

# Under the influence of Uncle Ben

Two deaths: one close, one distant, one immediate, one recent. The two men were linked long ago, but each is fresh in my memory.



**Michael Maidenber**

My uncle Ben Maidenburg died July 27 in Akron, Ohio. He was formerly editor and publisher of the Akron Beacon Journal.

John P. Carmichael, former sports editor of the Chicago Daily News, died June 6 in Chicago.

I was 13 or 14 when I met John Carmichael, and it was only because he was a colleague of my uncle that I knew him. Ben arranged the meeting, which led to one of those extraordinary moments in a boy's life when he comprehends, as if for the first time, that he is destined to become a man.

Ben was from earliest to last memory a force of nature. Perhaps the difference in the spelling of the family name indicates his individuality.

Ben lived and worked in Akron while I grew up in Marion, Ind., where the other three Maidenber brothers made their homes, started a business and raised their children.

Ben was someone who would visit occasionally, or whom my family would visit, also infrequently. Those times when we were together, Ben tended to treat this nephew in much the same way as he treated the reporters who worked for him, by asking tough, demanding questions, whacking back the answers with profanity and critical comment, then offering sweeping judgements about how one should go about getting ready for life and work.

It was daunting, to put it mildly. Knowing that Ben was coming for a visit, I would sometimes rehearse dialogue, hoping to match him in verbal thrust and parry. But once he let me know one of my ideas was about the god-damned dumbest thing he had ever heard in his life, my resolve melted.

Beneath this prickly exterior was the classic heart of gold. Ben's devotion to the community of Akron and to charitable and civic institutions there was extraordinary. Yet to the end, Ben could show his soft side only indirectly. Our personal meetings remained confrontational, although I felt our closeness grew as I recognized a satisfied glance, or heard a word or two of grudging praise for the Herald (he took the Sunday edition).

Ben's influence on me was really more indirect than direct. Ben came through to me reflected by others. Recalling Ben and those who knew him well, one can reconstruct the rough and tumble days of newspapering 30, 40, 50 years ago. The "Hello, sweetheart, give me rewrite" era of the "Front Page" was the finishing school for my uncle, not the graduate school of journalism that I attended.

Over the years in my career I would run across those who worked with Ben. They often were old warhorses on the verge of retirement. Typically, I would be told, "Kid, you don't know what it was like. Your uncle and me, we're the last of a kind. They don't make them like us anymore."

It was true. When I heard of Ben's death, I thought of a big tree falling. I thought of the groves of giant trees that once grew. When the groves were cut down, they were not succeeded by giants.

Ben's strongest reflection came through my father, Ben's next youngest brother. My father was not only close to Ben as a brother, he admired Ben's profession. If my father was a businessman during the day, at other times he was an extraordinary editor, filling the house with newspapers, magazines and journals. I still get notes attached to articles that I am instructed to read (with good reason).

John Carmichael took me onto the playing field of Comiskey Park in Chicago in 1955 or 1956. Ben had asked him to do this, because I wanted to meet my heros, the New York Yankees. I knew everything about this mighty team. From Allie Reynolds to Hank Bauer to Mickey Mantle, I had studied the demigods of the Yankee lineup as well as manager Casey Stengel.

When Carmichael led me toward the dugout to shake hands with No. 7, my heart pounded. Then came a sudden realization: I was taller than Mickey Mantle! To this day, I recall that handshake as a rite of passage.

I clipped out John Carmichael's obit but wasn't planning to do anything with it, until Ben died. Then the two came together in memory. Through Carmichael, Ben helped me meet Mickey Mantle. In this incident, as in so much of our relationship, Ben educated me in ways he probably did not know, but for which I am grateful.

*Maidenber is publisher of the Herald.*