

**5th District Independent Party:  
Patrick Co. professor enters race /3A**  
**Callands Potpourri:  
Annual festival scheduled Oct. 5 /1B**

**Viewpoint:  
*What should happen  
to the former Climax  
and Mount Hermon  
Schools? /4A***

**Chatham Community Club:  
Organization receives  
\$1 million grant for  
housing improvements /1B**



# STAR-TRIBUNE

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# County editor remembered

By TIM DAVIS  
Star-Tribune Editor

Preston B. Moses will be remembered as an authentic country newspaper editor who was never afraid to champion unpopular causes.

Faithful public servant, dedicated community leader, noted historian, and talented artist also describes Moses, who died Friday morning at his home in Chatham.

Moses, 88, was editor of the *Star-Tribune* for 51 years.

"Preston was first and foremost a newspaperman who believed in standing up for what he felt strongly about," said *Star-Tribune* publisher Charles A. "Zan" Womack Jr. "He never shied away from controversy, and used the paper for what he thought was in the best interest of the county."

Womack, who bought the paper in 1975, said working with Moses was an invaluable experience.

"He was one of the best weekly newspaper editors anywhere," he said. "He knew the county and knew what people wanted to read. The paper was involved in everything. It sometimes made people mad, but they always read it."

Henry Hurt, a long-time writer for *Reader's Digest*, sold newspapers for Moses in front of the courthouse when he was 10 years old.

"He was one of a kind," said Hurt. "He understood the exquisite nature of how to run a county newspaper. He did not mind the fact that sooner or later everybody was going to get mad at him. What arose from that was a newspaper that everybody read from front to back."

A great storyteller, Moses had a way of making even the most ordinary things inter-

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Frances Hallam Hurt

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esting, Hurt said.

When the editor wrote about a trip he and his family had taken, it was like the reader was right there with them.

"He had the ability to bring an almost childlike curiosity and enthusiasm to whatever lay before him," Hurt said. "That's the essence of running a good newspaper—and he never lost it."

Paula Irby Bryant, who became editor of the *Star-Tribune* after Moses retired, said he was a good teacher and great influence for young journalists.

"He taught me that everything is important to somebody, and that people like to see their name or picture in the paper," said Bryant, who worked as a reporter with Moses for five years.

"He listened to people, and if he could, he would help," she said. "People came to him a lot of times just to get his advice on things."

Former *Gretna Gazette* editor Laurie S. Moran said Moses was probably one of the most powerful and influential people in the county.

"You rarely questioned his position on things," she said. "He maintained a strong

See MOSES, page 2A



Preston Moses, who spent 51 years as editor of the Star-Tribune, died Friday at his home in Chatham. In addition to his long career with the newspaper, Moses was remembered for his work as a public servant, artist, and local historian.

## Moses

Continued from page 1A

editorial stance on issues of importance to the county."

Moran, now executive director of the Pittsylvania County Chamber of Commerce, said Moses always had his finger on the community's pulse.

"And because of that, he often became one of the most important advisers that elected officials turned to for input," she said.

Retired sheriff Taylor McGregor was among the public servants who sought Moses' advice.

"Preston—he would not let me call him Mr. Moses—was an outstanding and delightful person of wit and charm. His writing was as interesting as he was a person," said McGregor, who was sheriff for more than 30 years.

"He was a wonderful friend, and he always gave me a lot of good, sound advice," McGregor added. "He will be greatly missed."

Sen. Charles R. Hawkins agreed, noting Moses's familiarity with rural life gave him unique insight in how to run a weekly newspaper.

"He's the type of individual small towns are built around," Hawkins said.

Moses always advised politicians running for office to wage a clean, honest campaign, and to wear a necktie when their picture was taken for the newspaper.

Once, when a candidate came in without a tie, Moses took his picture anyway, but later "retouched" the photo, using an ink pen to draw one in. Readers never knew the difference.

### Getting started in the newspaper business

A native of Chatham, Moses attended Hargrave Military Academy and graduated from Chatham High School. He earned a degree from Duke University, paying for his education by waiting on tables and working with the school's public relations department.

After college, he taught in the county's public schools for a short time and worked with the Works Progress Administration. He then joined the Civilian Conservation Corps, and later transferred to the Soil Conservation Service as a field supervisor for two years in Appomattox.

Moses got his start in the newspaper business in 1936, when he

leased the *Pittsylvania Tribune* from J. Hurt Whitehead.

He launched his own newspaper, *The Star*, in 1944, and, in 1952, bought the *Tribune* and merged the two newspapers into the *Star-Tribune*.

Moses served as publisher and editor of the *Star-Tribune* until 1969, when the weekly newspaper was sold to Charles A. Womack Sr. He remained as editor until he retired in 1987.

In addition to being a newspaper editor, Moses conducted a weekly radio program called "The County Editor" on WBTM from 1938 until 1949.

### Legacy of public and community service

Moses also left a long legacy of public and community service, including two terms in the Virginia House of Delegates from 1939 to 1943 and two terms as Pittsylvania County Commissioner of Revenue.

As a state legislator, he sponsored a bill for popular election of school board members and co-sponsored a bill to waive poll taxes for men in service.

Moses, who always took great delight in being a Leap Year baby, was recognized by lawmakers as the youngest member to serve in the General Assembly since he had only had eight birthdays when first elected.

A veteran of World War II, Moses was a member of Gretna American Legion Post 232 and recipient of the post's distinguished service award.

He was president of Chatham Chamber of Commerce for two terms, and helped form the Pittsylvania County Industrial Development Authority to bring new industry to the area.

Moses also was a charter member of Chatham Rotary Club, past president of Chatham Lions Club, and member of the board of trustees of Oak Grove Lodge.

He also helped organize the Pittsylvania County semi-pro baseball league in the 1940s and 1950s, and served as its secretary and official record-keeper for 15 years.

"He was really a public-spirited person," said retired Pittsylvania County Circuit Court Judge Samuel Hairston. "He was always interested in good government and the betterment of the county."

Even after Moses retired, he con-

tinued to encourage and support qualified people for public office, Hairston noted.

"He used his influence and time to try to better the community in which he lived," said the judge. "The community is better for having had Preston Moses."

A long-time supporter of education, Moses served as chairman of the Pittsylvania County School Board Selection Commission for 16 years.

He started holding public hearings on interviews with prospective school board candidates, a practice that became state law.

"Preston was a great believer in education," said Billy Easley, who served on the school board for 15 years and was chairman for five.

Even though it wasn't popular, Easley pointed out Moses supported bond issues on consolidating the county's high schools and construction of a vocational school in Chatham.

Moses received the Virginia Education Association's prestigious "School Bell" award and Sertoma "Service to Mankind" award for his strong support of public schools.

Cited by the *New York Times* as one of the few southern newspaper editors who gave fair treatment to news concerning blacks during integration, he also received the Friendship Award from Dr. H.G. McGhee, pastor of Greater Triumph Missionary Baptist Church, who praised him for promoting racial harmony.

Throughout the years, Moses received a number of awards. He was named "Citizen of the Year" by the Pittsylvania County Chamber of Commerce in 1986 and received Modern Woodmen of America's Community Service Award.

He also received numerous awards for newspaper writing and editing from the Virginia Press Association during his distinguished career.

### Talented artist and historian

After retiring from the newspaper, Moses turned his attention to art.

A talented painter, his watercolors featuring local historical landmarks won numerous awards in Danville Art League exhibitions, and hang in many county homes, businesses, and churches.

"He was the best man at retirement I've ever seen. He had so

many things he liked to do," said Liz Hairston, who served with Moses on Pittsylvania County Portrait Committee.

The committee, which Moses chaired, selects portraits to hang in the county courthouse.

Besides art, Moses was an avid gofer, having won over 25 trophies in golf tournaments through the years.

He also was one of the organizers of Cedars Country Club and served on its board of directors.

Leon Townsend, one of Moses' golfing companions, noted that even in later years, the retired editor loved a good game of golf and could play longer than men 10 to 20 years younger.

Moses also raised a vegetable garden every summer, and enjoyed sharing his harvest with others. Nothing made him happier than leaving a dozen tomatos or a few ears of sweet corn on a neighbor's doorstep.

"He just seemed to take a new lease on life when he retired," Mrs. Hairston said. "He had so many things that he hadn't had time to enjoy while he was working with the newspaper."

Moses also was an active member of Pittsylvania Historical Society, having served as president for two terms from 1991 to 1995.

"He had a great concept of historic preservation. He was the best thing to happen to the historical society in many years," said Herman Melton, who followed Moses as president.

Melton noted that, under Moses' leadership, membership in the society doubled.

Moses also edited the society's publication. "He took the Pittsylvania Packet and developed it into one of the best historical society publications in the nation," said Melton.

Melton, who marveled at Moses' legendary recall of historical events, said the retired editor was a strong supporter of a county museum and would have played a key role in its establishment had he lived.

A life-long member of Chatham Presbyterian Church, Moses was a former deacon and recently helped write a history of the church commemorating its 150th anniversary.

Frances Hallam Hurt, who co-authored the church history with Moses, admired his role as a newspaper editor and civic-minded vol-



Preston Moses is pictured congratulating former Pittsylvania County Sheriff Taylor McGregor (r) upon his retirement.

unteer.

"He ran a hot country paper for 51 years," she said. "He devoted his life to it. His whole life was tied up in the paper, and people wondered what in the world he would do when he retired. But he really savored life and filled it well."

Hurt also worked with Moses during the county's bicentennial celebrations and the two became good friends through the historical society.

"With his passing, it is an end of an era," she said. "A lot of color has gone out of the town and county."

#### Devoted family man

Moses is survived by his wife, Minnie, who worked by his side at the newspaper until he retired. He

often said she was the secret behind his success. They would have celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary next month.

He also left two daughters, Eve M. Thorson of Richmond and Pattie Sue M. Lilley of Raleigh, N.C., and a son, Preston Donald Moses of Staunton.

A devoted family man, Moses loved spending time with his nine grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

His daughter, Eve, said life was his stage.

"He loved to hold court. He saw humor everywhere," she said. "I just think of him as an entertaining person—grander than life—who packed more in his life than most people do. He had such a zest for living."