

## 10.

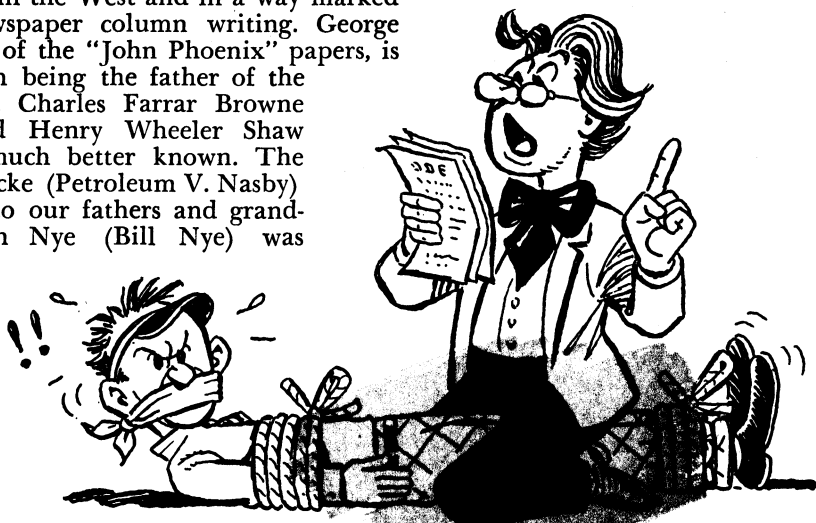
# Column Verse

THE COLUMN, least dignified of newspaper departments, would seem a good place to run light, humorous, and clever verse. And it is. But the small-town press makes relatively little use of verse. Most hard-worked editors have neither the time nor the energy for expression in rhythm and rhyme. Contributed verse, moreover, is likely to be rather awful.

In the formative years of the column, content was more literary and humor was expected. Hallam Walker Davis wrote in 1926:<sup>1</sup>

Sure-fire humor in America got its start in the sixties. It was evolved largely in the West and in a way marked the beginning of newspaper column writing. George Horatio Derby, writer of the "John Phoenix" papers, is generally credited with being the father of the new school of humor. Charles Farrar Browne (Artemus Ward) and Henry Wheeler Shaw (Josh Billings) are much better known. The work of David Ross Locke (Petroleum V. Nasby) was also well known to our fathers and grandfathers. Edgar Wilson Nye (Bill Nye) was another of the school.

<sup>1</sup> *The Column*, p. 82. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. Copyright, 1926.



We have noted that Eugene Field gave a literary turn to the column. Contributors' columns, such as the *Chicago Tribune's* "A Line o' Type or Two," encouraged writing of humorous verse.

In any acceptable form, good humor is good sense. It helps keep the world sane. Many persons have grieved because Will Rogers' untimely death lost to the world the sanity of his comical but basically solid perspective. As community builders, editors sometimes forget to live in the present. An all-serious newspaper can hardly escape being dull.

Small-town people have readily accepted verse in their magazines, but in general they have not preferred this literary type as a means of local expression. Similarly, their editors have liked alternative forms, such as the anecdote, the tall tale, the humorous paragraph, and the light essay. The college magazine has continued to exploit possibilities of verse, doggerel and otherwise, and not infrequently naughty. Serious rhyming has been considered "long-hair" in regions which prefer Edgar A. Guest and Ogden Nash to the poets laureate.

By verse is meant writing in poetical forms which are considered in contradistinction to prose. Poetry is hard to define, and we need not concern ourselves long with it here. Poetry is usually musical, or at least rhythmical. It may rhyme, or not. Poetry uses distilled diction — imaginative, emotional, idealistic, tender or impassioned — and in subject ranges from the lightly fanciful to the deeply philosophical. Of course, given similar motivation, prose partakes of many of these same attributes. For prose, too, can move on wings of high purpose, beauty of expression, and flights of imagination. Some great sermons and orations have the form of prose and the concepts of poetry; they may be called prose-poems. Prose is usually differentiated from verse by its full lines and by paragraphs indented only at the beginning. Poetry

#### GET AN IDEA

A cute idea, usually expressed in the final sentence, may quickly result in acceptable newspaper verse. The idea differs little from the humorous or witty paragraph. With a little practice, anyone capable of expressing an idea neatly should turn out clever verse. Expanding the idea and giving it a title and an opening are relatively simple. It is not surprising, then, that much brief verse is written from bottom to top. The whip must crack at the end.

usually is set in shorter lines, which have a regular appearance because of the repetition of metrical units. Free verse, however, has irregular lines which are fitted to the thought only, and a line may contain one word, or many, and rhyme is not essential. The goal of free verse is perfect expression of a thought.

Not everything which has short, indented lines is poetry, however. A short, simple verse, with or without rhyme, intended only to entertain or perhaps to carry a radio commercial, is not poetic in conception. It is a jingle, or perhaps a doggerel verse. This is said not to condemn but to define it. But it may be bad verse, just as prose may be bad prose.

From couplet to limerick, simple verse is well within the abilities of many columnists. It also appeals to many contributors who are not interested in prose. In fact, its appeal may be so wide as to embarrass a columnist who must decline to print some of it. Old people, especially, turn to maudlin verse and are quite hurt when jingles which their friends call good are not printed. And some readers are shameless in taking even copyrighted verse out of scrapbooks and sending it in as their own.

Nevertheless, it is likely that future columns will use more verse, not less. Some pump-priming will be necessary to encourage readers to contribute. Hodgepodge columns, which have the greatest need of verse, sometimes carry offers of prizes for last lines of limericks or other forms.

Much of the good light verse written today is flowing into magazines and children's books. Newspapers could get more of it by being more hospitable to amateurs' efforts. Strangely, publishing houses are accepting manuscripts from housewives, school teachers, and other beginners whose efforts are given no outlets in local papers.

Contributors need patterns; they learn best

#### **RHYTHM**

The thought that simple rhyme is unworthy of a columnist seems to suppress this kind of writing. Some consider it too difficult. Sports columnists have been among the notable exceptions. . . . Telling a simple incident or idea in rhythmic verse is mainly a matter of learning, or imitating, a simple pattern. Soon it becomes as easy to versify as to write headlines. The idea, not the rhyme, comes hardest.

The Editor practically never writes good English, as much as he appreciates the art of those who do. In the first place, he is too lazy. And in the second place he finds it so difficult to be himself. There are so many other people he would rather be.—Paul F. Watkins, Ashland (Va.) *Herald-Progress*.

through imitation. Nothing is a greater stimulant to endeavor than a bit of success. Few contributors will develop the light and delightful style of a Franklin P. Adams, but addition of verse to a column, by the columnist or anyone else, broadens the base of popular acceptance.

Writers of column verse compose for the day, not for eternity. A jingle may be as timely as a paragraph based on the latest news headline. Its mischievous variety is its greatest charm. In the small-town press, column verse is clean. It is simple. It is brief. Mechanically, it may miss a meter now and then. In subject matter it ranges from the nonsensical to the evangelical. It is less subtle than the comic paragraph in that its meaning is not half-concealed and its charm usually is in its wide-grin good humor and tuneful swing.

Versifying takes a little more time, but the change in form is pleasing to readers if the verse is passably clever and has an unexpected verbal twist. This example is from "Annegrams" in the Morton (Tex.) *Tribune*:

That life begins at forty  
I've read in book and verse,  
But does in then begin to get  
Much better, or much worse?

Another single, simple idea:

I hate to see a puppy's tail  
With nothing much to measure,  
For what is there for him to use  
To indicate his pleasure?  
—Lebanon (Ohio) *Star*.

And this one, in an election year:

I've always been rather lucky,  
As I went my weary gait.  
So now I feel fine and ducky,  
Because I'm not a candidate.  
—Hays (Kans.) *News*.

And this rhyming birth announcement:

Smiling Sam, the colored cop,  
Is a mighty happy poppie;  
His wife has given him a son—  
A little carbon cop-y.  
—Lyons (Kans.) *News*.

Of deeper discernment is this bit of verse by Kay  
Noel (Mildred Wamberg) in the Glenwood (Iowa)  
*Opinion-Tribune*:

God,  
Give me  
Insight to stay my hand,  
Enjoying a moment now those little  
fingerprints  
I wipe away.

Rhyme which has the added cleverness of a surprise is especially to be desired in columns:

Our canary won't sing, though  
we've had him a year;  
To inspire him we've tried  
every day.  
But since he won't warble  
in spite of our care,  
We've decided to give HER away.  
—C. C. Caswell in Clarinda (Iowa)  
*Herald-Journal*.

The same author, in a more thoughtful moment:

I've lost half an hour somewhere,  
I don't know where it went;  
All I know is that it's gone,  
Vanished, squandered, spent;  
But there's no cause to worry if  
It's merely gone unused—  
The consequence would be more dire  
If it had been abused.

I would like to live in 1951  
wages, 1932 prices, 1926 dividends,  
1910 taxes.—Clarke  
A. Sanford, Margaretville (N.  
Y.) *News*.

Column verse is without pretense, and if colloquial speech intrudes nobody minds. Homey ideas look better in verse form because even the typography suggests lightness or at least a departure from prosaic observations:

Whether a lady should wear a hat  
Depends on when and where she's at.

\* \* \*

Once people frowned on gentlemen  
Who in public wore no coat,  
But nowadays the opposite  
Is what one seems to note.  
For the coatless man is now the thing,  
And those who cannot bear 'em  
Frown upon the fellows who  
Continue now to wear 'em.

—Kingsport (Tenn.) *Times-News*.

Timeliness is enough to support a rhyme when  
otherwise it might not be acceptable:

Hoardhogs are members  
Of that self-centered clan,  
Whose cellars hold more  
Than their bellies can.

—June Paschal in Des Moines *Register*.

The gift of merging idea and rhyme is not inherited full blown, but it must be cultivated. Many reporters would do well to doodle with words instead of figure-eights. A scrapbook of verse one has had printed may be the source of much pleasure. The following column verses, written by Morris Midkiff of Austin, Tex., are taken from his scrapbook:

#### Left of Center

Too many motorists lose sight of  
The way I'm sure I have the right of.

\* \* \*

#### My Sweet Is Occupied

Who blocked the punt? Who made the score?  
Does My Fair One see that? No, verily;  
But she does know just what each woman wore,  
And comments on them all so merrily.

Who caught the pass, made touchdown run?  
To My Dear One all that's a mystery;  
But she derives much big-game fun,  
From gossip swaps with sistery.

Pity us if the time ever comes  
when the teen-agers do not  
think they know more than  
their elders. — Grants (N. M.)  
Beacon.

### The Hyphen

Hyphen, pesky little pest,  
 Horizontally at rest;  
 You, I know, are quite syntactical,  
 But why can't you be more practical?  
 You're no good, 'tis plainly seen  
 Except to serve as go-between  
 For certain words that need compounding,  
 But that's what makes you so confounding.  
 Stand up, hyphen! Out with chest!  
 Look your military best . . .  
 No, you've got no lung inflation;  
 You won't do for exclamation.  
 Lie back down, you may as well;  
 For, standing up, you look like "I."

More fanciful is this bit of verse by "Sandra Ames"  
 (Mary Jo Niendorf) in the Earlham (Iowa) *Echo*:

A flash of red against the blue,  
 His crest . . . a brilliant crown  
 Arched high, above each gleaming eye  
 As he sat . . . looking down  
 Singing to me . . . "Oh, do not weep,  
 The world is bright, and fair" . . .  
 And slowly plucked a feather bright,  
 And dropped it . . . on my hair.

Verse sometimes grows like a chain letter. This  
 exchange probably ran through more stanzas than  
 these:

### Gates Ajar

Oh, shed a tear  
 For Luther Stover;  
 He tried to toot  
 Two State cops over.  
 —New York *Sun*.  
 Please wail one wail  
 For Adolph Barr;  
 He just would drive  
 A one-eyed car.  
 —Macon *Telegraph*.  
 Bill Muffet said  
 His car couldn't skid;  
 This monument shows  
 That it could, and did.  
 —Newark (Ohio) *Advocate*.

Now the scientists are trying  
 to dehydrate water. It's some-  
 thing like taking the him and  
 her out of love.—Gardner-  
 ville (Nev.) *Record-Courier*.

Toying with words has not been disdained by many columnists and some magazine wits. This bit appeared years ago in the London *Tit-Bits*:

Give a man plenty of rope, and  
his kid will make a lariat of  
it. — Clay City (Ind.) *News*.

O, MLE, what XTC  
I always feel when UIC,  
I used to rave of LN's eyes,  
4 LC I gave countless sighs,  
4 KT, 2, and LNR,  
I was a keen competitor.  
But each now's a non-NTT,  
4 UXL them all, UC.

#### **Easy Does It**

Heppelwhite or Sheraton,  
Empire, Mission, Chippendale;  
I do not care  
What style of chair  
Just so it fits my hippentale.  
—Morris Midkiff.

Free verse looks easy, but demands close attention to order of elements, choice of words, and conclusion. Extreme brevity may be used to produce a well-indented appearance in a twelve-pica column. An extreme example by Bob Bowen of the La Jolla (Calif.) *Light* follows:

#### **Competitor**

somehow  
a salad  
is pretty  
as ballad  
  
the way  
it's arrayed  
when it's  
displayed  
  
on 24  
sheets  
around  
our streets  
  
beyond  
belief  
each  
lettuce leaf

Tomorrow's greatest luck is that  
today's teen-agers will take it  
over. — Langdon (N. D.) *Re-*  
*publican*.

in full  
and green  
tomato's  
sheen

is glowing  
red  
on  
leafy bed

the  
mayonnaise  
is color  
of maize

but home  
at table  
i'm  
never able

to make  
a salad  
pretty  
as ballad

lettuce  
is limp  
tomatoes  
like shrimp

are small  
and pale  
and i  
always fail

to make  
a dressing  
without  
messaging

my clothes  
and floor  
it makes  
me sore

i can't  
compete  
with  
24 sheet



The same newspaper also printed this appealing verse by Louisa Boyd Giles:

### Applicant

Description: Lost, alone.  
 Parentage, unknown.  
 Skills? The useful ones locked up  
 In a homeless pup.  
 Occupation? Just a stray  
 Unemployed today.  
 But hold a quiet hand and wait—  
 Loneliness will take the bait  
 When cautious exploration ends  
 And nose and eyes say "friends."  
 Food and drink are only part  
 Answer to a canine heart;  
 Human love is daily bread  
 To loyalty unlimited.  
 Now the long-sought god has come . . .  
 Petition granted. Found — a home.

Observation of nature has through the ages inspired poets to song. And the following verse was written, from a similar urge, by C. R. Spencer in his "Free Speech" column in the Ouray (Colo.) *Herald*:

### Call of the Hills

Along high south exposures, where the warm,  
 bright sunshine falls,  
 There's a greening in the niches of the  
 mighty, ageless walls,  
 Starting sap is bringing color to the  
 hibernating pine,  
 And, released, the streams dash singing from  
 the heights at timberline.  
 There's a stir and urge and promise 'neath  
 the snows in gorges dim,  
 And the ice is creeping backward from the  
 yawning canyon's rim.  
 Rocky trails that toil far upward  
 to the tundras on the heights,  
 Where the towering peaks blaze crimson in  
 the last bright evening lights,  
 Are calling me up yonder where the present  
 meets the past,  
 Where time runs on uncounted, each new  
 aeon like the last,

As a matter of fact the ant is a horrible example of the life we are trying to avoid. The ant works as hard as he can every waking hour every day in the week, every week in the year of his short life, fetching, carrying, storing, building, feeding, propagating, without an hour off for play and recreation, with never a day to bask his soul in rest and reflection and all to what purpose? Does he leave the world better than when he entered it? Does he entertain the world by the beauty of his song or the gaiety of his plumage? Does he consider the plight of others besides himself or provide food and shelter for anything but ants? Does he serve any useful purpose to anyone? No indeed. He works his legs off and his heart out his whole life just to keep himself and his colony alive. And the only fruitful consequence of the ant hill is more ants.—Paul F. Watkins, Ashland (Va.) *Herald-Progress*.

Where the sharp, clean air untainted by  
 smoke-belching mills of men  
 Starts my stagnant blood to racing and stirs  
 my youth again.  
 Lead me far from all this turmoil, this self-  
 seeking human strife,  
 Far from those long-winded speeches on the more  
 abundant life;  
 Let me grab a pick and shovel, throw once  
 more the di'mond hitch;  
 With a jackass and a grubstake, turn me  
 loose: my old feet itch.

Verse compresses thought so much that readers may not sense the overtone felt by the writer. Ray Murray, writing his numbered items for the "Murray-Go-Round" of the Buffalo Center (Iowa) *Tribune*, occasionally uses a prelude, like this:

Each of us has, filed away deep within the hidden recesses of his mind, small but sweet somethings which we seldom parade before others but never neglect in our own thinking. . . . Mother's cradling arms, Dad's seldom tears, a woman's kiss, your baby's first cry. Not so important, but also hidden there, are memories of fishing in the creek, the feel of rain in your hair, of mud between your toes. Mayhap the luxury of just loafing in the sun or walking through autumn's leaves. I have no doubt but that many of our fighting force in Korea may harbor some of those same thoughts as they live with death.

*Even as the Leaves*

Life holds a host of little pleasantries  
 Like shuffling deep through brown October leaves.  
 Today, that pleasure brought me little joy,  
 I sensed the marching feet of every boy  
 That once trod Autumn leaves, so crisply dry,  
 But now walk ways where men, too, fall and die.

This philosophical idea of living one day at a time is all right, if today's the day you're using. — R. B. Lockhart, Pittsburg (Tex.) *Gazette*.

*The American Press* commented that Grant Utley, publisher of the Cass Lake (Minn.) *Times* had received considerable fame for the verses he runs under the heading, "Timely Tunes — Current Comments in Cubic Centimeter." His verses have the appearance of prose. Example:

There's nothing much wrong  
with love, except it shoves you  
around. — Jonesville (La.)  
Booster.

"It's in McGuire's Coffee House that village tradesmen meet — where problems of the day are solved — from atom bombs to wheat. Each morning, at the stroke of nine, the tradesmen gather there; and fill that little java joint with superheated air. We won't attempt to call the roll — we've tried it, and lost track — for if a man attends just once — you know that he'll be back. More fish are caught in Calvin's booths — by measure and by weight — than in ten thousand spring-fed lakes, around the North Star State. More deer are slain, more ducks are shot, more bullhead nets are set, than's done in any other place that's been discovered yet. Whenever you can't find a man around his store or shop — call 'six' and if he isn't there, he's bound to make the stop. There may be places in the world, where one can get more pay, for what he sells or what he gets for working by the day. But money isn't everything — in Flint and Pontiac are men who'd give a sack of dough, if they could wander back, and gather with the gang at Cal's, where o'er a cup of 'joe' all tongues are loosened in a spell of Wisdom's fluent flow."

A similar style was noted in the Three Rivers (Tex.) *News*. However, paragraphs were equal in number of lines. Example:

#### I Like to Go to Meetin'

"I like to go to meetin' where the folks extend the hand; and a word of friendly greetin' seems to be at their command. Where the stranger finds a welcome, no matter how he's dressed, and in that sort of atmosphere he's comforted and blessed.

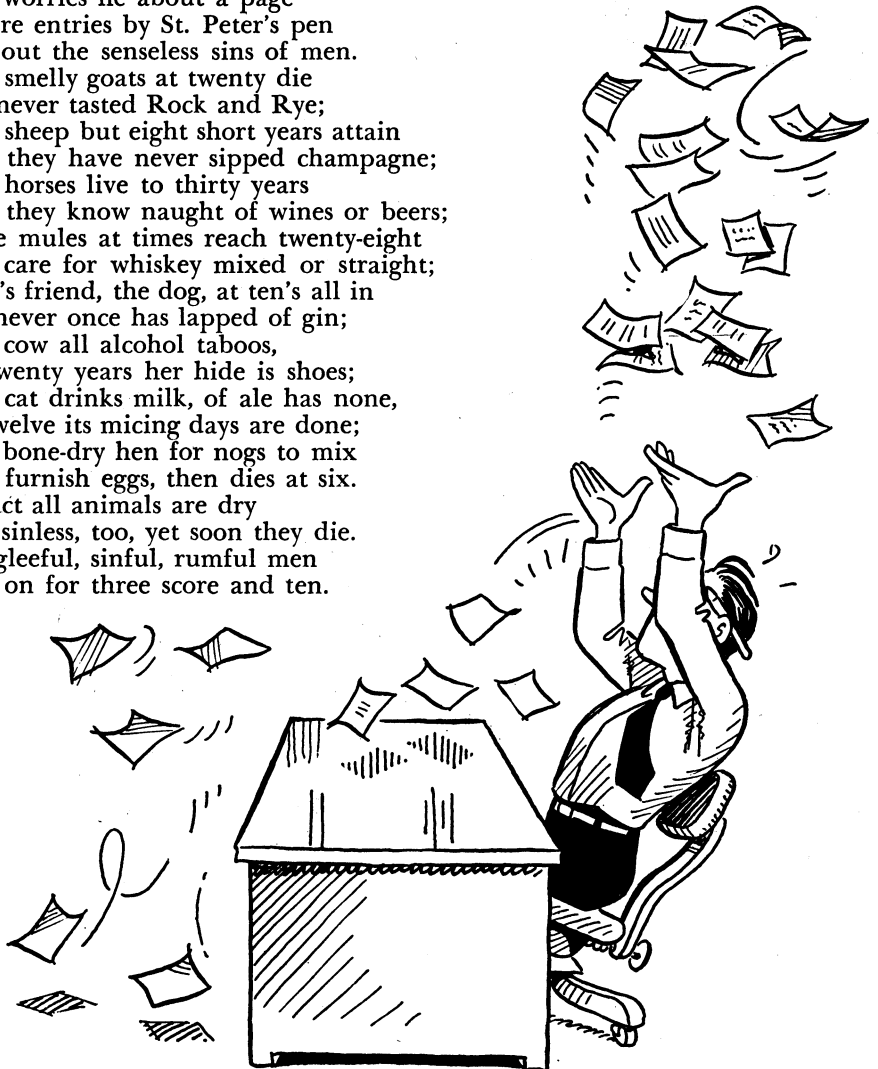
"I like to go to meetin'" where all may have a part; in all the ways of worship that may touch and warm the heart. I like to sing the good old hymns of worship and of praise. I like responsive readin' and we need it in these days."

A smiling picture of Chris Reese is printed at the top of his "Rippling Rhythm" column in the Algona (Iowa) *Upper Des Moines*. A mischievously comical example:

We're told it takes self-made millionaires about six years to get over being startled by valets. — North Canaan (Conn.) *News*.

I often wonder at the plan  
 (It beats me; I can't understand.)  
 By which we live and love and die,  
 The reason therefore, or the why.  
 Mankind is given everything  
 By way of brawn and reasoning,  
 Is fitted out with talents, brain,  
 That he may over kingdoms reign;  
 And though he lives in sundry sins,  
 Consumes of toddies, beers, and gins,  
 St. Peter never overlooks  
 But makes entries in his books.  
 So man goes on in careless way,  
 Considers not the judgment day;  
 He aims to reach a ripe old age  
 Nor worries he about a page  
 Where entries by St. Peter's pen  
 Sets out the senseless sins of men.  
 The smelly goats at twenty die  
 Yet never tasted Rock and Rye;  
 And sheep but eight short years attain  
 Tho they have never sipped champagne;  
 Few horses live to thirty years  
 And they know naught of wines or beers;  
 Some mules at times reach twenty-eight  
 Nor care for whiskey mixed or straight;  
 Man's friend, the dog, at ten's all in  
 Yet never once has lapped of gin;  
 The cow all alcohol taboos,  
 At twenty years her hide is shoes;  
 The cat drinks milk, of ale has none,  
 At twelve its micing days are done;  
 The bone-dry hen for nogs to mix  
 Will furnish eggs, then dies at six.  
 In fact all animals are dry  
 And sinless, too, yet soon they die.  
 But gleeful, sinful, rumful men  
 Live on for three score and ten.

... Encourage verse writing —  
 even at the cost of having to  
 reject much of it.



Popular targets draw column verse, as in this item from the Bryan (Tex.) *Eagle*:

The weatherman dreamed that he  
was dead;  
That he stood by his monument tall,  
and read  
The message thereon  
and hung his head;  
For, "probably warmer"  
was all it said.

Descriptive verse frequently is written in tribute to a town or to the native soil. This example is from the Sierra Blanca (Tex.) *Hudspeth County News*:

#### Rain in the Desert

The hot sun parched the drying land;  
No vapor rose from earth's parched face.  
For months the skies the ranchmen scanned  
For signs of rain, through endless space.  
Then flashed the lightning, thunder roared;  
Wind-driven rain flooded ranch and street;  
Tanks, long dry, now depths of water stored,  
And sound of frogs, extinct before, was sweet.

It's always a good plan to carry your bride over the threshold. Thus, you always can feel that you supported her until she put her foot down.—Cottage Grove (Ore.) *Sentinel*.



Composing light verse is for those who enjoy doing it . . .

Racial foibles are used, as in this "new Indian love song" from the Greenville (S.C.) *Observer*:

Comb 'um hair,  
File 'um nails,  
Paint 'um mug,  
Watch 'um males.

Writing light verse is for those who enjoy doing it, but the number who enjoy reading it is much larger. If newspapers are written to be read, and if reading can and should be fun, doesn't it follow that small-town columnists should encourage verse writing more than they do, even at the cost of having to reject much of it?

If you drive fast enough, your car will probably last your lifetime. — L. S. McCandless, Craig (Colo.) *Empire-Courier*.