



Above, Jackson as a Los Angeles Times systems editor in the early 1980s. At right, in a sketch by a Times artist, Jackson is depicted as "Tron," the title character in a 1982 Disney science fiction film, where most of the animated action takes place inside a computer.

Undeserved Credit

By Jackson Sellers, May 2010

OVER THE DECADES, I've always gotten more credit than I deserved. At the *Evansville Press* in Indiana and the *Louisville Courier-Journal* in Kentucky, even at the *Asahi Evening News* in Tokyo, I became accustomed to high praise from high places, sometimes from the publisher himself. I could write and I could edit, and I did both. Praise for my writing was accepted as possibly my due. Praise for my editing, however, really

belonged to the writer, I felt. In those cases, I was just tinkering, massaging and rearranging.

In 1970, I came to the *Los Angeles Times*, where I stayed for 34 years, retiring in 2004. I was hired as a copy editor for the Orange County edition, but rather quickly I rose to copy desk supervisor, or "slot man" as I was called in those non-Politically Correct years. I dished out copy to "rim rats" for a full decade. Newsrooms hadn't changed

much in a hundred years. If a newspaperman from the Gay Nineties were resurrected, he would have felt at home among the old typewriters, the glue pots, the copy spikes and the copy boys. For much of the 1970s, the “back shop,” too, would have been familiar. Rube Goldberg contraptions called Linotypes spit out lines of type that were cinched up in chases on metal roller tables called turtles. Makeup editors, standing out of the compositor’s way, became skilled at proofing lead type that was upside down and backward.

The *Times* “got the lead out” in the late 1970s. The composing room became a clean, well-lighted place. But the newsroom itself remained unchanged. Until 1981.... That’s when a newsroom revolution finally occurred. “Coyote” terminals replaced all those old Underwoods. I was sold on computers the first time I hit the “Compose” key on a 45-inch story and found the velox coming out of the composing room’s typesetter just a few minutes later. Always before, a story of that length had to go out at least an hour in advance, to give the composing room time to re-keyboard it.

To the surprise of my fellow journalists, I jumped the editorial ship and joined the *Times* team that was developing this extraordinary newsroom technology. I spent the next quarter of a century as Orange County systems editor, and for most of those years, I was still happily in the Editorial Department. The work itself was not as different as my friends thought. The whole idea was to move information from far-flung places and put it into the newspaper, efficiently and accurately. I had spent several decades doing just that, but with pencils and paper. As a systems editor, I delved deeply into electronic spellchecking and hyphenation. I also wrote manuals, which spread my name among *Times* people who, otherwise, might never have heard of me.

The “Coyote” was a dedicated writing and editing terminal with in-house messaging – marvelous compared to a mere typewriter. “Decade,” coming along years later, was software installed in a PC, allowing Internet research, *Times* library searches, email to and from the world, etc. Finally, we got it all – pagination, the means by which

full pages of text and images could be output. No more piecemeal outputting, no more pasting up of stories and photos. Of course the pagination system replaced “Decade,” which was shut down shortly before I retired.

“Decade Is History” was the headline in *Among Ourselves*, an in-house publication for *Times* employees. Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial writer Alex Raksin was writing an obit for “Decade.” He told how fond he was of the Coyote and Decade systems. “They were plainspoken and easy for even a Luddite to use,” he wrote. “Their achievement becomes clear only when you consider that the *Times* was literally being assembled with typewriters, glue pots, pneumatic tubes and pica poles on the day in 1981 when Orange County editor Matt Goree approached his copy desk chief, Jackson Sellers, and fretted, ‘They are going to take away our typewriters and give us magic boxes, and it will be chaos.’ As Sellers recounted, ‘I then made the mistake of my journalistic career, saying: Don’t worry, Matt, I’ll look into it.’ Sellers spent the next 22 years working with Tom Kuby, Wayne Parrack, Wil Locke and Bart Everett to develop, refine and support the Coyote and Decade systems.”

And Raksin then went on to quote me further in the lengthy story, making me out to be more important than I was.

Hey, I was embarrassed. I wasn’t the main guy here. I just nibbled around the edges, doing the best I could to make things work in *Times* newsrooms and remote bureaus. I protested to Raksin, saying I was given too much credit, much too much. Raksin sent me an email:

Jackson: Just wanted to put it on record that you were actually much more self-effacing in our discussions than I let on in my “Among Ourselves” piece. You did go on at length, for example, to explain how Wayne Parrack, Wil Locke, Dick O’Reilly, Bart Everett and others helped open your mail, offer refreshments and otherwise provide invaluable support as you single-handedly invented the Coyote and Decade systems. Congrats on that lonely but important achievement.