

Press Columnist Organizations

[Because the columnists of Iowa are active and well organized, and because their activity might be used as a model in other states, this chapter is given to a description of their program.]

THE COLUMNISTS OF IOWA, through their organization, the Press Columnists of Iowa, have become pretty well acquainted and have found, to their delight, that "columnists are people." With rare exceptions, the columnists of the Hawkeye state do not run to literary pretensions, to journalistic all-wisdom, to upper-strata intellectualism. They are just run-of-the-crib Iowans. And, since Iowa is fairly representative of other states, probably it's fair to assume that columnists anywhere in the United States are not given to literary, journalistic, or other pretensions.

The obvious explanation is that any such pretensions are knocked out of the small-town writer, within weeks after manifestation, by the readers with whom he cannot escape daily contact. That, plus the fact

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SING BROTHERS, SING!



The Ding Darling cartoon on Iowa press columnists.

that often the columnist was pitched into the writing business, willy nilly, without much preparation, and therefore continues to be humble.

The Press Columnists of Iowa have made a study of the "columnists are people" aspects of themselves. They did this through their organization office, and the oft-disturbing but tried-and-true device of a questionnaire. They asked themselves how they happened to be columnists anyway, then countered with a query about hobbies, possibly with the thought that a hobby might offset tendencies toward column phobias. From these questionnaires, thumbnail personality sketches have been prepared, and are the basis for a "Who's Who Among Iowa Columnists" on the weekly programs quoting the columnists on the university and college radio stations.

Later in the questionnaire, because the prominence and influence of the columnists in their communities are very real, they are asked what organizations they had served as officials and whether they had served on city councils or in the legislature.

Iowa columnists, organized for five years, were well prepared to make the survey. Elections of the Press Columnists of Iowa are carried on by mail. The secretary's office in Des Moines handles records and edits and distributes a clip-sheet. The secretary and the board of directors establish policies.

Every columnist in the state is a member of PCI by virtue of his column. Money for the small expense involved is raised by a registration fee at the three or four meetings held each year. Members may, if they wish, have a copy of the membership certificate, a large affair bearing a cartoon by the famous Iowa cartoonist, Ding (J. N. Darling).

A Ding carton also appears on the "kernelship" awards made by the columnists. Indirectly, these awards signify the leadership and importance of columnists in their own communities. Only colum-

Don't learn the traffic rules by accident!—Calhoun (Ky.) News.

nists can present the awards, and these are made to such persons and in such ways as the individual columnist determines. He gives them, of course, for outstanding community work by persons in his home area — the school superintendent, the retiring head of an important business, a faithful Sunday school official. The columnist decides to give an award to some person; writes the secretary for a “kernel” award; receives it; and presents it as he wishes. That’s all there is to it. The award has gone to some five hundred Iowa community leaders, to a former Iowan, Herbert Hoover, and to dignitaries whom Iowa editors have visited, including the president of Mexico.

The phrase, “Kernel of the Iowa Tall Corn,” seems to carry the connotation that the person receiving the award is an essential part of all Iowa—a local leader whose accomplishments help make a great state. And the pun on “kernel” and “colonel” has many uses.

Each year the PCI sponsors some activity not entirely “columnar.” One year, it was the choosing of a “Queen of the Lands”—an Iowa farm girl who represented Iowa in out-of-state affairs. In a previous year it selected five “Master Iowans.” In another, PCI officials gave a series of lectures on column writing at Iowa colleges.

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THE PCI COLUMN SCORE CARD

Iowa columnists have developed a score card for columns which the PCI calls the “double T” or “T-T,” because of its two divisions, “topic” and “treatment.” This card runs:

Topic:

Actual interest of readers)	
Potential interest of readers)	45 points

Treatment:

Writing of column	40 points
Appearance of column	15 points

100

Since woman's life is four years longer than man's, you'd think she could wait about having the last word. — DePere (Wis.) Journal-Democrat.

Mathematicians may deny it, but it is possible for certain well-arranged sets of curves to make a triangle.—North Canaan (Conn.) *Western News*.

The column that would get 100 points, the perfect score, would be on a topic, or topics, in which 100 percent of the readers actually already were interested, or could reasonably be expected to become interested by the column if written and printed perfectly. To be written perfectly, the choice of words and arrangements of phrases would be such that no one would reasonably conceive a better expression; printing would satisfy a similar standard.

This score card can be tricky. Its intelligent use demands independent consideration of each factor and its suitability for readers of the paper in which the column appeared.

This score is primarily for grading a column against its own possibilities, in its own paper and for its own readers or possible readers. But by comparing totals, judges can use the scores for comparing columns in different papers and in different areas.

The score obviously is not complete enough for grading columns as to their fitness for being quoted in (1) other papers of the area, (2) the metropolitan press, or (3) magazines. For that, the elements of timeliness (or timelessness), of brevity, and of universality of interest have to be added. But if those are added, the Iowa "TT" score is adequate for judging columns as to quotation possibilities.

REASONS FOR WRITING COLUMN

Response to the questionnaire sent by the secretary to all PCI members throws some light on the origin and nature of the species, *humanus columnist*:

The replies to the query on *Why did you begin writing a column?* support the conclusion that columnists got into their sprightly business for many reasons. Here are some of the answers to the questionnaire:

- Substituted on father's column in 1928 • wanted to get rid of canned stuff • by accident • wanted column for news that wouldn't fit other columns • Dad was away and

I tried his column • best way to get across editorial ideas • natural thing for a newspaper man • outlet for interest in public activities • I blame it on evil companions of teen age days • wrote column in high school • heard of columns' popularity in other papers • lends individuality to paper • began columning in fourth grade • bought a newspaper • needed a galley more to fill front page.

Just had to . . . the urge was wearing me down • to satisfy readers • my family grew up and I sighed for other worlds to conquer • seemed a good place to express one's self • it was an impulse during vacation • writing to boys in World War II • only thing in newspapering I hadn't done by 1931 • just wanted to write • orders of editor • propositioned by editor.

Effort to segregate personality from other departments of paper • editor said needed column and looked at me • my ambition since early childhood • following anonymous letters to editor • birth of late baby made me ill, started column to kill time • because I don't go for editorials • for five years enclosed private column in weekly letter to shut-in father; it became newspaper column • substitute for profound editorial stuff • because of heart trouble, which made me quit sheriffing • as substitute for long-winded editorials • as hobby • public demands a column, so I write it.

COLUMNISTS ARE PEOPLE

To support the declaration that *columnists are people*, here are some of the replies to the query, *What are your hobbies?*

Making doll clothes • gardening • really good music • a certain kind of housekeeping • modernizing newspaper office • African violets • athletics • porch-sitting • flower arranging • planning trips I never can afford • photography • ventriloquism • barbershop quartet singing • making doll cradles • sing in gospel quartet.

Collecting cook books • doing good deed each day • helping three children to voting age • sewing • flowers • folks • North and South American history • organizing new groups • American Indians in my counties • piano by ear • some arithmetic • sitting by streams • handwork decorating • jazz music and cooking.

HOW IOWA'S COLUMNS ARE EVALUATED

A continuing study of columns is being made by the Press Columnists of Iowa. This is being done by a weekly reading of the columns of the state at the

Mother knows her little boy is growing up when she finds the Charles Atlas coupon torn from his comic book.—Mona E. Kissinger, Junction City (Kan.) Republic.

office of John M. Henry, secretary of the association, at Des Moines. From this study a clip-sheet is made up, including thirty excerpts from as many columns, as a part of the Monthly Bulletin sent to all Iowa columnists. Three times a year further studies are made at forums. The spring forum is at Iowa State College; a second is at the State University of Iowa; the third is at Drake University in Des Moines.

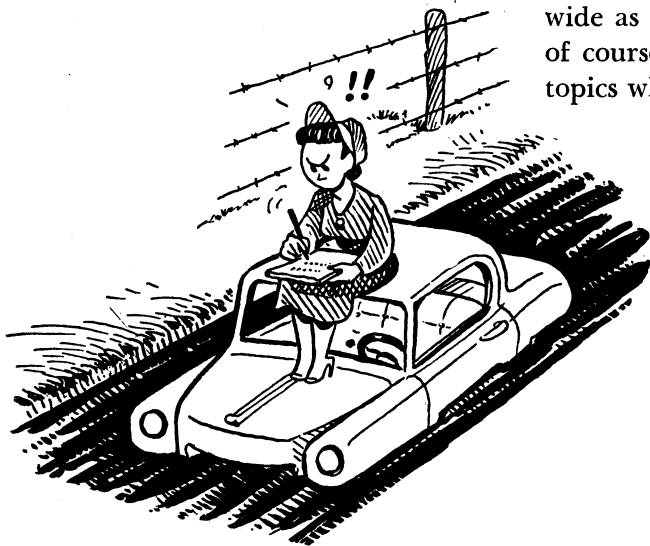
All forums are the essence of simplicity. At each meeting there are two discussions, one on materials and the other on methods. A past president of the association presides at each, with at least ten columnists on the panels. Audience participation is emphasized. By a session's end each columnist has had an opportunity to speak.

The materials used in Iowa columns and the methods of presentation probably differ little from materials and methods of columnists in other states, so the continuing study in Iowa is in effect an examination of columns of all the states. As a matter of fact, spot checks made by the author of this chapter, in his reading and editing of column material for his "Main Street" column in *Cosmopolitan*, showed the materials and methods of the country's columns parallel those of Iowa closely.

The Iowa materials, naturally, are of a range as wide as the writers' interests. This means, of course, that subjects extend from those topics which are of universal interest, such as the home, personal philosophy, kids, man-and-woman, and friends, to those areas of state or local significance, such as corn-affecting weather, upkeep of farm-to-market roads, and the school situation.

The clip-sheet from the sec-

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retary's office has been issued for the last four years, and is edited by his secretary, Miss Betty Adelman. It is intentionally made a cross-section of the columns — the excellent, the fair; the serious, the frivolous; the humorous, the few pessimistic; the pleasant, the sarcastic. What it does not contain is material of an entirely local interest — the plea for paving of Cross Street, the whoopla for the high school athletic teams. It might well contain this, because what it would clip from any one paper would be representative in this field for all the others. But the clip-sheet tries to include only those quotes which logically can be reprinted by other columns in the state, and to this end it does not use excerpts of local interest only.

The methods of handling the material also are numerous. They extend from the hortatory in which the reader is urged to drive carefully, to vote at the general election, to support the hospital bond election, on to the incongruous comment, used usually "just to get a laugh" but which can be very effective in putting across an editorial point by ridicule.

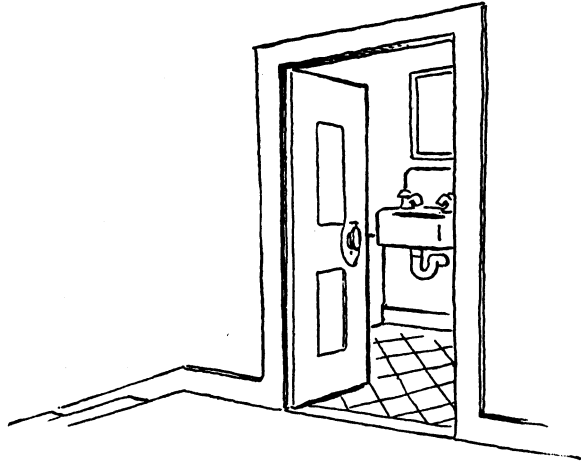
Professor L. N. Flint of the University of Kansas, whose booklet, "Paragraphing, The Sprightly Art," written in 1920, has been the bible of most students of columns — especially those earning quotes — developed some twenty classifications of treatment of column material. In Iowa, these twenty types are used nearly every week, as they are in other states.

But in Iowa, as in other states, some styles of writing have developed which defy classification. A typical columnist, questioned about his style and method, will laugh and say, "Oh, it seemed a good idea at the time to write it that way."

Perhaps it should be emphasized parenthetically that Iowa columnists, for all their organized study of

There are said to be only seven original jokes, and all but one of them go clear back to Adam. They can't blame him for the mother-in-law one. — Everett M. Rensberg, Vista (Calif.) Press.

their weekly output, pretend to be casual about their writing. They insist that they just sit down and spread their elbows and write whatever comes to mind. And probably that really is the way they do it. Actually, however, they do give a lot of thought, at odd moments, to what they are going to write, and how they will express it. So, when they do sit down and spread elbows they are pretty well prepared.



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