

## V. CONCLUSION

### The Rag

I sought no certain and definable conclusions in this project. My goal was to describe and preserve.

There are, however, tendencies which can be noted, possible life stages to be described. There is commonality among the interviewed participants despite the different times in which they worked on the paper.

Above all, the Rag was a creature of its times, locked in a cause-and-effect circle with the movement of which it was a part. The Rag people created political events as political activists. As journalists they reported the same events, thereby communicating with and informing a larger audience. The larger audience became more politically active, and the cycle continued. Somewhere momentum was lost and the spiral declined.

As much as the Rag created the movement, it was itself reflective. When the political movement was dominated entirely by male leadership, the Rag ran nude photos of women and encouraged women to essentially aid in the sexual liberation of men. When feminism became a strong political tendency within the movement, there were no more such pictures or articles.

The underground press must be seen not only as

part of a rebellion in society but also as part of a rebellion within journalism. I found no evidence, not even hearsay, that the Rag ever once even pretended to objectivity nor that it ever shrank from creating the news it reported.

The achievement of keeping an alternative, entirely voluntary newspaper alive for eleven years is significant. Interviewees cited commitment, dedication, peer pressure, social ties, and, in one case, journalistic ambitions as factors in their involvement.

That the Rag was kept alive for so long is an achievement, but the fact of its being managed solely through collective effort is mind boggling. The founders who had experience in traditional journalism rejected the whole idea of an editor, and the decision stuck. It is a strength, a testament to the political commitment of staff members to living their politics, and also a weakness. There is efficiency -- and responsibility -- in leadership. Yet, the Rag shows that a radically different decision-making process can be sustained for a weekly for a substantial period of time.

A study of the Rag is also a study of the ebb and flow of alternative media and periods of social conflict. When nations, races, classes, social and political groupings contend, they will find a means of mass communication.

That medium will, in turn, be the product of the conflict. The underground press is a good example. A new press was created to express opposition to a war, to present different ways of living, and to disseminate a wide range of news and opinion not carried by the traditional press. The tools available were many creative minds and offset printing and all the possibilities that combination could produce.

The nature of the underground press was also determined by the dominant medium of its time -- television. The Rag and other alternative newspapers recognized the appeal of communication through visual impact. A glance at several random Rag covers provides examples.

There are many criticisms that can be and have been made of the Rag. It has been called sexist, inefficient, "individualist, elitist, barely political",<sup>1</sup> and sectarian. It failed to speak to a determining point in its own existence, the murder of one of its founders. However, that the Rag lived at all is something of a success. That it lived so long and touched so many is testimony to the intensity of the times and the dedication of the people.

Stages in the Rag's life can be noted. It began as the creation of a small group, but it touched a chord in a larger community. In fact, as Alan Winter has

noted in an unpublished Master's thesis, "The Gay Press of the United States", "The move from the spoken to a written word is a major step toward an open community."<sup>2</sup> The Rag took that step in Austin. The community recognized itself, and the Rag grew and changed with it. Nothing is static. Circumstances changed and the community changed. The medium that reflected that community no longer spoke with a strong voice, and it began to falter and die. The downturn for the Rag came in the mid-1970's. What is really reflected in the rise and decline of the Rag is the rise and decline of social movements, which ebb and wane in different forms at different times. The Rag and the underground press in general were manifestations of one of those times. There is not yet equality, dignity, economic and political freedom in the world. There will be other upsurges -- and other media to reflect them.

As Michael Fellner, the former editor of Madison's long-running Take Over, said

What people don't understand is that the underground press was supposed to self destruct. That was as it should be. The destruction process starts when people realize they don't need that voice anymore.<sup>3</sup>

#### Future Work

The next step in this research will be to identify key areas for further investigation. One such area

will be contacting other Rag staff members. Severe limitations were imposed by time and funds. Some key figures in the Rag's history not represented in this study, notably Judy Smith, could fill in the story. The goal of extending this project will be to produce an integrated, narrative history of the Rag and the 1960's and 1970's in Austin, Texas which also maintains a sense of the people themselves through their own words.

As this project developed, after the data had been collected, I found myself thinking of a book that had not entered into my methodological considerations. The book is Five Sisters: Women Against the Tsar,<sup>4</sup> a 1977 translation of the accounts of five revolutionary Russian women, "five memoirs from the last century's tumultuous sixties and seventies and after, when the fires of revolution began to catch and spread...."<sup>5</sup> The women had been saved in a way to share their experiences with future generations. We can learn from the past, and it is my desire in this project to preserve some of it in its own variations and complexity.

Content studies of the Rag might also be of interest. Changes in language (like dropping the word "chick") might be revealing of something if recorded and correlated with other events at the time (like the women's movement).

Future work might also investigate patterns among the responses and memories of Rag staff members. Similarities in backgrounds, motivations, difficulties, and such, could be of interest from the points of view of history, psychology, or sociology.

Similarities and differences among the Rag and other underground newspapers is another area of possible study. If experiences were common to larger trends, that fact should be established.

The underground press is a part of the history of our time as well as a part of journalism history. The Rag is one case, one of hundreds similar, and yet unique, the product of the particular place, personalities, and circumstances. Those specifics make a story that deserves remembering.

## V. CONCLUSION

- <sup>1</sup>Austin S.D.S. leaflet, Progressive Labor Faction, 1969.
- <sup>2</sup>Alan Winter, "The Gay Press of the United States: A History of the Gay Community and Its Publications.
- <sup>3</sup>Michael Fellner, interview, March, 1981.
- <sup>4</sup>Barbara Alpern Engel and Clifford N. Rosenthal, editor and translator, Five Sisters: Women Against the Tsar (New York: Schocken Books, 1977).
- <sup>5</sup>Barbara Alpern Engel, Five Sisters, p. XI.