

## Chapter Three

# The Fine Art of Public Relations

By Opal R. Lovett

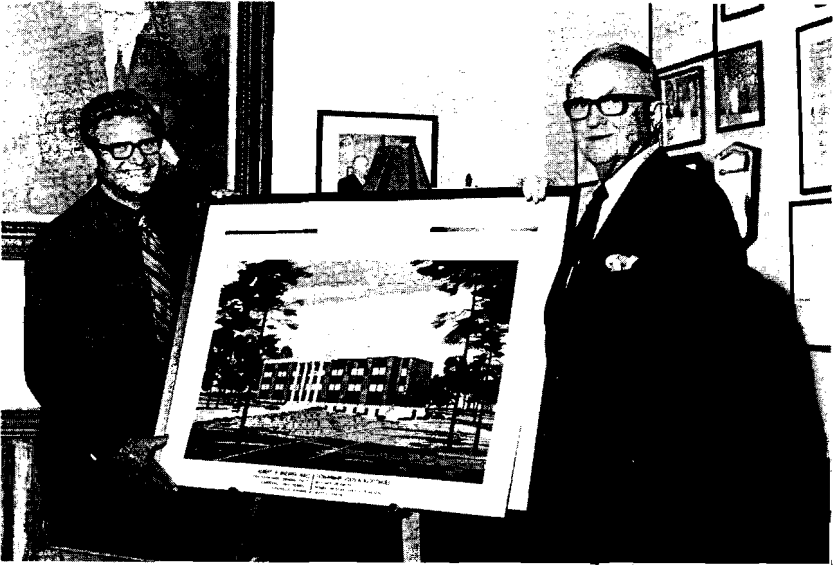
Traveling by foot and train, it took Houston Cole an entire day to reach Jacksonville Normal School to enroll in college. It was a long journey for the inexperienced young Lookout Mountain farm boy who would later become one of the state's top public relations experts.

Overhearing a remark from some classmates about an upcoming debate to the effect that they would have to "carry him" set fire under young Cole's determination to prove to the other debaters he could produce as well or better than anyone else.

Jacksonville State Normal had a debating society named after John C. Calhoun that was organized in 1884. By the time young Cole arrived on the scene, the society had grown and was divided into two groups. The other half was named for John T. Morgan. Houston Cole debated on the Morgan team and won. From that day on his speeches became popular and he was in demand. This is the first step in producing public relations — having something to say.

Cole already had a statewide reputation and an army of admirers. Becoming a college president, settling in Jacksonville, and leaving a high-ranking position created a great challenge from the outstart.

He was returning to his Alma Mater which had changed since he graduated. He inherited a faculty and student body who were



*Opal R. Lovett, seldom seen in a picture, and Dr. Cole display the architect's rendering of Brewer Hall.*

in the throes of grieving for their deceased president. Also he was working with the OPA in the transition of its new director.

Challenge is the second step in public relations. He started with the students by organizing a student government. This drew the attention of the press and radio.

Now he was on his way to reaping the immeasurable benefits of public relations. More was to come. He also began changing and adding to the curriculum, as well as to the physical structure of the school.

The press liked Cole. His administration was sending out more stories about the students. He sponsored events for the students, as well as for the faculty and the community, that interested the press. This was the third step in good public relations.

Among some of the first changes were the adding of a business department and putting in a major in that field.

Meanwhile he was inviting business leaders and the press to his now growing student body. His programs and events on government attracted the attention of state legislators and national lawmakers — more press.

One of his tools was the International House Program, which not only brought local, state and national publicity but also international exposure.

While his football program was getting started after World War II, the basketball team went to the National Tournament in Denver.



*Violinist Rubinoff and his wife discuss the fine violin with Dr. Cole before a performance on campus in 1945.*

*More national press.* It took little time for a much publicized, undefeated football team to go to three postseason bowl games in just that many years. A balance of sports, academics, and entertainment gave him publicity in all sections of the papers. Jacksonville's now famous music program was developed in his early years and resulted in more and more press coverage. This program took little time in getting carried nationally on television.

His fourth step in good public relations was an old adage, "doing good and letting others know about it." For example, in 1953 Dr. Cole was the state Chairman of the Crusade for Freedom drive. Like the war effort work in the past, he was in the eyes of the public, doing good for a good cause. To publicize the crusade, a dynamic approach had to be taken. The something extraordinary was planning for the Communists to invade Jacksonville. The key here was the plans. Many hundreds of people were to be involved. The SGA

president and the ROTC students were eager to help. The operation had to be a well-guarded secret for it to work. The plans were laid. The press was called and told. They jumped at the idea and said not only would they send reporters but also photographers. The entire town, the college and high school were to be captured.

The night before, all the press and photographers came to get everything set to go at dawn for the surprise element had to work for the full effect. The time approached, but an unpredicted tornado struck and forced the cancellation of the event. Everyone agreed to keep the secret and return the next week. Fear that the secret would leak on the project of this magnitude lurked everywhere.

The following week the reporters and photographers returned. Amazingly, those involved had kept the secret. The ROTC cadets, wearing white shirts and red markings, were dressed like Communists. They marched on the schools "arresting" teachers, students, and staff. Loading them on the trucks, they started toward town. The high school students were already being marched to the same destination up town. Along the way, some members of the ROTC outfitted with a special harness were hanged from limbs of trees that lined the street. Wrecked bicycles and boys posing as executed paperboys were lying here and there. Occasionally a few members of the marching "prisoners" would break and run. The "Communists" fired blanks at them and they would fall as if they were dying. Back at the library old books were piled outside and burned. The post office was captured. Ministers of all the churches, city officials, and the local newspaper editor were rounded up. When the crowds came to the town's square, the ministers were bound, blindfolded, and "shot." The fire whistles were sounding and smoke grenades were set off in old buildings to add to the effect. The photographers and reporters were having a field day.

Everything went well because thousands gathered near the town square to see what was going on. At the peak of the scheme, a low flying plane flew over dropping Crusade for Freedom leaflets into the surprised crowd.

The next three or four days everyone across the state and in this section of the country read stories and saw pictures about what could happen if there were no freedom. Cole had a good follow-up report for the state Crusade for Freedom group when they met in Birmingham.

Three decades of everyday activity would be too much to write about, but most of it was just as exciting.

Taking a normal situation and putting a different slant or viewpoint on it made the difference from something ordinary to

something that would catch the attention of the press and the public. Case in point: the Gem of the Hills featured photographs of beautiful coeds using topical themes that became popular, regular features in the daily and weekly publications. Two wire services also carried these releases.

Another popular activity was the sponsorship of a Christmas party for the children of all servicemen whose families were residing in the Jacksonville area during the Vietnam War. Press coverage for many years was tremendous.

Wide coverage in the media gave participants in landmark events recognition for their personal, academic or civic achievements, including science fairs, women's clubs, conventions, music events, Student Conferences on American Government, and many others. The beauty contests included Miss JSU, Miss Mimosa, Homecoming Queen, and Class Beauties. Some went on to win on the state level and one became the first runner-up to Miss America on the national level.

During Cole's tenure he saw the changing of the school's name twice, the colors of the school once, and the changing of its mascot. Full advantage of wide press coverage was taken in each of these events.

The much deserved and overdue recognition was given the state classroom teacher when he organized and sponsored the Teacher Hall of Fame. Prepublicity and the follow-up publicity were enjoyed by JSU, the individual candidates, and their school system throughout the state. This recognition will continue forever.

Dr. Cole named a building after the governor who named him president. Years later the family donated some fifty thousand dollars to be used for scholarships to Jacksonville. Benefits from good relations go on and on.

Cole not only kept a record of the column inches published in the papers but had a weekly chart of them. He called those involved into the office every week and showed them the report, along with the measurements of all the other schools in those same papers.

PR work in the early years had to be carefully coordinated. The press did not have the reporters and photographers to cover events very far from their home base. Their deadlines, the transportation and distance to the papers had to be considered. The material had to be hand delivered or placed on a bus to reach them by deadline. Most of the time, the photographs had to be taken just before an event and processed during the event in order for the pictures to be on their way to meet a deadline. The story was called in. In some cases when a reporter would come, he or she would carry an ex-

posed film back to the paper. This routine, considered spot news, was followed on all events. On features the material was always mailed.

Every effort was made to make it convenient for the press. A day late story is like a day old fish — it stinks.

In later years when the papers became more affluent, they began to staff the events with their personnel.

Because of the complexity of all that went into a well-planned event, sooner or later something had to go wrong. The crowning of Dorothy Thompson "Miss Groundhog Day" was not well received. Another time a big ending for a festivity called for the ROTC to lower the flag from its pole that was located in the quadrangle. Many people were present, the cameras were all in focus, the band played, and the flag was lowered. A howitzer was fired, and the concussion from the blast caused window panes to break and fall at intervals for about fifteen minutes. It was not a pretty sight.

The A Cappella Choir was getting good reviews and their Christmas program was going to be a living Christmas tree. The huge risers were built into the shape of a Christmas tree. The choir dressed; photographs were made. Before they could be used to announce the program, however, a tornado struck the campus and damaged the auditorium. The school was forced to close early for Christmas. The program didn't happen, and the pictures and stories were never used. However, the storm damages and repairs were photographed and sent out with stories that were widely used.

Another plan that went awry will show how complex PR can sometime become.

"What's Your Problem?", a popular television talk show on a Birmingham station, gave great PR for JSU. Dr. Cole was the moderator for that program, and he was going to have a noted speaker who was appearing at JSU on the program. Naturally the time element had to be considered. The talk show panel had to be in the studio in Birmingham with the TV crew to record the program. A fast convoy was to rush the speaker and Dr. Cole to Birmingham just after she addressed the student body and faculty. The train on which the speaker was traveling to Piedmont was late. The students and faculty were assembled in the Leone Cole Auditorium waiting. The train finally arrived. The speaker would not allow the driver bringing her from Piedmont to travel any faster than 45 miles per hour. She was afraid to ride fast, her reason for not flying. The crowd waited. She finally arrived and give her talk but refused to be rushed to Birmingham to appear on the TV program.

The difference in not being heard of and being known can be compared thusly: a teacher in the Birmingham School System didn't

know where Jacksonville was. After Cole's programs started, a testimonial was given by one of his alumni. This alumnus was employed at a Pepperell textile plant as a supervisor. He was in a staff meeting, along with some foreign visitors. Everyone was asked to give his school. The Jacksonville man gave his and said they probably had never heard of it. To his surprise, the people from India said they knew about it through the International House Program.

Public relations will be reflected one way or the other by an institution's personnel and its programs. Some far-reaching, positive notes were sounded when Cole turned the food program around by bringing James Haywood to the campus and putting him in charge of the food services. A mushrooming reputation sprang up when his meals melted in the palates of the students, faculty, and visitors. Some of the many visitors that helped to spread this fame include Sen. Barry Goldwater, Johnny Weismuller, Paul Harvey, Doug Edwards, Sen. John Sparkman, a number of governors, and many others.

More than a half dozen citations came declaring the excellence of the food and service. Full-page articles appeared in newspapers, along with color pictures, telling of the great banquets. Some were



*Dr. Cole and Governor Albert Brewer admire James Haywood's ice sculpture before enjoying one of Haywood's exotic buffets.*

for the legislature in Montgomery and some at the Governor's Mansion. Jacksonville was the first institution of higher learning to be awarded the "Gold Cup Award" by the Coffee Brewing Institute. This recognition was another outlet for valuable publicity.

Cole's professional staff included Mrs. Clifford Coffee, Opal R. Lovett, Gus Edwards, Finus Gaston, Jack Hopper, and Rudy Abbott.

The material used in this article came in part from the files of the *Teacola*, *Collegian*, *Chanticleer*, the *Mimosa*, and the scrapbooks of clippings from newspapers that are housed in the Houston Cole Library. Most of the events in this article were witnessed by its author.



*Dr. Cole and Community P. R.*