

Significance of the Personal Column

It's the little things that make
life sweet,
Like going to bed with uncold
feet.

—Catherine M. Sheire,
Fairfax (Minn.) *Standard*

The modern cautious lover
checks into how steady she is
in her job.—Gene D. Robinson,
Loudon (Tenn.) *Herald*.

THE UNITED NATIONS, GUADAL, THE BULGE, and the plunging neckline were not the only significant milestones marking the middle of the century. Significant changes appeared throughout the decade; the old civilization would never be the same again.

Not the least among the things that came and made a difference were some 6,000 smaller-town newspaper personal columns. Six thousand, maybe more; no one's ever been able to count them. They kept coming; few disappeared. They came and were significant; significant not only to newspapers, but in public affairs, which influenced all of us. Significant also to education, because some of the columns were nothing less than literature.

In the bustling about of getting that war won, the smaller-town personal newspaper column got itself born without a birth announcement in the columns of the newspaper most concerned. It grew up in about the same casual way. Its birth was like that of Minerva, who sprang full grown and swinging from the brow of Jove.

Readers adjusted themselves to postwar habits. They found themselves anticipating this wonderfully efficient, very personable newspaper column. Publishers noted, with maybe a little apprehension stratifying their pride in it, that the column was getting a lot of things done about the journalism house that they had been intending to do all these decades. Apprehensively they wondered if, in its efficiency, the column might elbow out of the way the old symbolic editorial column which may have been gathering more moss than readers.

Summing up: during the 1940's some 6,000 small-town American newspaper began using personal columns. Probably 2,000 already had them, so the total probably has grown to around 8,000.

These columns are significant in public affairs, because they are popular and because the columnist frequently is saying what the editor would say in an editorial column if he had one. So, these well-read columns contain comment by an editor or other writer who is in touch with what is going on and is qualified to comment.

These new columns are not all editorial comment, however. They are mostly entertaining or interesting. The editorializing is carried along with the entertaining or startling comment. They are like the radio program that entertains you and then slips across a commercial; or like the engaging conversationalist who enthralls you with his talk and then, without resentment or lessened interest by you, passes across a plug for this or that idea. Result: new millions of people read columns, including the editorial messages in them.

Readership surveys list the per-

NOT SO LIGHT

It is our studied belief that from no other source may one so clearly list to the speaking voice of the heart and soul of democratic America as by harking to the so-seemingly-lightly-written comments of the small-city editor or of the big-city columnist. Here is the voice of a free people unhampered by the restrictions of a pre-determined editorial policy geared to meet business and political considerations. — Ray Murray in Buffalo Center (Iowa) Tribune.

... entertains you and slips across the commercial.



Just because he was nice yesterday, women and dogs expect a man to be nice today.—
Lebanon (Ohio) Star.

A lot of people too polite to talk with full mouths will go around talking with empty heads.—Coloma (Mich.) Courier.

sonal column of today right at the top in popularity, with the possible exception of local news in which appears a wealth of names.

Since the very existence of the paper is based on popularity with readers, it is readily evident why the column is important. It is one more reason why people subscribe to the paper, and why they renew their subscriptions when they have expired.

Subscriptions enable the publisher to sell his advertising, pay his bills, keep publishing the paper. That is a very bread-and-butter, discount-your-bills reason for the growth of columns.

Another is the fact that the publisher likes to be influential, for the good it does his community, state, and nation, and for the benefit to his own ego.

Also columns contribute to education. They afford a pleasing and frequent contact with the public. That means a lot both in support of general school matters and more directly in adult education.

As to the column's significance in literature, evidence is there. Probably many professors—the purists among them at least—will insist that nothing written as hurriedly as a column, about such rural topics as a small-town columnist would note, could possibly be literature. But, if they could read, month after month, the hundreds of columns in the country press, they would know that the successors to Mark Twain are among the men and women who shove

back the live ad copy once a week, push the exchanges off the desk, elevate their elbows, frown and grin, and peck out columns.

Many of the periodical creations contain immortal gems of narration, exposition, and description. Examples are found regularly in the writings of such columnists as Bernice Mc-

As to columns' significance in literature . . .



Cullar of Georgia; Earl Tucker of Alabama; Duke Norberg, LaVerne Hull, Kay Metz, and Duane Dewel of Iowa; Giles French, Oregon; Florence Stone and Clarke Sanford, New York; two dozen Kansans ("every Kansas editor fancies he is a columnist"); Mrs. Gene Davis and Opal Melton, Missouri; Hazel Murphy Sullivan, Wisconsin; and Nelson Brown of Michigan.

Yes, columns sprang full-grown as from Jove's brow; or better, if from Mars Minerva did her springing, because it was in war that so many new personal columns had their origins.

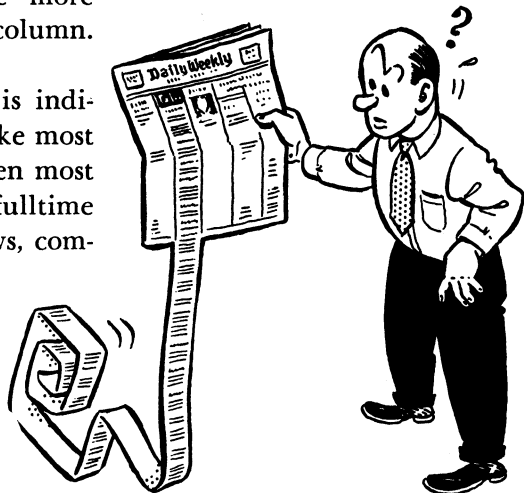
Dozens on dozens of the columns had the same birth and early case histories. Because of the shortage of help, the editor or pro tem editor was getting along as best he or she could. This meant taking every shortcut possible. There were numerous war projects he wanted to help along, bond sales, Red Cross, and such. The publicity material about these he put together with some personal comment in a column to which he gave a title while swallowing a fourth cup of coffee. As time went on, he added comment on this and that. The column was a very handy place to dump the things he didn't have time to arrange for publication elsewhere. This made the column pretty much of a hodge-podge, but no one seemed to worry about that.

When the war ended and help became more plentiful, the editor tried to liquidate the column. But the readers wouldn't let him.

The wartime experience of Earl Tucker is indicative of the popularity of columns. Earl is like most other small-town editors; he's a printer. When most all his help left during the war he became a fulltime printer. And all, absolutely all, the local news, comment, anything that appeared in his Thomsville, Alabama, *Times*, was in his "Ram-

It's an awful feeling when you attempt to kid somebody and discover he is taking you seriously.—Ralph S. Hamilton, *Washington (Iowa) Journal*

The column was a very handy place to
dump things . . .



bling Roses and Flying Brickbats" column. Five daily papers circulated in the town, two of them with local correspondents. Despite that competition, and with no solicitation by Mr. Tucker, his circulation total at the end of the war was even with that at the start.

After the war, many people expected the columns to fold up. But when they survived, the analysts began to examine them. A new recognition of their worth became evident. Many of the columns were intimate, personalized chats with readers, like gossiping over the back fence with a neighbor. They were varied. They offered more emotional release than the cold news columns and editorials. They throbbed with life of the community. Readers anticipated what the home town columnist would say about an event. They frequently turned to the column first when the paper came. They noted and quoted. Advertisers asked to have their messages run alongside the column. When the columnist left on vacation readers asked, "Who will write the column?" and "When will he be back?" In many a small-town newspaper "the column" became as stable a community insignia as the clock in the court house tower — and more intimate even though less predictable.

The state press associations began giving awards for the best columns in dailies and weeklies. Some associations made the division as between columns written on one topic and several topics — a division used in the first-place award of the National Editorial Association contest.

The metropolitan papers are quoting the smaller-town press columns as never before. Several have begun putting such quotations over in the literary and artsy parts of their magazine sections.

At about the same time the metropolitan papers began quoting the smaller press more liberally, the national magazines started using small-town quotes

PAGE OPPOSITE

Big newspapers have developed the "page opposite editorial page" as the location of feature articles, big-name writers, and background material. Columns found there are of personal opinion, specialized comment, and entertainment values. Small newspapers usually must disperse such material or omit it altogether. Yet some small-city papers give space to many columnists, mostly local. These column personalities include the thinkers, the boosters, the humorists, the spice-and-variety boys, the hobbyists, the sports commentators, the farm agents, etc. Each regularly turns out a more-or-less fixed amount of space-filling, reader-pleasing material. The best of the output is worth wide reprinting.

at the bottom of back pages. A little later some of them boxed the quotes in the middle of a page, offering an earned prominence.

Perhaps the most significant recognition of the small-town columns came in 1949 when *Cosmopolitan*, certainly not a publication given to ruralities as such, instituted a page devoted to the small-town sayings. This was given even billing with quotes from the metropolitan columns.

Now there's scarcely a national magazine of general appeal that does not use some small-town column material.

So the war baby with the neglected adolescence now becomes a candidate for newspapering's Miss America.

THRILLING EXPERIENCE

We rate being a columnist on a little country weekly newspaper in Iowa as being one of the most satisfying, outstanding, and thrilling experiences of our life.—Florence Laffer in Correctionville (Iowa) News.