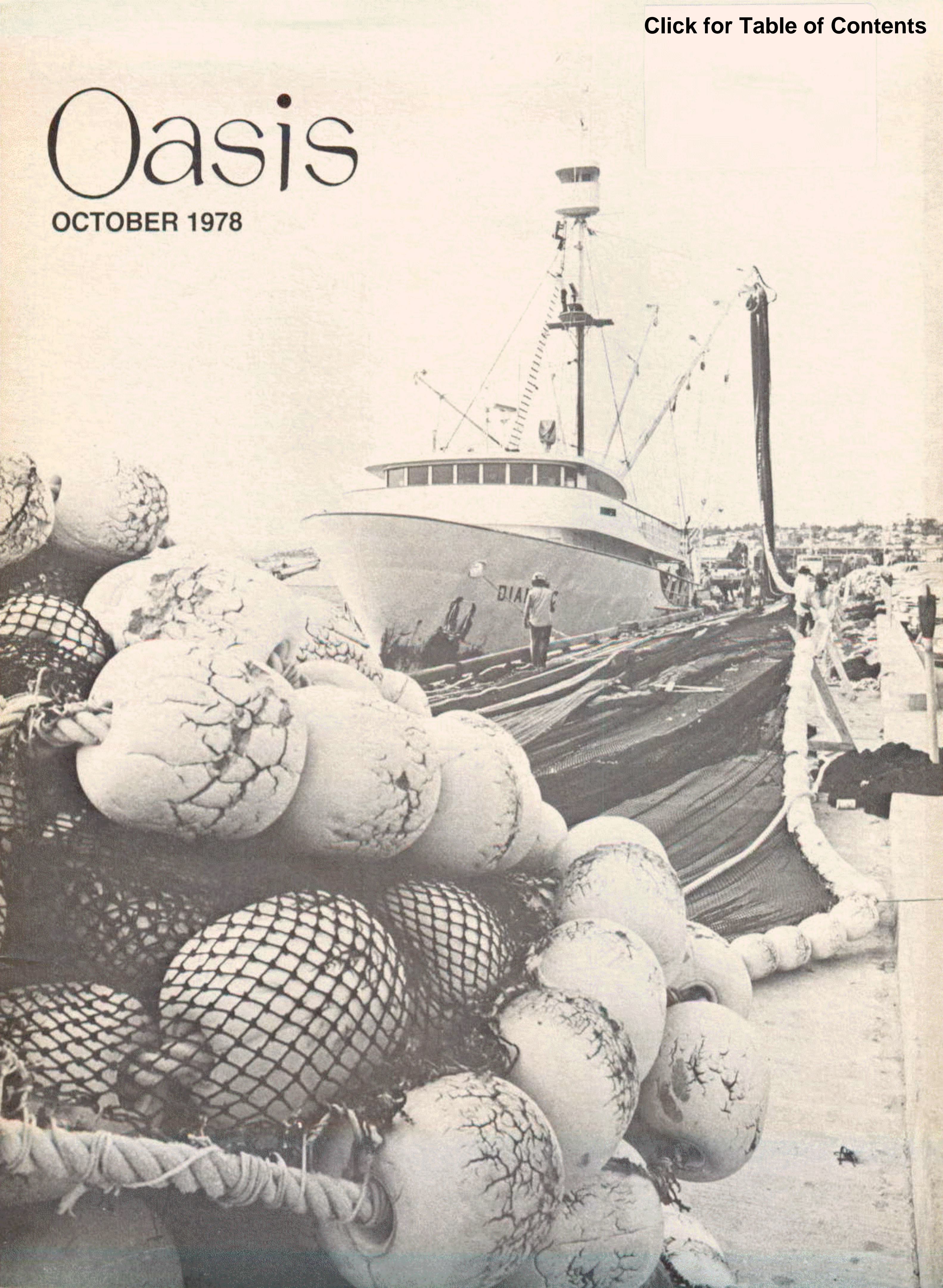


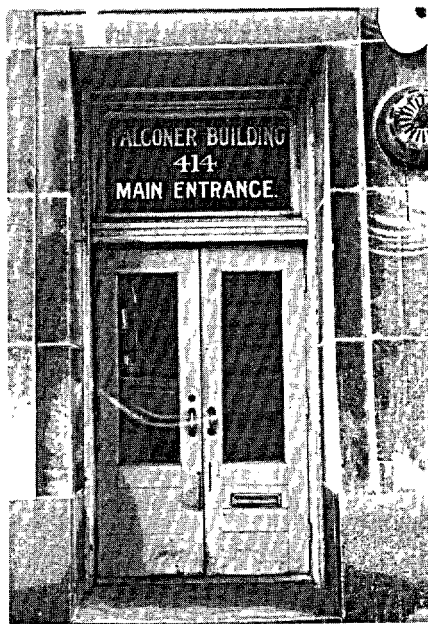
Oasis

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The Way We Were **ON THE NIGHT SHIFT WITH BATS, BUGS AND WINOS**

By Jim Sizemore



MID-SUMMER until the end of 1959 accounts for only a small portion of my life-less than half of 1 year out of 41 lived so far-but it made a lasting impression on me. During that time I completely changed directions: I started a new job, made new friends and began a lifestyle unlike anything I'd experienced before.

I was 22 years old and still unsettled, with no real idea what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. Two years before, I had been discharged from the Army after serving a S-year enlistment. In the months following I worked at various menial jobs: stock clerk in a large mail-order department store, driver for a lunch wagon, selling hot dogs and sodas to construction workers, and as a laborer in the steel mill at Sparrows Point.

None of these jobs appealed to me as a lifetime endeavor, even though that last one-in the mill where hot steel was rolled and shipped to factories-paid well for what it was. What it was was grimy, dull, back-breaking labor. Working there for 6 months convinced me that my future lay elsewhere-preferably some place I wouldn't have to pick up anything heavier than a pencil.

So I filed to take the test for employment with the Federal Government.

My score was a passing one, and that-plus a 5-point veterans preference-landed me a GS-2 clerical position with the Social Security Administration. At the time I don't think I knew what

SSA was-my one experience with it having been on my 16th birthday when I applied for my social security card-but I didn't care what it was. I was just very happy to say goodbye to the hot, hard, dirty life in the steel mill, and move on to a cool, calm, clean government office.

I guess you could say the Falconer Building was clean-at least compared to the mill it was (everything is relative after all)-and on warm days with the windows open there was a nice cool breeze. As for calm, it was that, too, except for those afternoons when the strippers were spotted sunbathing on the low roof of the nearby Gayety Show Bar.

The Gayety was then the keystone of Baltimore's infamous "Block" of sleazy nightclubs. During breaks in the entertainment the girls often retired to the roof, and when that happened, the male clerks arriving early for the night shift went a little crazy. But forgive me, I'm getting ahead of my story.

That first evening I was something I'd never been before: an "EOD." For the forgetful or the uninitiated, this stands for "Entered On Duty." There were eight of us new folks and we were a mixed bag: black, white, male, female, young and middle aged, and we looked confused. We had been assigned to the 4 p.m. to 12:30 a.m. shift in the Numerical Register Section of the old Division of Accounts and Adjustments.

A booklet issued to new clerks

at the time had this to say about the Numerical Register Section: "This section maintains a numerical register of all accounts established, initiates name or account number cross-references, and reinstates rejected earnings items based on information shown in the Numerical Register."

The section, with its hundreds of large, gray, metal-covered ledgers arranged in numerical order in racks on the tops of rows of tables, occupied the 6th and 7th floors of the Falconer Building on the corner of Gay and Water Streets near the waterfront in downtown Baltimore.

The first order of business for an EOD, we learned, was the "orientation." The purpose of the orientation, it seemed, was to deepen our confusion. It consisted of a short talk-which, even as short as it was, contained too much information for my young brain to process-and a tour of the building. Both were conducted by a young, enthusiastic first-line supervisor.

In his talk he gave us an overview of the operation, some idea of what would be expected of us in terms of production and conduct, pointed out the locations of the restrooms (he told us we could use them anytime provided it wasn't too often or else it would be reflected in our ratings-whatever they were), and he had us fill out and sign some forms.

But there was more. He then took us around the corner and down the hall to the freight elevator, which, he informed us, could be used by employees at peak load times, like during a change of shift. He also showed us where the steps were located and mentioned in passing that the freight elevator only went to the 5th floor. He did not comment on the empty wine bottles in the hall, nor did he explain the sleeping wino in the freight elevator. We didn't ask.

He did tell us that our cafeteria was located on the 4th

floor. That is, around 9 o'clock each evening an old man came up on the elevator, got off and stood there selling sandwiches out of a large cardboard box.

As we rode the passenger elevator back upstairs, our guide explained that the first five floors of the building were full sized, while the 6th and 7th were "L" shaped. When we got off on the 7th floor, he marched us to a window and pointed down to the roof of the 5th floor below. It looked as if an enormous hand had plucked a large chunk of the building away. There wasn't any logical architectural reason for the odd shape that I could see. I finally concluded the builders had simply run out of money in mid-construction and cut back on the plans.

As I mentioned before, the ledgers were arranged in numerical order in racks on the tops of tables. The tables, four or five deep, ran along the outside wall of the building. They occupied fully three-fourths of the two floors. The fourth quarter-or one leg of an "L"-contained clerical desks, and behind them was the branch office. On each of the two floors a firstline supervisor's desk was located at the point where the two legs of the "L" met. It was a good spot from which to observe the activity on the entire floor.

The ledgers were used in one of two ways: either by taking the work to the book, or by taking several books to a desk to work from. Most general entries, such as name and date-of-birth changes, were made in the former manner. The clerk carried a small, specially-designed tray of SS-5 cards and walked through the files, weaving in and out of each row, pulling individual books, making an entry, checking a box on the card and writing his or her clerk number next to it, then flipping the card over and refiling the ledger, and moving on to the next book. In this way he or she worked from one end of the register to the

other, from one floor to the other.

Other operations required checking thousands of social security numbers and other information on punched cards against the information in just a few books. In that case the clerk pulled the ledgers in question (in their place he left a charge card giving the location where they could be found), and returned with them to one of the desks. There the ledgers were opened, and the clerk began checking and making changes page-by-page.

If memory serves, each ledger contained 200 pages, and each page had printed on it the numbers, names, and dates of birth of 100 people. Sometimes there was only one card to check against a page, but usually there were several, and as the evening wore on the clerk fell into an ever-changing rhythm of turning pages, checking and changing and flipping cards: flip, check, scribble, scribble, flip, flip, check, flip, check, scribble, scribble. Such was the worklife of a clerk on the night shift in the Numerical Register Section in the Falconer Building in the closing months of 1959.

Our social life was rather more interesting. In my case it included the new friends I made on the job. That first evening I was assigned to work with a lady who was to serve as my trainer. As it turned out she spent as much time pumping me for information as she did training me.

Shirley (not her real name) displayed an inordinate curiosity about my private life. In anyone else the prying would have been offensive. In her, somehow-I guess because of her wonderful sense of humor-it was only harmless fun. She was a funny, nosy lady whose constant stream of chatter, spiced with non-sequiturs, malaprops and double meanings, made the long evenings of repetitive work bearable. In fact, she made them entertaining.

And in truth it was an exchange, because I pumped her, too. I probably got more information from her (about the romantic status of the young ladies in the section) than she got from me because I really didn't have much of a private life to expose-I was still trying to develop one.

I managed to keep her happy by making up stories about my exploits. I had a vivid imagination and could often come up with plausible tales on the spot, but it went on for so long that I finally had to start tapping the rest of my family for plots. Shirley seemed to especially enjoy the lies I told her about the erotic adventures of my mother. I guess she identified with those fictions because the two of them were about the same age.

For the most part the younger clerks in the section were friendly, too, and I was quickly drawn into a sort of loose-knit social club. Few of us wanted to go home to bed when our work "day" ended at 12:30 a.m.-we were still too keyed up-so most nights a meeting was called at the home of someone for the purpose of a party or card game. Or we might get together for a group date. That usually involved bar-hopping, which was the only form of entertainment still available at that hour. Sometimes we simply cruised the city and talked until dawn.

Many times I dropped into bed at first light or later. I'd sleep until two in the afternoon, then get up to start the work/play cycle again. Some of my friends had been living that way for 2 years or more. It would last only several months for me. I soon discovered that I had EOD'd at the tail end of an era: we were scheduled to move to a new home in the suburbs early in 1960.

It came to pass that my social life was greatly enriched as a direct result of some information provided by Shirley. She informed me that a particular young lady was interested in me

beyond mere friendship. So she was. I rewarded Shirley by continuing my now truthful, if still slightly embellished, stories; I even expanded the scope to include some of my coworkers. She showed a keen interest in the escapades of myself and my peers during our nocturnal forays to various "hillbilly" bars on Eastern Avenue, and other hotspots around town. Those tales didn't require embellishment.

The Falconer Building was often a hotspot in its own right. Now we have snow leave; in 1959 we also had heat leave. When the temperature went above a certain mark, Government workers in buildings without air-conditioning were sent home. That seldom happened on the night shift because when the sun went down, so did the temperature-but not always to a comfortable level. Many warm evenings we had every window open and every fan in the building going full speed.

Shirley and I sat there in the cross-ventilation and talked and flipped and scribbled the night away. That's a magic memory for me. I can vividly recall the sights, smells, and the sounds of that time: the clerks bent to their tasks against the background of dirty brick walls; the pungent aroma of the inner harbor wafting in the windows, and when the wind shifted, the even more interesting odors emanating from the fish market to the east; the soft sound of whirring electric fans as they cooled our necks and blew punched cards out the window; the strange noise of bats' wings as they flew in one window and out the other; the gentle rustling in the wastebaskets as rats foraged for food scraps; and the incessant buzz of blood-sucking insects as they foraged for us. Ah, yes, I remember it well.

The Falconer Building is still there. It houses, among other establishments, a commercial printer advertising wedding invitations-"The complete paper trousseau for the bride"-

and a sub shop.

The building is still there, but the era is past. (Did I just hear a chorus of Falconer Building alumni exclaiming "Thank God!?"?) I guess you could say that I've found a home at SSA-I've been here 19 years now-but I haven't had an experience since those early days quite so rich in character or in characters. Life in the suburbs may be healthier, but I'm afraid it's also duller.

Not long after the move to Woodlawn I realized that I didn't want to spend the rest of my life flipping pages in ledgers anymore than I did wrestling steel at Sparrows Point, so I took advantage of the G.I. bill and enrolled in evening art school. That led to a job in the old Bureau of Data Processing and Accounts drafting section on the 3rd floor of the Operations Building.

Which gives me an idea for another *OASIS* article □

My thanks to Jack Sloan, Katie Walker Gill and Rita Stump for helping to jog my memory during the preparation of this article.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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