

CHAPTER 15

INTERVIEW STORIES

MOST of the material out of which news stories and feature articles are made is secured by the reporter as the result of interviewing. Few stories can be written without asking somebody something. In this sense, interviewing, the task of getting from people the facts for news and feature stories, is the basis of practically all news writing.

We want to deal a little more fully with this act of interviewing and its technique, but first we want to make clear what an interview story is and illustrate it with a few examples.

When a newspaper man or magazine writer refers to an interview story, he has in mind a particular kind of article—one which predominantly deals with the opinions or with the personality of the person or persons interviewed.

There are roughly two kinds of interview stories, though sometimes both are combined in one story. They are:

1. The *news interview* which presents opinions or ideas of a person of more or less consequence because they have news value. It may also present facts given by the person interviewed, adding value by connecting his name with them.

2. The *personality interview* which makes news of the person interviewed and his interesting characteristics and qualities.

The news interview: It takes only a moment's consideration to see that news inheres not only in events but also in what people think. Many times the thoughts of people—because they are the forerunners of events—make as important news as the events themselves. For instance, what an agricultural economist may think about the probable livestock market trends of the next six months or a year may be very important news.

The news interview deals with the thoughts of people as they concern movements and events in which the public is interested.

The value of any particular news interview will largely depend upon two factors, the prominence and authoritativeness of the person interviewed and the importance and timeliness of the subject of the interview.

The idea for an interview usually originates in the mind of the editor or reporter in one of two ways. Public interest in some important event or movement may suggest to him the value of interviewing someone particularly familiar with the situation and getting his ideas upon it. For example, an outbreak of hog cholera will suggest to the farm paper editor an interview with a well-known veterinarian on the situation. The fact that it is canning time may remind a reporter that an interview with a home economics specialist on canning will make a good story.

On the other hand an interview may be suggested by the presence in a reporter's field of some well-known, prominent person. A foreign scientist or a noted engineer comes to the university. An interview with him will be of interest to many readers. In this case the subject of the interview is thought of secondarily.

Many interviews are secured from local authorities or people of prominence to give a local angle to stories of a larger nature.

The interview story also enables an editor of a publication to present facts, as well as opinions, to his readers. A newspaper editor who wishes to promote civic beautification can run an interview with a man who is an authority on the subject, in which this authority relates how other cities have been beautified. A farm editor interested in pushing certified seeds can interview a farmer who grows certified seed, one who increased his production by use of such seeds, or a farm crops authority who can tell of the methods used in producing and handling the certified seeds.

The *Chicago Daily Drovers' Journal* has for years carried almost daily one or more interviews with livestock farmers who have come to the Chicago stockyards with cattle or hogs. These interviews give news of feeding operations, crop conditions, or farm methods from a wide territory. Persons who attend farm gatherings, conventions, and the like can also be interviewed.

A county agricultural extension agent who supplies a department of farm material to a local paper can make good use of an

interview in preparing his copy. Instead of trying to put his information in form of advice or exposition, he can convey the same idea in much more readable form by writing an interview with a farmer who has had success with a new variety of potato, who gets a premium for production of quality milk, or who has found a better way to handle the irrigation of his cotton. Likewise, the home demonstration agent can write an interview story telling how Mrs. John Jones prepares vegetables and fruits for storage in a zero refrigerator or how somebody else washes nylon hose.

Some discussion of the principles of interviewing follows later.

The writing of a news interview is handled in about the same way as a speech story. Just consider it as straight news and write it as such.

Study of the following examples of news interviews will give an idea of the handling of the news type of interview material:

With a scientist—

Minneapolis, May 5 (UP)—A young University of Minnesota physicist revealed tonight how he had succeeded in isolating a chemical substance possessing 30,000,000 times the exploding force of TNT, but cautioned that it has little commercial or military value at present.

Dr. Alfred O. C. Nier, 27 years old, only four years out of graduate school, confirmed an announcement made in New York City yesterday that by means of an instrument known as a "mass spectrometer" he had isolated U-235, one of the three isotopes of uranium. If the discovery can be perfected for commercial use it possibly would mark the most revolutionary step in the field of power since introduction of the steam engine.

Dr. J. H. Williams, Dr. Nier's colleague, said production of U-235 on a commercial scale was "definitely possible."

Dr. Nier believes that his experiments have proved a theory advanced by Neils Bohr, Danish scientist, that the explosive tendency of uranium lay in U-235.

"The isolation of the isotope has little commercial or military value at present," said Dr. Nier.

"U-235 is present in uranium in only minutely small quantities, the bulk of the

metal being U-238, another isotope of uranium which does not possess the explosive quality of U-235."

So far, he said, laboratory experiments had produced an infinitely small amount—"hardly enough to spring a mousetrap."

There is no possibility, he added, that U-235 could be developed for use in the present war.

He explained that there are three uranium isotopes—U-234, U-235 and U-238—chemically identical but varying in atomic weight and structure.

The explosion of U-235, he said, is due to nuclear change.

Immersion of U-235 in water is enough to start the reaction, he asserted.

The Physical Review Magazine, which published announcement of Dr. Nier's discovery, said a relatively large sample of U-235 had been isolated at General Electric Company laboratories and that other industrial laboratories were following suit.—(*United Press*)

With a cattleman—

By no means has the west run out of thin cattle, asserted A. R. Latka of Dawson county, Mont., when here with a

shipment of replacement stock recently. The small movement for so late in the year is because of the wonderful feed conditions during the past summer. And when he left home late in September to bring his cattle to market there had not been a killing frost. The summer and fall season this year lasted longer than it has for many years.

"One reason we are a little reluctant to move out stock at present is because they are full of green grass. And when stock is shipped in that condition they lose a lot of flesh before they hit the market. If they are held back a few weeks on good dry grass they are less apt to shrivel up on the way to market, for the dry feeds put on good firm flesh. But you'll see a lot of cattle move in the next four to six weeks," predicted Mr. Latka.

Included in his shipment of cattle were 13 head of 502-pound feeders that sold at \$12.00; a few feeder heifers that brought \$11.50, and some killer heifers at \$9.75.—(*Chicago Daily Drovers' Journal*)

With a housing specialist—

No "ghost towns" will succeed Federal defense housing after the present emergency has passed, according to Miss Gladys Miller, recently appointed consultant on the defense housing projects of the Public Buildings Administration.

"Before any houses are built," she revealed here yesterday, "a survey of the community is made to determine how many slum houses should be condemned, and that number of new houses is built. Workers moving into the 40,000 individual dwelling units now available, especially in areas near shipyards and airplane factories, bring with them a certain feeling of permanence."

Meeting fortnightly in Washington with other consultants on the project, Miss Miller is working with Gilbert Stanley Underwood, architect in charge, who built the Sun Valley resort. She is focusing on plans for interiors and giving advice on home furnishings.

In visits to completed houses Miss Miller said she had noticed that the tenants, impressed by the fact that the houses were new, had been challenged to fix over their old furniture. . . .

In designs for the interiors of the defense houses Miss Miller is concentrating on economy in building costs, short cuts for the housewife through careful planning

of closets and hallways and variety in floor plans.

"We don't want to think of this as mass housing," she asserted, "but as the creation of individual homes constructed and furnished with considerable variety."

The houses vary in size from one-room units to double houses and four-family homes with a separate entrance for each family. These houses may be occupied only by defense workers. Rents are scaled from \$27.50 to \$35 a month.

Complete sites are designed by planners who incorporate schemes for erecting underpasses, overpasses, new roads, playgrounds and landscapes for the entire community, in addition to planning the placement of houses. The maximum cost for one house has been \$3,500.

"I'm really a clearing house for the government and the manufacturer in an effort to provide the consumer with the finest small homes in the world," Miss Miller declared. "Good living quarters create better morale."

Miss Miller is an author and a member of the staff of New York University, as well as a decorator.—(*New York Times*)

With a home economist extension worker—

Ames, Iowa—The country woman of a quarter of a century ago—the one caricaturists drew with hay in her hair—where has she gone?

The woman whose hat was always summer before last's, whose shoes sometimes bore dried traces of the morning milking, whose tightly drawn hair and unsmiling mien spelled "life is real, life is earnest" and life is hard—why did she go away?

Because she wanted to, said Miss Fannie Gannon, extension home management specialist at Iowa State College. That sounds like a "raison de femme," but not if you'd heard Miss Gannon say *wanted*.

"You see," she said, "the country woman has built up a new philosophy of living, and defeatism is definitely out. She used to contrast herself, when she went into town, with the women she saw and continue resignedly to think—and show it—"I am the country cousin," a marked woman."

There's a lilt in her walk now; a sort of purpose when she looks at a kitchen knife or an enameled pan on the hardware counter. Occasionally she has to

remind one—and she does it laughingly and with pride—"I'm from the country, you know."

Whence this new alert, alive being?

Miss Gannon cited four influences that have contributed to the "inner something" that marks the new poise and self-confidence of the rural woman: The automobile and good roads that have opened her front door; the radio, magazines, newspapers and books that have stretched her horizon into "a great, wide, beautiful world"; the depression which brought problems challenging her "to take it"; and adult homemaking education with new ideas and efficient time and energy-saving practices.

All this is, translated, different clothes, different food, a different family, a different living room and a different spirit.

Her clothes?

Begin at the top, suggests Miss Mary Wood, extension clothing specialist. The summer-before-last hat, for example—several things may have happened to it. If she could, the country woman bought a new one; if she couldn't, she outwitted the 'hoppers who had devoured the Easter bonnet money off the south forty. A quirk here, a twist there, a brave new bow, and last season's hat was perched on a confident profile that said, "I know it's right, because I know what 'they're' wearing." Too, the hats she buys aren't draped with fruit, furbelows and froth; they tend to be the simple, just-for-you type that "stay in" if she doesn't buy every year.

And under the hat, perhaps a permanent wave, or at least a hair-do. Parts are copied from Hollywood and Paris instead of from Aunt Lizzie in the red plush album, although if the cycle has swung around, they may follow Aunt Lizzie's with digressions.

The country woman cares how she looks. Over one-half of the 114 farm women in Keokuk County answering a recent survey spent part of their clothing budgets for permanents and common beauty aids. Age has ceased to stamp "30" or "50" on the farm homemaker's brow. She lives in a life-begins-at-forty and an as-young-as-you-feel age.

Daughter deserves a hand, asserted Miss Wood. She has been a strong ally of the sociological and economic influences. No farm mother could long stay in a rut with a high school daughter voicing a distressed "Mother, your hair!" or "Wear your green dress to the 4-H leaders' meeting—it looks swell!" 'Twas Daughter who fur-

nished part of the courage it took to smooth on the first faint touch of youth-bringing rouge.

Standards are higher, little things count. Stocking seams are straight, straps stay put, sagging hem lines are evened and yawning plackets securely snapped or efficiently zipped. Blue calico kitchen aprons have given way to pink print or gay plaid. Waspy, stayed-to-death corsets are replaced with foundation garments that smooth but don't obliterate curves.

They're slimming up from the inside, too, said Miss Ruth Cessna, who has talked diet to farm women, both up and down a business cycle. The country woman who carried kindling to build the morning kitchen fire, pumped water to heat and milked cows before breakfast needed a "stack of wheats." There are more fruits and vegetables now, and less starch, sweet rolls and pie—consequently, a clearer eye, clearer skin and slimmer silhouette.

Better diets of farm mothers are showing up in their babies, Mrs. Alma H. Jones, child development and family relations specialist, said. She talked of the "going, glowing and growing" children of farm mothers she had seen recently.

Children's clothing is simple, comfortable and attractive, Mrs. Jones said. Fewer school youngsters have hand-down complexes, as did the Marys and Jimmies who needed no mittens because the sleeves of big brother's cast-off coat quite enveloped their hands. The problem of tell-tale winter underwear ridges that brought periodical rebellion from Jane—"The town girls don't wear it, Mother; I'm in high school now"—has been solved with ski trousers slipped off before school.

Mrs. Jones said something about "a more cooperative family spirit," too. She illustrated: When Mother wants to go to a homemaker study meeting, Dad spends the afternoon balancing his farm account book and seeing that three-month-old Judy's schedule remains intact. When Dad runs out of binder twine, Mother puts Judy in a basket on the back seat and hies to town. John and Mary whisk the dinner dishes off the table and through the dishwasher so that Mom can referee the three-player basketball game or ping-pong tourney in the basement.

The 1937 homemaker's life is still real and earnest, yes—"but I like it," she says, with a steady glint in her eye that convinces. And there is her secret—she likes it.

The personality interview: Because of the intense interest of people in the personality and character of men and women who are prominent in the world or who have had unusual experiences or whose outlook on life is unique, newspapers and magazines run many personality interviews whose purpose is not so much to present what the interviewee thinks as what he is, how he looks, acts, talks, his character and philosophy.

In any community there are a few people who stand out from all the rest because of their achievement or because of something unique in their character or experience. Interviews with such people will be widely read because of the human interest involved. Again, there are continually coming into one's community prominent people from outside, to speak, to conduct investigations, and the readers of the local newspapers are interested in hearing about them.

The personality interview is secured in the same way as the news interview, but it is usually written in a much freer, more unconventional feature style. The following stories are examples of personality interviews, based on current news:

With a 37-year-old grandmother—

Phoenix, Ariz.—A 37-year-old grandmother stopped her work of tearing down an airplane motor here, shook a heavy wrench at a group of amused spectators, and said:

"America's going to have to get smart."

"They're training women to take the jobs of a lot of men who'll be needed for other things if we get into the 'big fight.' But they're missing the boat completely in one occupation:

"Airplane mechanics."

The stocky, good-natured, blond and blue-eyed woman—who looks far more like a chorus girl than a grandmother—believes the Government should start a nationwide training program for women airplane mechanics.

Mrs. Ann H. Stanley is recognized hereabouts as the only woman in the United States licensed by the Civil Aeronautics Authority as a tearer-downer and builder-upper of flying machines. She's the wife of Dale Stanley, head of maintenance for Southwest Airways here.

She was doing bookkeeping and steno-

graphic work in a Los Angeles office—and hating it—when she met Stanley. He was running an airplane repair shop.

Waiting around for him, she started handing him tools. Then she put a wrench on a bolt and the business "just got in my blood." Soon she was doing work about the shop in her spare time.

She had two years of practical experience when her license was issued September 19, 1938.

With a veteran civil engineer—

This morning, about 10:30 o'clock, Thomas Ulvan Taylor will be called to the platform in the auditorium of the Engineering Societies Building for a short speech upon becoming the first Texan to receive an honorary membership in the American Society of Civil Engineers. He will be one of thirty-two such members in the nation.

He may find it difficult to tell in five minutes in his drawling voice the thoughts that come to a man who was born eighty-two years ago along the Texas cattle trail

twenty miles from Fort Worth, then the nearest town.

Yesterday, in his room on the thirteenth floor of the Governor Clinton Hotel, he stood at the window staring down on Broadway, with the wind blowing papers above the heavy traffic.

"You know, son," he remarked, "when I was a boy back in Parker County, Texas, if we saw a bright day like this we'd figger there'd be a moonlight night. And when that happened folks would get their livestock and run them down into the woods by the creek and we'd scatter the critters. On moonlight nights the Comanches used to come riding down on their raids."

The telephone rang and he strode across the room, his legs a bit bowed, his powerful shoulders slightly rounded. "Hello, Jack," he said cheerily. "Sure, come on up."

He grinned at a reporter. "That's Professor John Focht of the University of Texas. He used to be one of my pupils. That was before I became dean of the School of Engineering. I've been dean emeritus since 1936."

After the introductions, he sprawled in a leather armchair. His former pupil, seated on a bed, asked: "Did Dean Taylor tell you about his job for a saloon?"

Dean Taylor's ruddy cheeks became scarlet and his blue eyes twinkled. His gnarled fingers played with the heavy gold chain on his vest. There were no keys on the chain to indicate he had been graduated from the University of Virginia and Cornell.

"When I was about 10 or 12 years old," he began, "there was only about twenty miles of railroad in the whole state of Texas. It was twenty miles to the nearest post office and there wasn't a cook stove in the State.

"You had to travel mostly by stage coach, frame box wagons and often you used ox teams. Well, about 4 in the morning the stage would come in and the driver would take his tin horn out of a holster and blow a few notes. He couldn't

blow anything fancy but he'd wake up the whole town. He was like an alarm clock.

"You didn't have any water right in your house in those days. So the saloon keeper would pay me 5 cents a bucket for bringing him water. I'd make about 15 cents that way. Why'd they want water in a saloon? Why, people didn't drink raw whiskey. They'd put a little water in it and make what they called a bull toddy. It was a bad season when they drank it straight.

"The saloon keeper in our town was one of the leading citizens. He didn't want any drunkenness and rowdies. Of course, now Dodge City, that was different. No, it wasn't so much of a railroad center. 'Twas more of a cattle center. And the drinking and gambling in Dodge City—wow, they were something."

He threw his head back and laughed, his frame shaking.

Professor Focht began talking of the changes that Dean Taylor had witnessed at Texas University during his fifty-two years of service there. For a while Dean Taylor kept looking out the window dreamily. Then he told how he had come to forsake ranching for school.

"There was an old Campbellite preacher, they were kind of off-shoots of the Baptists. And this preacher he put the fire into me. Well, there was a normal school that had opened about that time. So I entered a competition and won a scholarship. I didn't have a thin dime.

"By the time I got out of there I was ready to go to a regular university. I liked mathematics so I took up engineering. When I got out of the University of Virginia I went to Cornell."

He snapped his fingers suddenly. "And here's one of the strangest things. When I got out of Cornell in 1895 the man who conferred my degree on me was Henry S. Jacoby. And he's one of the four other men who will be gettin' certificates or medals or somethin' with me tomorrow."

—(*New York Times*)

Skill in interviewing: Securing a successful interview of either the news or personality type is usually no easy job. The beginning reporter does not always make much of a success in the first few attempts. Interviewing on a newspaper is a task usually assigned to an experienced reporter.

A college campus furnishes plenty of opportunity for a journalism student to secure an interview story. Faculty members, the campus policeman, a janitor, the keeper of the stadium, the student from Liberia—all are probably accustomed to being interviewed and know what to expect when the reporter appears and begins to ask questions.

Interviewing taxes the skill of the reporter as thoroughly perhaps as any reportorial task. To be able to get the information that he wants most from a man or a woman, who many times is not particularly anxious to talk for publication, is a task which calls for the reporter's best ability.

As in the case of the meeting story, the reporter can do much to prepare himself for an interview by familiarizing himself with the subject of the interview and with facts about the person he is to interview. Nothing could be more detrimental to success than to show the interviewee that one is ignorant of a subject in which the interviewee is vitally interested or that one is not familiar with the name, position, and record of the interviewee.

It is obvious, therefore, that skill in getting from people the information that one needs is one of the most important, if not *the* most important, problem of reporting.

What can be said in a general way about this task?

1. The reporter needs to know human nature in an intimate and realistic way. He has to deal with all kinds of people. He has to make an approach to them that will incline them toward cooperating with him. To this end he must be able to "size up" people, to recognize types, to make quick and accurate estimate of peculiarities of character and temperament. The reporter should be both a scientific and a practical psychologist. He can get much from books on psychology. He can perhaps get more from an eternally vigilant study of people, their actions and reactions, their foibles and idiosyncracies.

2. The reporter must be sensitive to the relative values of testimony. One whose business it is to get information from people learns very early that he cannot put equal reliance upon what different people tell him. One man to whom he goes for information is congenitally careless of facts; another is an inaccurate ob-

server; a third does not have a too scrupulous regard for the truth; a fourth is biased through vanity or fear; a fifth is prone to leap to conclusions from insufficient data.

It is well, therefore, for the reporter to cultivate, in this connection at least, a skeptical attitude of mind, to the extent of persistently questioning and checking what he is told.

3. The reporter cannot expect the person he is interviewing to do his work for him. It is too much to expect that the interviewee will know what information will make news. The reporter, in other words, must be the questioner. It is not enough to go to a man with the query, "Do you have any news today?" The answer is nine times out of ten—and quite naturally—"No, I don't believe I know of anything." When the reporter makes such an approach he is asking the interviewee to be a better reporter than he is.

Use of interviews: The interview story still remains a fixture in journalism. It is true that the old-fashioned "celebrity" interview story is not as common in newspapers as it once was; the radio has encroached upon that particular field of presenting the opinions of persons of prominence for public consumption. The motion picture screen likewise has invaded what was once the exclusive domain of newspapers and magazines.

But the very useful device of the interview story is still valuable, and the pages of both metropolitan and "big town" journals are well sprinkled with them.

As a part of the technique of writing magazine articles, the interview has become steadily more important through the years. Many articles carried in magazines, other than those of the more technical sorts, are nothing but interviews. Other articles are made up of a number of interviews or include well-defined interviews as part of the material in the article. Some investigation by the journalism student will reveal how widespread this is. To illustrate, a recent issue of *The Etude*, a noted magazine for musicians, had four interview feature articles in it. One was an interview with a famous pianist. A second was headed, "She Studied With Liszt," and was an interview with an elderly woman who once had been a pupil of Liszt, the great pianist.

The interview is as much a part of writing the feature story as it is of straight news writing. Perhaps more so. In many a good interview story the line distinguishing it as a news story or a feature story, is mighty thin. Often it is nonexistent. Because this is so, interviews will also be considered again in a later chapter in this text.

ASSIGNMENTS

1. List five tips for good news interviews on or near the campus.
2. List five tips for good personality interviews on or near the campus.
3. Gather and write one of each of these two types of interviews.
4. Secure and write an interview story based on one of the following: research work under way; extension project; visitor to campus; most unusual member of faculty you know; faculty member or student who has had some strange adventure—was on a torpedoed boat, say; faculty member in charge of some unusual laboratory—as psychology clinic, nursery school, veterinary clinic.
5. Write an imaginary interview with one of following or equivalent: Statue of soldier in front of museum, statue—or portrait—of former president of institution, with swan in pool on campus, with the dean's watch, with a flower in garden of department of horticulture, with frog that lives in botany greenhouse, with the vase made by ceramics student which broke in firing, with a spike used when the Union Pacific Railroad was first built, with the data book used by some civil engineering student years ago, with an old-fashioned wood cook stove, with grandmother's wedding dress, with dress form used in clothing laboratory, with a corner fence post, with the old cider press, with the old reaper under the elm tree.
6. Examine one issue of one of the following and report on interview stories found in it: *Detroit Free-Press*, *Baltimore Sun*, *Minneapolis Tribune*, *Chicago News*, *Salt Lake Tribune*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Milwaukee Journal*, *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, *Ft. Worth Star-Telegram*, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *Lincoln Journal*, *Denver Post*. If none of these newspapers is to be found in the library, some others of prominence will do.