

On the Job

Local Story Leads Reporter to China

By GREG STEPANICH

City Editor, *The Stuart News*

American journalists are no strangers to that ancient romance known as fascination with China, a condition that has affected observers from Marco Polo on down to Bill Clinton. If anything, interest has only grown in the years since the Tiananmen Square uprising of June 1989.

So it was with a sense of historic mission and pursuit of a local story that *The Stuart News* — a newspaper with a daily circulation of 39,465 — sent a reporter to China in the company of a hometown entrepreneur

The reporter we chose for the assignment, Andrew Conte, has been with the newspaper for about a year. He's a graduate of Dickinson College, where he edited the college newspaper, and Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. Before joining our staff, he worked as an associate for Washington columnist Jack Anderson.

Andy accompanied Henry "Skip" Clements, a one-time CIA operative who's taken up the citrus business. Clements was meeting with Chinese officials about bringing his fruit into their country.

Florida's orange and grapefruit growers have been trying for years to find new markets for their produce, which in supply far outstrips demand, keeping prices too low for

them to make a profit. An entree into China, with more than 1 billion potential customers, could mean for some citrus merchants the difference between prosperity and selling off their grovelands to home builders.

But the trip to China earlier this year was not all that easy to organize. To begin with, there was the

'... the China trip showed our readers that their newspaper was willing to pursue a special story if need be, and give them something truly out of the ordinary to read.'

seemingly simple question of filing copy. Although there was no technological barrier to sending stories, there was another, more serious impediment, having to do with politics and bureaucracy.

Sam Mok, one of the businessmen joining Clements on his trip, broke it to Andy: You can't file any stories while you're there. You have to wait until you get back. Mok told us there were a limited number of journalist visas available, and to apply for one would



Stuart News reporter Andrew Conte, left, at the Great Wall near Beijing with Henry "Skip" Clements, a Stuart businessman who traveled to China on a mission to sell Florida citrus and fruit juices.

take months. Without one, we wouldn't be allowed to file.

But there was a way out.

In order to go, Andy would have to travel as a member of Clements' entourage, and send a letter to the Chinese Embassy telling them that although he was a journalist working for the News, he did not plan to conduct official interviews for publication while he was there.

Mok's news almost scuttled the trip. We were the only local paper going to China for this event; why should we agree to hold back?

We wrestled with this for a couple of anxious days, finally deciding that Andy's reports would have value to our readers regardless where they were filed.

So Andy got his passport and he practiced shooting photos (we could send a reporter, but couldn't afford a photographer, too). Almost before we knew it, he was airborne, on his way to an unprecedented story for the News.

The China itinerary included stops in Beijing, Chengdu, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Jintang and Hong Kong. Andy called the desk

each day to tell us how things were going. It was a thrill to talk to him over all those miles and hear about what he was seeing.

The trip began well. By the second day, Clements was talking about sealing a deal with the Chinese for importing some of his citrus. He was going to have to send juice, not fruit, but it was a breakthrough nonetheless. Although Andy had to wait until he got back to report the good news, we had a scoop.

Or so we thought.

The next morning (our time; China is 12 hours ahead of Eastern Daylight Time), everything changed. Morning listeners to a Stuart radio program heard the host talking to his friend, Skip Clements, by phone from Beijing, about the citrus deal he was cutting with his Chinese hosts. The program didn't last long, but it was long enough to scoop us. Quickly, we contacted Andy in Beijing and told him all agreements were off: We needed a story.

Andy got to work. But how would we get a story when he couldn't file

Next page please

On the Job



Chinese fruit vendors sort through a box of apples that were probably brought into the country through the Hong Kong black market.

20

anything? Mok came up with a solution: Write a letter home and fax it. So Andy faxed a "letter" to our lawyer that began like an ordinary missive home: "Dear Rob — Everything's fine. Beijing is a wonderful city ..." and then segued to the real story a couple paragraphs later.

That's the routine we followed for the rest of the trip. Andy would let us know if he had a story for the day, and then fax us a "letter." Andy also sent us some photos while he was in China, popping a couple dozen rolls of film into a pouch in Beijing for DHL to fly over to us. His photos turned out well, and we had art to illustrate his work while he was still there.

What we didn't know until Andy returned was how carefully he had been watched on the trip.

"I found out that in Beijing they were actually watching me in my bathroom," Andy told us.

The reports Andy sent back were fascinating for fans of Chinese history and culture. He talked to a wide spectrum of Chinese, from

ordinary urbanites to farmers, from ex-Communist cadres to government officials. He gave his readers a compelling picture of a China in the midst of an economic revolution, its people shed of Mao coats and toting cellular phones, making deals and dreaming of making a killing in stocks.

All told, he filed about a dozen lengthy stories, most of which we later ran as a special package (China: Opening the Door) in the paper and on our Web site. Several of the stories were breaking news about an important business deal, but more than that, the China trip showed our readers that their newspaper was willing to pursue a special story if need be, and give them something truly out of the ordinary to read.

It remains one of the most exciting journeys the News has ever taken.



13 Days In China

Excerpts from a Reporter's Diary

Stuart News reporter Andrew Conte kept a diary during his trip to China that's both insightful and entertaining. Excerpts follow. For the complete text, visit the Scripps Howard News Web site at www.scripps.com/shnews

By ANDREW CONTE

Reporter, The Stuart News

Day 1: We arrived in the Chinese capital after traveling by airplane for more than 21 hours, including 14 hours on a non-stop flight from Detroit to Beijing. The sun never set as we moved west, and this feels like the longest day I've ever lived through. Actually, it was two days after crossing the International Dateline.

Day 2: The Chinese have a saying that "to eat is to try." We have only been here two days, but we have already eaten and tried a lot. Chinese banquets can last for hours and include everything from deep-fried scorpions to cobra. Many of the dishes are stir-fried, as in Chinese-American restaurants at home, but most of the ingredients are unfamiliar. Chicken stir-fry, for example, often comes with the head displayed on the plate.

Day 3: Beijing seems to be two distinct cities: old and new. Riding on a major thoroughfare through the capital today, we saw a horse-drawn cart trotting alongside German, Japanese and American luxury cars. Earlier, we visited two business offices that could have been separated by a hundred years in time rather than a few city blocks.

Day 5: Chinese factories make everything from Nike shoes to children's toys, and Beijing has developed its own style of factory outlets. Near the U.S. Embassy, Chinese vendors have taken over a city street to create an open-air shopping area called the Silk Market ... Most of the items apparently are either rejects or products that have been set aside for the black market.

Day 7: 10:30 p.m. - An airplane skidded off the runway at Shanghai International Airport 11 hours ago, and because of that I'm sitting in a cramped bus on a dark, deserted highway. We left Chengdu at 4 p.m. for a two-hour flight to Shanghai, but the pilots diverted our flight to Nanjing just before landing. In almost every way, the Chinese airline, China Southern, acted like an American one. None of the flight attendants had any useful information and only told us to patiently wait for answers. The travelers also acted like Americans. They gathered around the ticket counter shoving each other and demanding answers from the airline employees. But unlike in the United States, as the crowd started getting surly, 10 Chinese police officers in green uniforms lined up around the terminal gate. For \$40 a person, we are being treated to a rickety bus ride through the Chinese countryside at night. Cold wind whips through the windows, and I will have to curl in a ball around my luggage to try to sleep.

Day 9: Last night, a friend and I rode in a bicycle taxi, the two of us sitting on a back bench as a man pedaled in front. Bicycles are a popular form of cheap transportation throughout Chinese cities ... I could not help but think about the thousands of Chinese who die in bicycle accidents each year.

Day 10: Posters in every city we have visited advertise the movie *Titanic*, and tickets are hard to get at some theaters. In Beijing, people were paying \$10 to see the movie, and in Shanghai, tickets to some showings were available only through the black market. Chinese audiences could choose to see the film in English with subtitles or dubbed into Cantonese and Mandarin. Most of the Chinese I have talked with enjoyed the movie, and the young women have swooned over the movie's leading man, Leonardo DiCaprio. But almost every man seems to have the same complaint about DiCaprio's co-star Kate Winslet: She's too fat.

Day 13: We just left Hong Kong for the United States, and I cannot wait to get home.