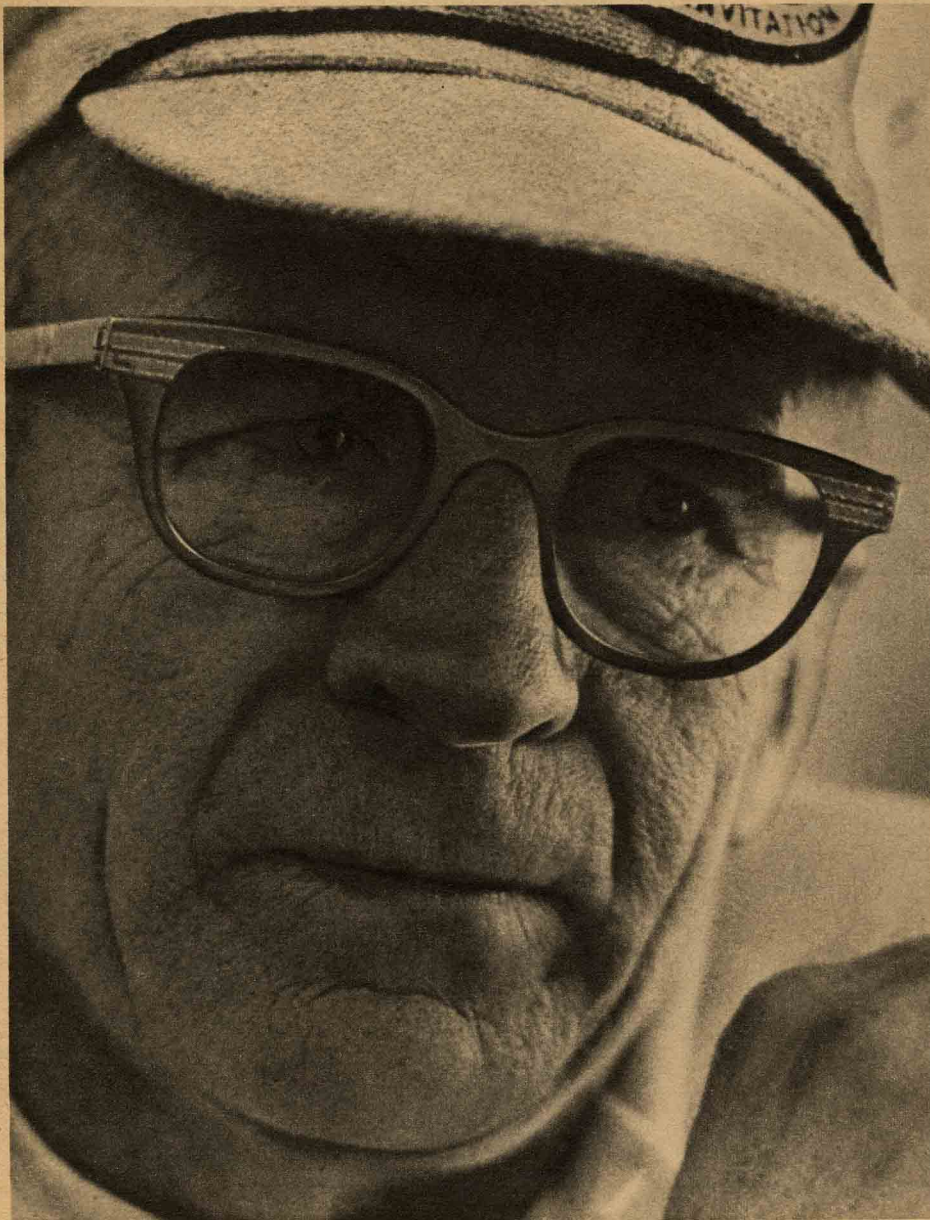


# PENN JONES

is, in many ways, a typical country editor. He is combination reporter,



Photos by Scott Dine



engaged local lovelies. Proud of his town's accomplishments, he gigs its shortcomings. Typical. But



editor, photographer, businessman, mechanic. He tries to cover everything from fires to teas honoring newly

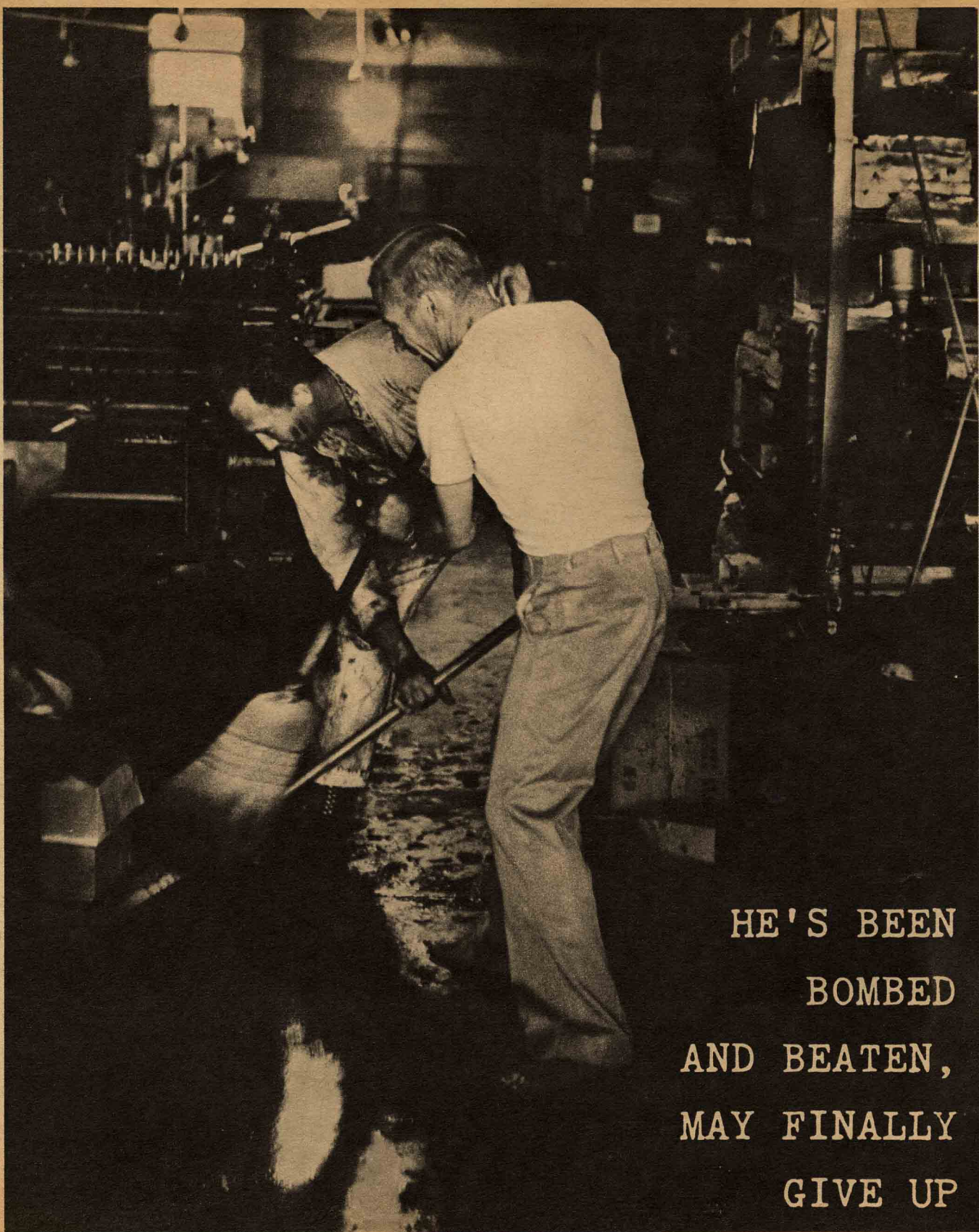


there's a difference, which is why they call him

# TEXAS' TOUGHEST COUNTRY EDITOR

Continued

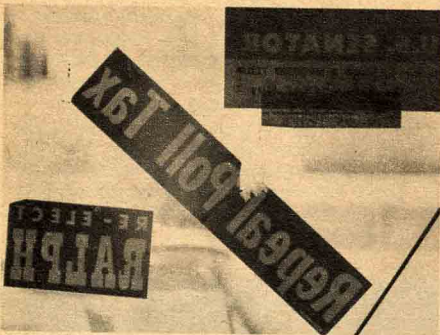




HE'S BEEN  
BOMBED  
AND BEATEN,  
MAY FINALLY  
GIVE UP



**Charred plant** is cleaned up by Jones and employee, left. Editor's liberal politics, displayed on his window, below, may have provoked early morning bombing. At right, is spot on the floor where the firebomb hit.



### Text by Van Hetherly

**A** FIRE siren's scream jolted Penn Jones awake. He bounded out of bed, fumbled for spectacles and clothes, then raced into the early morning gloom.

"Whose place is it?" Jones shouted to a shadowy figure a block away.

"Yours!" night watchman J. T. Garvin yelled back.

Thus, on a May night in 1962, the chaotic career of Texas' toughest country editor reached a violent climax. Someone had hurled a homemade fire bomb (a can of cleaning fluid with a fuse) into the office of Jones' Midlothian Mirror, leaving it a charred shambles.

The crusty little man wasn't surprised. Neither was his wife. Her reaction: "That's strange. I always thought it would be our home they would try to get."

Already Jones had been in fistfights.irate advertisers had squeezed him in an economic vise. His enemies snubbed his family. And he had even sent his youngest son to the more amiable climate of Waxahachie High School, 11 miles away.

Jones himself is no slouch with the insult. He has vigorously kept his vow, made 19 years ago when he bought the Mirror, "to insult those people who fail . . . to fulfill the obligations they have inherited along with their citizenship." Friends contend that the editorial barbs he sinks into public officials are justified. His opponents are mostly mum, but one declares: "Some mighty bad things have happened to Mr. Jones, and he has deserved every one of them."

One of the latest bad things was the bombing, which remains unsolved despite investigation by local police, sheriff and Texas Rangers, plus a standing \$2000 reward offered by Jones. Damage totaled some \$7000, but the Mirror was not silenced. Three days later it crackled off the press just as it had every Thursday, as sassy and irreverent as ever.

Its appearance sparked mixed reactions among the 1800 souls in Midlothian, most of whom commute to jobs in Dallas, a half hour away. Jones figures two thirds of them applauded the unnamed bomber. He can chuckle now when he says, "One city councilman asked Garvin why the hell he didn't wait 15 minutes more to turn in the alarm."

Why this animosity toward Jones:

For one thing he is a liberal Democrat in a

town where political tastes run to the far right.

Secondly, he's a sworn foe of locked-door doings by public officials.

Both are unpopular attitudes in Midlothian where the John Birch Society is big and where the school board informed Jones years ago: "We're closing these meetings in order to keep things from getting out."

The pugnacious publisher pulls no punches in his fight against what he calls the town's aristocracy, the larger landowners and old families who influence public affairs. Jones freely claims voting irregularities, ineptness and plain fraud. But legal action is futile, he says, because there are people in the courts "who hate my guts."

Jones grew only 5 feet 2 inches high in his 49 years, but the fearless World War II vet has twice defended his views with his fists. Both bouts grew out of a compulsory high school assembly to hear a Birch-tinged talk by right-wing lecturer Edgar W. Seay. The first erupted with the school principal when Jones went to his office to ask that he allow "some other speaker—I mentioned Judge Sarah T. Hughes—to address the students and give the other side of the story." The second swapping of blows was with Seay himself in the Mirror office. And if he didn't win the fistfights, Jones' other battles have won him the Elijah Parish Lovejoy Award for Courage in Journalism, have made him a sought-after speaker and have been tough on his wife. Says he: "She's a brainy little girl and gutty, too. She's put up with me for 23 years, but she doesn't enjoy getting snubbed on the street or having people turn away when they see her."

This is one reason Jones may soon give up. "Twenty years is long enough to fight a community and not even elect a single school trustee. Looking back, I've tried to improve things and I guess I pushed too hard."

Should he leave Midlothian, you can bet he'll keep pushing for what he believes in. First choice: Jones wants to organize a John F. Kennedy Society "to answer the Birchers speech for speech."

If that doesn't jell, Jones seriously intends to join the Peace Corps, "if they'll have me." Says this tough Texan who never lost the ability to laugh despite dark days: "I could at least teach printing to Africans on the antique equipment they must have because that's the kind I've got."

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