

CHAPTER 24
GATHERING FEATURE ARTICLE MATERIAL

He wrote of lords and ladies
(He lived in Arkansas).
He wrote of countless millions
(A "V" filled him with awe).
His tales, indeed, were many,
His sales, alas, were few;
He wrote of things he'd read about
And not of things he knew.

A TREASURED delusion of many novices who think they would like to write feature articles must at this point be dispelled. Following the inception of a bright idea, the beginner often thinks that he need only shut himself in his bedroom and, out of his inner consciousness, evolve a story. It is very doubtful whether this method will work consistently with any type of writing. One thing is sure, that it will not work in the writing of feature articles. The making of a feature article consists not of a single step, the writing, but of three steps—the inception of the idea, the gathering of the material, and the putting of the story into words. And the most important of these, if it were possible to make a distinction in a process where each step is integral, is the second, the gathering of the material out of which the story is to be made.

In the field of technical articles, the material in the article is more important than the way in which it is written. News quality and informational value are more essential than facility in composition. The writer cannot conceal laziness or lack of sound material by superficial cleverness in use of words and phrases. It is the "stuff" in the story that counts most.

The feature writer should think of himself first of all as a reporter—no more and no less than that. If he does think of himself as a reporter—a reporter for magazines, to be sure, but still a reporter, for he is dealing with fact and not with imaginative material—he will have the proper perspective, the proper attitude,

toward his work. The same qualities of perseverance, regard for the truth, ability to see the salient facts from a news point of view, that characterize the good reporter, are essential equipment of the successful feature writer.

Mechanics of gathering feature article material: Feature writing is a business, and it demands systematic methods. Every feature story writer must work out for himself some system for handling the mechanical phases of his work. It would be unwise to formulate a set of specific rules—much wiser to suggest a process that has been successfully used by many feature story writers and let the individual develop his own methods on the basis of these suggestions.

If a writer conceived a single idea and worked upon a single story at a time, the process would be very simple. But, fortunately or unfortunately, it is impracticable to do this, for the simple reason that one's output would be entirely too low to be worthwhile. On the other hand, a feature writer must hoard tips and material not only for immediate stories but for those of the future.

The first tool of the feature writer is a notebook in which he can record tips for stories wherever he may be and whenever the occasion arrives. This notebook may also be used to gather material. It should be constantly expanding and contracting as material is secured and then transferred to a filing system.

A separate filing system for feature story ideas and tips will be found advantageous. It need be only a simple card index, where, under appropriate heads, ideas may be transferred from the notebook, clippings pasted, and references and sources suggested.

When the writer begins to gather material on a particular subject he will need to start a folder labeled with the subject of his story. Into this folder he will put, as he collects his material, notes, bulletins, clippings, and articles. When he is ready to write the story, all of the data that he needs will have accumulated in this folder—and all that will remain will be the process of turning the raw material into the final product.

Having some sort of plan or method for gathering material will save time and insure a better story. When your story subject has been determined, look through your files for material that

bears upon it. Or there may be a chapter in an available textbook that deals with it. Read what you have found and acquaint yourself more fully with the subject.

Then list the places where you may expect to secure further material and the persons you will want to interview. Include in this list some sources which are not so very promising, but which might yield something of value. Many a time worth-while information and suggestions are secured where you least expect to find them.

As you set out to get your information, begin at the place which seems most logical. Often this is the place where you are known. Someone you know will be more likely to talk freely with you and give you further suggestions as to where else to go. Before you finish the calls on your list, be certain that you have the last bit of information you need for a complete story.

Let us see how this would work out with a specific example.

Assume that you are a student in dairy manufacturing—or dairy technology. You expect to write an article on milk as a food. That subject is too general, and too broad, but you expect to find some news angles that will make a suitable story. The news angle may turn out to be new research or it may relate to the place of milk in national defense.

After examining such related material in your file, you would logically begin the gathering of material by talking with one or more members of the dairy instruction and research staffs. Don't forget the dairy bacteriologist.

Your calling list will include some or all of these other places and persons for information-gathering interviews: The college or department of home economics, where some specialist in foods may tell you about different ways to use milk in the diet. The chemistry department, where someone will explain the fundamental food values of milk. The animal husbandry department, where information about livestock and poultry feeding uses of milk and milk by-products may be secured. The economics department, for information on marketing, distribution, and prices of milk.

With that it may look as though you have adequately covered the field, but wait a minute! Children drink milk. Often children

don't like milk and refuse to drink it. Yet children need milk as a food. Is there anything new in how to get children to drink milk? Who could tell you?

Probably a nursery school is operated by the school of home economics, and the person in charge is likely to know. So you go to talk with her. She shows you how mugs shaped as rabbits are used for drinking; or glasses with Walt Disney pictures on them. There are Mother Goose pictures in the bottom of cereal bowls which the children cannot see until they have eaten their cereal and cream. She tells you that the psychology department has been making a study of how to get children to drink milk.

That last is something new. At the beginning you hardly dreamed that a psychologist might know about milk as food. When you interview the psychologist, he tells you of experimental work that is being done in cooperation with the city milk council and the local association of milk distributors. So in turn you interview the young woman secretary of the milk council and the president of the distributors' association. You learn that the local children's hospital, the county medical society, and the community fund which aids in distribution of milk to the poor are all cooperating to learn more about milk and its use. So on you go to see these agencies.

By this time you have covered the subject adequately and are ready to begin writing. You probably have enough material for writing not one, but several articles. Because it is all secured in one community, it may be suitable only for a local or state publication. But it may also be possible that some angles of it would make a story for a national publication, a dairy trade paper, or some other more general magazine.

So much for a local feature story as a student reporter might handle it. Let us see how a feature writer would go about handling an article of nation-wide scope. One of the authors of this text was given an assignment not long since to write an article for a national farm magazine on seeds as they related to the world war—the cutting off of seed imports and the efforts being made to produce in this country the kinds of seeds formerly imported. The instructions were to make a thorough investigation.

This writer began by getting out of his files whatever information he had. He went through government releases and reports for the previous year or two to make himself familiar with statistics. He carefully read back numbers of seed trade magazines. He also talked with local men who were in touch with the seed business. He took a map of the United States and marked on it the important centers where seeds are grown, mainly in the West. He also made a list of seed growers and other persons in about a dozen states who should be interviewed. Then he was ready to start out. It was an assignment that could best be handled by driving.

The first stop was at St. Louis, to visit the annual convention of the American Seed Trade Association. Here he interviewed seedsmen from sections of the country he did not expect to visit on the trip. He also made the acquaintance of seed growers from the Pacific Coast and arranged to see them at their seed farms later.

He also had a talk with the seed statistician of the United States Department of Agriculture who had come from Washington, D. C., to appear on the program. From him he secured a mimeographed report on a recent seed survey. From a representative of a trade paper he secured a copy of a seed trade yearbook which was of untold value later.

Leaving St. Louis, the writer drove west through New Mexico and Arizona to Los Angeles. His real work began at Santa Ana, below Los Angeles, where he interviewed a grower of tomato seed. Going north he went through California, into Oregon and Washington, and then turned eastward into Idaho, Montana and Utah, and Colorado. In these states he interviewed commercial seed growers and experiment station agronomists. As he went along, he took a good many pictures and gathered up others available. He also accumulated a large amount of printed and typewritten material, such as catalogs, bulletins, weekly reports to farmer growers, and copies of talks.

When he returned home, he had traveled nearly 12,000 miles in a period of two months and he brought back material for several articles dealing with vegetable, farm, flower, and herb seeds. An article dealing with the vegetable seed situation was written first,

since it was of most public interest; a paragraph at the end summarized the flower seed situation. A second article was written on forage and grass seeds, and another dealt with seeds of herbs and essential oil plants. Material for some other articles had also been gathered on the trip.

This may look like a tremendous lot of hard work, yet it was the only way a firsthand gathering of material could have been accomplished. To a greater or less extent, many present-day magazine articles are gathered in just this same way.

Suppose we look now at magazine feature article reporting in more detail from various angles.

Reporting the experience story: It may be contended that one does not have to "report" the personal experience and confession stories, but there is reason in the opposite view—that even in the case of these types of stories the writer must be a reporter. What he actually does, of course, is to interview himself. Now, although these types of stories are the simplest to report, it is not so easy a matter as it may at first appear. It is a difficult task to keep an unprejudiced attitude toward one's own deeds and ideas, but this is just what the writer must do if he is to produce an article that will interest a wide number of readers.

The gathering of material for a story which is to relate the experiences of someone else than yourself is a strictly reportorial task. You will employ the same methods that you would use in covering an interview assignment for a newspaper. Let us suppose that you have in mind writing a story about Arthur Harris, a farmer who has a reputation for his high yields of soybeans. You have heard of Harris from the county agent in his county, whom you asked for tips for feature articles. Your first step, probably, will be to write Harris, explaining what you have in mind and asking for an opportunity to see him, talk to him, and look over his place. You will want to make clear to him that you want to write a story about his work, that you are making him a business proposition from which he will derive indirect benefits. You put the matter, in other words, on a straightforward business basis.

When you go to see Harris you already have a conception of the nature of the story. You think that it is going to be a soybean

production story—and it probably will be. But it is unwise to have your mind too firmly made up as to what will be the central idea of the article until you have covered the story. Something may be discovered that will entirely alter the direction and emphasis of the article. But, with this precaution in mind, it is a good idea to have outlined, in thought at least, the main points upon which you want to secure information. You want to learn, for instance, the record of his yields over a period of years, his rotation scheme, his soil treatment, the source of his seed and its treatment, methods of cultivation, production costs, profit, size of farm, labor employed, horse or tractor power used. These may be the most important things, but they are not all. You will want to get a clear visual impression of Harris' farm and farmstead, you will want to meet his wife and children. You will need to learn about his other farm operations. It will be very important to get in Harris' own words some of his opinions of farming methods and the elements in his success. You must, above all, get a number of good pictures of Harris, his family, his crops, his farmstead, and any other things of special interest.

It will begin to appear that this is neither a small nor an easy task—but we are not yet through. The material that we have here has been secured from what we may call the *primary source*. But may there not be other material which you can use advantageously in this article? In short, are there any *secondary sources* which you should exploit? For instance, it may be well to talk to Harris' wife and get her story of their struggles and success; to see the county agent and learn from him what he thinks of Harris; to visit some of Harris' neighbors and get their points of view. It will be worthwhile when you get back from your expedition to go to the census reports to find out the average soybean yields in this state; it may serve you to read up in bulletins on soybean breeding and cultivation. Only when you have done all of these things, covered all of these angles of the story, and accumulated these data in your folder marked "Harris" will you be in a position to begin writing your article.

An experience story may be of the sort which reports not the achievements of a single individual, but the work of an organization

or community. In this case, one must thoroughly canvass the situation and determine carefully the primary and secondary sources. You are going to write, we shall say, the story of a rural women's club which is doing notable work. The club has founded in the market town a rest room for farm women, it has organized a traveling library and has been responsible for a lyceum course during the winter. The primary source for this story will be some woman who is a ringleader in the work, the president, perhaps, or the founder of the club, or its oldest member. From this woman you can get most of the material that will form the backbone of your story. But there are other sources that should be utilized. You should attend a regular meeting of the club, visit the rest room, talk to a number of the members, get the attitude of the men, both farmers and townsmen, toward the work of the club.

In the case of this story you run the grave danger of failing to cover the story, if you rely on one or two sources of material when several should be investigated. A writer for a farm paper once made a curious blunder which illustrates this point. In a story on a rural organization, he mentioned the work of a Mrs. A——, giving her credit for the organization's success. Several years later he learned that there had been two Mrs. A——'s and that he had written of the wrong one.

Reporting the process story: Although essentially the same, the task of reporting the process story is superficially different from the problem of covering any of the other types. You have, in this case, to gather and present material which will make clear to the reader "how to do something." You must yourself, in the first place, have a clear mental picture of the object or the process that you are going to describe. In the second place, you must have complete data on how this effect is achieved—the details of construction or the steps in the process.

In a story which tells how to make something—a barn, a concrete fence, a piece of apparatus, a breakfast alcove—there are three kinds of data that will be necessary in practically every case:

1. Materials and specifications.
2. Costs and labor.
3. The construction process, including all of the necessary steps.

In some cases all of this material can be secured by interviewing a single person. An agricultural engineer may be able to give you all of the material you need for a story on the construction of a sales pavilion. You may be able to get sufficient material from a new bulletin on the use of concrete on the farm to write the story about the concrete fence. On the other hand, it may be, as perhaps in the case of the breakfast alcove, that you will have to get the specifications from an architect, the lumber and paint quotations from dealers, and the construction process from a carpenter. The point is that in every story of this sort these phases must, if possible, be covered.

Reporting the news-feature story: It would seem at first glance that there is nothing more to reporting the news-feature story—a fair, conference, field day, lecture, or some other such event—than to attend, take notes of what transpires, interview the leaders, and see what is to be seen. To be sure, this kind of story can be reported in this way—must be, in fact—but in a great many instances there are other sources to which the skillful reporter will have recourse.

The reporting of fairs is one of the important jobs of writers for agricultural papers. There are two things in regard to the fair in which the farmer readers of the paper will be especially interested, the judging and the agricultural exhibits. The usual farm paper story of a fair consists of a more or less extended summary of the fair activities and a list of the awards in the judging contests. Farm boys and girls will also be interested in the junior contests and exhibits.

Is there anything more that a fair story should do? There is. The state and county or sectional fair is a reflection—and a very accurate one—of the agricultural conditions of the state, county, or section. The story of the fair, then, should reflect the spirit of the exposition and through it the spirit of the agriculture of the district which it covers. There is another source of worthwhile material for a fair story—the records of previous fairs. It is interesting and valuable to trace the development of the agriculture of the state by outlining or hinting at the development of the fair, making striking contrasts with the past.

In all of these meeting stories, the purpose of the feature article writer should be more than merely to present the surface facts. He must interpret the present events in the light of past events, and to do this may require considerable delving into the official records and old magazines.

Reporting the information story: The simplest sort of information or scientific story is that for which the material is secured from a single person, an expert or well-known authority. In this case the primary source of material is the interview with this person, although it is frequently well to amplify one's information by reading up on the subject in books, bulletins, reports, and magazines. It may also be necessary to interview more than one expert to get a thorough picture of different phases of the question.

Perhaps you are going to write a story on the function of the vitamin in the diet. You would naturally go first to the research chemist who has made investigations in this field. He can give you the bulk of the material that you will want to use. But before you go to see him, you should read on the subject as much as possible. After interviewing the chemist, another slant on the question can be secured by talking to an authority on dietetics to get the practical application of the theory of vitamins.

In many cases the information story is more complicated. We spoke in Chapter 15 of stories which cannot be secured from a single individual or even from a limited group of individuals in a single community; and many information stories are of this kind. They deal with state-wide or national movements or conditions—and present probably the most difficult task that the feature writer has to face: stories, for instance, which deal with the position of women in some profession or occupational field, with the fight on a plant disease, or with the growth of the use of electricity on the farm. To handle any one of these subjects the writer will have to utilize a wide variety of sources, and will probably have to take weeks or even months for the development of his material.

Reporting the personality story: In the reporting of the personality story, we are dealing, as far as the gathering of the material goes, with a much simpler proposition. The story concerns a single individual and will be secured as a result of an interview. What

was said in the chapter dealing with interviews in regard to the reporting of the personality interview applies here with equal force. The point that the reporter must remember when he secures this interview is that his purpose is to reproduce for his readers the personality—not merely the words—of the person interviewed. In other words, he needs to be keenly awake to visual as well as auditory sensations. He must be able to reproduce the appearance of the person and his surroundings. More than this, he has to capture this man's or woman's spirit, character, philosophy of life. The securing of material for this type of article is more than the routine interview. It requires keenness, insight, and alertness and is a supreme test of the reporter.

Experiences in gathering feature material: So far in this chapter, general suggestions concerning the gathering of material for the different types of feature articles have been given. Now it will be interesting and profitable to recount the experiences of feature writers, the authors and others, in getting material for stories, in order to illustrate the general suggestions that have been put forward.

Gathering firsthand material: There is a story told in the Bible of how on an occasion the Egyptians refused to give the Israelite sojourners straw for bricks, but ordered that, instead, the straw must be hunted for, each man for himself.

Before the feature article can be written, the writer must do precisely as did the Israelites in bondage, go out and seek for himself the straw, wherewith the bricks of his article are to be made.

After a writer has an idea for a feature article or after he has been given an assignment by an editor, the first thing he should do is to sit down and make an analysis of the material he may have already at hand and outline what he will need and where it may be secured.

If there is time, it is a wise thing for him, as was suggested earlier, to go through all of this material, refresh his mind on the subject, determine what are the essential and important angles. As he goes along, he may set down a list of the men he needs to interview, the places he will visit, the points upon which he wants

to get fresh or additional information. This done, his job is to gather the straw for his bricks.

Call on the publicity man: Suppose, for instance, that a reporter for a farm paper is to go to a state agricultural college to get certain information. He is a total stranger there. Where shall he begin? Some successful reporters begin by calling on the president or the dean of agriculture; they interview them and go on to other men on the college staff.

The method of one successful writer is usually precisely the opposite. If he is unacquainted, his first visit is to the bulletin editor or college publicity man, who is in touch with everything on the campus, and who can tell the writer just where the information is that he wants. There is no ceremony about getting to see him, and he will outline the whole situation in a few minutes and put the correspondent directly in touch with the men he wants to see. After this, if it is necessary, he calls on the dean or president. In fact, after he has talked with others, he can talk more intelligently with these and save their time by asking more specific questions.

This writer was once sent to interview the governor of a state on the administrative reforms he had instituted. The governor was a total stranger to him. He did not know a single man in the whole administration forces of the state. So, contrary to his usual plan, he went directly to the governor and explained what he wanted. After a few minutes of conversation the governor stopped him.

"I'll give you the interview," he said, "but before I do, I want you to spend about three days digging into what we have here. I want you to talk with our administrative board secretary, with our budget director, with our purchasing agent, and others. After you get through and find out all these men have to tell you, come back and see me. You will know then what I am talking about."

Know the man you are to interview: If the whole story is to be secured from one man, the matter is comparatively simple. Know the man from whom the interview is to be secured. Look him up in "Who's Who" if his name is to be found there, or in

any other place, or ask someone. If he is a farmer, the county agent or local banker can usually give one information about him. If these are not available, a grocer, the county auditor, the fellow who sells you a sandwich, the druggist even can sometimes help.

Or suppose that the man to be interviewed is the chief engineer in charge of the construction of a large dam. If this man is difficult to locate when you want to see him, one of his associates, or a salesman for a materials company may help you out. Possibly the engineer is staying at a hotel in a nearby town, and the clerk there can help you out. In fact, if you ever do any considerable amount of magazine reporting of whatever nature, you will often be surprised at the information about people that hotel clerks and managers can give you.

The point is to know your man, know what you want him to talk about, know what you want to get from him, before you go to see him, whoever he may be.

Picking the place for the interview: If knowing the man in advance is the first rule for getting a good interview, the second concerns the surroundings in which he is interviewed.

It is best to see a banker, a college president, a man of public affairs away from his office. At his office he is often interrupted, and his mind is on other things. If he can be seen at lunch or dinner, at the hotel or elsewhere, a much better interview can usually be secured.

A college president invited a staff writer to his home for dinner, and afterward they sat by the fireplace in his study and talked. The governor of a state once came down to his office early in the morning and talked to a reporter for an hour before interruptions began. Another governor took the same writer with him on a hundred mile auto trip which he had to make, after the reporter had waited at his office for five hours for a chance to speak with him.

Another governor was interviewed in a taxi ride from the state-house to a railroad station. To get an interview with two prominent farm organization officials, one writer had to travel with them on a train from New York City to Washington, D. C. At another time he rode with an official from Chicago to Omaha to get his interview.

But if the interview is with a farmer, whether for only a few minutes' chat or for a lengthy interview, the best place to see him is on his own farm in familiar surroundings—but when he is at leisure—in the barnyard, in the granary or hog house, by the kitchen stove, in the farm office. And the best time is on a rainy day or a Sunday morning.

Get the farmer at a leisure moment if possible, when he has a chance to relax—but get him. The latter part of this rule means that, about nine times out of ten, the farmer has to be interviewed at work, especially if it is summer. The worst possible thing is to ask a farmer to stop work while he talks with you.

A purebred livestock man who understands the value of publicity will stop work he is doing to talk with a farm paper reporter. So, too, will a producer of hybrid seed corn, a poultryman who sells baby chicks, or a grower of fruits or vegetables who sells his products under his own brand. Nurserymen and commercial seed growers who do a large retail or catalog business welcome a reporter for a garden publication or other magazine which has a garden department. A cattleman or sheepman of the western range country who sells feeder cattle or sheep is an easy man to interview. So, too, is a man who feeds livestock in large numbers and markets them on a central market. A man who operates a large farm or a number of farms talks readily.

All these are likely to be men who travel, who meet the public, and who often come in contact with reporters. But the average farmer is often much harder to interview.

So reporters have talked with farmers on top of threshing machines, in hay mows, on loads of hay, on straw stacks; have ridden manure spreaders, tractors, and loads of wheat going to town. They have followed a drag around a plowed field, have tramped along by men shucking corn; stood by while the farmer milked his cows, cleaned the stable, clipped the horses, sheared the sheep, fed the cattle.

In recent years, as power farming has increased, interviewing farmers has become even more difficult. It is hard to get a farmer who is driving a tractor that is pulling a combine or a corn picker to stop with you and talk, while his equipment and often help

must stand idle. Or a fruit grower spraying an orchard with a power sprayer. When he is irrigating a field, a farmer can't turn off the water and stop while he talks with the reporter, either, but must go on working.

Once a reporter stood outside and shouted questions at a tenant farmer who was inside a clover seed huller, repairing it. Another time in Kansas, when the county agent had gone along, the agent fed the hay baler while the reporter talked with the farmer, and then the reporter took the fork while the agent talked. When he left, the reporter had blisters on his hands—and material in his notebook which he used in a series of three articles. Often he has had to interview a farmer or someone else over the long distance phone.

The home economics reporter for a women's magazine, or the household department of a farm magazine, has some of the same difficulties. Oftentimes she tries to get her story from women who are attending a convention or a farm and home week program. It is almost impossible to do this unless she can get her subject off somewhere, where they will not be bothered as they talk. A good many times she will get much better material if she merely gets acquainted with the women and arranges to see them at their homes later.

A writer who is gathering material for an engineering story finds that many times he must get his interviews from men who are at work. This may mean tramping through a factory between humming motors or machines. Or yelling questions above the roar of a blast furnace. Or climbing up on a construction job. Information could be gathered to better advantage if the interview could be in the office or in a hotel lobby in the evening.

In engineering and industry, it is often difficult to get men on the job or the branch manager to talk. They prefer that you go to the "boss"—the general manager or to the company headquarters at some distant place. These are problems the reporter-writer has to solve. Often it will save time and facilitate work if a call is made at headquarters first and a letter secured, which gives you permission to get your story. This permission may not

be granted unless you are a staff representative of a recognized publication or have a specific assignment from an editor.

Recently a magazine staff reporter was told by his editor to get a story on the manufacture of a certain special product which had come into the news because of war, although it had no direct connection with war or defense in itself. The reporter found that this product was made by only one firm, which had a secret formula for it and secret methods of production. The manufacturer had a world-wide monopoly and was guarding the process by every means possible. Visitors are not allowed to go into the plant under any consideration.

The reporter went first to an old friend who taught a related technical subject in a university. He asked this friend to help him. The faculty man called a friend of his on the phone who was a branch manager for a local plant which belonged to the firm making the product. He told this manager that it would be a good idea for the whole industry if this article could be written. What could he do to help make it possible?

The reporter went next to see this branch manager and explained what he wanted. The branch manager called by telephone a vice-president of the company at headquarters several hundred miles away. The vice-president agreed that the article would be worthwhile. In turn, he made a phone call to the manager of the plant where the article was made and told him that he was to admit the reporter and talk with him. The reporter was also given a letter which would identify him.

A few days later, the reporter went to this plant. He was shown all through it. He was given the facts for his story, though not of course the secret technical details. He was told what he could not put in his story. After he had the story written, it was sent to the vice-president and to the public relations man of the company at headquarters to be checked. In due time the story appeared in the magazine. The reporter had carried out his assignment.

Opening the interview: One important thing is the point of approach, the way in which the reporter comes up to a man, introduces himself, and opens up the topic. If he knows the man

he wants to interview, the task is easy. If the man to be interviewed is a college man, a county agent, a banker, a man in public life, or a purebred livestock breeder, accustomed to meeting people and being interviewed, the opening has no difficulties. But when a reporter approaches an average farmer, who, perhaps, never talked with a reporter before in his life, it is a horse of a different color.

Farmers, living and working to themselves, are apt to be reticent with a stranger; they are modest and self-deprecatory. With many farmers these qualities are intensified into suspicion of a stranger and a consequent reluctance to talk freely with him about personal affairs, their business and farming methods.

In many cases the reporter can best open the conversation by telling the farmer his name and stating in almost the first moment just what his business is and why he has sought him out. If the farmer is a subscriber to your paper, he will recognize your errand. If not, he might reply:

"No, I don't want your paper. I take too many papers already."

For some farmers know the farm paper only through the subscription agent. Then the reporter must explain in more detail that he is not there to take subscriptions.

It is well to form the habit of sizing up a farmer as you approach him—in case you do not know much of him in advance, and if he appears to be a man not accustomed to meeting strangers, to have a ready phrase which will put him at his ease. One writer, in such a situation, often opens up in this way:

"Mr. Jones, I'm a queer fellow. I don't have anything to sell you today. All I want is a little information."

This usually brings a laugh from the farmer and, the ice broken, the writer goes on to state that he is a farm paper writer and that he is gathering information on soybeans, or the working of the new cooperative livestock marketing association in the county—or whatever it is.

Sometimes, however, one must conceal his real purpose. This is true when the information sought is likely to be uncomplimentary to the man being interviewed.

Some time ago a writer was sent out to get a series of articles on three different kinds of farmers, those who always make money, those who never make money, and those who are on the dividing line—sometimes do, sometimes do not. This meant that he must see farmers of the highest type, the average or run-of-mine sort, and the ne'er-do-well, shiftless ones.

Setting out in his car, he drove 2,500 miles or more through five states, doing nothing but searching for farmers of these three types and talking with them. Of course, the men he saw had to be hand-picked in advance by consultations with county agents, extension service men, and country bankers.

When he approached a man of the best type, he found almost always a farmer who was fairly well educated, a business man of ability. Without hesitation, he told him just why he had sought him out.

But when he approached the men of the other two types, he did exactly the opposite. He gave them no hint as to his real purpose in visiting them. Instead, he interviewed them on general agricultural conditions in the community. But as he went along, he kept edging in now and then a question as to methods the farmer followed, the number of stock, fertility, drainage, marketing, profits, amount of sales, yields from crops, ways of handling live-stock. The information was not, of course, to be used against these farmers as individuals.

He made no effort under these conditions to take notes. He was afraid that the sight of a notebook might make his interlocutor suspicious and cause him to close down on information. But after he left, he would stop his car down the road a way, get out his notebook and write down the things he wanted to remember. More than once he stopped at neighbors for further information.

If in your interviewing, you need to call on a business executive, a manager of an industrial or engineering firm, you have first to satisfy this executive that you are a reporter, rather than an advertising man or salesman. You will usually be halted in an outer office by a secretary, to whom you must explain your business. If you can do this and get in to see your man, your next job is to

sell him on the idea that he should talk for publication or give you the information you need. You may have to convince him, too, that you can handle the material accurately.

If you can do this, you will frequently find that this executive is easy to interview. If your name is already known to him or if you are an editorial representative of a well-known publication, all this is easier than if you are a free lance writer. Sometimes a friend of yours who is well known to the executive you wish to interview will introduce you and vouch for you.

Suggestions on interviewing: Interviewing is in simple essence the process of asking questions that will elicit information for your article. Upon the questions asked, the manner of asking them, the manner in which the answers are received, depends the success of the interview. There are no set rules that can be given. A reporter can learn to interview only by interviewing and by profiting from mistakes.

It is often poor policy to ask the most important questions first. Rather, begin with some unimportant one, with some side issue, get your man interested and talking and then lead on to the thing you most want to know. Often a good way to begin, either with farmers or others, is to get your man to give you the history of the thing about which you want to learn.

This gives the man a chance to talk freely and without reserve. As he gets into the story, he unbends, thaws out, and makes the later close questioning more easy.

In asking questions, don't make the interview sound like an inquisition or a cross-questioning. The more nearly it can seem to be a conversation, the better it is. The skillful interviewer just sits down and talks with the man. But he leads the conversation, steers it the way he wants it to go, by means of his questioning.

The reporter seldom disagrees with the man he is interviewing. Even if he doesn't agree, he remarks that that is surely an interesting viewpoint, that he had never heard the matter put in just that way before. Once in a while it is necessary to disagree sharply and get an argument started. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, the reporter should be courteous, even in the face of rebuffs. The one time he may have to insult a man to get him to talk.

One time a reporter called on a country banker, a pompous individual, to get some facts regarding land sales in the county.

"I don't have time to bother with you. I'm too busy to talk with strangers this morning," he snapped.

"Look here," the reporter spit back, and he shook his finger at him, "my time is just as valuable as yours and maybe a durned sight more so. My editor sent me a long way to see you. It's likely the banker across the street knows just as much about this as you do and maybe more. I'll go over and see him. Good day."

"Wait a minute," he called as the reporter turned on his heel and stalked away toward the door. "I'll give you a little time."

He took the writer into his private office and talked for more than half an hour, giving him the information he was seeking.

As a rule, the bigger the man, the more important he is, the more ready he will be to talk. The governor, the senator, the college president, the head of a farm organization, the successful business farmer are much easier to interview than the underling, the assistant secretary, the conventional-minded or shiftless farmer.

The careful reporter or writer will make good use of his notebook. One well-known writer tells that when he first set out to gather material for farm paper articles, he carried only some scratch paper in his pocket as he would have done on a newspaper assignment. But one day when he reached home he found he had lost the most important part of his story—one of the sheets was missing.

So he provided himself with a looseleaf leather notebook, just the right size to fit into his inside coat pocket or the hip pocket of his trousers. He can take notes in it all day long and at night separate out the different interviews and classify them.

The essential thing is to take notes. One successful farm feature writer knows shorthand, but he is the exception. It is well to take plenty of notes, making sure to get down figures accurately. When a man being interviewed uses some apt phrase, some rugged term, some peculiarly rural or provincial simile, the reporter needs to get down the exact phrasing—for that is the stuff out of which good stories are made.

It is a nice point of skill to know just when to pull out the note-

book. Seldom do it at the beginning of a conversation. Wait until the man is talking freely and says something that needs to be noted with particular accuracy—perhaps it is some figures. Then get out the notebook.

“Say, I better write those figures down or I’ll forget them or get them wrong,” is a good excuse. But once the notebook is out, keep on using it.

In fact, in dealing with a topic that is important, involved or highly technical, it is a good plan, to insure accuracy both of fact and of quoted statement, to let the man who gives you the information read and verify or correct what you have written.

This is a practice often followed on technical and scientific magazines. It is good practice for student reporters too.

Once, after preparing a series of popular articles dealing with a highly technical subject, a writer had every article read for errors by two different scientists in this field. When he first set out to get the information for the articles, he found these scientists reluctant to give him the information he wanted because they feared that a reporter not trained in this science would not write the articles accurately. So he told them that he would submit the articles to them before they were published. In this way he secured information that might not otherwise have been available.

Value of records and reports: Another rule in gathering material for feature articles is to ask to see any books, records, reports, or documents available—any printed or written material, in fact. From these make accurate copies of the figures or other material that you want. Many an honest man will give wrong information because his memory is false. Or he will speak in general terms when specific figures will mean something quite different, as you find out when you come to analyze them.

A writer who was investigating cooperative marketing once stopped to talk with the secretary of one of the oldest cooperative creameries in Minnesota. To his great joy, he found that this farmer, now an old man, had in his desk the complete records of this creamery for some thirty years. A poultry farmer in southern Illinois brought out of his house his account books showing records

for twenty-eight years of poultry keeping. An Indiana farm woman had records on her flocks for twenty-five years.

An Indiana farmer once showed a reporter his poultry cost accounts, records which the writer afterward learned probably cover a longer period than any other such poultry records in this country. Many farmers have farm account books going back for many years. These records, milk sheets, cost account books, bank statements, income tax statements, and what not, often furnish valuable information.

Copies of annual reports, bulletins, press releases, letters, clippings—anything of value that can be secured or copied—should be utilized. In getting a story from scientists and research workers, you will find that often they can supply you with reprints of “separates” of technical articles they have written. Often on engineering work of a public nature, printed copies of plans and specifications are available. In other cases, extra sets of blueprints and specifications can be obtained. The reporter takes everything he can that is available. A blueprint detail or the carbon of a typewritten sheet given him may be precisely the information he forgot to ask about in the interview.

Human interest sidelights: In talking with a farmer, use your eyes as well as your tongue. You will notice things about which you should ask. There will be little touches of human interest, which can be put into the story to make it more realistic. The farmer who came to the door with a lead pencil over his ear, the remark that a neighbor makes, what the son or wife says, these often give a clue. The little concrete anecdotes that a man relates often are the best of the story.

Once a reporter asked a country banker in South Dakota about the agricultural situation. For answer he arose and walked over to the cabinet where the bank kept its notes. He pulled out a drawer for the month.

“This drawer was packed so full of notes due on the first of this month that they could hardly be squeezed in,” he said. “Here it is the eighth—and look at it.”

He squeezed the remaining notes up—and the drawer was less

than half full. More than half of the notes had been paid off, around 300 of them, within eight days. That gesture was the most striking thing the reporter saw on his trip.

Verifying story data: A reporter should seek to have his story told to him over and over again, by as many people as possible, from as many angles as possible. He should verify what one man tells him by inquiring of a second and a third about the same set of facts or circumstances. He should cautiously inquire as to the veracity or reliability of people he has interviewed.

On one occasion, a reporter interviewed the president of an agricultural college on certain matters of agricultural policy in that state. A few minutes later the dean of agriculture gave him some information which pointed in exactly the opposite direction. So he found it necessary to take a whole day, talk with the farm management men, extension men, heads of several departments, and men off the campus, before he got the matter straight.

Sometimes the dean or the head of a department is not to be relied upon for accurate information. Involved in administrative duties, he fails to keep up with the particular subject upon which he was once an expert. Some assistant back in a laboratory is more up-to-date. The dean, speaking out of his experience, can give the broad background and interpretation. The assistant must be depended upon for late and concrete facts.

A department head who is generally recognized as a national authority in one line of scientific agriculture once gave a writer some information. When the latter checked on it, he found that it was incorrect. A half dozen experiment stations had disproved it. So the next time he was back on this campus, he went quietly to a friend who taught this subject and asked him about it.

"Yes, the doctor is still talking the same stuff he did twenty years ago. We know it's all wrong, but we don't dare tell him about it."

The reporter also learns to know, or at least finds out later by checking and inquiry, which men are faking or lying, which are seeking notoriety or undue publicity.

One night a reporter was in a western intermountain region town looking up agricultural conditions. Seeing the office of a

political headquarters open, he dropped in to gossip. The men there were all total strangers to him, but he soon had them talking. They told him in glowing terms that hard times were over, that prosperity had come back. And then in came the sheriff. He didn't look like the accepted movie version of a western sheriff.

"Sheriffs out this way don't have as much to do as they used to," the reporter remarked.

"The blankety blank they don't," was the unexpected reply. "With 208 bankruptcy notices to serve in one month and nine bankruptcy farm sales on the courthouse steps this morning, it looks like I don't have anything to do!"

The looks on the faces of the others were interesting to observe. Here was a man speaking the truth. He was giving concrete facts. The others had been trying to stuff an unsuspecting stranger with "bunk."

Not long ago a member of the editorial staff of a well-known publication in a technical field had to interview the branch manager of a large industrial concern. He had been warned in advance that this manager was a natural-born liar and could not be believed. Yet business diplomacy in connection with advertising matters made it absolutely necessary that he be interviewed.

So this staff writer first called on the leading competitor of the firm in the same city whom he knew well and frankly told him of his difficulty. This competitor went with him to call on the unreliable manager, introduced the reporter to him, and listened to the interview. Later on, this competitor set the reporter straight on the facts, explaining which were accurate and which were not. If the reporter had not thus safeguarded himself but had instead printed what this branch manager told him, he would have put himself and his paper in the proverbial hot water. This writer says that he still doesn't know whether the branch manager actually lied or whether he was just one of those individuals who likes to hear himself talk on any subject, no matter whether he knows anything about it or not.

There is the case of another man, an important executive in an industrial firm which is probably the largest of its kind in the country but with several important competitors. Editorial repre-

sentatives of several publications have to call on this man regularly. These men know that everything the man tells them has to be checked. He frequently distorts facts to the advantage of his products as compared to those of his competitors.

Men such as these are rare. A reporter may work for years without meeting one. Yet the careful reporter constantly checks and verifies, lest he be misled by something told him.

Casual interviewing: The experienced reporter sets everybody to talking who will talk, not only the man or men he sets out to interview, but the conductor on the train, the man he meets at the dining room table in the hotel, the passengers in the Pullman smoker, the hired hand, the threshing crew, the stenographer or secretary, the office boy, the hotel clerk, the man sitting next to him in the lobby.

Anecdotes could be told by the score of valuable information secured by chance in this way. By setting to talking two contractors whom a reporter found by chance in a smoker one night, he learned the inside of some of the most notorious graft cases in roads and public buildings in the northwest. A man on the back steps of a street car in Indianapolis gave the same writer some valuable information regarding land sales in North Carolina.

This reporter found that a stranger sitting in the lobby of a hotel in North Dakota was the manager of the local dairy plant who told him of increased dairy production in that county. In western Texas, a stranger proved to be an official of a Federal land bank with information on farm conditions. In a Nebraska restaurant the stranger turned out to be the dean of engineering at a Pacific Coast university. The salesman buying gas ahead of him in an Idaho town gave him a specific bit of information from his firm headquarters in Chicago that was just what the reporter needed for an article he was gathering. The man who came into the club car as the train was going through Connecticut was an industrial engineer with a firm making war explosives and had a viewpoint of defense and war matters which the reporter could use.

This method of getting information on a tip from strangers does not always work. There are times when the reporter fails to

establish a friendly contact with the stranger, and he may be repulsed or rebuffed. But it is always worth the effort.

To summarize: A reporter or writer of articles goes to original sources for his material. This may mean talking with one man in the engineering experiment station who is working to develop dishware that will not break. Or it may mean covering a state, or a trip clear across the country. He interviews men and women who know, who have had experience—be it growing pecans in Georgia, building a new type land leveler for irrigating fields in California, hybridizing water lilies in St. Louis, or designing a new woman's glove in New York City. He sees many, checks, verifies, takes notes, gets facts. He travels and sees and asks at firsthand. He either takes or secures pictures.

The farm paper reporter comes to know of many things. He knows that a broiler industry has developed in Delaware and in the Ozarks; that news of a hybrid sweet corn may be found at Purdue, Connecticut, and Idaho; that there is new information on hogs at the Iowa Station; that in New York he can learn about dwarf fruit trees; that some of the most valuable farm cost account work is in Illinois; that a new hybrid grain sorghum has been developed in Texas and another in South Dakota—and hundreds of other things.

So, also, do reporters in other fields accumulate equivalent knowledge.

The best feature reporting can be done only after a writer comes to know these things. The more he knows, the wider his acquaintance, the better able he is to gather material and to judge or evaluate ideas and information. Until he acquires experience and judgment, the young writer must make up for lack of such by hard work and eternal vigilance in checking and verifying.

The wise reporter gathers much more material than he can possibly use. If he comes home with three or four times too much, he can pick, choose, and discard.

Three-fourths of writing a feature article, be it for a farm paper or any other paper or magazine, is a process of gathering material—and one-fourth is writing.

It is the material that is all-important. The facts make the story. Clever writing can seldom if ever conceal the absence of facts. It is the beginner, the inexperienced hack or the lazy man who tries to put across a story by stringing together neatly turned phrases and puns. The writer who tells a story that gives information or gets results makes his impression by marshalling facts.

A farm writer of considerable experience says that in all his years he has had only three compliments paid him that he really appreciated.

A brother writer said to him one time:

"Say, you are the most prodigal fellow in the writing business. Every time you write a single article you waste enough material for me to write a whole series."

On another occasion this man had secured a story of national importance. Three men knew the facts, but he was able to see only two. Shortly after the story appeared, he met the third, a grizzled old livestock farmer.

"Say, young fellow," this old farmer said to him, "I don't know where you got all the dope in that story you wrote about me. But you didn't have a lie in it."

On a third occasion, not long ago, he came to an isolated ranchhouse out in the range country of Utah. The rancher was away so he introduced himself to the rancher's wife and grown son. He began to explain who he was, the farm magazine he represented, and what he was after.

"You don't need to tell us who you are," interrupted the woman. "We read that magazine. We have read your articles for years. We never dreamed that you would ever find us, way out here."

ASSIGNMENTS

1. Find tips for an experience story, process story, news-feature story, information story, and personality story; discuss the sources of material for each.
2. Make a carefully prepared plan of an interview for a feature story.
3. Read five magazine feature stories, list the sources of information that seem to have been used by the author, and discuss other sources that he might have utilized.

4. Take one of the following topics, ask in four different departments on the campus if there is any news regarding this topic, and see what you find: paints, gardens, irrigation, cotton, wool, lubrication, nitrogen, nicotine, aluminum, soybeans, alfalfa, rubber, seeds, pork, concrete, grass, steel, coal, tomatoes, peanuts, oranges, longleaf pine.