

Guidance—Control of an Environment

MEN OF FREE SPIRIT cherish their opportunity to control, at least in some degree, the environment in which they live. The desire to do so motivates most editors in the formulation of their policies. The realization that press freedoms might be lost if newspapers should fail to supply facts, analyses, and leadership has stiffened support of self-government, but historically the editor has not been like other men, and the newspaper business has not been like other private firms. These facts are not palatable to some critics of the press, but they are demonstrably true.

There are differences in editors, in newspapers, in towns, and in people. Theoretically voters are equal at the ballot box. The ballot stands as a symbol of citizens' right to have a part in the decisions which affect them and in selection of men who represent them. That they do not always exercise this right because their votes seem lost in the mass of similar votes does not diminish the fundamental importance of their franchise. However, as voters they may neither know the candidates nor understand the

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BEING HIMSELF

The average reader, encountering clippings, mush-pile, or barren desert on the editorial page, gradually crosses this part of the paper off his reading list; and the small-town editor who could be commentator, critic, publicist, and reviewer has let his greatest natural right go by default. Harried Harry, the editor, has little time and is at a disadvantage in getting the background on national and even state issues. Under these circumstances, he can accomplish much, and be much more comfortable, just "being himself" in a personal column.—Hugo K. Fear in *The National Publisher*.

issues which are so variously explained to them. In large cities, parties and machines may reduce to the vanishing point the ability of unorganized citizens to influence public policies.

It is one of the satisfactions of small-town living that people know each other and that local issues are small and near enough to be understood. And it is the privilege of editors and columnists in these towns and small cities to know conditions as they are, people as they are, and problems as they are; to exert a personal leadership both in thought and action; to bolster their written word with the spoken plea; to see their ideas develop not only in material ways but in the lives of people born, married, and sometimes buried within their own lifetimes.

These editors speak out in various ways. In some states the traditional editorial is preferred by the better papers; in others, fewer than half the small papers carry editorials under their mastheads. Pontificating in pious tones no longer seems the thing to do. Excesses in writing style have tended to disappear with tightening of libel laws and development of newspaper work as a business. The editorial essay is not dead, but many of its masters are. Yet guidance of community thought and action is an editorial function. No serious student of journalism can fail to regret any weakening of the editorial voice.

We have noted that the friendly personal column, often found on Page 1, is supplementing—in some cases supplanting—the formal editorial. A small paper may have one column that is the voice of the editor—or may not be—or it may have two columns, or three, or even more. The column's rise in number and popularity may be a concession to the fact that an editor today is not necessarily the best read, most traveled man in town. News is no longer a commodity exclusive to a newspaper. College degrees are no longer rare. Local readers, from housewives to

farmers, endeavor to understand issues which affect them. With these the editor shares viewpoints. It is a wholesome condition on which both editors and readers differ in detail while agreeing on fundamentals.

As columnists, editors seldom make any claim to infallibility. Theirs is a more relaxed approach to life than that of editorial writers. What they lack in profundity they make up in terms of broad tolerance, good humor, and a reception of divergent viewpoints for purposes of illustration and education. Columnists can use all the arts of the editorial writer, then add others. They furnish some entertainment as the price they pay to get good audiences. They can be as big in the community as they are able. They may be less than brilliant and still be influential; the one greatest demand is that they not be dull.

An outsider is not a good judge of a column's effectiveness. What may seem to him trivial and clownish may have overtones which subtly affect reader attitudes. A writer's influence accumulates so that his stature is the totality of his work. As a teacher, he can afford to let readers sense the moral values in his theme. As a preacher, he can remain largely a teacher. As a leader, he can save his heavy verbal artillery for critical community issues. As a citizen, he can take rank with the school superintendent, the bank president, and the county judge.

Columnists who have combated provincialism have had strong allies in public education, good roads, libraries, radio, advertising, and civic clubs. There are no apologies for small-town and rural life in their writing, although constructive suggestions come naturally from their thinking, study, and contacts. But because column material usually is collected throughout a day or a week, instead of being composed in isolation or on the fairway of the Country Club, it often has the flavor and earthy quality of the

DISTURBING

A thought recurring in editorial comment on newspaper leadership is this: Some readers are certain to be disturbed when an editor speaks out on a public issue. Many more will be disturbed when he fails to speak out. Which shall he fear?

streets and offices. The number of viewpoints expressed in columns runs high.

The popularity of columns is traceable, at least in part, to the growth of towns and the larger size of newspaper staffs. Newspaper men now have more time to write. But it also is true that we have better educated writers, a fact with which we associate a lively desire to know and to speak and to write. Whether this education is formal or acquired with experience, it removes inhibitions and inculcates a desire to develop as a personality.

Some resistance to columning is not only prevalent, but probably wholesome as well, with regard to the desire of journalism graduates to have a personal soapbox before they have gained the necessary wisdom and understanding. Some columns can be written without the mellowing of experience, but even here a young writer usually is advised to first prove his ability to write superior news stories and features about his special interests.

Even a casual study of trends will show that successful columning may be started at any mature age. Many oldsters, fortified by rich memories and an understanding of the little things which people think and do, are writing superior columns. Some very salty characters have been amusing and guiding readers for a quarter of a century or more.

In every state, columnists are answering the questions: "What is the meaning of this?" and "How is it going to affect us?" No local crisis is without the sobering comment of editors who write with some detachment, as trained observers, yet with the warmth of a worried friend. In one town, during an epidemic of burglaries, some high school boys were caught.

"But for the grace of God," wrote a columnist, "these boys might have been your own."

He pointed out that the boys were from "good

EDITORIAL PAGES

In any discussion of editorials, it is necessary to consider the case for the editorial page—not editorials alone. Even small papers can, by grouping features, produce a page of opinion, background information, and local feature items. The editor's column can be prominent on this page, or just as appropriately can be run on Page One.

families” and had no real need for the goods stolen. Their search for a thrill showed a definite lack in their lives. Damning the younger generation for such outbreaks, he wrote, isn’t scientific. A columnist probes deeper. He seeks expert advice. In talks to peace officers, truant officers, school officials, Scout leaders, and others he traces the development of anti-social traits.

He connects these with misused leisure time, lack of parental supervision, failure of the community to provide planned recreation, lack of understanding on the part of peace officers, and similar shortcomings. He seeks a positive program, including education of all the community.

Such a columnist does not seek to excuse young offenders, but he does not thoughtlessly condemn. His attitude will vary, however, according to his age. In moments of candor, the older writers may confess to worse sins of their own generation. Some scolds, however, never fail to point out the misdeeds of the youth of other nearby communities — as a warning to local youngsters. A community is fortunate if it has an editor who trusts the young and is not ashamed to ask the advice of teen-agers. He who champions boys and girls will not be forgotten when they are men and women.

Readers are people, and especially they are parents. Mention of their young arouses emotional responses. And since most columnists are parents, too, their attempted guidance in matters affecting youth is without pretense. So it was when William Allen White was moved to anger by reports from parents that Emporia, Kan., police, in the presence of children, were shooting some of the dogs which “waited patiently about” the school grounds. White wrote, in part:

It’s all right to be a cop; even to be a dog killer is a public service. But even a cop, even a dog killer, ought

LEADERSHIP

Columnists, backed by nearly unanimous readership, have an opportunity to nominate civic leaders and to reward them with appreciation. By their attitude, they can make public service palatable. The smear word “politics” then will not drive good men from local leadership. Similarly, a columnist can vigorously defend a leader who is under the fire of some self-seeking group or person.

to be able to use just a little brains, just a mite of intelligence, and if not that, just a little heart.¹

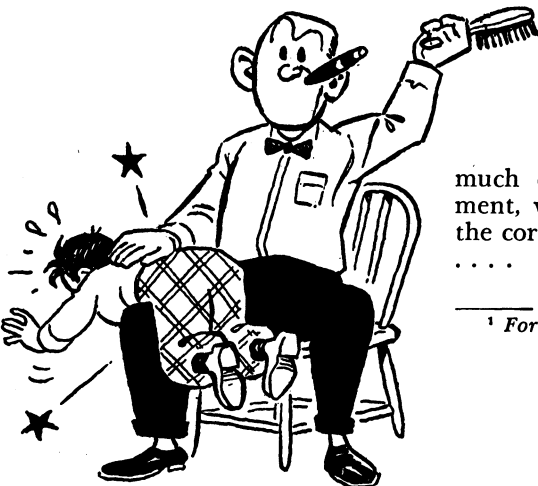
Columnists may raise Cain as a professional duty, but in general they stand for domestic and civic peace. They hear gossip with regret, not elation. Here is pertinent comment by Sara Roberta Getty in the "Looking and Listening" column of the Somerset (Pa.) *American*:

"I thought you should know" is a comment one hears many times. Once in a while it is the remark of a kindly, even though mistaken friend; more often it is done because some one wants to make a disturbance between friends, out of jealousy or envy, and perhaps partly because the person himself is unhappy, unstable, and worn by seeing others happy. . . . If we ever feel like passing on something disagreeable, let's think instead of something pleasant and pass that on; it will make us feel better and make others happy at the same time.

Guidance usually is on an impersonal basis in small-town columns when critical, except where public officials are concerned. Then advice may be more pointed. "The Plainsman" in the Lubbock (Tex.) *Journal* wrote this "Memo to the City Commission:"

There seems to be considerable dissatisfaction with the way misdemeanor charges are handled down at the police station. At least, such dissatisfaction is indicated in mail, phone calls, and through personal visits to us from time to time. The principal kick seems to be that an individual hauled in for allegedly violating some city ordinance is deemed to be guilty simply because he got pinched; that if he's given a chance to fight the charge — which some claim they are not — he hasn't got a Chinaman's chance, anyway. The feeling seems to be pretty general that there's too much cooperation between the police department, which is a law enforcement agency, and the corporation court, which is a judicial agency

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¹ *Forty Years on Main Street*, pp. 376-77.

If this condition actually exists, and our guess is that it must exist to some extent, you gentlemen of the commission doubtless want to get it straightened out, not only in a spirit of fair play, but also to safeguard the City of Lubbock. The City might get a whacking big damage suit sometime, growing out of failure to give the citizen the opportunity of a fair and impartial trial.

Not having been born yesterday, we realize that few people admit their guilt when arrested, and that fewer still admit guilt after they've paid off. Our experience has been that 99.44 per cent of the people arrested will swear until they're blue in the face that they've been mistreated, etc., and of course we long ago stopped believing fairy stories.

However, under the American code, a citizen charged with law violation is presumed to be innocent until proved guilty, rather than vice versa; and every person charged with law violation has a right to a fair trial in case he wants one.

It would be good business for the commission to make certain that everything is as it should be in the matter of arrests, fines, and rights of citizens.

This face-saving criticism is in distinct contrast to the way a frontier editor probably would have handled the situation, and a far cry from the tempo of a big-city daily tearing into a city commission it does not favor. In smaller cities and towns most critical comment is softened, at least in opening chapters. Editors remember that they have to live with hometown officers and officials, whether these are re-elected or not. Moreover, personal guidance may take the form of attending city commission meetings regularly. At least one columnist boasts that he has missed few commission meetings in 22 years.

In these parlous days, things often reverse themselves. In the Southwest, for instance, two-gun editors have passed but today two-gun sheriffs include typewriters as standard equipment. They write columns. A Dallas *News* staff writer reported that Orear Watson, high sheriff of Upshur County, Tex., was one of the most widely read newspaper writers in that area. Ex-football star and army flier, Watson makes

HIRED HELP

"This is being set by John Brown, our new Linotype operator," wrote a columnist-editor who probably will have less labor supply trouble than some publishers who think printers should be seen but not heard — of.

They were talking about my turning 40 years of age, and how it is that one is young only once. But, take it from me, once is enough if you work it right.—Billy Arthur, Jacksonville (N. C.) *News and Views*.

no pretense of being a journalist. But his chatty weekly column in the *Gilmer Mirror* is regarded as a potent factor in reducing crime.

"A lot of folks," said Russell Laschinger, his publisher, "turn to the sheriff's column before they read anything else."

Starting the column was one of Watson's first acts after taking office.

"I wanted to break down the idea that peace officers are a hard-boiled, heartless lot who delight in punishment," he explained. "I wanted to take Upshur Countians behind the scenes to show that the men who wear a badge can be friendly and sympathetic."

The writing sheriff seeks to unite his county against reckless driving, juvenile delinquency, and drunkenness. He rarely uses names and he speaks of locking up prisoners by saying, "He is now visiting with us." At Christmas he was able to make this unusual report:

Our business has been very good during these holidays. I mean that we have only locked up one person. This man just got a little too much Christmas spirits and he didn't seem satisfied until he spent the night with me. Next day about noon I went in and talked with him. After a bit he told me he would like to spend the rest of Christmas day at home. He told me he would report back any time I asked him to. I let the man go, as he told me it was the first time he had been drunk in the last six months.

In other instances, peace officers have their weekly reports ghosted by reporters. But not so is the case of T. W. "Buckshot" Lane, sheriff of Wharton County, Tex.; he writes the longest and frankest reports the authors have seen. He also reports to the people by radio.

"I find by warning and educating the people through radio and newspapers you can do plenty

good," Sheriff Lane wrote the authors. "I hardly know how in the world I could contend with the criminal situation in this county if it were not for the interest taken by the people, brought on and encouraged by the aid of newspapers and radio talks. All I have to do is run a column regarding the danger of driving with no tail light and name a specific instance where a life was lost or considerable damage done, then ask all people to check tail lights at once. That tale is picked up by service stations and by the people, then for quite some time we have no tail light trouble.

A gentleman will not tire out a lady by making her chase him. — Petersburg (Va.) Journal.

"I once had a certain bridge in the county where several wrecks and deaths occurred; in fact there were lots of wrecks there. I wrote a tale on the bridge and an oil derrick there, saying the derrick stood as a monument to the dead and as a warning to people using the bridge. For months there were no more wrecks there."

The sheriff's column, which appears in several newspapers in the area, is titled "Buckshot Lane, Sheriff, Wharton County, His Writin's and Musin's." It is an uninhibited, ungrammatical report printed just as he writes it. Editors using the column say its readership is virtually equal to the literate population. And Lane, like the other writing sheriffs studied, won re-election at the polls. They believe a column is a powerful political instrument.

The following are excerpts from one of Sheriff Lane's weekly columns: as printed in the Bay City (Tex.) *Daily Tribune*:

Folks the past week was to me a very high temperature week, for it was the week of elections, rumors were flying high against me, I was unable to answer all of them and I was unable to get out and among the people, for I was more than buisy.

We began the week by having Criminal District Court the first day, Monday, we did not so much as call a jury still we tried six persons and as follows first was an

auto thief and he was glad to take 4 year in the Pen for it was his second offense, the second was glad to get off with four years, for he had 14 marihuana cigarettes on him when I caught him right here in the jail trying to peddle it, he was a trusty, third was more than glad and very thankful to get off with five years suspended, he was a burglar and was caught in the building, but he had never before been in any serious trouble, the fourth took four years for forgery, and I am sure that had he fought the case he would have gotten at least ten years, fifth was a woman and she was glad to get off with two years down the river for she had cashed many forged checks but only one in this County and the last was muchly surprised to find that Judge gave him four years in pen for he actually was entitled to be sent as a habitual criminal, having been in the Penitentiary four different times.

Tuesday came along and on that date we called up a Jury, we had six cases to try, the first didn't show so we forfeited his bond, the second who had the day before demanded a Jury took one look at those grim faces and said I don't think I want a Jury, so he asked the Judge for mercy and was glad to get off with 5 years in pen, he was a three time looser and a fast burglar. . . . I personally want to thank you good men that laid by their businesses of one kind or another and reported for Jury service. I realize it is a great bother and burden on you men to have to come into the Court room and sit idly by and wait to be called on to listen to some tiresome criminal case, and I realize each and every one of you men loose money by coming and you neglect your private business, but fellows trial by Jury is one of the AMERICAN ways of doing business, it is one privilege the American citizen has and certainly we do not want that American privilege and right to break down, and unless you good men do volunteer your services as Jurors it will in time be a breakdown, and when that time comes I hate to think what may be the outcome. . . .

During the week in Wharton, the Aldag addition, I had a call from a good lady and she was in some sort of a stew, she and all the kids were out there within the street they had two small magnets tied together with a piece of wire to pull them with it was hot and so was the lady, she was pulling that thing back and forth, and it was getting results, for ever so often she would pick it up and a dozen or more tacks would be stuck to it, she said Buck I have had nine flat tires in just the last few days, I don't know if some body is mad at us or what has happened, but look in this can, she had a big tomato

Back in the good old days the dishwasher, the mixmaster and the sweeper came equipped with sex instead of an electric motor. — Edwin F. Abels, *Lawrence* (Kan.) *Outlook*.

can over half full of tacks, she said we have been dragging this thing up and down and we have been down on our knees, looks like some one has it in for us. . . . I believe that some persons riding by accidently dropped a sack of tacks, for I know the Man and Lady and so help me never in my life did I ever hear any person say any thing but good about them, I just wonder how many more people have picked up tacks on this spot there is many cars going by there during a day and night, and in each occasion a flat was had some body cussed some body else, but all and all no body knows just who to cuss, and if those tacks were put there on purpose it was a mighty sorry thing to do.

Jail report for the week: 1 investigation, gen., 2 drunks, 1 Statutory Rape, 1 Insane, 1 Assault with Knife, 1 Threat to take life with shotgun "It was not loaded" 1 Disturb Peace, 1 Drunk Driver, 3 Federal Prisoners, we have in Jail 22 County and 11 Federal Prisoners.

Such columns are being imitated not only by sheriffs but by other officeholders. Peace officers have the advantage that their activities are close to the people and involve many of the factors which make news. Such columns are not beyond criticism, of course. In them it is possible to pre-try the accused, to show bias toward races, and by unfortunate remarks do the opposite of what this chapter is concerned with — control of an environment in some degree.

However, a sheriff-columnist gives voters and taxpayers an insight not only into his activities but into his policies and thought patterns. On the other side of this picture is the newspaper which carries only the merest summaries of court and crime news, and gets these from the records and indirect sources. A better balance would be normal reporting of public affairs, giving the people a check against their peace officers' versions, and an editor's column, which from time to time might evaluate the findings of both reporter and sheriff.

Your friends may lie to you,
your mirror deceive you, but a
flight of stairs will be brutally
frank. — Helper (Utah) Journal.