

Decline and Fall of the Column Item

by NORMAN HILL

There was a time when Franklin Delano Roosevelt, adjourning a White House press conference, motioned to the Broadway gossip columnist Walter Winchell to stay behind after the reporters left. Then the President leaned forward and whispered: "Walter, I've got an item for you."

That was thirty-odd years ago, when the Broadway column was in its heyday, at the pinnacle of readership and importance as a publicity outlet. An item "planted" by a publicist in a New York columnist's daily potpourri of news, gags, scandal, and innuendo would be syndicated within a few days to as many as 600 newspapers from coast to coast. Aging and death of some of the giants in the field, and then, in the middle and late Sixties, the demise of a number of newspapers, including four of the biggest in New York City, turned the press agents' dream medium into a historic curiosity. The number of columnists dwindled, and reader interest sagged.

But while that golden era lasted, a hundred or more ingenious column publicity specialists—referred to variously as press agents, flacks, tipsters, and worse—earned their living through their ability to get their clients' names into the columns. A mention was valuable. A note of praise for the client was a coup. An all-out panegyric—such as a coveted Winchell "orchid"—was the press agent's paradise. Countless PR professionals based their business careers over several decades on their perfection of the technique of dealing with (or "servicing") and achieving acceptance among the leading columnists.

Besides Winchell there were Ed Sullivan, Danton Walker, Dorothy Kilgallen, Louis Sobol, Damon Runyon, Mark Hellinger, Lee Mortimer, Leonard Lyons, Hy Gardner, Earl Wilson, Frank Farrell, Jack O'Brian, and others.

Today, only a handful of major columnists remain. The most important—by the publicists' consensus—is Earl Wilson, syndicated in an estimated 200 newspapers. Leonard Lyons is carried in fewer papers, but reaches a select audience of influential theater and publishing notables. The remaining columnists are Ed Sullivan, who still finds time in his busy television schedule to turn out two columns a week,

Robert Sylvester, and Charles McHarry.

Ed Weiner, a former column press agent, and biographer of Winchell and Runyon, survived forty years in the field to become advertising and promotion director of New York's Statler Hilton Hotel. He recently said, "The column item is practically gone as a number one plug." Weiner can recall when a mention by Winchell could make a best seller of a book or record, a hit of a show or movie; when world leaders would confide off the record in journalists and issue trial balloons; when "FDR planted stuff in Winchell's column through intermediaries, to see what would happen."

One of the industry's most successful figures, Lee Solters, started as a column press agent in 1937, while still a student. Today, his world-wide organization represents Barbra Streisand, the Beatles, David Merrick, and a host of top-echelon names (he no longer takes on unknown beginners, saying, "I've paid my dues"). He admits to "a virtual monopoly on shows" and laments the loss of those halcyon days when "Winchell could harp on one thing day after day and ride a show until it was a winner. Nobody does that today."

Bob Perilla, an energetic PR executive who started as a column contact sixteen years ago, points to a significant change in the field: the decline of the "inside dirt" tip maligning another person or firm. Such tips came from the press agent as "free items": news tidbits designed to ingratiate the press agent with the columnist, who would reciprocate by mentioning the tipster's client. A "dirt item" might read: "The Blank Company is in trouble—rumored to be on the verge of bankruptcy." Or: "Producer Harry Doe walked out of the famous Fancy Restaurant because they served his soup cold." Perilla says times have changed. "The columnists are not as receptive to that as they used to be. People have grown up."

The element of reciprocation—a client plug in return for one of several free items—is still the basis of the relationship between columnist and press agent. Weiner says when he planted an item that some little-known singer was "being viewed by MGM talent scouts at the Copa," it wasn't news—it was a "concoction." But it could stimulate contract offers, particularly if it appeared in an in-



—Wide World
Leonard Lyons—"a select audience."

fluential column such as Winchell's. "Columbia, Universal, and Warner's would have to get out and take a look at the performer. The item instigated movement," says Weiner.

Frank Bowers, former assistant to Earl Wilson, now a magazine editor, confirms the "unspoken agreement" between columnist and press agent. The columnist felt obligated, if he had got one or two choice blind items from a press agent, to use a client item "as a payoff." Publicists employ a variety of methods to let the columnist know when an item they've submitted involves a client. Sometimes they write the word "client" in parentheses at the end of an item. Some label nonclient items similarly, inserting the word "free" as a frank reminder to the columnist of the press agent's services. One publicist occasionally marks an item "of special interest," meaning: "I need this one!"

Free items can be straight news about nonclients, gags not attributed to clients, clever phrases, unusual typos culled from other publications, odd or surprising information. All are offered to the columnist by press agents seeking to prove their trustworthiness, cleverness, and allegiance in exchange for favored treatment. Interestingly, not one of the people interviewed would take credit for having initiated a specific news story or having coined a noteworthy phrase. All the publicists' wittiest creations, most unique observations, most breathtaking bits of exclusive news remain forever anonymous.

Even Weiner, long out of the column-planting business, while immodestly conceding that he was "the best news gatherer around—eight-word hard-news items that often wound up as front page stories"—declined to cite any examples. Once an item appears under a columnist's name, he said, it has to belong to that columnist. If it was good, the columnist "took the bows. If it was incorrect, the columnist, as Winchell put it, had to take the boos."

The same cautious self-effacement applies to word coinage, which used

to be one of Winchell's proudest specialties. (In 1933, W. J. Funk listed him as one of the ten most fecund originators of slang.) Innumerable Winchellisms passed into contemporary common usage: "blessed event," "bundle from heaven," "Chicagorilla" (a 1930s word for a gangster, it has a startling current flavor), "infanticipating," "gone phffft," "makin' whoopee." Prophetically, his column dubbed Broadway "The Hardened Artery." He first used "oomph" and "it" to describe female pulchritude. Weiner, who "won't take any secondhand bows in absentia," and a host of other press agents were the men who actually created most of these ingenious terms. Perilla agrees that "devising clever lines is the name of the game in this business, but why should I take credit for a phrase under someone else's by-line? It's *his* column." Lee Solters says he gets all the credit he wants, for putting good gags in clients' mouths, "in the form of a check from the client."

During the five years he worked for Earl Wilson, prior to 1968, Bowers observed an important change already taking place in the quality of column content. "Publicity items got to be more legit-sounding. They still sought the same result — get your client's name in the paper any way you can—but there were fewer stunts, outright lies, and wild stories." Insiders agree that the columns were more fun in the old days. Nobody, including the columnists, cared much whether items were truthful or not. During the Sixties, Bowers recalls, Wilson was "starting to take his job more seriously." No longer could a press agent level with him that an item or event was an out-and-out stunt, then add: "Earl, let's try to pull it off anyway." A number of press agents, such as Jack Tirman and Jim Moran, were particularly good at faking news stories that made good reading. In earlier years, "Earl went along with an awful lot of fake stunts," Bowers recalls.

Tirman, a veteran column man, misses the era of the uninhibited stunt. "Years ago the guys were more daring," he says. "They wrote with tongue in cheek. Now it's all hard news. No laughs." Publicists can still plant a gag attributed to one of their clients, but the pickings are leaner. They vie in Wilson's column for one of six or seven items a day that lend themselves to a publicist's purposes. One Sylvester column per week is devoted to gags.

Revealing a technique insecure stars might well study, Solters says columns are frequently used to "box people in" during contract negotiations. A producer who is having difficulty wrapping up a deal with a star will instruct

his press agent to place column items saying that he is negotiating with a rival performer. Solters's organization is "often given the word to plant such items." The object is to "frighten the star a little." Columns offer an ideal medium for this purpose, by both the nature of their content and the speed with which items can be published. Often "you can call Lyons and Wilson and get it in print the next day." The reason such tactics work, says Solters, is that the star being "boxed in" never can be sure whether or not an item is true. A performer's basic insecurity may be enough to convince him there really is a rival, and to intimidate him into accepting the terms offered.

A new phenomenon is the press agent's sly use of the column item as an esoteric, insider's communique to other media, a means of building the client's name value with magazine editors and TV panel-show producers for feature stories and guest interview spots. Says Perilla: "Years ago you got someone into a column and that was it. Today, editors, wire-service people, and magazine writers read columns. We write letters without any response. Then we plant a column item, and the editors start calling us. It's the power of the printed word."

Solters still exults over an item he once planted about a girl singer from Texas, claiming that NYU's "Texas Club" was planning a tremendous party for her. It was, says Solters, "a complete phony." Nevertheless, *Life's* editors called and asked to cover the party. "You know the rest. I had to go and organize everything. I was looking for one line in a column, and I got a layout in *Life*."

Newsweek editor Bill Roeder, who runs the magazine's NEWSMAKERS page, confirms that he follows the columns closely, checking for personalities and stories that might be worth following up. There is "rarely anything solid," but he sometimes finds usable quotes.

A handful of press agents still depend almost exclusively on their expertise and contacts in the column field. Two years ago the *Wall Street Journal* reported that press agents earn "up to fifty dollars for each mention of a client." The fact is some run as high as \$200, and can go higher in special cases, such as seasonal promotion for a perfume, cosmetic, or camera, where the client is interested in column plugs only during the Christmas shopping season.

Most of the column experts who have survived did so by branching out into heretofore foreign areas, such as magazines and TV. The column specialists who were unable or unwilling to offer their clients rounded PR pro-

grams have fallen by the wayside, or drifted into other businesses. Some moonlight to supplement their income. One press agent, who earned a great deal of money in the old days, has been working in a bank for a number of years, while handling two publicity accounts on the side.

Solters hit on a comfortable formula with which to conquer the new era. He accepts only clients who are so famous they don't need anybody to get them publicity, in or out of the columns. He no longer has need for the "twosome" gambit for cracking a column, i.e., linking a new, unknown performer romantically with an established star, because he has no unknown clients. "Getting Streisand publicity is no trick," he confides. His biggest challenge is to make the right selections from among the multitude of invitations and requests for interviews his clients receive.

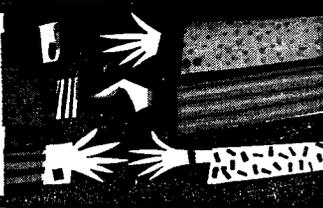
Some of the column specialists carry on, but yearn for a return of the golden era, and a few believe it will come back—perhaps, they say longingly, borne by a revival of interest in humor and eccentricity when the war in Vietnam ends.

Charles Fisher, writing in 1944, celebrated those "golden days for columning—that highly charged type of personal journalism which has come to so elaborate a blossoming in this generation. A mere score or so of writers command audiences of a size, diversity, and devotion . . . without parallel in the history of print." At the height of that era Walter Winchell, seated one night in the Stork Club with his friend and loyal contributor Ed Weiner, said, "Look around the room and tell me what you see." The publicist replied: "I see eleven newspapermen." "You mean," said Winchell, "you see eleven copycats." There are a few copycats left, but the era that belonged to the Winchells and their tipsters is really just a has-been.

LITERARY I. Q. ANSWERS

1, *Ambassadors*, c, James; 2, *Pride & Prej.*, p, Austen; 3, *Middlemarch*, r, Eliot; 4, *Bliethdale Romance*, o, Hawthorne; 5, *Benito Cereno*, m, Melville; 6, *Franny & Zooey*, a, Salinger; 7, *Amer. Tragedy*, s, Dreiser; 8, *Treas. Island*, k, Stevenson; 9, *Doll's House*, n, Ibsen; 10, *Bleak House*, f, Dickens; 11, *For Whom Bell Tolls*, t, Hemingway; 12, *Main St.*, h, Lewis; 13, *Dr. Faustus*, j, Mann; 14, *Brave New World*, b, Huxley; 15, *Egoist*, d, Meredith; 16, *Vicar of Wakefield*, q, Goldsmith; 17, *Vanity Fair*, g, Thackeray; 18, *Absalom!*, i, Faulkner; 19, *East of Eden*, e, Steinbeck; 20, *Return of Native*, l, Hardy. (Some titles are abbreviated.)

Public Relations



Profit Alone Is Not Enough

The social ferment, the changing structure of society, the overwhelming domestic problems afflicting the nation—each has had its impact on the American corporation. The public's demand that the large industrial organizations provide some leadership in solving the ills of the cities has wrought changes in the role of the corporation. No longer can a corporation tend to its profit-making alone, while by-passing issues once considered beyond the concern of business managers.

Many of the changes in the outlook of corporate managers have been in the making for some time under the stimulus of a concerned nation looking for improvement in the quality of life. But recently the speed of change has accelerated within the major corporations. Not so long ago it was considered that the role of the manager was simply to maximize his profits. Now he cannot properly perform his job unless he becomes deeply involved in furthering the aspirations of the nation as a whole.

Since General Motors is the largest industrial enterprise in the country, with 794,000 employees world-wide, a payroll of \$6.928-billion, and 1,363,000 stockholders at the close of last year, it seemed worthwhile to ask the chief executive officer of the corporation for his views on the social responsibility of business. James M. Roche, chairman of the board of directors of General Motors, has worked for the corporation for forty-two years and holds the prime responsibility in running the vast empire. As the country's biggest and most successful corporation, GM is bound to be the target of attack, for it is an old, and not necessarily unhappy, condition of national life that bigness is often mistrusted. And that holds true whether it is big business, big unions, big universities, or big religious institutions. The bigger they are, the more they are the center of scrutiny. GM can't hide. It lives in a big glass house. Here are some of Mr. Roche's views.

On social responsibility: "Business must conduct itself in accordance with the laws of the land; provide products of the best quality possible; carry out its responsibility to stockholders, customers, and employees, and conduct itself as a good corporate citizen. Obviously, unless we operate on a basis

consistent with the public welfare and the best interests of the country, we couldn't succeed for a very long period.

"The term social responsibility, as it is applied to a business or a corporation, is being interpreted on a much broader basis than ever before in our history. We have many problems in the social area—problems of jobs, problems of minorities. In General Motors, we have been concerned with minorities for many, many years. There were approximately 100,000 minority employees within our corporation at the end of 1969, roughly 15 per cent of our total U.S. employment. I believe a most important factor in meeting our social responsibilities is to provide job opportunities. We hire people who perhaps have never held jobs before. We give them an opportunity to work, and to be trained to qualify and advance on the basis of their abilities and skills. We spend a great deal of effort on such programs."

On what business can do to help solve urban problems: "The most important contribution business can make is to supply jobs. Business people can also serve as consultants in such fields as public education and housing, particularly in urban areas. We are devoting manpower and time in these programs."

On what business can do to ease the housing shortage: "Business, if it were given the opportunity, could contribute a technology to housing that has not been available up to now. There are great possibilities for prefabricated homes. We are now building homes pretty much with the same technology that was used three hundred years ago—piece by piece, brick by brick, nail by

nail. Assembly line techniques could be adopted. Parts prefabricated in factories could be assembled on building sites. This offers a great potential, but it can't be realized until several things happen. There has to be a different attitude on the part of the building-trade unions. Building codes must be revised. The supply of skilled labor—electricians, plumbers, millwrights, carpenters, and such—must be increased. Business can make a contribution here, and hopefully it will."

On what the stockholder expects: "There is no question but that the average stockholder expects the company he invests in to both make a profit and be socially responsible."

On the quality of primary education: "Business must get itself involved in seeing that children are properly taught. One aspect, I think, is the feeling among blacks that there is a difference in the quality of the education being given in predominantly white schools and in the black schools. This is at the heart of busing. I think the pressure for it stems from the fact that the blacks believe that if the whites have to go to a black school, then the school will improve."

On the demand for instant change: "It is impossible to adjust to the demand for instant change. Unless we can bring mature consideration to the solution of some of our problems, we can make serious mistakes. Those problems didn't develop overnight, and they're not going to be solved overnight. For example, pollution does not come from one source. It reaches deep into the economic roots of our country and is closely allied with some of the conveniences we take for granted today. All our problems are usually discussed primarily within the context of the United States. But many of them are not confined to this country alone. Finding equitable solutions to some of these problems in the United States doesn't mean they will be eliminated, because we are only one comparatively small part of a very large world. Remembering that most of our oxygen comes from the oceans and other large bodies of water, what happens if we clear up our atmosphere in the United States, and Europe and Asia and Latin America don't clear theirs? We have the means to pay the bill for pollution control, but many countries in the world don't."

Business is now compelled to perform a new role. The public demands it, and wise managers know that to ignore that demand is to court disaster. Acceptance of public responsibilities, far beyond the basic one of making a profit, is now a must for those corporate heads who believe that what remains of the private sector is worth preserving.

—L. L. L. GOLDEN.

