

In Conclusion

WRITING the small newspaper's personal columns has become a serious but pleasant business. The hobby stage of columning has passed. The exceptional readership and unmistakable influence of the medium have been generally recognized. A trend toward column essays of greater literary merit is well defined.

The columnists themselves testify that they derive much entertainment from their efforts to amuse others. They appreciate the greater community stature they attain by becoming popular writers. For some of them columning represents the best minutes they give to their papers at the typewriter.

Many of the small-city and town editors and reporters do not write columns, of course. Some of them prefer the less-demanding brief editorials of opinion. A few of them have a hostile attitude toward all columns, including the home-grown variety, for various reasons. In some regional and state press associations the subject has reached the stage of warm debate. It is a timely topic because, as Professor Thomas Barnhart of the University of Minnesota has

... local columns are not preferred by ALL publishers.



stressed in recent speeches, "As to whether personal columns may replace editorials eventually, the answer is that it is not just a possibility, nor a probability, but an established trend."

The growing popularity of the column is not universal, of course. Some editors feel a distaste for it. These include some who do not like to write editorials, either, but do, and others who do not like to be spotlighted by an actual or implied by-line. Other criticisms of the column are (1) that it is too light to express institutional policy, (2) that it lowers the dignity of an editor and impairs his community standing, (3) that it is either too easy to write or, if well done, too consuming of time, (4) that it requires a literary rather than a journalistic style, and (5) that columns by non-staff members weaken editorial authority. Also, the critics damn the column as a device because so many poor ones are seen.

The sometimes unstated fear is, also, that the traditional editorial essay will seem pallid in comparison with the lively personal column.

Column enthusiasts point out that good columns and good editorials do exist in the same — good — papers; and certainly editorials are not improved by omitting columns. The two departments can be complementary. And use of column techniques in signed editorials might enliven a page which also can be converted into a device for backgrounding the news with not only opinion, but features, cartoons, etc. One thing is clear: editorial responsibility must be somehow bolstered. The editorial writer now finds himself rivalled not only by the local and national columnists, but also by the by-lined interpretative reporter.

Every editor must choose the literary forms which he thinks can best do the whole job and also merit

A good wife can do most anything for a man except put his hat on just right.—Loyd Burns, Toledo (Iowa) Chronicle.

the press freedom he exercises. As an editor he recognizes his responsibility to weigh facts, interpret the news, and express opinions on what events mean to his community. Small papers are demonstrating that the editor's personal column can do the whole task or, supplementing the editorials, can amuse, promote, and serve. It is not our purpose here to debate the position of the editorial, but to record and examine the evolving patterns of the newspaper columns.

The case for the personal column includes the following points:

1. High readership — rarely exceeded.
2. Strong influence; effective in results.
3. Well suited to use by a writer of many contacts and a variety of duties.
4. The column humanizes an editor and restores personal journalism.
5. It is pleasing and flexible in typography and position, although as a continuing feature it should run on the same page each week.
6. It carries material not usable elsewhere.
7. It supplies a change-of-pace and entertainment as an antidote to dullness.
8. It is a good instrument in combating competition.
9. It encourages reader responses and contributions.
10. It has the strongest emotional appeal possible in a continuing feature.
11. It can set the tone of community thinking and so become an instrument of leadership in thought and action.
12. It develops creative ability in thinking and writing.
13. It combats Afghanistanism — that tendency to pontificate on remote subjects — and gobbledygook, that habit of obscuring thought in vague and "fine" writing.
14. It builds the popularity of the columnist as a person and thereby opens new avenues of usefulness and influence.

Let's profit by the mistakes of others. We may not live long enough to make them ourselves. — Mason City (Ill.) *Banner Times*.

15. It improves community attitudes and conditions the people for the reception of new ideas and for reactions in crises by using the twin tools, high readership and a man-to-man frankness in discussing local problems. Other points might be mentioned, but the above list includes most of them in a general way.

The personal column imposes two important imperatives: (1) the necessity for writing it every day or every week, and (2) individual responsibility as its conductor. The first of these may not seem important, but the fact is that many town and small-city editors do not write editorials, others write them only occasionally, and some merely reprint editorials from exchanges. The second imperative may be considered in connection with the relative anonymity of the editorial "we." Men who would shrink from writing an indifferent column do not hesitate to turn out inadequate editorials of opinion — with few facts or evidences of reasoning. While a brilliant essay can stand on its merits, the use of "we" and "this newspaper" and other non-individual terms by small newspapers offers few challenges.

On this subject Carl R. Kesler wrote as follows in *The Quill*:

It is easy to dismiss the editorial "we" as a convention which offers no real handicap to the thinker behind it. But it can be a handicap, not to thought itself, but to communication of thought. It can rule out use of the personal experience, of the hopes and fears and tastes of the individual human being that do so much to translate his thought into words and phrases that will reach the minds and hearts of other men.

The first person writer, if he chooses to use it, has complete flexibility of expression. If a special bit of knowledge or a personal anecdote or even a frankly admitted prejudice or dislike will help point up his theme, he has "I" and "me" to convey it to his readers. If he is worth his salt, the anonymous editorial writer also thinks as an individual, but too often he can avail himself of his individual experiences only by circuitous rhetoric. . . . The impersonal, institutional approach

The small boy's lament: "If I'm noisy they spank me. If I'm quiet they take my temperature!" — Jim Cornwall, *Stanton (Neb.) Register*.

forces the editorial writer to write didactically. It permits him few "ifs" or "buts" about an issue. Senator Jones is right . . . How this piece of legislation is wrong . . . we cannot allow this or condone that. This type of argument is not effective between individuals and I sometimes wonder how effective it is between newspaper and reader. When you try to make a point in ordinary conversation, you are likely to make allowance for the other fellow's ideas while advancing your own.

The personal column is of course conversational in method. And in small communities its conductor is so generally known that the "I" prevails in essence even when the writer avoids it. But the columnist has such a flexible instrument that he can fill the space without scolding, quarreling, or explaining events already detailed in news stories. And most any editor, worried with shortages and costs, is likely to be saner for having to spend a little time each week philosophizing and pondering on the smaller satisfactions of life. Otherwise, he may take his role much too seriously. And an editor who regularly attempts to create something amusing or stimulating will have the help and advice of others of like mind in his community. Such a meeting of minds at several levels of wit, humor, and seriousness is readily possible through the personal column.

In his attempts to influence public opinion the columnist may be blunt, moderate, or subtle. Some writings which seem mainly to provide light entertainment include well-directed policy statements which reach more people than would a serious essay. For, like modern educators in general, the columnist tries to interest as well as to inform, to inspire as well as to instruct. It is important that a serious subject be presented by an interesting person. And the reader goes to the column in the expectation that it will speak to him, or about him. It is this localization, as well as a light touch, which accounts for high readership.

As we interpret the teen-agers, the perfect match would be between "Whatta Guy!" and "Some gall"—Pineville (W.Va.) *Independent-Herald*.



A meeting of minds at several levels is readily possible . . .

A letter to the authors from Miss Elinor V. Cogswell, editor of the Palo Alto (Calif.) *Times*, is pertinent:

My column materials fall into four main categories.

1. Matters I get steamed up about, chiefly local.

2. Civic projects, political issues, municipal business which the general reader passes up as dull. These I try to slide into with anecdotes and a light touch, hoping to trap readers who would otherwise not inform themselves. It was to do this sort of thing that I started my "Editor at Bat" column.

3. Palo Alto and area history. Columns dealing with landmarks, picturesque characters of early days, traditions, and backgrounds interest me very much and seem to have good readership.

4. Tripe to fill. Letters, anecdotes, angles. After all, the column must come out.

Some days the news developments make certain discussions almost mandatory. Other times, we work for weeks on angles before something finally jells. When I really have an idea, I brood over my approach and sometimes rewrite the lead a dozen times. After that it goes fast, as a rule. Once I've gotten into a topic I write with some excitement and considerable pleasure. . . . The column is a more congenial medium than the formal editorials, which must be an expression of a group opinion or group policy, and which must be presented with dignity. Dignity is often stuffy. In my own column I can often send up trial balloons, strike a glancing blow, smoke something out.

Miss Cogswell's letter keynotes many of the principles and practices which the authors believe form the basic pattern of small-newspaper columning. She is an editor. When the writers are staff members or contributors, the materials are likely to be more specialized, or written in such a manner that institutional policy is not contradicted. The personal column maintains its appeal regardless of whether the writer is editor, preacher, teacher, farmer, or housewife.

To summarize: the future of the editor's personal column and other local columns looks bright, indeed.

Well, you still can use a dime for a screw-driver. — L. S. McCandless, Craig (Colo.) *Empire-Courier*.

The hometown column has proved its ability to get and to hold circulation. On many papers it has brought a resurgence of editorial influence. It offers much promise in the field of creative writing. It promises a sharing experience in that editors can in it regularly report their brightest thoughts and experiences, while permitting readers to enrich the space with theirs.

In small towns and cities, people live more through their emotions—loves, hates, enthusiasms, sympathies—than through abstract ideas. Daily, as they move out upon the community scene, they find nature alive, folks alive, business alive, young people abubble with energy and interests. It is a scene in which people are cheerful and full of laughing; and some grieve. Death is not a statistic when the dead is a friend.

It must follow, then, that local newspapers, which best mirror these scenes, should be similarly alive and throbbing with the spirit of people. Names make news, surely, but names pick up personality, movement, glamour, and excitement when clothed in the column techniques of suspense, quotation, anecdote, biography, light essay, verse, and witty paragraphs.

The personal column carries a high-voltage impact when well used. And more and more small-newspaper writers are learning to use it effectively. Both they and their readers are enjoying the experience of thinking and laughing and acting together. In some states the columnists are organizing to meet and study their art and methods.

Meanwhile, the difference between the unplanned and unimaginative columns and the better ones is startlingly great.

That is the challenge.

