

CHAPTER 9

THE NEWS GATHERER AND HIS METHODS

NEWS is gathered and written by a reporter. He may have the city hall run or be the farm editor of a daily paper. He may be on the editorial staff of a farm paper, an engineering magazine, a trade weekly, or be the fashion authority on a women's magazine. He may be the college extension editor, the home demonstration agent who gives a story of a township canning demonstration to the local weekly, the reporter for the FFA or 4-H club who writes a story of a coming picnic, or the secretary of the garden club who writes a story of a flower show to be held in the near future. The reporter may be a Washington columnist, a foreign war correspondent, a magazine writer investigating some important development, or the humble chronicler of events in the Happy Corner community for the county paper. All these are reporters.

The daily newspaper reporter, about to go out to cover his beat or some special assignment, usually provides himself with conveniently folded copy paper. Magazine reporters who are likely to make more detailed or formal notes, often carry a medium-sized or small looseleaf notebook. Some magazine reporters, however, make notes in a stenographer's notebook. Women reporters usually carry copy paper or notebook in their handbag.

Reporters usually like lead pencils with a large, extra soft, black lead. They seldom use fountain pens in their work, though one nationally known magazine editor and writer, an authority in a special field of engineering, always makes his notes with a fountain pen.

A reporter approaches a story or an interview without anything in his hands. A man however might carry a folded newspaper, a woman carry her handbag. The student reporter, out to get a campus story from a faculty member, will be wise to put down

books and notebooks in the secretary's office, before seeking the interview. Magazine reporters frequently carry a briefcase or camera. These should be kept as inconspicuous as possible until needed. This applies, too, in use of pencil and notepaper or notebook.

These points may seem trivial, yet these little details may mark the difference between the experienced reporter and the novice—"cub" is the old newspaper term—who fumbles and hesitates in his first news-gathering attempts.

Let us see just how a reporter actually goes to work and covers his assignment. While this example is in the field of farm paper reporting, the principles involved would apply on any reporting job in any field.

His first assignment: When Thompson received his first assignment from the editor of the farm journal whose staff he had just joined—an assignment to cover a state Farm Bureau convention—he asked, "What do you want me to get?"

"I want you to dig up the news," the editor replied.

That answer wasn't so very helpful. The new reporter asked again, "Well—shall I write up the program?"

"Oh, yes," said the editor, with a bit of deprecation in his tone, "but that may not be the best news there. That's the most obvious thing to report and every farm journal man on the job will do that as a matter of course. But you ought to get something better than that. Get into the crowd, mix with the folks, seek out the farmers who are worth talking to, keep your eyes and ears open for the things that will interest our readers. I can't tell you just what to get. You'll have to use your news sense."

Of course, Thompson listened to the program and got out of it the things most valuable to his journal, but before he was through he had done much more than that. He found a little group of vocational agriculture teachers talking shop. He joined them, got acquainted with them, and in due time had a modest part in the conversation, which yielded him a good grist of material, to be developed later into incidental or independent stories.

As he was leaving the group one of the teachers said, "See those two men talking together over there? One is a county chairman

of the Farm Bureau and the other of the Farmers' Union." Thompson related that fact to his knowledge of the rivalries of these organizations and had not only something significant to add to his story, but later, when he found a chance to talk to both men, he learned that they had discussed the possibilities of closer cooperation between the two groups, and that promised the making of a good story.

He moved over to a group where an interesting debate seemed under way, shook hands with an acquaintance, met the others, and then in a friendly way fitted in and listened to what was going on—a lively back and forth talk about experiences with soiling crops. Modestly he injected a few questions of his own. Later he drew aside the most promising man of the group, and soon he had an abundance of material for an experience story.

He dropped into another animated group and found it discussing paved highways; still other groups were warmly debating the same question. In much the same way he found and talked to a man from the state agricultural college, a state Farm Bureau leader, a farmer who regularly topped the hog markets, a dairyman whose herd was leading the cow testing association. He knew something about the men he met and their relationships, and each new contact he made yielded him material, either to be written into his convention story or to be handled independently. His activities yielded more than that—they added to his background of understanding of rural people and rural life and work. While Thompson sat through the program itself, he was alert to see and hear other things than those that went on on the platform. He took what he wanted from the talks—the most significant things—but he watched keenly for what happened incidentally, for reactions and comments, so that when he wrote his story it would truly portray the event as it was.

Thompson had a notebook, but he did not use it constantly; rather, he used it somewhat covertly. He applied his memory as he talked with men, and when opportunity offered made his notes inconspicuously. Of course, he made note promptly of important figures, initials, oddly spelled names, and similar data, and if he secured a more formal interview with a man, he used his notebook more freely.

Very clearly, Thompson had the "news sense" which his editor said he must use. He had an ability to see in the convention and its attendant circumstances those things that would have interest for the readers of his journal. He had the ability to find in any set of circumstances the facts and incidents that make a news story. He would be limited only by the boundaries of his understanding of the subject matter and the conditions of life with which he would be called upon to deal.

An analysis of news sense: A little study of Thompson's news-gathering activities reveals that news sense is dependent upon several essential factors:

Objective interest: There must be an abiding attitude of mind that concerns itself with things outside of oneself, in people, in affairs, both large and small, which studies them, evaluates them, relates them to each other.

Curiosity: There must not be a mere prying, but a wholesome, intelligent, ever-active desire to know the who, what, when, where, why, and how of things and activities around you.

Observation: You must be everlastingly alert. You must see! see!! see!!! details, the whole, the interrelationships of the details to the whole, and of the whole to other things and events. Not even the smallest thing must be allowed to escape you, for in it may live the germ of your best story. Time and again novices fail in writing a satisfactory news story because they have not secured essential details.

Understanding: A general understanding of the particular field and its affairs makes it possible to interpret correctly what is seen and heard, to gather information intelligently, to relate it to other events, to interpret and present it accurately. This general background of understanding is of utmost importance to the writer of news in special fields, such as agriculture, home economics, engineering, finance. A keen reporter may write some sort of a story without this background, when he gets into such a special field, but it is quite likely to reflect his lack of understanding and be unacceptable to those who do know.

Memory: There must be ability to store away things seen and heard and to fit them in correctly with the new experiences and observations of tomorrow.

It is an old "city room" question whether news gatherers with adequate news sense are born or made. It will be passed with this comment: Through intelligent effort, whatever news sense one may have, whether much or little, can be developed and made better. By conscious exercise, one's objective interest, curiosity, observation, and the other factors can be made increasingly more effective.

A score card for rating reporters: But there is a difference in news gatherers, a marked difference in their ability to gather news. They range in quality all of the way from the "star" to the hopeless individual who manages to get together from issue to issue enough "stuff" to hold precariously his place on the staff.

One does not inherit reporterhood any more than one inherits business ability or musical virtuosity. In other words, one can, on the basis of his general inheritance, develop those qualities of character and mind which go into the making of a good reporter. And too often, it might be added, this side of journalistic training is neglected. A young man or woman is taught the technique of journalism but is allowed to overlook the development of those qualities of character and temperament which are requisite to success in journalistic work.

No group of newspaper men would, probably, agree as to just which qualities are most essential and as to their relative importance. In a general way, however, they would all subscribe to the importance of the qualities listed below, some of which have already been inferred from the Thompson illustration.

It might be well for the student to go so far in self-analysis as to rate himself on the basis of these qualities. Thus he could determine in which respects he is weak and set about through conscious effort to correct his weaknesses.

Curiosity: An endless desire to know what is happening of news value.

Alertness: A mind with a hundred antennae reaching out to sense what the crowd never knows is happening until it is told.

Knowledge of men and affairs: The more thorough a reporter's interest in and understanding of his field, the more significant becomes everything that men say or do in that field. The scientific discovery of an individual research worker isn't news

in the fullness of the term until it is related to other things; the meeting of two men doesn't seem of any significance until after their positions and relationships are understood and the possibilities of their conference are surmised. Making two and two add up to four is an important part of the reporter's work. And with knowledge must go good judgment both of men and their activities.

Breadth of sympathy: In a degree a reporter must be all things to all men. That is, he should not habitually approach any news situation with indifference to or scorn for the men and women he will see or for what they are doing. Instead, he should seek to know their viewpoint and insofar as possible deal with the news in his better understanding of their purposes. When a reporter becomes cynical, hard, unsympathetic, he needs to beware; that attitude will interfere with his usefulness.

Friendliness and adaptability: The knack of "mixing" well with people without overdoing it.

Modesty and tact: The good reporter does not seek to impress himself unduly upon people with whom he comes in contact; cocksureness is usually offensive. He may know much about the things with which he happens to be dealing, but he isn't out to tell what he knows but to find out what others know; and then in his writing job he relates what others give him to what he already has. To give an impression of knowing enough and not "too much," to talk enough and not too much—that marks a good news gatherer.

Accuracy: Getting things straight; setting forth facts precisely; drawing conclusions, if they are to be drawn, with utmost care; checking up and verifying with persons concerned—all these are essential. The good reporter is never indifferent to accuracy; he never permits himself to accept as a final excuse for misstatement that the haste of news gathering made it impossible to get the facts.

Industry and perseverance: In the very nature of things the news gatherer must range over a wide field and see many people; he must keep at the task to the end. He must get news whether conditions are propitious or not. He must stick.

Surveying the field: Every reporter will develop his own technique in news gathering, according to his own individuality, but there are some factors that are essential in any system.

A study and organization of his more limited news field are just as essential for the individual news gatherer as they are for the staff of a journal in its comprehensive field. He may well make such a survey of his particular territory as is suggested in the preceding chapter for a journal's complete territory. The farm writer or the independent contributor, who may cover a portion of the state or even several states, or who may be assigned to an entire phase of agriculture, cannot hope to gather news certainly and adequately without such a survey.

Establish personal relationships: In connection with this survey, a thorough news gatherer will establish personal relationships with the men and women of affairs throughout his territory and renew contact with them by visits or correspondence as frequently as may be necessary.

"I have a definite list of men and women who know what's going on in their various fields of activity," says one experienced farm journal news gatherer. "I cultivate their friendship; I get them to understand what my journal considers good news; insofar as I can I get them to take an interest in the game of digging up good stories and getting them into print; I try to get them to see that it's helping along the chariot of progress to get the right sort of stuff into print; I try to secure friendly cooperators and never fail to express my appreciation of their cooperation; I never violate their confidence. When occasion offers, I see that they get certain credit for their cooperation. I get out of this policy an assistance without which I could not do my job right."

There is a suggestion of the value of "tippers" in what this experienced reporter says, which every news gatherer will confirm. Back of many, perhaps most, of the stories that are published is such a "tipper," a man or woman who happens upon a good story, recognizes it, and tips it off to the news writer who has won his friendship and confidence. Usually these people remain in obscurity; they are anonymous like most news writers, but when the story they tipped off is printed, they seem to get as much of a thrill out of seeing it on paper as the news writer himself.

Keep informed: A persistent, faithful reading of newspapers, magazines, bulletins, pamphlets, and books that have a bearing on one's work is invariably recommended by experienced news gatherers. As explained in more detail in connection with the methods of getting feature articles, this practice is invaluable. One very large daily newspaper is said to assemble the novices in its advertising department for regular lessons on advertising solicitation and requires of each man and woman a brief written synopsis of the important news in the issue of that day. It does this on the theory that any individual who represents a newspaper in any contact with the public ought to know what is in the newspaper he represents. Logically that practice would have even greater value in the editorial department. The managing editor of another large journal made complaint that reporters are usually woefully ignorant of what enters into the making of their newspapers in all departments and that their lack of interest and knowledge on this score stands in the way of their advancement.

Develop your own interest in subject matter: It is axiomatic that one writes best about the things in which one is most deeply interested. It follows that a part of a reporter's or feature writer's preparation for writing a news or feature story is to arouse within himself some interest in and enthusiasm for the subject matter. "I never undertake to write about something that I am not interested in," says a feature writer on agricultural subjects who has regularly "made" the best national magazines during the past ten years. "It would be futile for me to do so. I would be certain to fail to write anything worthwhile. While there may be a great many other rules for good writing, I have only this one: Find something that interests you as a normal human being, learn all you can about it, develop your enthusiasm about it, and then write out of your interest and enthusiasm. If a fellow has normal interests and enthusiasms, he can count on other folks having them too, and he has through them an easy approach to his readers. Whenever I feel that I may be losing my understanding of what my readers are interested in, I get out where they are, in the rural communities and the villages, and visit with them until I feel assured that I know them."

Put aside your prejudices: Neither a news writer nor a feature

writer has a right to carry prejudices into his gathering of material or the writing of his stories. He should be big enough to put them aside where they will not influence him in finding and selecting his material and in putting it into his story. His readers have a right to expect him to be honest and sincere in his work and to give them as fair a picture or statement of what has happened as it is possible to give. Write your stories so that you may go back among the people concerned in them and feel that you haven't lost their respect or confidence.

Make approach with tact and self-confidence: In making his approach to persons of consequence, the reporter needs to keep in mind the value of making a good first impression. Neatness and good taste in attire, courtesy of manner and speech, a recognition of whatever dignity may rest in the individual because of his position or achievement, a proper degree of friendliness, a suitable opening of the conversation, a tactful bringing in of the news quest, a reasonable self-confidence based on the self-assurance that he isn't a mere busy body, but that he stands for a journal which is a highly essential institution in its field, and that his particular mission is important in its many bearings—these should be the attitudes of the reporter.

"I don't want any of my staff to go to any man for news in an apologetic way," says an editor of note. "I don't want him to feel that he is begging a favor when he seeks information from anybody. A magazine or a newspaper is a quasi-public institution, absolutely essential in our scheme of democracy and education for democracy. It is essential that it have the right sort of accurate news and information to print, and it is in a way the responsibility of men of affairs to cooperate in getting that news or information to the people. I don't mean that we as newspaper men have the right to pester folks, needlessly, but we do have a right to expect reasonable cooperation when we go to them on worthwhile news missions. If a reporter will get that into his thinking, it will do a lot to help him make the right approach in confidence and self-respect."

Make preparation for your interview: "I like to know something about the man I'm going to see when I'm after news, although

it's not always possible to have that information," said another experienced newspaper worker. "And then if I know in a general way what I want to get from him, I like to figure out in advance the most important questions I ought to put to him. I'll have to supplement them, and sometimes I'll have to abandon them, because of unexpected circumstances of my interview, but the fact of my having in advance gone over the details of my interview fortifies me greatly and helps me to meet emergencies. I have on some occasions actually written out my chief questions, especially in very important interviews. A well-planned question impresses upon the man you're seeing that you know what you're doing. A foolish, vapid question suggests an ignorance with which the interviewee can have no patience.

"Then, too, this planning ahead helps me to keep command of the interview, and that's especially important if I want certain specific things which the person interviewed may not be so willing to give me. If I'm just visiting with a man to pick up whatever he may happen to have, or to get tips, what I've just said doesn't apply. But it does apply otherwise. Not an infrequent problem is that furnished by the man who rambles around a lot when he talks, without getting anywhere, and another is furnished by the man who purposely dodges the main issues of the interview. The well-organized plan helps one to meet both of them."

This planning in advance applies to a student reporter working on a campus assignment just as much as to a newspaper or magazine reporter. What a home economics extension specialist once said to one of the authors of this text will illustrate what this means:

"When a reporter comes in to see me I can always tell whether she is one of your students or someone from a downtown newspaper or a visiting magazine writer," said this specialist. "Your student reporter comes in with her arms loaded with textbooks, and asks in a haphazard way, 'Do you have any news today?' But the off-campus reporter comes in with an alert manner, says, 'I'm from the XYZ,' and asks me a direct, specific question that has to do with my work."

In most cases, particularly in gathering of news or feature articles in the technical news fields, it is advisable in the first words of

your interview, to identify yourself, giving the name of your publication and your own name. Also, if there is likely to be any question as to your purpose, state your purpose in seeking the information and give some idea as to about how your publication expects to use it. Then the person being interviewed will understand, without question, that he is being interviewed and that what he says is for publication.

Watch for developments in the interview: It is important, also, to keep close watch on what is said and done by the man from whom you are getting your story. He may uncover some other story by a chance remark or an equivocal answer, or his manner may support or belie his statements.

"I was getting an important policy story from a farmers' organization official," said a farm journal staff man in telling of an incident which illustrates these points. "When this man qualified one of his important statements with the phrase, 'at least I guess so,' I was aroused by his manner as well as his phrase. I jumped to the conclusion that maybe there was something in the whisper I had heard that this man might not be reelected to his executive job. I decided to put my surmises to the test, and I said rather suddenly, 'Jim, what is there to this story about your getting out of your job?' He hesitated a bit and then said, 'Well, I'll tell you about it; it might just as well be now as later.' And then I got a big story that I hadn't counted on getting. The experienced news gatherer is always on the lookout for significant signs along the way of his interview."

The man who doesn't see news in his work: A puzzling problem for the news gatherer is the man of affairs who is so deep in his work that he doesn't see out of it and appreciate its relationship and interest to the world around him. He is likely to say quite positively and with an air of dismissal that he doesn't know of anything of news interest in what he is doing. If the reporter is convinced that in the work of such a man there is worthwhile news, he may get it by loading himself with information about the man, what he is doing and its probable relationships, and then finding an opportune time for a long and intelligent conversation with him.

"One experiment station scientist regularly told me when I saw him that he wasn't doing anything of news importance," said a farm journal reporter. "I knew it couldn't be so, because he was too good a man to be wasting his time that way. I made inquiry among his associates at the station about his work, read a few of his research papers, and otherwise informed myself on his subjects. When I went to him again I was able to talk to him intelligently about his work, and he opened up and gave me stuff that promised to bring about big changes in certain phases of dairy manufacturing."

Dealing with the indifferent or unfriendly man: Another puzzler for the less experienced news gatherer is the man who is either indifferent about getting his work into the journals, or who has had some experience which makes him unfriendly to publicity, or who believes that there is something unethical in a scientist's giving out to the lay press news concerning his work. Sometimes such a news prospect may be induced to "loosen up" by an appeal to his personal pride, through the suggestion that the journal will carry his name far and wide and extend his reputation and increase his good standing. Again, the appeal may be to his altruistic sense through the suggestion that while the giving of the news of his work to his scientific societies or his students in class is influential for good, he may through a journal reach and benefit hundreds of thousands instead of a few. Or it may be urged upon him politely that inasmuch as he is a public servant he has some obligation to the mass of people who make his research work possible through public funds. If the news prospect is suspicious because some unskilled news writer has made him appear ridiculous or has violated his confidence, then the reporter must first seek to win his confidence for himself and his journal.

The technique of recording the facts: As the reporter gets his facts he may rely upon his memory to retain them until the time comes to write his story, upon written memoranda or notes, or upon a combination of the two methods. Usually he will combine the two. He may eschew the notebook or note pad as he interviews his news prospect, because circumstances may make its use inadvisable or because it may be too cumbersome and incon-

venient to use, but as soon as possible thereafter he will make notes of the data and statements that he secured. Or he may use the notebook during an interview to record the things which demand very exact restatement, such as dates, names, figures, and important quotations, and rely upon his memory for the larger mass of related material which need not be restated so exactly. For greatest accuracy, notes need to be made immediately after facts are secured if they are not recorded at the time of securing them. To rely entirely upon the memory is dangerous for all but a few exceptional reporters; such practice is likely to result in unjustifiable inaccuracies. Some interviews demand the making of very complete notes through the progress of the interview, as when an important formal statement is made.

The notes made in connection with an interview are most valuable when they suggest an outline of what was said. If the reporter, through well-considered questions, develops his interview in an orderly way, his notations will easily be made in an orderly way. If the interviewee gives his information in an orderly way, again it is relatively easy to make notes. How much "fill in" material should be put into a notebook will depend upon whether or not the reporter can rely upon his memory to retain the essential details. But usually notes should carry an abundance of details—the most unlikely small point may be of value when writing the story.

It is not within the scope of this book to discuss memory at length or to suggest devices for making the memory more effective. This may be said, however, without encroaching upon the field of the psychologist: Your memory will be impressed by the facts or information that you gather as a reporter according to your concentration upon the task, according to your understanding of what is said and done, according to your own vital interest in the subject matter, and according to your ability to find in what you see and hear an orderly succession of significant things—an outline—and establish some kind of an association among them. As one experienced reporter expressed it, "If you understand, if you concentrate, if you fix the big things in your mind in order and then go back to the beginning again, you can unravel the whole yarn with surprising readiness."

Accuracy: Inextricably woven in with the subject of news gathering is the essential of accuracy. It has been discussed again and again. Its importance needs no argument. An error in journalism is not merely a matter of concern to the writer, nor only to the writer and the persons immediately connected with the subject matter. It is multiplied a hundred thousand, even a million times, as it is printed; virtually it concerns everybody.

Accuracy is important, not merely with respect to the larger information involved in a news story or feature article but also for the many bits of minor detail. Names, initials, places of residence, dates, locations, areas, yields, sizes, distances, costume, furnishings, incidental happenings—all these should be accurately recorded in notes or memory and accurately presented in the story, if they are used. For the principals in a story, it is marred if their initials are incorrectly given, or their home addresses are erroneously stated, or mistakes are made in the color of hair or eyes, or whatever other personal detail is involved. Other readers are also likely to note these minor errors first of all and to doubt the big facts because they know that the little facts are not correctly told. The distinguished managing editor of a great metropolitan daily used to say that if he had the task of training reporters he would first take them into a room and lock himself up with them until he had drilled into them the importance of accuracy in names and places. A reporter who is indifferent about having names and places and similar detail right is quite certain to be indifferent about accuracy in larger matters.

Many rules to insure accuracy might be given, but accuracy depends very largely upon the attitude of the news gatherer, so this suggestion seems most important: Take into your work an understanding of the high function of journalism, a sincerity of purpose, a devotion to truth, a care for detail that is painstaking, an industry that is tireless, and a desire to meet the men and women at the sources of news with a clear conscience and without apology, the day after publication.

One veteran teacher of technical journalism who has spent many years in trying to impress upon student reporters the necessity for

accuracy, sometimes talks to a student who has been careless in his facts, much as follows:

"Young man, if you are as careless in your chemistry laboratory as you have been in getting this story, you will blow your fool head off someday. Wrong details in a story may cause an explosion just as much as the wrong chemical in a test tube, but it will be a different kind. If ten years from now, you forget every other thing I've tried to teach you in this course but still remember that I told you to be accurate, the course will be successful."

Checking up on what has been written is a valuable safeguard in this matter of accuracy. Check names with directories, check facts and figures with books of data and statistics, check statements with the men who gave you information, check events with those who had a part in them, check the whole with your own sense of the probability that the things set forth happened as you have recounted them. In writing on technical or scientific subjects, secure the fullest cooperation in checking your article of the men and women who gave you the material. Keep them in mind as a part of the audience for which you are writing. All this takes time, and time is often short in newspaper making, but this might be a good motto for the editorial rooms: *Better be right than rapid and wrong.*

Adequacy: When material is gathered and notes made, make certain that notebook or memory is well filled with facts. It is a good rule to get together more information than you can possibly use and upon all related phases of the subject. The particular bit that you did not record may be the bit that you need most of all when you come to write your story. Just as out of a full mind the mouth speaks best, so out of a full notebook the hand writes best. The reporter who has five times as much material as he can possibly have space for in his story will write a story which reflects the fact that he knew several times as much about the matter as he was able to give the reader. Just as the whole weight of an inverted pyramid rests upon its point, so the whole weight of a writer's information about a subject rests upon the single fact or the few facts he may find it possible to present.

ASSIGNMENTS

1. Counting ten as a perfect score for each of the eight characteristics of a good reporter listed in this chapter, make a rating of your own qualities.

2. Over a period of a number of days, and subsequently from time to time, perform this exercise: Have someone read or dictate to you while you take down verbatim what is said. During the first few days have the dictation given very slowly. Gradually increase the rate.

3. Read through 500 to 1,000 words of a bulletin, text, or magazine article and attempt to reproduce in your own words the essential facts and as many details as possible of the material you have read. Compare, for accuracy and completeness, your account with the original.

4. Find a tip for a good news story; outline a detailed plan for covering the story. Then secure and write it.

5. If you have been assigned to a beat or preparation of news for a department, continue this as scheduled for you by the instructor.

(*Note:* It is a good idea to have student reporters who have checked and verified facts, names, dates, figures, and the like, to make note of this by some such device as "C-V" at the top of the right-hand corner of the first page of copy. A student reporter who neglects to do this should be given a failure on the assignment and required to do it before getting credit for the work.)