

As read at the Indianapolis Literary Club meeting on April 15,  
2024 by David E. Young

“UP, UP, AND AWAY IN MY BEAUTIFUL BALLOON”

After a stint in the US Army and several years of college, I decided it was time to enter the work force. I came from a family of small-town accountants and bankers and I was sure I didn't want to go into business. Teaching didn't appeal to me and I didn't see much of a future in journalism although writing had always been important to me. So, I decided to go into government work and took the civil service test. Soon I got a call from the US Civil Service Commission in Chicago. They liked my test score and were pleased that I had had a high-level security clearance in the U.S. Army. They gave me a conditional offer as a hearings officer and after I was checked out I reported to their office in Chicago in August 1966.

Most of my new colleagues were WW2 vets and many had gone to law school on the GI Bill, but either didn't pass the bar or, lacking connections and outstanding credentials, found that the opportunities for a young lawyer to earn a decent salary were mighty slim. After several months, a vacancy opened in Indianapolis.

The Director wanted to send an experienced hearing officer there, but there were no volunteers. Indianapolis in the 1960's was a pretty grim place. I gathered that my new buddies thought that Hoosiers were hicks and that the capital city was really called Indy-No-Place. I loved the energy of Chicago but it was wearing me out. When the chief put the arm on me to return to my native state, I did not resist.

My new office was on the top floor of the old Century Building at 36 South Pennsylvania. It was very spartan and small. I would work there until the Thomas Building fire melted the insulation on the pipes that ran along the ceiling and I was moved to a swell office in the U.S. Courthouse.

One of my duties was to officiate at due process hearings for civil servants who were being involuntarily separated from their jobs. With a few exceptions they were low-level postal workers or veterans' administration employees who were being let go for performance issues. In those days it was much harder to discharge a federal civil servant and the only sure-fire way was to document job abandonment. Most of these fellows (almost all were African-American males) had problems with alcohol and had trouble showing up for work on a regular basis. After receiving many chances to shape up, their absences were written up and finally they were told they would have to go. They were also told they could appeal their removal to the mighty U.S. Civil Service Commission.

That's where I came in. The about-to-be fired employee would appear in my office and would be represented by someone from their union. The federal agency would send someone from their personnel office to make the case. Then we would have a discussion which was recorded on a dicta-graph (an early version of the Dictaphone). I doubt that the sessions were ever transcribed. Rules of evidence were never a consideration and real lawyers were rarely involved. I would summarize the discussion and send the results to the Regional Director who invariably generated a letter of removal which was sent to me. I then had the unpleasant duty of hand-delivering the letter to the appellant. That was years before the phrase "going postal" entered our vocabulary.

Finally, I will get to the point of this essay. One fine day an appellant appeared with a lawyer. That lawyer was Nelson Grills. I forgot the case almost immediately, but I never forgot Nelson Grills. He made his case with great passion. You would have thought the appellant was not merely being fired but was facing the firing squad. After he left, I didn't often think of him but his name would regularly come up in the news. I never met him again. When I read his obituary, which I am convinced he himself wrote, I resolved to learn more about him and so tonight he is the subject of my talk. I hope that some of you remember him and can add something to this discussion.

Nelson Grover Grills was born on April 26, 1912 in Decatur, Illinois and was the oldest of three children. His father was a railroad foreman and soon moved his family to Hammond, Indiana where he worked for the Indiana Harbor Belt Railway. Nelson attended Hammond Technical High School where he graduated at the age of sixteen and then spent the next two years working for his father's railroad where he was quickly promoted to knocker in the marshaling yard. The knocker was a trouble shooter who had memorized the tracks and switches and knew how to assemble a train by moving cars from incoming trains to outgoing trains. He so impressed his co-workers that they took up a collection to send him to Indiana University at Bloomington, Indiana. Nelson was grateful to the union and became a dedicated union man all of his life, often offering his services pro bono after he became an attorney.

Nelson thrived at IU. He had played football in high school, but was more suited to wrestling and pursued that in college. He pledged Sigma Alpha Epsilon and earned his room and board by tutoring his fraternity brothers who were not so academically inclined. After graduating from what is now known as the McKinsey School of Business, he entered Indiana University School of Law where he also did well and supported himself by

teaching business law in the business school.

He was admitted to the Indiana Bar in 1937. He taught business law at McKinsey from 1937 to 1939. In 1940 he was awarded a \$1,500 fellowship to study law at Columbia University and studied there until WWII broke out. On September 14, 1940 he married Reva Rawles McMahon, also the child of a railroad worker. Reva herself, a Tri-Delt, had graduated from IU and was working the bursar's office there when they were married. They immediately left on a honeymoon trip in Nelson's Oldsmobile convertible coup with \$300 savings to start a new life in New York City.

A few months after they arrived in New York, Reva and Nelson were profiled in a lengthy article in the March, 1941 issue of the Ladies Home Journal. The magazine had a long-running feature called "How America Lives." The article was headed "Meet the Grills of New York City."

At first, they lived in a Manhattan hotel at the rate of \$3.50 per day, Reva found a job as an information girl at Rockefeller Center where she received \$95 a month, working six days a week with Wednesdays off. This brought their yearly income up to \$2,100 a year after \$400 was deducted from Nelson's fellowship for tuition.

By luck, a spacious one-room newly constructed apartment soon became available. It was a fifteen minute walk from his office at Columbia and near a subway entrance. The rent was \$47 per month which was about 25% of their income. By Hoosier standards, New York was expensive even then. Reva and Nelson, who had both grown up in working-class families, were ardent supporters of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Nelson paid \$6 per month to store his Oldsmobile which was rarely out of the garage. Their only luxury was fine dining once a week. They brought a handsome radio-phonograph with them and

enjoyed listening to Fibber McGee & Molly, Bob Hope, and Jack Benny. Their favorite serial was "One Man's Family." At the end of the article, the writer mused on the emerging role of women who worked while taking care of their families, always subordinating themselves to the career needs of their husbands. The article concluded: "Time and Money. Youngsters tackling New York have never had enough of either. They have their nerve with them. But nerve is a good thing for anyone to have along when experiencing both marriage and New York for the first time."

At the end of the school year, Nelson took a job as an attorney with the U.S. Department of the Treasury in Washington, D.C. while completing his thesis. When war broke out after Pearl Harbor, he joined the U.S. Navy as a commissioned officer. Columbia later granted him a master of laws degree in 1942. His thesis was "The Use of Sanctions in Creating Effective Statutory Law."

After training, Nelson was assigned to a Navy Lighter-Than-Air Squadron based at Richmond Naval Air Station in the swamps west of Miami. As a Lieutenant and First Pilot he commanded a blimp manned by a crew of ten. Crews rotated among blimps, but Nelson is associated with Navy Blimp K-74 of Squadron ZP21. The squadron's mission was to patrol the shipping lanes around Key West where American cargo ships carried war material between the east and west coasts via the Panama Canal.

The Florida Straits between Florida and Cuba were narrow and much freight cargo was concentrated there. Several Caribbean islands sympathetic to Germany or Vichy France provided clandestine support to German U-boats which sank a vast tonnage of goods. The blimps were equipped with radar and were on the look-out for them. In those days, submarines were powered by batteries charged by diesel engines. They had to surface periodically to run the diesels to charge up the batteries.

When submarines were spotted, the blimps were supposed to radio the Naval Air Station and fighter-bombers would respond in an attempt to destroy the submarines. It may not have been spelled out in the Navy regulations, but it was understood that the blimps were not to directly engage with surfaced enemy vessels.

At twenty minutes before midnight on July 18, 1943, Nelson's crew picked up a radar image and later spotted in the bright moonlight a surfaced German submarine, later identified as U-134. It was resting a few miles off the Florida Keys near passing merchant cargo traffic. Nelson decided to attack the sub. Blimp K-47 was equipped with four 500 pound Mark VII depth charges to bother submerged subs and a .50 caliber machine gun for defense. The blimp moved over the sub and sprayed the submarine with 100 rounds of machine gun fire. There was some question as to whether the depth charges were released. The sub returned machine gun fire punching holes in the blimp which slowly descended to the gulf while the sub sailed away without submerging.

Call it the fog of war or SNAFU, Blimp K-74 was in a world of trouble. Their radio was unable to call for help other than a mayday call relayed to another blimp. The life raft was not secured and drifted away before the crew could board it, and ominously, the crew believed that the depth charges had not been released or jettisoned and were threatening to explode. Was there a fault in the release mechanism or some deficiency in the training of the bombardier, Machinist Mate Isadore Stressel? It is also possible that Stressel did not hear the repeated "bombs away" command from Lt. Grills. There were some accounts, including from the Germans, that loud explosions heard by several were in fact the deployed depth charges.

Unfortunately, Stressel could not be interrogated because he was eaten by a shark. Nelson became separated from his crew and

swam or floated several miles toward dry land. The rest of the crew clung to the floating wreckage and paddled away for thirteen hours until they were rescued by a U.S. Navy submarine chaser, USS SC-657 and the destroyer USS Dahlgren. Nelson who had stayed aboard to destroy classified material, was rescued after nineteen hours in the water some distance from his crew.

After the crew had left the area, the U-boot returned to the slowly sinking control car to gather intelligence. The control car was about the size of a school bus and hung down from the 343 foot Class N Naval Blimp. The Class N blimps were manufactured by the Goodyear Rubber Company in Akron, Ohio. I spent some time there in the 1970's investigating a personnel matter, but they never told me how blimps might be used in nuclear warfare. I had no "need to know." Goodyear discontinued making the Class N blimps in 1962. Much later it was speculated that at least two of the depth charges were not released. The release mechanism was relatively complicated and may have jammed. Those depth charges may have become water-logged and ineffective before they reached their assigned depth. The U-boot then headed east toward its home base in Vichy France. En route, it handed off its daily log or Kriegstagesbuch and whatever other intelligence they had to another vessel.

The U.S Navy brass were not happy with Lt. Grills and some wanted to court-martial him. It was the summer of 1943 and the war was not going particularly well for the Americans. The court martial never happened, but Nelson had a cloud over his head for many years. In October, 1952 he requested that he be recalled to active duty so that he could clear up the record. His request was denied. Finally, after many years, the records of the German Navy were translated and made available. The recovered Kriegstagesbuch told a different story. The record showed that U-134 was in fact disabled by the blimp attack and was unable to submerge. Apparently, some of the depth charges had indeed

been released. The sub limped back toward its repair base in France and was sunk by the British Air Force near the Azores before it reached its harbor. The U.S. Department of Defense determined that the action of Lt. Grills prevented an attack on at least one merchant ship and awarded him The Distinguished Flying Cross on October 13, 1960. The citation on the DFC states that the award is for "heroism or extraordinary achievement while participating in an aerial flight." Nelson remained active in the US Naval Reserve until 1965 when he retired with the rank of Commander. He regretted the loss of the bombardier, Machinist Mate Isadore Stressel and attended his memorial service in July, 1997. At the service, he gave credit to Stressel for releasing the depth charges which damaged the German submarine.

After the war, Nelson moved his wife and family from Hammond to Indianapolis where he taught law in the old Mannerchor building at the corner of New York and Illinois streets from 1946 to 1952. The Mannerchor housed the Indianapolis division of the IU School of Law. He was a good teacher and a good scholar, having written several legal articles while teaching. However, he was unsatisfied and felt that he could make a better contribution if he got into politics. He opened a law practice in the Circle Tower Building on Monument Circle and signed up as a precinct committeeman. He rapidly advanced to become Marion County Democratic Chair and also Democratic Chair of the 11th Congressional district which then included Indianapolis. In 1953, he also became the minority attorney for the Indiana House of Representatives. He served in the Indiana Senate from 1959 to 1967.

One of Nelson's first initiatives was to consolidate the various governmental units in Marion County into one city-county government. There was some support for this, but the Indiana General Assembly was divided between Democrats and Republicans and he was never able to bring a bill to vote. Ten



years later, this was accomplished when the Republicans controlled both houses and the governor's office and Uni-Gov was born.

He was a strong advocate of the "one man, one vote" philosophy and had resolved to make his mark in the reapportionment of legislative districts. A righteous reapportionment would have given more seats to Indiana's metropolitan areas, including Indianapolis, which he represented. But the rural interests which had long dominated the state Assembly would not even vote the reapportionment bill out of committee. Frustrated, Nelson came up with a plan. A close reading of the Indiana Constitution disclosed that every bill introduced into the legislature required a reading in its entirety before the sitting legislature. Finding that cumbersome, as over a thousand bills were usually introduced each session, The Assembly adopted the custom of reading a bill only by its title in the first, second, and third reading.

On February 20, 1959, Nelson invoked this provision and the Indiana Senate ground to a halt as four clerks began simultaneously reading bills that had been introduced. This event became known jokingly as the "Grillibuster." Both Democrats and Republicans were upset and put pressure on Grills to relent, but he stood fast. The late Paul Ogden, a blogging lawyer and anti-establishment Republican, wrote about this, noting that the now defunct Indianapolis Times (considered to be a Democrat newspaper) supported Grills.

According to Ogden, "Committee chairman Willis K. Batchelet of Angola refused to budge, stating that if Grills succeeded, he would 'set a precedent that would light a fire and burn the Statehouse down.'" Criticism mounted from his own party and from the Republican Governor, Harold W. Handley. Nelson persisted for nine days, until he yielded on February 28, 1959. He vowed that he would continue the fight when the Indiana Senate

reconvened to the 1961 “long session.”

I can't find any source that says that the Grillbuster was used again. On November 6, 1984, Article 4, Section 14 of the Indiana Constitution was amended to read:

“Every bill shall be read, by title, on three several days, in each House; unless, in case of emergency, two-thirds of the House where such bill may be pending shall, by a vote of yeas and nays, deem it expedient to dispense with this rule; but the reading of bill, by title, on its final passage, shall, in no case, be dispensed with; and the vote on the passage of every bill or joint resolution shall be taken by yeas and nays.” After about ten years and a few federal law suits, steps were finally taken to replace the old gerrymandering system with a new gerrymandering system which gave Indianapolis more power in the Indiana State Assembly.

As I studied the life of Nelson Grills, I was amazed at what a small world we live in. He lived most of his professional life about twenty blocks from where I have lived for the last fifty years. Nelson and Reva resided at 1669 East Kessler Drive, just across the street from Northminster Presbyterian Church where he had been an active member and a lay leader.

His two sons, Walter and Peter, attended Broad Ripple High School with my late wife. His twin daughters, Susan and Sally, attended there later. My best friend, Brent Sutton, rented the home from him after he moved further northeast. Brent recalled that the home had a temperamental furnace and that Nelson was always available to help him keep it running. My wife's classmate, Lyle Mannweiler was a good friend of his son Walter and knew Nelson well. Just a few weeks ago, I was hanging out in my favorite bar, the Redkey Tavern, having a conversation with Rosie Haugh who had worked as a clerk at the Indiana General Assembly many years ago. Out of the blue she asked me if I

knew Nelson Grills. It turned out that her in-laws had lived around the corner from him for years and that she got to know him well.

I belong to a monthly discussion group that includes former legislators John Mutz and Ned Lampkin. Although they served after him and were not of his party, they recalled him favorably as a man who always kept his word and served his constituents well. Other members of the group, Jerry Williams and Jim Beatty, both active in the legislature as Democrats also recalled him favorably. Nelson was known for writing long letters to the editors of local newspapers and to people he hoped to influence. Jim Beatty who succeeded him as Marion County Democratic Chair, recalled that Nelson would bombard him with long letters and would then buttonhole him in the hallways to ask if he had read them, which he had not. All recalled that he was very passionate in pushing his beliefs, but when things did not go his way, he would just smile and move on. He was never bitter about anything.

Nelson Grover Grills passed away on October 18, 2005 at the age of 93. His death was attributed to prostate cancer and heart failure. He died at his home, 6236 Hyde Road, in northeast Indianapolis where he practiced law until the day he died. His wife of 64 years, Reva, had preceded him in death a few months earlier. He had been a longtime member of Northminster Presbyterian Church where his funeral was held. According to his obituary, his almost last words were: "I am on my way, but I have no arguments with anyone. I know no one who has any arguments with me, but then again, if they do have arguments, they better sharpen them up."

And this is the end of my telling of the life of Nelson Grover Grills, a life well-lived.

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For further reading:

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