

## Chapter Two

### Traveling in the High Lane: 1939-1942

By Larry J. Smith

As the DC-3 flew across the Jefferson County sky on the night of Tuesday, March 17, 1942, the city of Birmingham was engulfed by darkness as if by magic at precisely 9 o'clock. Passengers aboard the Eastern Airplane were elated to see the lights go off, for it was part of a planned blackout of cities across the East coast.

Blackout drills were held in anticipation of enemy bombers reaching America during World War II. Getting the public to realize the real threat of such an attack and obtaining their cooperation in carrying out an exercise of such magnitude took a special type of person — someone who knew public relations and how to organize large groups of people.

The man who had master-minded the blackout in Birmingham was Houston Cole, head of the state's Civil Defense program. Always the master of detail, the 43-year-old Cole had even made arrangements for the city's several steel-making furnaces to be shut down during the blackout, thus eliminating the customary red glow of the industries.

One reporter who witnessed the blackout said “. . . a Jap airman trying to find Birmingham without a compass would have faced as much difficulty for 31 minutes Tuesday night as he would have had if he tried to find an oasis in the Mojave desert.” While the news media called the project a complete success, Cole was

upset that it had only been 98 percent effective (one industry had failed to shut off all its lights).

Cole had received the job as head of the Office of Civilian Defense on September 5, 1941, while he was employed at the University of Alabama in the Public Relations Office. He had excelled in his job at the University by attracting thousands of prospective students to the Tuscaloosa campus. He organized a band day, high school senior day, and citizenship day. He also coordinated a spiritual emphasis week which proved to be a positive program. Such devotion to his job attracted the attention of Eleanor Roosevelt, who sent him a letter of congratulations for his efforts.

Dr. Richard Foster, president of University of Alabama, was also mindful of Cole's outstanding record. In 1941 Dr. Foster received a call from Gov. Frank Dixon asking for his recommendation for someone to head the state's Civilian Defense. "Of course, there are many men who can do this job," said Governor Dixon, "but this is one time I want a hard-hitter in whom the people will have complete confidence; a man outside the realm of all politics." After studying the governor's request, Dr. Foster replied: "Yes, I know the man you want; he is Houston Cole, an administrative assistant here."

The next day the former DeKalb County farm boy walked into the governor's office and was offered the job. Although it would take him away from education, his first love, Cole accepted the new job as both a challenge and his patriotic duty. From that day on, a lasting friendship would flourish between the governor and his new Civilian Defense Director.

He began his new job by first convincing the people of Birmingham that their city was the second most vital and strategic point of attack in the entire nation (Pittsburg, which had more steel mills, was the most logical and susceptible target for attack, he said).

Always on guard against apathy, he repeatedly warned that America could very well lose the war. In a guest editorial which appeared in the *Rotarian*, Cole stated: "No one can say that the situation facing this country is anything less than serious. MacArthur and his boys are bravely fighting what in all probability is a losing fight. The battle in the Far East is going against us. Indications point to a long and destructive conflict. No one knows the price we must ultimately pay for victory. It is clear, however, that the duration of the contest is dependent in no small measure upon the determination of the 'Civilian Soldier' to take his or her place in the ranks and make whatever sacrifice the occasion demands."

This relentless media blitz had its effect on the public, especially when the allies suffered many serious defeats during the early stages of the war. The Tuscaloosa Exchange Club newsletter had this to say about Cole's warnings: "I had thought that our mutual friend, Houston Cole . . . was going around making speeches, unduly alarming us. Recent events have changed our thinking along those lines."

The Civilian Defense network was established several months before this country entered the war. In September of 1941 Cole attended a meeting of the Southern States Civilian Defense Conference in New Orleans. It was during this meeting that he became acquainted with Fiorella LaGuardia, one of the most popular mayors in the history of New York City. LaGuardia was attending the meeting as National Civilian Defense Director.

Other meetings would take Cole to the nation's capital in Washington, where the state maintained a room at the famous Willard Hotel.

Cole used the knowledge gained from the meetings with national Civilian Defense leaders to make Alabama's program a model of efficiency. He prepared an evacuation plan which was planned down to the last detail. To make sure telephone lines would not be tied up in the event of an attack, he asked the public to refrain from making unnecessary phone calls during the blackout period in Birmingham. Telephone operators at the *Birmingham Age-Herald* reported that not a single call was received during the 31 minute blackout.

To carry out the successful evacuation plan required an enormous number of volunteer workers, and he recruited over 3,000 people for the project. Speaking before the volunteer group at the Birmingham Municipal Auditorium, he told them he was afraid the wrath of the axis air power would be turned loose on them at any time. Speaking to another group at the Tutwiler Hotel, Cole said that ". . . 2,000 miles of ocean are no protection in a war fought with instruments that recognize neither time nor space."

Perhaps his most brilliant propaganda scheme was "Town Meetings of the Air," a series of radio broadcasts held at various cities across the state. Northport was chosen as the first town for the program, which was a forum on the town's participation in the war effort. Reports on defense activities, War Stamp and War Bond drives were also given at the forums. Nationally known politicians were often guests at the forums, such as the one held at Jacksonville on July 3, 1942.

Although organizing the Civilian Defense network was a staggering undertaking, an even greater task was in the making. When

it was determined in Washington that compulsory rationing was a necessity, a search was made for someone to head each state's rationing program. The Federal government organized an agency called the Office of Price Administration (OPA) which was placed under the leadership of Leon Henderson. Houston Cole, who had brought national attention to Alabama's Civilian Defense program, was at once offered the job as head of the state's OPA after a full endorsement by Governor Dixon.

It was quite a challenge and a tremendous responsibility. Cole now had direct control over how the three million Alabamians ate, purchased groceries or paid their rent. One newspaper called Cole's appointment "... the biggest job ever handed one man in the state." Always thinking ahead, Cole had already done some preliminary work in establishing rationing boards. An entirely new media campaign was initiated to educate the public in the need to ration items and to curb inflation by keeping prices under control.

Ration books were issued for critical items which were in short supply, such as sugar, shoes, gasoline, coffee, and tires. The distribution of the ration books alone was a complex and difficult problem but one which Cole met in stride. A survey, was conducted in July of 1942, and indicated that 98% of the Alabama stores and businesses were in compliance with OPA regulations. To ensure they stayed in compliance, Cole employed a staff of 25 people to make periodic inspections of the businesses.

Rationing affected virtually everyone in the state. One day a preacher from Covington County came into Cole's office with a tire over his shoulder. The preacher said it was his obligation to go into the entire world to spread the gospel, and he saw no justification in Cole's rationing plan. Another time a hearse had a flat while going to the cemetery and Cole was summoned to provide a new tire. He solved these minor problems with finesse but ruffled some feathers when he issued a news release suggesting that women of Alabama plan their bridge parties closer to home to save on gasoline.

Although Cole criss-crossed the state to organize his rationing program and monitor prices, even he was not altogether exempt from travel restrictions. Most of the time he was assigned a highway patrolman to drive him to his appointed engagements, but he had to be back in Montgomery each night by 10 o'clock. Sixteen hour workdays were common, and one reporter noted that his phone rang more than any other phone in Alabama.

Looking back on his successful career with the Civilian Defense and OPA, Cole credits being at the right place at the right time for being offered the jobs. His involvement with the Rotary Club pro-

vided him with the opportunity to meet many influential people and this, in turn, opened many doors of opportunity.

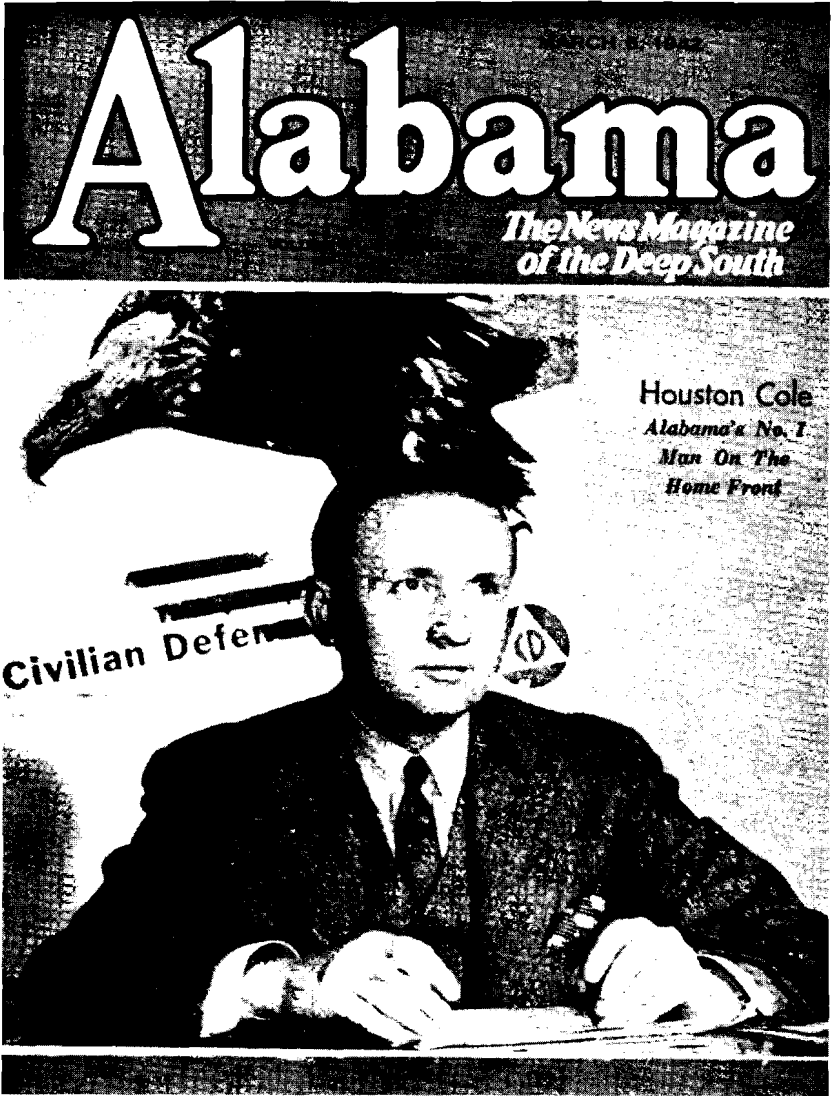
It was during Cole's years as a superintendent of education in Tuscaloosa that he began an involvement with Rotary which spanned well over half a century. He joined Rotary on the recommendation of his colleague at the University of Alabama, Dr. John McLure. Immediately upon joining the club, Cole's many talents were put to use as a speaker and organizer. He was soon elected president of the Tuscaloosa club. Dr. Richard Foster, president of the University of Alabama, was also a member of the Tuscaloosa Rotary Club, and was most impressed with Cole's enthusiasm and gift for public speaking. It was through this relationship that Dr. Foster hired Cole to work in the Public Relations Office at the University.

Following his success at jobs in Tuscaloosa and the Civilian Defense, Houston Cole became a household word in Alabama. In 1942 he was selected as man of the year by *Alabama* magazine. His picture appeared on the cover of the March 6, 1942 issue of the magazine, along with a caption which labeled him as "Alabama's number one man on the home front." The magazine said "Cole exhibits a cool genius for facing realities that mark him as one of the most practical educators who ever opened a textbook." It went on to say that he travelled 20,000 miles by plane in the first six months he was on the job, and that ". . . if the bombs fall on Alabama and somebody gets killed, it won't be Houston Cole's fault."

Opportunities for other jobs began to occur as the result of his outstanding record and rise to fame. His name was mentioned for the presidencies of both the University of Alabama and the Polytechnic Institute at Auburn. He was also urged by many people to consider running for governor.

In May of 1942 he attended a state-wide Rotary convention in Montgomery in a theatre next to the Whitley Hotel. Cole had lived at the hotel for the past two and a half years, using it as his base of operations. He had already served as district governor of Rotary, the highest state office of that organization, and had a part on the program. Also appearing on the program was Col. Harry M. Ayers, who was owner of a daily newspaper and an influential person in Alabama politics. At the conclusion of the meeting Col. Ayers called Cole aside and asked him if he would be interested in the presidency of Jacksonville State Teachers College, as there was an expected vacancy.

Although he had a good job as head of the Office of Price Administration, Cole knew the war would not last forever, and he had



*Alabama Magazine* honored Houston Cole as its man of the year in March of 1942.

the urge to return to the education profession. He was still on leave of absence from the University of Alabama and could have certainly returned there at the conclusion of the war. It was a difficult decision to make: choosing between his present job, the University of Alabama, or Jacksonville Teachers College. The war had drained the enrollment at the teachers college to only 119 students, which made the job offer there less attractive.

When C. W. Daugeette died in August of 1942, the presidency at Jacksonville came open, and Col. Ayers followed through on his inquiry by contacting Governor Dixon to recommend that Cole be given the job. Once again, Governor Dixon gave Cole his full endorsement.

Around the latter part of August of 1942, he received a call from his longtime friend, Congressman Joe Starnes of Guntersville, who told him that the State Board of Education had offered Cole the presidency of Jacksonville State Teachers College. Houston Cole was now at the most important vocational crossroads of his career, and he and his family pondered long and hard as to what would be best for them.



*Not all hard work . . .*

*Dr. Cole hosted Christmas Parties for children whose fathers were serving in Vietnam . . .*



*Oh, such rewards!!*