Bill - Have you seen attached PRSA article re Charlie Holmes? Thought you'd want to.
Jane

National Bank of Commerce

June 25, 1968

Dear Charlie:

Thanks so very much for your thoughtfulness in sharing with me your article (that is, Heber Taylor's article about you)"Campus to Squad Room," in the June 1968 Public Relations Journal. Margaret Barr and I still await final clearance notice from the PRSA summit re whether or not they've decided you fellows in Memphis are really wise to "integrate" and let us female-type people join your fine group! Thus, without your sharing your June Journal with me, I'd not have had the privilege of reading the excellent Taylor coverage re Charles Holmes.

There aren't adequate words to express my personal admiration for your volunteer stint as press officer for Mr. Frank Holloman during the crisis here aftermath of the King tragedy. Moreover, now you're going to serve again with Sheriff Bill Morris in connection with the forthcoming James Earl Ray trial.

Your willingness to help the remarkable Mr. Holloman before... and the dedicated Bill Morris now...makes me even prouder to know you, Charlie, and to be a lifelong Memphian.

Needless to say, if there's any menial assignment you need a strong back and weak mind to fulfill for you during the trying days ahead of us, you know where to call me collect.

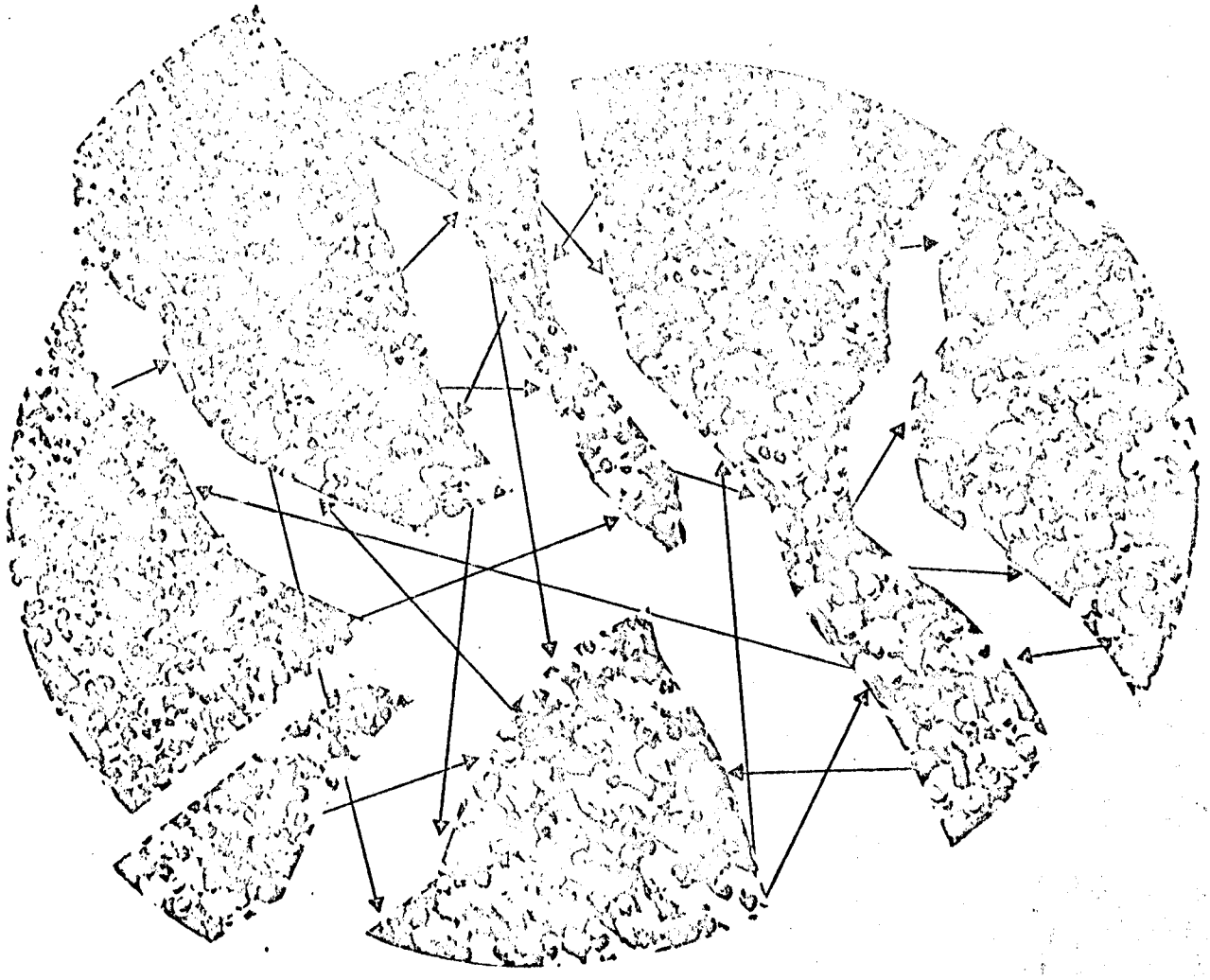
Will keep you...first and foremost...informed re what the Soroptimist Club can work out to help Brigadier Purdue and Reverend Slack of the Salvation Army feed those deserving youngsters lunch on their two Army-sponsored playgrounds in deprived areas. Sam Alpert of New York City reconfirmed LD to me yesterday...his $250.00 check will be immediately forthcoming the second I beam that Good Samaritan Whistle his way.

Sincerely,

Jane Kinney

Mr. Charles Holmes, Public Relations Director
Memphis State University
Memphis, Tennessee 38111

June 1968 75 Cents



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University P. R. Director acts as volunteer press officer at Memphis police headquarters after Dr. King's assassination.

CAMPUS TO SQUAD ROOM

By HEBER TAYLOR

PUBLIC relations textbooks recommend that practitioners be willing to help their communities or worthy organizations in time of need. This is the story of a public relations man who, putting this theory into practice, helped his city during a recent major crisis.

HEBER TAYLOR *is an associate professor of journalism at Memphis State University, Memphis, Tennessee.*

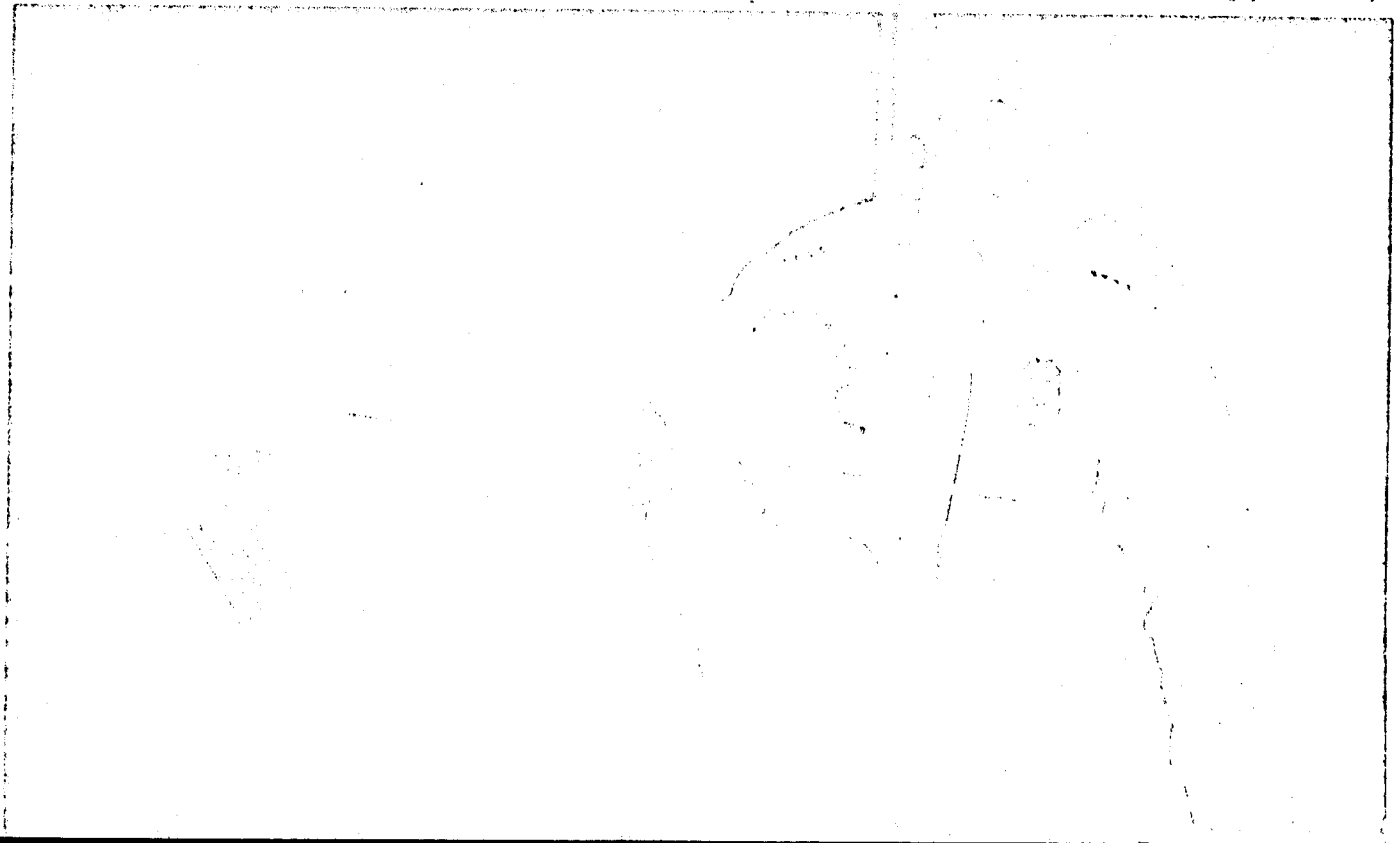
Charles F. Holmes is director of public relations at Memphis State University. A 1957 journalism graduate of the school, he worked five years for the Memphis *Commercial-Appeal* before returning to his alma mater in 1962.

When Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated in a Memphis motel on Thursday, April 4, Holmes called the Memphis Police Department to offer his assistance. The man he talked to was Frank Holloman, director of police and firemen in the city. The two had been acquaintances since the time, a few years earlier, when Holloman had worked for Memphis State as director of development.

Holmes had anticipated that the police would need help in press relations, so he was not surprised when Director Holloman asked him to serve as press officer for the Police Department during the crisis.

"I knew that after such a tragic and

Charles Holmes (left) discusses information policy with Director Frank Holloman and Henry Lux, now acting police chief.



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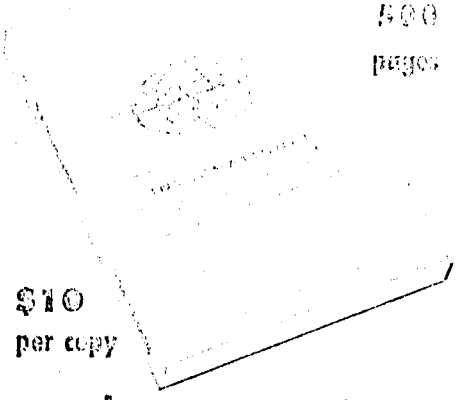

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newsworthy event," Holmes recalls, "a world wide representation of the press could be expected. I had been a police reporter my last two years with the *Commercial Appeal*, and I knew that the Police Department was not equipped to cope with an army of reporters in such a situation."

With the blessing of Memphis State University's president, Dr. C. C. Humphreys, Holmes reported to the Police Department on the morning following the assassination. He was assigned Assistant Chief Henry Lux's office—Lux would be too busy with outside duties to use it.

Holmes received a briefing from Director Holloman at the outset. He was scheduled to begin work with the press immediately, answering their questions personally or by telephone.

By the time he got to his office after the briefing, the calls were piling up. That was the way it was to be until midnight that night—in fact, through the four days that he helped the police. (He was not needed after April 8 because the news spotlight shifted from Memphis to Atlanta for Dr. King's funeral on April 9.)

By helping with press relations, Holmes felt that his efforts would allow the police to proceed with the work at hand.

"The police had three major assignments—the restoration of order to the city, the search for the murderer, and the planning necessary for the mass march that was scheduled for Monday, April 8," he says.

THE EX-REPORTER KNOWS

Because of his experience as a reporter, Holmes felt that he knew the problems that newsmen faced, too. "I sought to provide them with whatever they needed, especially with sufficient investigative data."

Holmes found that there were many requests for information that could not be answered because providing such information would have hampered the arrest and conviction of the person or persons responsible for the murder.

As Holmes had expected, media requests took most of his time. He would take reporters' questions about the murder investigation, looting, rioting, fires, etc., and every hour and a half to two hours would get the answers from Director Holloman.

When several newsmen were interested in the same information, he released it in duplicated form. He arranged for press conferences during the first two days so that newsmen could ask the police director their own questions. The conferences, however, ran too long, and that approach was dropped.

Holmes estimates that some 150 to 200 newsmen converged on Memphis after the assassination. He dealt directly with about 75 to 100 of them. He worked with reporters from England, Australia, Sweden, France, and Yugoslavia. American reporters that he personally helped represented the networks, the news magazines, the wire services, and many individual papers and stations.

INQUIRIES BY PHONE

In addition to the media personally represented in Memphis, press representatives from around the world were calling to see what information they could get by phone. (A Dallas journalist called to inquire if there were any indication that the assassin was from Dallas. Holmes was able to say no.)

Most of the calls were in good faith. Holmes, however, doubted the value of a call from a Hartford, Conn., man who seemed more than a little drunk and who insisted that the assassin was a Hartford bartender whom he obviously disliked.

Another important part of Holmes' duties was working with the television network pool as the networks prepared to cover the memorial march of April 8. (This was the march that Dr. King had planned to lead in behalf of striking sanitation workers in spite of a city injunction forbidding it.) Even after the city agreed to the march after the assassination, the police objected to it because of the safety factor.

Holmes found himself in the position of a go-between, first between police and march leaders, and then between the networks and the police. The route of the march had to be determined, and when it was, Holmes released it in duplicated form to all interested media.

THE NETWORKS' PROBLEMS

There was a special problem involved in network plans for covering the march because no one was to be on the rooftops—a person there might be mistaken for a sniper. After this was worked out and camera stations were assigned to the networks, one network was unable to get permission from the owners of buildings to use any of its three assigned spots. Re-negotiations were then necessary.

Perhaps the low point in Holmes' four days of work for the city came when he gave out the rules governing the conduct of the media during the march. One rule agreed upon by march leaders and police was that newsmen had to join the march at its originating point, Clayborn Temple, or they could not march. On hearing about this provision, a New York broadcast newsman told Holmes:

"No - - - redneck Tennessee cop is going to tell me what to do!" (Holmes'

desk sign read, "Assistant Chief Flux.")

Another rule that the march leaders had insisted upon ran into unexpected difficulty. No one was supposed to interview Mrs. King except at a press conference before the march. Because of flight difficulties in coming from Atlanta, Mrs. King arrived too late for the conference. When she joined the march, already in progress, reporters rushed to her in spite of the rule. The rush was so spontaneous nothing could be done to stop it.

There were several other problems to be faced during the crisis:

- The Police Department did not have curfew credentials to issue to media representatives. Holmes could only notify reporters that proper press credentials would be honored. The yellow press cards given to reporters by the New York City police worked best.
- The police had some difficulty in adjusting to him, a writer, working *for* them instead of against them. There was no problem in working with the director, however, and Holmes considers the hesitancy that he ran into easy to explain.
- Rumors were an especially serious problem. They had explosive power in a super-charged city, and had to be carefully investigated and corrected when found to be false.

One rumor concerned an 18-year-old Negro youth said to have been shot by police. It turned out that the "youth" was a 48-year-old former convict who fired upon police when he was spotted carrying a rifle. A small arsenal of ammunition found on him indicated that he had planned to do some sniping that night. This case was an example of the rumors that were carefully checked out and handled well by the press when it got full information.

Another rumor of a "cab driver shot" turned out to have stemmed from a radio report by a cab driver who said that he had *"heard* a shot."

- Some of his old acquaintances, Holmes says, wanted special favors from him—interviews with police officials, tips, and confirmation of speculation. "I gave them sympathy, but I could only give out the information I knew," he says.
- The Police Department did not have enough secretarial help to answer the barrage of calls coming in or enough money to put out as many information bulletins as Holmes would have liked to release.

"The secretaries assigned also answered telephones for four other people, and did their paper work, and took reports and complaints over the telephone. They were tremendous."

He says that he does not know how successful he was in helping the Police Department and Memphis with the tremendous public relations problem it inherited with the firing of an assassin's bullet. He has not had a chance to make a complete study of how the media handled the situation. He has seen, however, stories written by several reporters who were in Memphis. He says that one newspaper, *The Wall Street Journal*, gave Memphis kind treatment; that one magazine was unkind; and that the rest of the media that he knows about (*Newsweek, U.S. News & World Report, Life*, and the networks) were objective.

His impression of the coverage of the city in the foreign press—as reflected by his conversations with the foreign correspondents—was "positive."

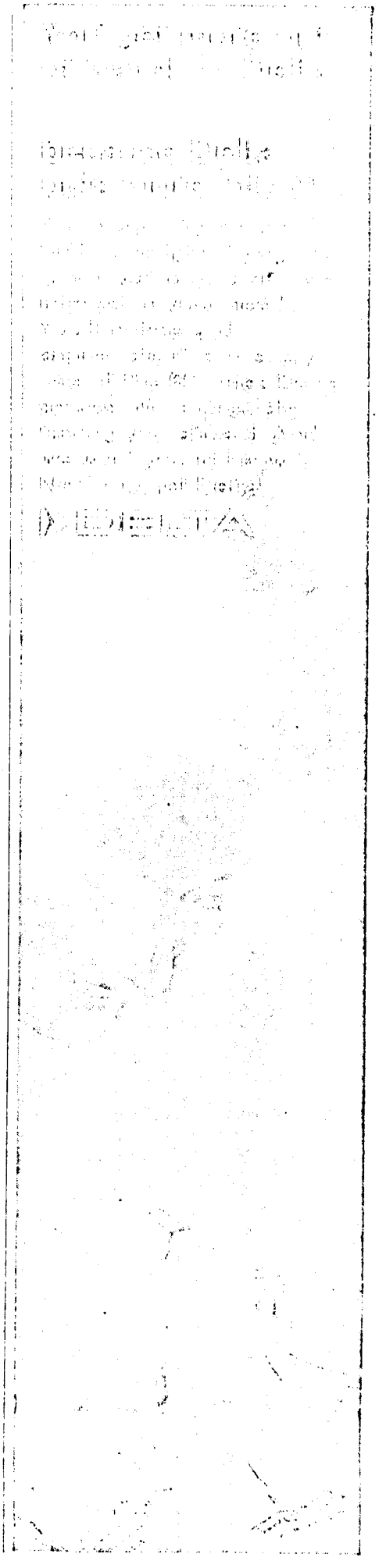
Love for his city was a motivating force in causing Holmes to volunteer to help in the crisis. When he heard the news of Dr. King's death, he thought of Birmingham, Selma, Dallas, and small towns in Mississippi where civic images were badly damaged. He wanted to help newsmen to get the facts of the situation. He also wanted the chance to tell them some of the good things about the city, including its history of racial harmony and the successful integration of Memphis State University. In brief, he wanted to do what he could to get Memphis fair treatment.

He concedes that fairness can be elusive during a crisis. "There were violent reactions—both ways. Some people wanted to condemn the city completely. Others sent money to help the assassin escape or to defend him."

The newsmen who came to Memphis were a part of a panic situation, he believes. "They were afraid that someone was going to get some facts that they didn't have. The work of our public relations outpost in the Police Department was to reassure them as well as to help them get all the news that could be released."

PRESS AND POLICE THANKS

The stories that were written that commended the police and the thanks of the reporters he helped were very gratifying to Holmes.

A letter from Director Holloman to Holmes' boss, President Humphreys, was also extremely pleasing to Holmes. It spoke of "the tremendous service that Charles Holmes performed during the critical emergency . . . I do not know what I would have done without his assistance. He handled the press in a superb manner. . . . I will never be able to express to Charles Holmes or to you how deeply grateful I am. . . ."

Overtime for the Police Department during the period of unrest cost Memphis over $500,000. When asked about payment for *his* four days of work for the city, Holmes' response was: "A turkey sandwich and a dill pickle." □