music. He played a significant role in organizing the NC Symphony Society in Smithfield to insure the state orchestra returned every year to play in the public schools. While at Duke, he played in the marching band as well as the Jelly Roll Morton jazz orchestra. For decades, Tom was part of a local community band that continued to play until 1991. Tom’s last high profile public appearance was at his granddaughter’s wedding at the Rainbow Suites in New York, when he played one of his favorites, “I’m Gettin’ Sentimental Over You.” He was just shy of turning 85.

Throughout his life, Tom brought the passion and fun with which he played music to bear on his more sober intellectual pursuits. He also kept his life balanced through his enjoyment of sports. Always an avid Duke football fan, he and Lib also

cheered the basketball team at Cameron Indoor Stadium for many years. Nancy L. Huggin, Tom's daughter, remembers her father's faithfulness during summers from the 1950s until the late 1990s when he listened to radio station KDKA to follow his beloved Pittsburgh Pirates. Many times, Nancy recalls, her father drove the family car on vacations specifically to attend Pirate games. Imagine the grin on Tom's face Friday mornings when he examined carefully the football prognostications of the *Herald's* "Stadium Sam." Not many, or maybe everybody, knew this noms de plume as the former editor's.

At the heart of his newspaper work was Tom Lassiter's beloved Smithfield and Johnston County. Wingate Lassiter wrote that his father "taught us much more than good writing. He taught us all about 'community journalism' – a caring neighborly, folksy, yet no-nonsense brand of newspapering that has more to do with mission than simply holding down a job... [he was] compelled to be personally involved with community endeavors that needed a helping hand." No doubt, that is why Tom used the phrase "community newspapering."

Lassiter was self-consciously aware of this imperative for a community newspaper. In a talk at Duke University, he noted: "The truly worthwhile newspaper is no mere creature of the community it seeks to serve. It is creative, helping to shape the character of the community. And the creative newspaper uses

news writing as well as editorial writing as it performs its creative function.”

For over forty years, with unparalleled clarity and eloquence, Tom Lassiter’s ideals and insights were inscribed in column after column, as he offered for discussion his ideas on everything from race relations to foreign affairs. These columns helped to shape the character of Johnston County over time, even when Tom’s ideas were well ahead of his and the county’s time.

Ashley Futrell, Sr., Tom’s friend and fellow newspaperman, observed that Lassiter “not only had a twinkle in his eye, but a twinkle in his typewriter.” As most readers know, by the 1940s Johnston County and the rest of the nation got to see that twinkle. Lassiter never shied away from controversial subjects, nor was he ever afraid to critique people, institutions and events in the strongest of terms. This included his hometown.

In 1963, for example, Lassiter brought front and center “the shameful truth” of Johnston County’s lack of decent housing and sanitation. “‘Underdeveloped,’” he wrote, “is a polite description of a country where ignorance, disease and poverty abound. The shameful truth is that we Johnstonians don’t have to go abroad to find an underdeveloped region.... We live in a county where one-third of the houses...have no sewage disposal facilities at all.... We live in a county where 47% of the houses do not have flush toilets. ‘Underdeveloped’ is a polite description of Johnston County.”

His words were equally sharp for issues that touched the regional and national levels, particularly race relations. Remarkably, Lassiter condemned racial discrimination in editorials as early as 1945, arguing that racial discrimination was “fundamentally wrong...contrary to the very heart of the teachings of Jesus Christ...contrary to the highest concept of democracy...specifically forbidden by the Constitution...” He chastised Southern “Dixiecrat” leaders who would abandon the Democratic party because of some moderation in its view of race relations. And throughout the period of 1956 through 1966, he attacked the “Pearsall Plan.” Developed by some of the state’s senior leaders, the plan was developed to enable North Carolinians to bypass the 1954 Supreme Court Decision of *Brown vs. Board of Education*.

No one in the foreign policy hierarchy escaped Lassiter’s pen. Once again well ahead of his time, Lassiter argued against intervention in Indochina as early as 1954 and remained a constant critic of the Vietnam War until its end. Rather than rooting out bad communism, Lassiter saw the violence as a movement of people for their own independence against colonialism and social misery: “The truth is we have been wrong in Vietnam,” he wrote in 1965.

Lassiter also was extraordinarily insightful about the analytical and moral mistakes of foreign policy makers who conceptualized Russia and China as only being evil monoliths seeking to

take over the world. What breeds communism, he would argue over and over again, was not some secret effort by Russia, but allowing men and women to work for indecent wages without security under horrid working conditions that diminished their human dignity.

Connecting all these columns was Tom Lassiter's conviction that people's minds and hearts could change. As the years passed, he began to understand more clearly than ever that such change must happen within an individual; it could not be forced nor would rewriting laws alone be sufficient. Better race relations would occur only when an individual could be moved to "wrestle with his conscience and emerge from the tussle with purer concepts of justice and righteousness in human relations."

Tom Lassiter was clear about what experiences moved people to this process of self-reflection and self-revision. People had to engage seriously in meeting others with whom they disagreed, in reading, discussing and in learning about and with others; these activities could stir the moral imagination required for long-term change in social relations. This is exactly what Tom Lassiter accomplished by the largest humanities project he organized, the Johnston County Forum.

Begun in 1973, the Forum was the culmination of one of Tom's lifetime dreams. It had its origins in the desire of citizens like Tom Lassiter to improve race relations. But it became much more because Tom Lassiter understood that race relations were

connected to a larger set of interlocking problems clustering around poverty: underemployment, dilapidated housing stock, inadequate health care delivery, an undeveloped education system, inadequate municipal infrastructure and other concerns.

One of the first members of the North Carolina Committee for Continuing Education in the Humanities, Tom encouraged the Johnston Technical Institute and the Public Library to apply for a grant. At the core of the programs proposed were a series of humanities-based questions designed not only to stimulate discussion about specific problems but also to foster community dialogue about the larger context of human values in shaping community life. An average of 350 people attended each session. In addition, sponsors offered workshops to targeted groups such as the Chamber of Commerce, farmers, women, and those interested in mental health issues, as well as inviting civic clubs and high school students to participate. In each library, special shelves carried books on all the subject matters.

The immediate affect of the Forum in 1973 and into 1974 was tremendous. Wingate Lassiter wrote in *The Herald*, “more important than the turn-out, was the impact the evenings discussion seemed to have on the minds of many persons who attended.” One participant, Ms. Frances Woodard, told us, “the Johnston County Forum rank[ed] among my greatest pleasures in life in Johnston County...[it was] uplifting and exciting, a breath of university life brought to the community.”

Lib Lassiter is right, “it really is exciting...seeing ideas happen.” Tom Lassiter had an extraordinary ability to transform abstract, intellectual visions into the concrete means that help us live life. He understood that the precious alchemy that allows this process to unfold was “the constant practice of putting yourself in the other man’s shoes and seeking to find out his viewpoint on questions that arise.” It didn’t mean that you made gold each time, but it was the right formula. Making ideas happen by pressing people to assess carefully and act boldly in their ways of relating to each other was, for Tom, the lifeblood of “community newspapering.” Even “Stadium Sam” knew that much.

The North Carolina Humanities Council thanks Elizabeth Lassiter, Nancy Lassiter Huggin and Wingate and Susan Lassiter for generously sharing their memories of and thoughts about Thomas J. Lassiter, Jr. Thanks also are due to the Lassiter family for sharing the copies of Tom's editorials which Nancy meticulously prepared, their scrapbook of the Johnston County Forum, their pictures and the booklet for Tom's memorial service on July 29, 2000. In addition to these resources, we benefitted from Walter Spearman, "Tom Lassiter as an Editor," *The Smithfield Herald*, May 25, 1982 and *Johnston County: 1746-1996*, by Thomas J. and Wingate Lassiter.

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