

## Bill Stall

by Suzanne B. Bopp  
Alumnews editor

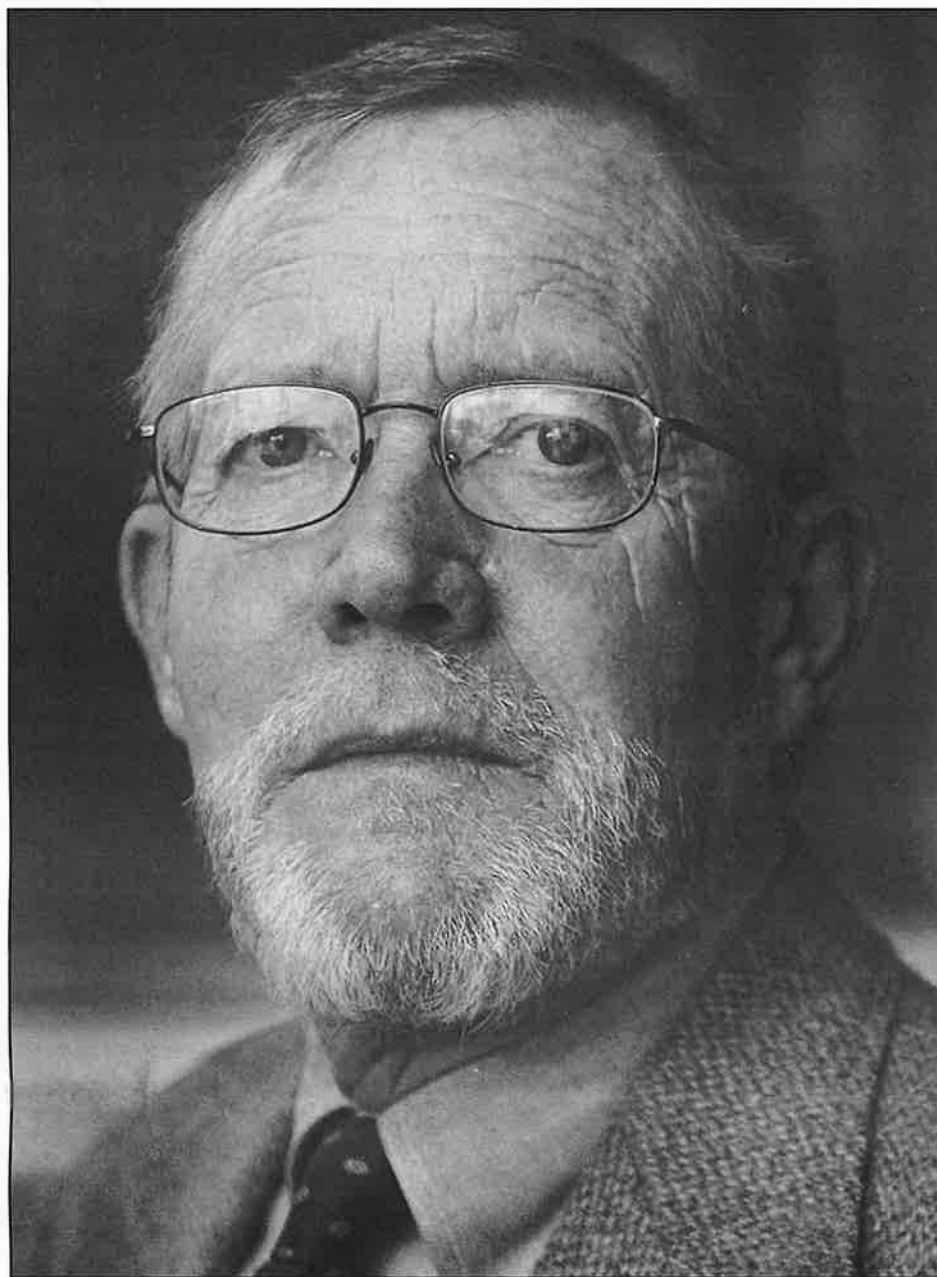
**W**hat does a journalist do when he learns he's won a Pulitzer Prize, the most prestigious award in the world of American arts and letters? If the journalist is Bill Stall, he drinks a little bit of champagne and heads back to work.

Not that he wasn't thrilled, but Stall is not easily distracted from his work, which is writing several editorials a week for the L.A. Times. In 2004, Stall's editor submitted a series of five of those editorials, plus two follow-up pieces, to the Pulitzer committee. All the pieces dealt with the same broad topic: "why California's government is so messed up," as Stall says. Those have been hot topics in California and consequently were natural subjects for editorial responses from the paper. Stall's prize-winning editorials not only detailed the problems - such as term limits, redistricting and budget deadlocks - but also suggested solutions.

Stall was unaware that the Pulitzer judges were considering his work until his editor told him he was a finalist. Stall was stunned. A month later, the phone rang, and Stall found out he'd won. "I said, 'Are you sure?'" Stall says.

The road that led to that moment began with a job as a reporter in Laramie. Stall and his family had come to Wyoming after his father quit his job and moved the family to a ranch near Big Horn. They never made a go of the ranch - it was too small to be viable, Stall says - but they stayed in Wyoming. His father went into the newspaper business; he owned the weekly Sheridan County Independent from 1947 through 1949, when it folded, having unsuccessfully tried to compete with the daily paper there. The paper was a family operation: Stall's brother ran the press; his mother did the book-keeping; the woman who became his sister-in-law was the proofreader.

Stall's father, who had some previous newspaper experience with papers in Buffalo and Philadelphia, taught him some things about the



Bill Stall (BS '59)

business. "He told great stories that I never paid much attention to," he says. "Later I wished I had."

When Stall graduated from Big Horn High School in 1955, he returned east for a semester at the University of Pennsylvania, where he intended to study physics. It didn't take him long to discover his math skills were insufficient for a physics career, so he returned to Wyoming and enrolled at UW as a journalism major, figuring that was a business he knew something about.

While in school, he became the sports editor, and thus the entire sports staff, of the Laramie Daily Bulletin. At that time, Laramie had two papers: the Bulletin and the Evening Republican Boomerang. The papers soon merged, and Stall became a general reporter for the resulting paper, a position he held for two years, showing up after class every day to cover the courthouse and the police station.

After graduation, Stall completed one term at Northwestern University,

then returned to Wyoming for a job with the Associated Press in Cheyenne. The newspaper business moved him around the country: to Reno, Sacramento, Los Angeles, Hartford (Conn.), and back to Sacramento. Most of the time, he worked as a reporter covering politics and government. An editor once approached him to ask if he might be interested in editorial writing, but Stall said no. He preferred being a reporter.

So that's what he was doing when he ran into the editor of the L.A. Times editorial page. She told Stall she'd been thinking about having an editorial writer in Sacramento to cover California politics from there. This time Stall accepted. He has been there ever since.

Writing editorials proved to be quite different from the reporting work he knew so well. One is opinion; one is balanced, objective reporting. "Reporters view editorial writing as the old stereotype of the writer in the ivory tower, thinking up things

to write," he says. "You're taught all your professional life to keep your opinion out of your stories. The first day I sat down to write an editorial. Then I went to the deputy editor and said, 'How do you write an editorial?'" The editor suggested it might help to remember a plaque he himself had once seen; the plaque asked, "What is it you're trying to say?"

Stall's own advice today echoes that thought. Two ideas that guide his own editorial writing still are: keep it simple, and start from a point.

What sets apart great editorial writing, according to the Pulitzer Web site, is: "...clearness of style, moral purpose, sound reasoning, and power to influence public opinion in what the writer conceives to be the right direction."

Stall's beat is state government, so at the paper's thrice-weekly editorial meetings, he talks to editors about what's happening in that world and they decide what to cover. On most issues, the paper has developed its position over the years; the ultimate decision is the publisher's. "Sometimes we'll stake out a new position," Stall says. "The paper has always been against the death penalty. When Timothy McVeigh's case came up, the editors decided to make an exception. The thinking was that the crime was so massive, it was justified."

Stall has been surprised that beyond an occasional letter to the editor and a phone call now and then, he doesn't hear much response to his editorials. That doesn't mean they're not having an impact. "A lot of the time, you're writing for a select audience - members of legislature or the governor," he says. "You're trying to influence the things they're doing. Reader may pick up the phone and call their legislators. If I write a story supporting a certain bill, at a committee hearing the sponsor will have a copy of that editorial on the desk of every legislator before they meet."

The Pulitzer has changed his life little. He heard from many old friends and colleagues with congratulatory messages and spent part of the \$10,000 check, which arrived with an IRS form, on a watercolor of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. But now while he's crafting his editorials, he can gaze at a Tiffany's crystal paperweight on his desk bearing the bust of William Pulitzer. ♣

*The UW Distinguished Alumni Award recognizes people who have distinguished themselves in their profession or career.*