

Alvin Victor Burt Jr. (1927-2008)

Alvin Victor Burt Jr. (1927-2008), *Miami Herald* reporter and columnist, was born Sept. 11, 1927, in Oglethorpe County, Georgia but grew up at the family home in Jacksonville, Florida. In later life, he prided himself on being both a native Georgian and a native Floridian. He always described Florida as "home," however, and would immortalize its people and places in his column "Al Burt's Florida."

Burt studied journalism at the University of Florida, where he was a member of Sigma Chi fraternity, served as an editor for *The Alligator*, and worked part-time at the *Jacksonville Journal*. His first job after he graduated in 1949 was condensing United Press wire service news to be read on the radio. "This was probably the best training I ever had," he said in an oral history interview in 1999, "to take a 600- or 700-word story and boil it down to two sentences for the radio."

In 1950 Burt joined the *Atlanta Journal* as a sports writer, then went back to the *Jacksonville Journal* for four years and was hired onto the *Miami Herald* in 1955. This started him on his 37 year career with the *Herald* as sports writer, reporter, editor, feature writer, and columnist. Burt headed the *Herald's* Broward County news bureau, then became night city editor, and then went to Cuba in 1961 as a foreign correspondent. He won the Ernie Pyle Award that year for his reports on the revolution that brought Fidel Castro to power. In 1962, Burt became the *Herald's* editor on Latin America, an assignment that took him on travels throughout the Caribbean and South America. He covered Haiti in 1963 and was expelled when his stories angered dictator Francois Duvalier. Burt and co-author Bernard Diederich later published a book about Duvalier, *Papa Doc: The Truth About Haiti Today* (1969).

However the news assignment that changed Burt's life was his coverage of the American military occupation of the Dominican Republic in 1965. On May 6th, 1965, while out on a story, both Burt and *Herald* photographer Doug Kennedy were severely wounded in a friendly fire incident at a roadside check point set up by the U.S. Marines. "They gave us conflicting signals," he later recalled, "come forward, go back." Confused, their driver put the car in reverse to back up and the Marines opened fire with a machine gun. Kennedy, in the front seat, took hits to the head and belly. Burt was shot nine times, the bullets shattering his hip. They were treated in the field, then air-lifted to Fort Bragg, N.C. Kennedy came out of the shooting permanently crippled in one leg and with shattered health. For Burt, recovery took two surgeries and three months in hospital. He afterwards suffered from life-long problems with walking, blood circulation, and other medical complications.

Burt returned to the *Herald* after his recovery but in 1966 he relocated to Hartwell, Georgia, where he was part-owner of a weekly newspaper. The following year, on June 23, 1967, he married Gloria White [Burt]. A few months later, Burt rejoined the *Herald* and the couple moved to Miami. Burt covered events in the Bahamas, hit the presidential campaign trail with George Wallace in 1968, and worked as lead editorial writer on affairs in Latin America. In 1973 he accepted the *Herald's* offer to become a feature writer and columnist

covering Florida. It was the job that would give him his legacy, allowing him to pick and choose his own topics and to work as a roving reporter.

In order to make travel around the state easier, Burt and Gloria moved from Miami to rural small-town Melrose in north central Florida. From their house on the lake, Burt launched the best-known part of his career as a writer on all things to do with life in Florida, focusing on people both celebrated and unknown, on nature and wildlife, and on the many hamlets and communities of the state's back roads. He and Gloria traveled the state together. "It was very much of a partnership thing, and we shared it. The best years of my life are the ones I spent traveling Florida."

Burt wrote his features with a news reporter's attention to accuracy but with a satirist's wry wit, highlighting what was quaint and charming about Florida while decrying the rape of its natural beauty. The cover of his book *Becalmed in the Mullet Latitudes* (1983) summed up his view of Florida. It featured a map that divided the state into such regions as Floribama (the Panhandle), Florgia (Central and Northeastern Florida), the Colonized Coast (South Florida), and the Conch Republic (Key West). With his column "Around Florida" and his regular feature "Al Burt's Florida," he ranked among the *Herald's* most popular writers.

Burt's feature stories included profiles of such well-known people as Jackie Gleason, Marjory Stoneman Douglas, Archie Carr, Harry Crews, Bob Graham, Stetson Kennedy, and Willie Nelson, but most of his writing focused on people and places little known to the urban South Florida readership of the *Herald*. He described an older more rural Florida represented in the hundreds of small towns he and Gloria visited.

"I tried to explain some of the shock and disorientation that come with rapid changes," he said in one of his autobiographical talks, "and how old customs and traditions and natural beauty were being exchanged for new conveniences and new opportunities and greater diversity. Over the years with building melancholy I reached the horseback conclusion that Florida, a great state, was putting itself in jeopardy." An advocate of all things "cracker" Burt often drew comparisons between rural and metropolitan life in Florida, almost always in favor of what was rural.

By the 1990s complications from his 1965 injury were slowly decreasing his mobility, from walking with the aid of a cane, to use of crutches, and finally to use of a wheelchair. He retired from the *Herald* in 1995 to become a freelance writer. His own favorite work *Al Burt's Florida* appeared in 1997 followed by *Tropic of Cracker* (1999). Burt found himself in demand as a speaker, especially with libraries and conservation groups. He crisscrossed the state doing talks and book tours. His interest in the Caribbean remained with him, as well. Among the works he never finished was a biography of Lynden O. Pindling, first prime minister of the Bahamas. Other published works were *Florida: A Place in the Sun* (1974) with photos by Heinz Erhardt and contributions to *The Wild Heart of Florida* (1999) and *The Book of the Everglades* (2002).

Besides the Ernie Pyle Award (1961), Burt was the recipient of an Associated Press award (1964) for feature writing, a Scripps-Howard award (1966) for an interview with Fidel

Castro, an Overseas Press Club of New York award for foreign correspondence (1971), the Florida Society of Newspaper Editors award for best editorial (1973), and the J.C. Penney-Missouri Journalism Award for feature writing (1980).

In addition, the Florida Audubon Society named him outstanding journalist (1984), the 1000 Friends of Florida established an annual Al Burt Award for environmental journalism and named him the first recipient (1989), and the Alachua Conservation Trust named him a conservation steward (2006). He was inducted into The Independent Alligator Hall of Fame in 1999 and was also named distinguished alumnus to the College of Journalism, University of Florida. In 1998 the Florida Historical Society awarded him the Patrick Smith Literary Prize. In 2004 Leadership Florida honored him with the LeRoy Collins Lifetime Achievement Award. Burt also received numerous commendations for his advocacy to protect Florida's springs and rivers.

Al Burt died in Jacksonville on November 30, 2008, at the age of 81.

References: "A Legend Rests," by Michael Browning, *Miami Herald*, Sunday, January 21, 1996, 3B; Interview with Al Burt, by Dr. Jean Chance, Florida Newspaper Project, October 6, 1999, Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, University of Florida; "Herald reporter, columnist once shot by U.S. Marines," *Miami Herald*, Obituaries, Sunday, Nov. 11, 2008; Al Burt resumes, Box 1, Al Burt Papers; fragment, autobiographical talk, Box 1, Al Burt Papers; *Who's Who in America*, 65th edition, 2011.