

No more Bill Hall columns?

Randy Stapilus/Ridenbaugh Press

Please pardon the reminiscing, but the time of year encourages it, as did a newspaper column I read a few days ago.

The column from last weekend was by Bill Hall, whose writing base for about six decades has been the Lewiston Tribune. Its message was, that column would be his last.

By the time I arrived at the University of Idaho back in 1974, Hall already was renowned around Idaho for his editorials and columns at the Tribune. Soon after that he departed, for about a year and a half, to work for Senator Frank Church, and there wasn't a certainty he'd be coming back. But Church lost his presidential bid in 1976, Hall wrote a book about it ("Frank Church, D.C. and Me," from Washington State University Press, a great read on all three topics) and soon returned to Lewiston.

His departure and his return was much noted and not just in Lewiston, where Hall's blistering, biting and often funny editorials so often launched political conversation in the mornings. It was a big deal statewide, even in the far reaches of the state, and even in the pre-Internet era. Politically-interested people considered it necessary to get hold of what Hall was saying.

One of the Tribune writers who worked closely with Hall, Jay Shelledy (now a journalism professor at Louisiana State University), was quoted in one article about Hall, "There are not many papers in the United States where the best-read page is the editorial page. Without question, Hall is the best-known journalist in the state's history."

He learned about Idaho in the three corners of the state, growing up in Canyon County, then attending college and starting his newspaper career in Pocatello. By the time in 1965 he left for Lewiston, he already was well-schooled in Idaho politics. When I arrived at the Idaho State Journal newspaper a decade-plus after he'd left, I often prowled through his writings about local and state politics, using them to fill in gaps in what I was learning elsewhere.

By then I knew where to look because of Hall's editorials, which I'd read at college and afterward. They were a lethal combination: Well informed and witty, and up for taking on just about anyone. Even Idaho hunters, as he wrote when the idea arose of a wildlife council picking Fish & Game Commission members: "That could be a two-edged sword because it might tend to give a disproportionate voice to those chronic whiners who want to blame state biologists every time they get too drunk, inept, or unlucky to kill an elk."

Many newspapers shrink from editorial heat, but the Tribune never has. Hall's view as I heard it was that he was good business: People might yell at the newspaper but they sure kept reading it.

Part of what allowed this to work was the unusual atmosphere at the Tribune, which issued punchy editorials before Hall's tenure and has continued to since, under the local control of the Alford family. But Hall's humor has been a critical individual part of the mix. Since his mid-70s hiatus his columns have been humorous, personal, often gentle – different to an almost drastic degree from the sometimes fiery editorialist. But the two sides could never be separated entirely, and a serious sensibility underlies even many of his more recent columns, since he retired from editorial writing in 2002.

No more Hall columns. Hardly seems like Idaho.