

THE OLIVER SIPPLE STORY

The questions it raises for the press

By Deni Elliott and Marty Linsky

It is seven years since Sara Jane Moore was thwarted in her effort to assassinate then-President Gerald Ford in San Francisco. Moore is serving a life sentence at the Federal Correctional Institution in Lexington, Ky. Ford is playing golf and enjoying senior statesmanship. The man who knocked the pistol out of Moore's hand, Oliver Sipple, is living a reclusive life "in the San Francisco area," according to his attorney, and still feeling the effects of the publicity surrounding the event, particularly the interest of the media in whether or not he was a homosexual.

Lawyer John Wahl, who has represented Sipple since the incident, now says that "Sipple wants to be left alone."

Sipple's alleged homosexuality became the story behind the story seven years ago. But there is a story behind that one, the story of how and why the media pursued his sexual preference. We interviewed 24 who were involved, including 17 journalists. What we have pieced together is a tale of journalistic decisionmaking which raises serious questions about the process and standards by which the press weighs the conflict between the privacy of an individual and the public's right to know.

The story begins the night of Sept. 22, 1975, several hours after the assassination attempt, when Oliver Sipple returned to his apartment. Earlier detained by the Secret Service, he was still shaking from "the scariest thing that ever happened to me." Reporters were waiting for him. Reluctantly, he confirmed that he was an ex-Marine with a full disability pension from injuries suffered in Vietnam. But he declined to discuss his service record in detail, or anything in detail for that matter. Even then, Sipple just wanted to be left alone.

Daryl Lembke, a Los Angeles Times reporter, was among those waiting at Sipple's apartment. He recalls that he suspected that Sipple's disdain for publicity might be because he was gay. "A lot of things" made Lembke question Sipple's sexual preference: "Where he lived, how his apartment was decorated, that sort of thing." However, the L.A. Times coverage the next day did not mention Sipple's sexuality. "It wasn't relevant," explains Lembke.

On Sept. 23, most papers nationally and in the San Francisco area ran a sidebar on Sipple. The wire service stories identified Sipple as a reluctant hero, an ex-Marine on full disability pension because of mental problems associated with his stint in Vietnam; Sipple was presented

as a man who hated violence. Sexual preference wasn't mentioned.

Harvey Milk and Ray Broshears, activists in San Francisco's gay community, decided that the public should know more about Sipple. They called San Francisco Chronicle columnist Herb Caen. The next morning, this item appeared in Caen's column:

One of the heroes of the day, Oliver "Bill" Sipple, the ex-Marine who grabbed Sara Jane Moore's arm just as her gun was fired and thereby may have saved the president's life, was the center of midnight attention at the Red Lantern, a Golden Gate Ave. bar he favors. The Rev. Ray Broshears, head of Helping Hands, and Gay Politico Harvey Milk, who claim to be among Sipple's close friends, describe themselves as "proud—maybe this will help break the stereotype." Sipple is among the workers in Milk's campaign for supervisor.

Milk and Broshears also called the San Francisco Examiner. According to reporter Jim Wood:

The word came down that Sipple was pissed off that he hadn't been thanked by the president. Milk and Broshears said that they were representing Sipple and his belief that Ford didn't thank him because he was gay.

Milk and Broshears did not talk to Wood directly ("they talked to someone at the desk, I guess") and Wood was not able to locate Sipple, so he put together what information



Photo by Martha Stewart

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Oliver Sipple



San Francisco Examiner Photo

September 1975: Oliver Sipple (left) lunges for Sara Jane Moore (arrow).

he had for a front page story which ran Sept. 25. The story begins:

He saved Ford's life—period. President Ford is planning to thank Oliver Sipple personally for helping to save his life regardless of whether the husky ex-Marine has been active in San Francisco's gay community. Sipple, who declines to state his sexual preference but has been active in gay politics, deflected the aim of Sara Jane Moore as she fired at the president Monday afternoon . . .

What's going on here? First, Herb Caen occupies two very special journalistic arenas—columnist as well as gossip and entertainment reporter. As a columnist, his work is exempt from most of the standard rigors of the editing process, including the kinds of probing questions which, had this been a regular news item, would have revealed the thinness and lack of relevance of the information. Moreover, because it is "gossip," information which would not stand up to the usual test of reliability based on number of sources and the requirement of talking to the subject of the story, it's allowed to slip into print. Caen won't comment now, because a lawsuit on the matter is on appeal and Caen is a defendant, but he has never claimed that he talked to Sipple or was at the Red Lantern that night.

Wood justified his story on the grounds that he had been told that Milk and Broshears were speaking on behalf of Sipple, that there was the possible connection between the White House "delay" and Sipple's sexuality, and, moreover, that the story was "in the air."

While Wood was piecing together his story, Lembke of

the Los Angeles Times was looking for Sipple. Lembke, having seen the Caen column, wanted to follow up on the gay angle. He went to Sipple's apartment. Sipple wasn't there, but Lembke found another reporter waiting, Charles Lee Morris, from the San Francisco Sentinel, the "gay" paper. Morris was upset when the L.A. Times reporter walked in. "We hoped to have an exclusive," he says.

I was determined that the Times was not going to get anything that we didn't. I was determined that the Times would not get any time alone with Sipple.

Morris had not seen the Caen column.

I got a call early that morning from my editor. He was anxious that I get to Sipple "first." When I heard about the Caen piece, I understood.

Sipple arrived, and there was an interview. Morris says the press treated him quite sympathetically: "What Sipple said, he said on his own. Nobody forced him to talk."

"Sipple talked to us about working for Milk," says Lembke. "He just wouldn't say if he was gay."

Morris says he pressured Sipple to say that he was gay because of the

enormous national ramifications if the president's life had been saved by a gay person. . . . But Sipple was more concerned with how it was going to affect his mother and an elderly aunt, and how it was going to reflect on the Marine Corps.

Morris felt frustrated with Sipple's willingness to discuss his activities which strongly implied that he was gay and his

concurrent insistence that his sexuality not be reported.

Lembke, too, felt that Sipple was "leading him on." But Lembke thought of a "news hook" for the sexuality question—there had been no word from the White House.

It had been two days since Sipple's action and my interest was why the president was so tardy in offering thanks. I also wanted to show gays in a good light if I could, and I was encouraged in doing that by the item in Caen's column.

But Sipple, ambiguous about his sexual preference, said he wasn't concerned about not having heard from the White House and saw no connection between the two.

Here, the pressures of competition encouraged reporters to pursue a story that might otherwise have been dropped. Sipple's desire for privacy seems to have had no weight at all. And a reporter for one of this country's most important newspapers contrived an unconfirmed "news hook" (getting a thank you from the White House, particularly if done by mail, two days after the event would have been a new world's record for responsiveness); and adopted the missionary mode: "Oliver, I know you don't agree, but this will be good for you in the long run, believe me."

The morning of Sept. 25, Lembke's second story on Sipple appeared in the Los Angeles Times. "Hero in Ford Shooting Active Among S.F. Gays," read the front page headline. Only four paragraphs of the 19-paragraph story dealt directly with the White House's response and Sipple's reaction to that. Sipple reportedly said he "would love to have a call from the president," and then-White House Press Secretary Ron Nessen said, according to the story, that President Ford planned to thank all the people involved. Most of the story described Sipple's activities in the San Francisco gay community, speculation from gay candidate Harvey Milk on why Sipple hadn't been thanked and Sipple's refusal to discuss his sexuality.

The story reads as though the main purpose of the piece was to expose Sipple as gay, despite his unwillingness to say so. Lembke now says that his editor, rewriter and various other gatekeepers within the organization changed the emphasis of the story. He says the presentation of the material was largely out of his control.

Subsequently, Sipple held a press conference and made his perspective perfectly clear:

My sexual orientation has nothing at all to do with saving the president's life, just as the color of my eyes, or my race, has nothing to do with what happened. . . . The president doesn't know anything about this. This is just another gimmick somebody has thought up to make a big deal out of. The president is a very busy man.

Meanwhile, the Lembke story was picked up by a number of newspapers subscribing to the L.A. Times-Washington Post news service; among them was The Detroit News, in Sipple's hometown. Detroit is one of the last great competitive newspaper cities. On Sept. 24, Detroit area journalists discovered Sipple had grown up

and spent much of his adult life in Detroit. The morning of Sept. 25, Bill Michelmore, then a reporter for the Detroit Free Press, went to the home of Ethyl Sipple, the hero's mother. Seven years later, Michelmore remembers:

There were some questions being raised about Sipple's sexuality, but, as I remember it, there was some doubt at the time. . . . My editor told me to play the homosexuality angle by ear. . . . The mother didn't want to talk about Sipple's sexuality, so we didn't. . . . She felt personally upset that he hadn't yet been thanked. I had no hesitation in thinking that his sexuality had no relevance.

Jennie Buckner, then an assistant city editor at the Free Press, recalls,

I thought the sexuality wasn't a point in the story. The press, in writing about it, made Sipple's sexuality an issue, but in truth, it wasn't one. There was no reason to believe the president was snubbing him because of his sexual preference. . . . the presidential people didn't think so; my common sense tells me that that wasn't what was going on. . . . If we had any real indication that the White House was trying to steer clear of him, that would have been used.

The legitimacy of carrying information on Sipple's sexuality depended, according to Kurt Luedtke, then executive editor of the Detroit Free Press, on how politically prominent Sipple was in the gay community. If Sipple was not clearly a public figure prior to the attempt, then Luedtke doesn't believe the sexuality was relevant.

If the press is dealing strictly with a hero involved in preventing an assassination, I don't think the hero's sexuality is any of our business. When we go out to find out how old he is, where he came from, what he has to say, I don't think that that inquiry legitimately includes, "And what is your sexual preference?"

The Free Press had run only the wire service sidebar on Sipple on Sept. 23, but nothing on Sipple's sexuality. The purpose of Michelmore's followup was the local angle. His page 3 story ran the morning of Sept. 26. Under the kicker, "No Word From President," the headline read, "Ford Should Thank Hero, Mom Says."

The first paragraphs of the 25-paragraph story read:

Mrs. Ethyl Sipple of Detroit, mother of the ex-Marine credited with saving President Ford from an assassin's bullet in San Francisco on Monday, said Thursday that her son should be personally thanked by the president.

Mrs. Sipple, 65, said in an interview in her west side home that she spoke to her son, Oliver, 33, for an hour on the phone Wednesday night.

"I asked him if he had heard from the president and he said he hadn't heard a word," Mrs. Sipple said. "I don't think that's right. I think Oliver should get a telegram or something."

The rest of the story told of Sipple's growing up in Detroit and related his family's pride in his actions.

The purported connection between the White House "delay" and Sipple's sexuality was conspicuously absent, particularly since the competing Detroit News had carried Lembke's L.A. Times piece the afternoon before Michelmore's article ran. Michelmore says:

It was not unusual for the Free Press and News to treat a story differently. . . . We wanted to do a local hero story. In 1975, heroism and homosexuality did not go together in the public's mind.

They did go together for Burdette Stoddard, who was then acting managing editor of The Detroit News. He says:

Papers exist to put things in the paper. The press should always err on the side of putting it in the paper.

The public, he feels, has "legislative options" if they don't like how the press is exercising its freedom. Stoddard does not think that privacy was an issue in the decision to run the L.A. Times wire service piece on Sept. 25.

If the whole world knows, you're only reporting a fact that the world already knows. . . . No one would have questioned running that story.

Mike McCormick, who was then the night news editor for The News, remembers a discussion at The News as to the purpose of using Sipple's sexuality.

I don't think his sexuality had anything to do with his heroism, but the thrust of the question was the president's response. The man becomes an important hero for saving the president's life. How does the president, the country, respond?

It seemed to him that

the president was thoughtlessly ignoring this man. The point of the story was to question if that was because of the man's sexuality.

"What enters into the situation," says Gary Schuster, who was then assistant city editor at The News,

is that everyone wants to know everything that they can about the person (who becomes a hero). The news media has a role in letting the people know as much as possible.

However, Schuster believes that the media may have been misled as to who Sipple was and the extent of his activity in the gay community.

Comments Al Lowman, then city editor of The Detroit News:

The Detroit News placed a lot of weight on those wire service pieces. It was as though the wire service was some sort of journalistic fountainhead.

The afternoon that the Lembke story was published in his paper, Pat Murphy, then a reporter for The Detroit News, interviewed Sipple's mother. "It's very likely that I showed her the L.A. Times piece," Murphy says. He thought that the homosexuality angle was important because, "it had to have been important or we wouldn't have played it on page one." Murphy explains the use of the question of Sipple's sexual preference in his local Detroit story:

The L.A. Times brought in his ties with the gay community: it was part of the whole aura surrounding the individual. . . . To write a story without reference to the on-going furor would have been to leave out something very important. . . . I never thought about not using the homosexuality aspect. That aspect came through the L.A. Times. If any damage was done, it was already done before my story appeared.

A dozen 'excuses' we use

From writers Elliott and Linsky, here are a dozen "excuses" (many illustrated in the Sipple case) that too often characterize the practice of journalism:

(1) Gossip journalism is exempt from the usual standards used to test the truth, accuracy and relevance of information received.

(2) Columnists are exempt from the usual rigors of the editing process.

(3) Once a story is "in the air," constraints against publication are removed, even though the story may not be accurate, or may not be known to the particular readers about to see it.

(4) A "news hook" permits publication of material which doesn't otherwise meet the standards.

(5) Beating the competition is a journalistic value which competes with other values such as truth, fairness and relevance.

(6) A subject's expressions of interest in not having personal material made public can be overridden by the missionary response: "We know better than you do what will be good for you."

(7) Reporters can disavow responsibility for what is published under their bylines because: (a) "We don't think up the headlines" or (b) "They rewrote it at the desk" or (c) "My editors changed it."

(8) One way to legitimize a shaky story is to ask people who know less than the reporters do—the men and women in the street—what they think.

(9) One way to guarantee a good controversy and thus a good story is to take an article and spring it on someone unfamiliar with dealing with the press who is likely to have an instinctive, dramatic and quotable response.

(10) You can't check the wire services—they're paid to be reliable.

(11) Journalists are in the business to print the news, not suppress it. In close questions, publish.

(12) If you don't like the way the press behaves, you can always pass a law or change the Constitution.

Murphy's story, which appeared on the front page of The Detroit News the afternoon of Sept. 26, was quite different from Michelmore's piece in that morning's Free Press. Under the head, "Ford Hero's Mother Has Misgivings," Murphy's story began:

The mother of the Detroit-born Marine Corps veteran who grabbed the gun aimed at President Ford says she

doesn't blame the president for not immediately acknowledging her son's heroism.

"No wonder the president didn't send him a note," said Mrs. Ethyl Sipple after reading that her son was a prominent figure in San Francisco's gay community.

The 46-paragraph story was jumped to an inside page. The jump head read, "Her Pride Is Tarnished, Detroiters Says" and "Mother of Ford Hero Embarrassed." Micheltore says he probably would have written the same story as Murphy if Mrs. Sipple had given him the same interview:

Maybe The News proved that they had the better story. Sipple's sexuality alone didn't have any bloody thing to do with the story; this fellow wasn't some kind of leader in the gay community.

But, "Mother Ashamed of Hero Son" was a damn good story.

The portrait of Sipple also changed dramatically from the morning Free Press to the afternoon News. Sipple, who was a Boy Scout and "never any trouble" according to Mrs. Sipple in the Free Press coverage, was identified by The News as a "Chadsey High School dropout" with previous trouble in other schools. The mother, who was proud of the bravery Sipple showed in Vietnam and with his action with the President in the Free Press, called Sipple's reaction "instinctive" for The News.

Murphy's story also summarized the L.A. Times article, Sipple's press conference and the White House's reaction. Murphy visited a local Detroit bar and asked patrons what they thought about the question of Sipple's sexual preference. The News published these responses:

"What has his private life got to do with his helping the president?" asked Mrs. Rita S. Sparks, barmaid at Steve's Bar on Springwells, where Sipple and his two brothers had been customers.

Ernest A. Moon, 58, a regular at Steve's, said:

"He could be queer as a \$9 bill but that doesn't change the fact that he helped the President of the United States."

On Sept. 25, Nessen released the text of a note sent by Ford, which Sipple received on the 27th. Nessen and others who worked in the Ford White House say Sipple's sexual preference was not discussed in connection with thanking him and that the note was a "fairly quick response."

On Sept. 30, Sipple sued Caen, seven newspapers and their parent companies, and 50 unnamed "Does" identified only as publishers of newspapers, magazines or news services. The suit was dismissed in 1980. Sipple has appealed. According to his attorney, Sipple never talked to his mother after their first phone call following the assassination attempt. The attorney said that "Sipple's mother refused to leave her home until her death." Sipple now has an unlisted phone number and won't talk with the press. Hardly surprising, we guess, and while our journalistic juices were pushing us to track him down, perhaps now is a good time to decide to leave him alone. For Oliver Sipple, the story is still not over. ■

And in response . . .

A key figure in this ethics situation is former Los Angeles Times reporter Daryl Lembke. Writer Elliott sent him a copy of their final text, and Lembke complained about some parts of the article. The writers stand behind the piece, but in the interests of fairness, here's reporter's Lembke's viewpoint:

I strongly object to the article's content and tone. The article seems more representative of the "give-them-a-trial-and-then-hang-them" school of frontier justice than a scholarly thesis produced by students of journalism ethics.

Although Ms. Elliott interviewed me by telephone at length on two occasions, very little of what I told her is reflected in the piece. The facts are twisted into the authors' preconceived conclusions. When Ms. Elliott first phoned me, she told me she felt that the case exemplified journalistic ethics, or lack of same, at their worst. She concluded our lengthy conversation by saying this situation was more complicated than she earlier thought.

In a lengthy deposition taken by Mr. Sipple's attorneys, I said my initial impression that Mr. Sipple's apartment indicated gayness was very slight and too related to stereotypes to have stayed in my mind more than momentarily and "where he lived" had nothing to do with it. Sipple's apartment was some distance from the city's concentration of gays.

I told Ms. Elliott this, and I told her I had been trying to follow up on the original interview for two days; that the public reaction to his heroism was the prime motivation in trying to reach Sipple. Yet she says I was looking for Sipple "to follow up on the gay angle."

I also pursued President Ford's tardiness in sending a "thank you" but the Elliott-Linsky piece chooses to treat this sarcastically. Ron Ostrow of the L.A. Times Washington bureau was running this down for me through Press Secretary Ron Nessen. You can find this in the court record, but it is dismissed in the article.

In my taped interview with Sipple he says he belonged to the "court" of "Emperor" Mike Caringi, for whose election he had worked. Sipple explained that the Emperor was "a male counterpart to the drag queen thing—to get a more masculine image. We have an Emperor of San Francisco who is selected at large by the gay community." Sipple also explained that one purpose of the event was to raise money, and that he had worked very hard and donated time and money to get Caringi elected. Sipple said the "coronation" occurred at a banquet with a couple of thousand people present, including politicians. He told the reporters present that they could print he was a member of the court and that he was involved in Caringi's election.

Sipple was also credited at the time of the interview with saving the President's life.

A Superior Court judge, following lengthy depositions from the parties involved, dismissed the invasion of privacy suit. The Elliott-Linsky article doesn't indicate that the authors examined the extensive court records, if they had, they would have found that Mr. Sipple said in his depositions that numerous people in other cities besides San Francisco were aware that he was gay.

Sipple also said for the court record that he was involved in numerous activities in San Francisco's gay community in addition to the Caringi court.

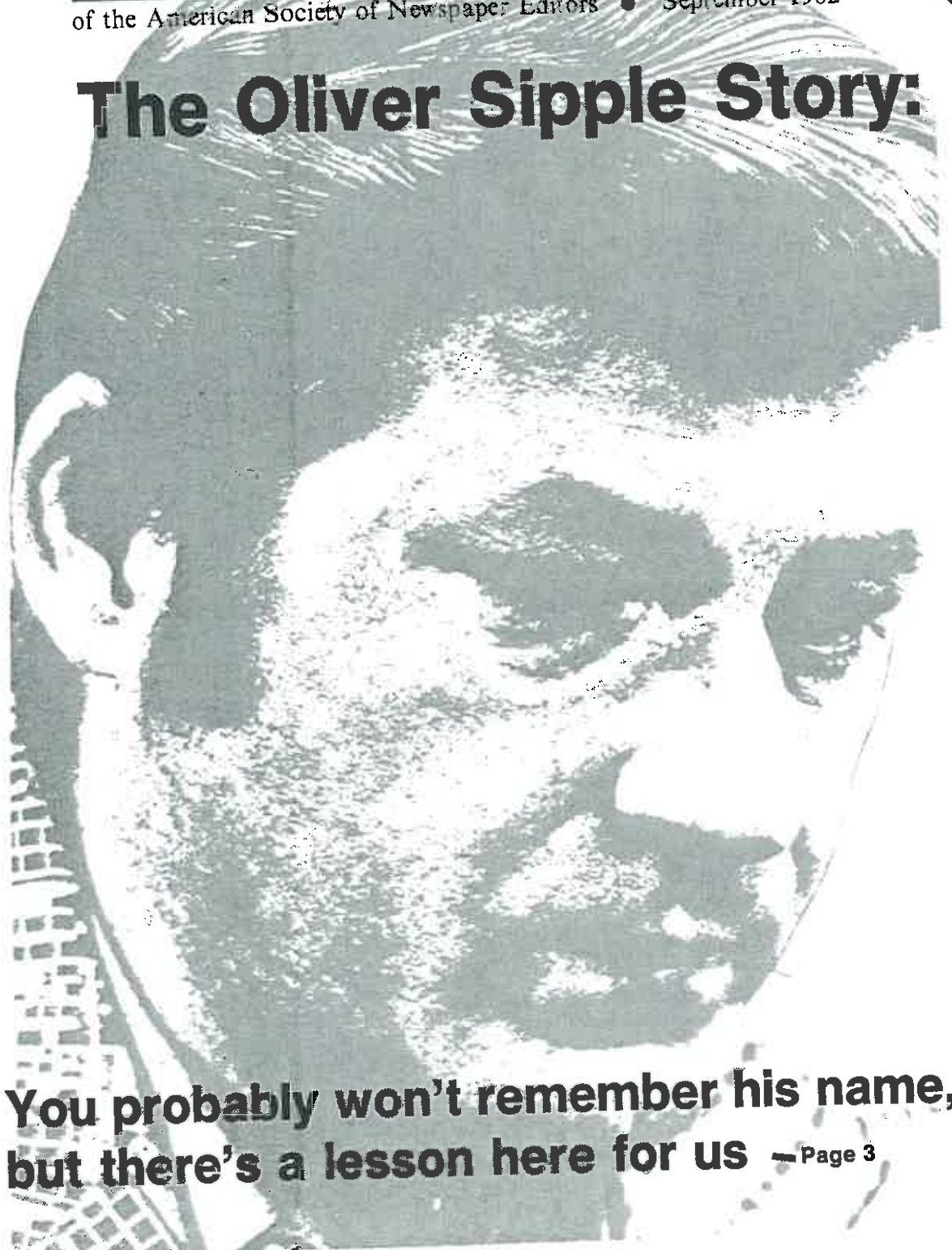
For those reasons I don't feel that Mr. Sipple's privacy was violated. My articles in the Los Angeles Times contained public, and not private, information about Sipple.

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The Oliver Sipple Story:



You probably won't remember his name,
but there's a lesson here for us — Page 3