DOUG CUMMING

“So Splendid It Hurts”
Rescued from the IRS, the Marshall Frady Papers at Emory University
Offer a Look at a Brilliant Southerner Practicing New Journalism

This is the twelfth in a series of articles on archival collections of interest to mass communication historians. Readers of Journalism History are invited to suggest collections that they would like to see appear in future articles, and the editors would welcome volunteers to write such articles.

The year was 1957. Marshall Frady, a seventeen-year-old rebel intoxicated with the romance of Byron’s death in the Greek revolution and Hemingway’s For Whom the Bell Tolls, had found a cause. In a Time magazine brief, this precociously literary son of a Southern Baptist preacher read about Castro and Che Guevara mobilizing for revolution in the jungles of the Sierra Maestra of Cuba. This would be Frady’s escape from a boring little South Carolina mill town into the heady fame—nay, immortality—of authorship.

Hemingway had his quixotic Spanish Civil War of the 1930s. “Now,” Frady wrote to his literary agent in 1972, recounting this youthful folly, “here was that very dramaturgy, by God, actually in sweltering re-enactment that moment no further than a seventeen-hour Trailways-bus-ride to Key West, a brief plane hop to Havana and then—well, as it turned out, I never reached those ultimate mythical mountains and wound up, with my third try, on the streets of Havana with some $12, accosting a series of right puzzled and uneasy Cubans with an offer to exchange the somewhat stale and crumpled suit I had worn on the bus-ride down for a bicycle on which I figured I could then maybe pedal the 750 miles on down to Oriente Province at the other end of the island, where Castro was.”

Frady’s 1972 letter to his well-connected book agent Robert Lescher in New York, asking him to pitch to Playboy magazine Frady’s idea of a profile of Castro, is one among thousands he pecked out on a manual typewriter over a four-decade career, writing on yellow bond paper and drawing on his love of the English language. These draft letters are packed in thick folders, along with reporter notebooks, thoroughly filled legal pads, plump drafts of books and other craft-shavings, in fifty-eight boxes of this remarkable journalist’s papers.

Marshall Frady (1940-2004), praised by Norman Mailer and David Halberstam for his distinctly eloquent and nimble reportage,2 ranged across lofty plateaus of the dominant media of journalism. He wrote magazine articles about Southern politics in the civil-rights years and its aftermath with a prose style like that of James Agee, first as a reporter for Newsweek, then on contract or as staff writer with The Saturday Evening Post, Life, Willie Morris’s Harper’s, and finally, The New Yorker. Starting at age twenty-eight, he also published novelistic biographies of George Wallace, Billy Graham, Jesse Jackson, and Martin Luther King Jr. In 1980, he leaped into television documentary news as chief correspondent for ABC News’ Closeup, and worked in that medium until as a reporter for Nightline he had a falling out with Ted Koppel.

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around 1987. He moved from New York to Sherman Oaks, California, to become a screenwriter Frady made good money scripting docudramas based on books—such as his favorite Southern writers, William Faulkner and Robert Penn Warren—and based on his own books. He also left an unpublished book manuscript and never-produced screenplay on his lifelong obsession, Fidel Castro.

One long sentence from a Frady letter of 1989 gives the flavor of what lies in his personal papers. "Another notion that's only recently brought a certain stirring in the blog. He wrote to one of his literary agents, 'prompted by having had occasion not long ago to rummage back again through the thousand odd bits of letters, speeches, files, that accumulate over the years and that I have somehow managed to hold whole along with me in to my heart and penegulations, including the one out there to this self-focussed lattitudes of southern California, to write a kind of quintessential reminiscence of the rather lunar, loony, wayfar, sometimes malarial life that's ensued since growing up a Baptist preacher's son in South Carolina and Georgia—but I won't go into this for now.

Frady died of cancer at sixty-four, just weeks after moving from Sherman Oaks back to South Carolina as writer-in-residence for his alma mater, Furman University. His widow allowed Furman to begin organizing his massive collection of papers into some bibliographic order. But then the Internal Revenue Service swept in, as it continued the papers to collect on $280,000 Frady supposedly owed in back taxes. In a New York auction offered by MARBL, legible, a kind of speed-sloping print, and that the Fradyesque...
In December 1972, Frady wrote a richly descriptive letter about a shaggy farmhouse where he was living in Camden, South Carolina. The place, he decided remains a living and having house parties with as many as eighteen writers and editors exchanging ideas for magazine assignments and books. 26

**Working with Frady**

Frady moved out to Sherman Oaks in 1988 to write for screenplay for Columbia Pictures, but a Writers Guild Strike paralyzed that work just after he arrived. 27 Still, over the next few years and more or less consistently Frady continued to publish in a greater and more varied manner. He continued to write books and book publishers are represented here: *The Atlantic, New Times, Madam's House, New York Times Sunday Magazine, Esquire, Sunday Express.* He also sold* for the John M. Barry book Rising Tide (on the Mississippi flood of 1927), Robert Penn Warren *All the King's Men* (updated to Frady's time). Pulitzer's novels *The Bear* and his own books on George Wallace and Billy Graham. All of these, or pieces of them, lie in thick packet in the papers. 28

The personal workspace. Making a living by writing can be difficult. Frady, despite his talent and high value for many editors, seems to have made the living life a lot more difficult than his novel. For example, Frady's commitment to his spending money when his final稿 finally arrived, nine years after the contract was signed, editor David Rosenthal congratulated Frady, scaring a note saying that Frady defied all odds and triumphed mightily. "I am very proud of and for the book and grateful for your courage," Rosenthal wrote. A number of the exchanges with editors are unprintable. Frady obviously worked hard and ventured far for his stories. But he also missed deadlines, left publishers and editors in the lurch, and spent his cash advances, some quite large, without delivering the goods.

Frady was a person with a thick skin and a high tolerance for self-hatred, but it is an effort to bring to a story that's true-a journalistic account in efforts to discern and sound the last and largest meanings in the newsroom editors and journalism professors try to instill.

Frady's juices really get going—when he takes on the job of writing or assignments for major magazines. Frady's reputation has grown in the years since his death. His journalism was less a hobby and more a passion, with a deep and abiding interest in the people and events around him. He wrote with a unique talent for imagining the spiritual, historical, and literary aspects of the human experience. His writing was often a blend of fact and fiction, as he sought to capture the essence of a story rather than simply report it. Frady's work continues to be read and studied today, and he remains a significant figure in American journalism and literature.

7 Friedel Ungeheuer to Willie Morris, Nov. 19, 1968, box 55, MFP. Ungeheuer, a writer whose work appeared in *Harper’s* in the same issue, told Morris that Frady’s piece on California "made Time’s hapless cover look really sick. It’s a pleasure to appear in such company."

8 Marshall Frady to “Herman,” n.d., box 17, “Across a Darkling Plain,” MFP.


11 Marshall Frady to Willie Morris, March 26, 1992, box 55, “Correspondence,” MFP.


13 Marshall Frady to Willie Morris, Feb. 24, 1993, box 55, “Correspondence,” MFP.

14 Willie Morris to Marshall Frady, Oct. 5, 1980, box 55, “Correspondence,” MFP.


17 Frady to Gottlieb.


21 Frady, *Southerners*, 331, 332.

22 Frady, *Jesse*, 5.


24 Marshall Frady to Jesse Jackson, Jan. 18, 1989, box 39, MFP


27 Marshall Frady to Joe Cumming, Dec. 3, 1964, donated by the author to MARBL to be added to MFP

28 Marshall Frady to Willie Morris, May 3, 1979, box 55, MFP

29 Marshall Frady to Will D. Campbell, June 2, 1976, box 55, MFP.

30 Marshall Frady to “Folks,” n.d., but described as December in Camden, S.C., home, box 55, MFP.

31 David Rosenthal to Marshall Frady, May 9, 1996, box 39, MFP.

32 Lewis Lapham to Marshall Frady, Oct. 8, 1971; Frady to Lapham, Dec. 18, 1975, box 55, MFP.


35 Frady to Credit Manager, Citibank.


37 Marshall Frady to his agent Sterling Lord, Aug. 11, 1975, box 55, MFP.

38 Frady’s description: “two storm-troopers come around the side of the house: a half-an-hour later, I’m imprisoned, locked in a dingy dimly-lit kennel downtown that was like a human dog-pound.”

39 Marshall Frady to Harvey Strassman, July 10, 1990, box 55, MFP.

40 Marshall Frady email to Jack Pratt, n.d., box 55, MFP.

41 Marshall Frady’s memos on story ideas for ABC News to “Dear Av,” Roone Arledge, and others are in box 51, MFP.

42 Marshall Frady to Sam Zelman of CNN, April 23, 1980, box 55, MFP.

43 Marshall Frady to Joe Cumming, Dec. 3, 1964, notes faculty who said a Frady novel titled “ Martyrs” showed a fine style with “ superb” characters, “except, disconcertingly enough, the hero, who was a bit ‘wraith-like.’”

44 Rust Hills to Marshall Frady, Dec. 18, 1993, box 50, MFP.