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Dean Of Journalists Celebrates 50th Anniversary

By ADRIAN A. DAUGHERTY

Col. H. A. Sommers, dean of journalism in Kentucky, Thursday, April 7, observed his golden anniversary as editor of The Elizabethtown News, probably the best known community newspaper published in Kentucky.

Since 1882, when he and W. W. Anderson bought The News, then already 13 years a weekly, from Col. H. M. McCarty, Mr. Sommers has edited it, and during that entire half-century, he exclaims with pride, not a single issue has missed the mail, despite the usual run of mechanical break-downs and the general undependability of the nineteenth century equipment long used by The News.

The News was established August 5, 1869, (during the week of the total eclipse of the sun, reminisces Mr. Sommers) by Capt. W. A. Bell, a Confederate soldier, and Judge Wesley Matthis. The paper was published upstairs in a building at the corner of Race street and Dixie avenue, now the site of a modern garage. Previous to the war between the states there had been several newspapers in Elizabethtown, but they suspended publication so that during the war, and until the establishment of The News, the little town was without the facilities of any local public print.

Bell and Matthis sold out to Richard Larue, who improved the paper considerably, and who, according to Mr. Sommers, was quite an important man in his day. After Larue ran the paper a short time, he suffered a stroke of paralysis and had to give it up, selling to Wickliffe Chapman, of Lebanon. Chapman in turn sold out to Col. H. M. McCarty, who conducted the paper until Messrs. Sommers and Anderson formed a partnership and bought it in 1882.

Mr. Sommers had come to Kentucky from Maryland four years prior to that, in 1878, with two letters of introduction, one to Col. Henry Watterson, epochal editor of the Courier Journal. Seemingly there is no relation between the letters and the fact that Mr. Sommers, immediately after arriving in Kentucky, established the Hart County Democrat, at Munfordsville. He had had no newspaper experience prior to that time, and the first line that he ever wrote was his salutatory in his own paper in 1878. At that time, Mr. Sommers recalls, there were only two money-making papers in the state, Craddock's "True Kentuckian," at Paris, and the "Danville Advocate," of

which James Marrs was editor. Most of the papers then barely made expenses. A number of them were run as sidelines by lawyers, and not a few were out-and-out political subsidies.

In response to advertising inducements from merchants of Horse Cave, the Democrat was moved to that latter town in 1880, and Mr. Sommers removed to Elizabethtown, to which place came Anderson with whom he bought The News in 1882.

Mr. Sommers and Mr. Anderson had been classmates at Rockville, Md., and for several years after that had worked together as civil engineers with the Baltimore and Ohio railroad.

When they bought The News, it was published weekly and had a circulation of approximately 1,100. The issues were four-page folio, nine columns wide—"...the same size as the Woodford Sun is today," observed Mr. Sommers, referring to the Woodford county weekly published by his long-time friends, the Bowmar brothers. The Sun is today the only blanket-size newspaper printed in Kentucky.

The major item of The News' mechanical equipment in 1882 was a country Campbell press, with a revolving cylinder, which was capable of making 1,000 impressions an hour. It was the best press of that day, costing around \$1,100. Motivating power for the press was provided by a large wheel, turned by hand. Steam power was available, but impracticable, because it was not slow enough, and facilities for gearing the press down were not adequate.

Mr. Sommers conjectures that he has used virtually every kind of power ever employed to run a press during the time that he has been arbiter of The News. He began with "nigger" power, applied as indicated in the preceding paragraph, and graduated to an oil engine, which was fairly efficient, but which backfired occasionally and violently, causing some little discomfiture to the staff members by ejecting them forcibly from the office by the repercussion. At one time a hydraulic motor, run by water from the municipal water system, furnished the driving power of the press. When the level of the water in the stand-pipe was low and the pressure too weak to use, a gasoline engine, "convulsive and fickle as a woman" was utilized. Today electric power does the work.

Nearly all other Kentucky papers

of that day, according to Mr. Sommers, used Washington hand presses, which theretofore had been the best presses known, being of such excellence and doing such perfect work that they were then used by the government bureau of engraving for printing all the paper currency. Only three or four Kentucky papers had better presses.

Other equipment at the outset of the Sommers regime included a hand press for large bills and a smaller Gordon Price and Chandler job press. (The News today uses two Price and Chandler job presses in its job department.)

All the type was handset in those days, a disadvantage that many editors partly overcame by having patent inside or outside pages, on the opposite sides of which locally handset news was printed. The News, however, Mr. Sommers complacently informed the writer, has never run a stick of copy but what was set in its own office.

To set the type by hand Mr. Sommers maintained a corps of a foreman and four girl compositors, the latter members of which corps picked up the disconcerting habit of getting married and quitting their jobs. "So," he says, "I bought a linotype, which does not get married."

Advertising, for the most part display, was not unknown to The News in its early days. The paper frequently carried full page advertisements, and more often half-page displays appeared. An interesting fact, nevertheless, is that there was practically no legal advertising carried; it did not exceed 50 dollars' worth in the course of a whole year.

In 1885 Mr. Sommers assumed full control and ownership of The News, buying out the interest of Anderson, who returned to Washington, D. C., whence he had come three years before, and where he now lives.

In 1902 Mr. Sommers bought, and moved his office into, the building which it now occupies at the corner of Dixie avenue and Mulberry street, across from the post office building being erected.

In the meantime, The News had changed from a four-page nine-column paper to an eight-page of six columns. It continued as a weekly paper until 1906 when it was changed to a semi-weekly, with Tuesdays and Fridays as the days of publication. The unusual in the change to a semi-weekly was that the size of the paper

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Rules Announced For 1932 Prize Contests

Five contests will be open to Kentucky papers in the annual 1932 newspaper prize contest and each editor is privileged and urged to send his entry in for each contest. These contests include best all-around newspaper, best front page, best editorial, best news story, and best advertising composition.

The exhibit this year promises to be one of the largest and best since the contest began. The committee are issuing this call for the newspapers to be entered, and, as in the past, valuable prizes will be offered. The rules and regulations for each contest follow. The papers will be put on display at the mid-summer meeting.

All-Around Contest

For guidance of the competitors the following will constitute the table of percentages by which the newspaper will be scored:

General appearance, 30%; local news, 25%; country correspondence, 5%; personal items, 10%; farm news or news pertaining to chief industry of section where published, 5%; general news, 5%; and editorial 20%. Factors to be considered in the scoring of general appearance include make-up of front and inside pages, advertising make-up and composition, headline schedule, literary excellence, community service, headlines' contents, illustrations, typography and press work.

Each contestant is required to select one issue of his paper from his files of January and February, 1932, from which the judge will select the best issue to be judged. Prizes to be awarded are: first, silver set; second and third, certificates.

Front Page Content

Factors to be judged include headline content, headline schedule, type balance, make-up, name plate and ears, press work and inking, appearance of illustrations (if any), news story value, balance, symmetry, and contrast. Each contest is required to select one issue of his paper from his files of March and April 1932, from which the judge will select the best issue to be judged. Prizes to be awarded include: first, silver set; second and third, certificates.

Best Editorial Contest

In order to stimulate the editors in expressing individuality, initiative, and leadership in this department which is the editor's own, attractive prizes are offered in this contest. The factors which will be considered in the judging are subject matter, thought sequence, community appeal, rhetoric (diction, unity, figures of speech, punctuation), and vocabulary. Prizes offered are: first silver set; second and third, certificates.

Each contestant is required to select

one editorial published in his paper between the dates of May 1, 1931 and May 1, 1932. The editorial to be pasted on a sheet of paper with the notation of name of newspaper, date of issue, and writer's name. No "canned" or clipped editorials will be considered in this contest.

Best News Story Contest

At the request of a number of editors, this contest is continued for competition this year on the best community news story. The factors to be considered are content, sentence and paragraph structure, thought, unity, coherence, vocabulary, the lead, and community service value. The prizes include first, \$15; second and third, certificates. Contestants are required to select the best news story published between May 1, 1931 and May 1, 1932. Each story to be pasted on a sheet of paper with the notation of name of newspaper, date of issue, name of editor, and name of the writer of the story. Open to weekly, semi-weekly, and country dailies in the state.

Best Advertising Composition

Three prizes will be awarded to Kentucky editors in this contest: \$5 for best full-page advertisement; \$5 for best half-page advertisement, and \$5 for best quarter-page, or less, advertisement. Factors to be judged include type contest, type arrangement, value of illustrations, selection of border and decorative material and fulfillment of the three functions of advertising—attention, interest, and conviction. The entries are limited to advertisements that have been set in contestant's office, ether, hand or machine composition.

Each contestant must select any advertisement that appeared during the year May 1, 1931 and May 1, 1932; each entry to be mounted on a sheet of cardboard with the notation as to the name of newspaper, date of issue, and name of contestant.

June 10 Deadline

All entries must be in the hands of Secretary Alcock on or before June 10. Entries can be included in the same bundle, but each entry must be plainly marked as to the contest. The package must be marked "K.P.A. Newspaper Contest," and addressed to Secretary J. Curtis Alcock, Messenger, Danville, Kentucky. It is suggested that the editor write a note, announcing that the package has been sent in order that the secretary may watch out for the package.

Open to Every Newspaper

Each and every contest is open to every weekly or semi-weekly in the state. The news story contest, is also open to the country dailies. Every editor is urged to send in his entries for each contest. Competent judges will be selected for each contest and every entry will be judged on its merits. Let us make this 1932 contest the biggest contest of them all. No news-

paper shall be eligible for more than one of the above prizes.

The All-Around Contest

Every editor is urged to enter his paper in this contest. There are many excellent newspapers in the state and each editor is justly proud of his product. There are no restrictions as to the size of the paper or the circulation—every one stands an equal chance. In answer to the question of the relative merits of the all-around newspaper, the following comments are offered:

General Appearance: This is the first requisite of a paper and there is therefore given the largest percentage. Items contributing to the best general appearance will be correct advertising and text composition, make-up and press work, a uniform system of headlines. While cartoons and illustrations contribute to the attractiveness and good general appearance of a community newspaper the omission of either or both, will not count against an entry. Black type locals will not be considered a mar when sandwiched between live news. It will be considered detrimental to the general appearance to have advertisements on the front page of the first section, but not on the first page of the following sections.

Local News: This means local items of two sticks or more emphasized with deck heads, or under line heads arranged in multiple columns. Also included church news, lodge news, hospital notes, deaths, births, school notes, women's club items, social, etc., which may be collected under similar headings as outlined and be considered under his division. The word "local" is to be construed in this instance to mean news from any part of the county or community territory tributary to the place of publications.

Country Correspondence: This will be judged and scored in favor of the merit of the items rather than the number and length of contributions.

Farm News: This is news devoted to the interest of the farmer and cannot be neglected. To meet the requirements of this department it is not necessary to have items collected under one head, as often there are items that warrant special headings. Where there is little or no farming in the section, the chief industry of such section will be considered in its place.

Personal Items: This means news relative of the movement of people, such as visiting, health mention, writeups of individuals, etc., NAMES!!

General News: This is understood to be that news of state or national character which is country newspaper is called upon to recognize.

Editorial: This department will be subjected to the closest inspection as it will be considered necessary for the editor to show in this department of his paper, individuality, initiative, and leadership.

was not diminished in the least. it remaining eight-page and sixcolumn. column.

W. H. Marriot, nephew to Mr. Sommers, in 1907, at the age of 16, became a member of The News staff. He has been with The News ever since, now being associate editor and general manager. Mr. Sommers himself has not worked very much in the plant of The News for several years; he maintains an office in a down town hotel where he does his work and (from) where, as editor, directs the policy of the paper.

During the present editor's connection with Elizabethtown he has seen the arrival, life, and departure of four other papers. The Democrat, Messenger, and the Independent all failed, and the fourth, the Mirror, was bought outright by The News and consolidated with it. By the succession of papers there has been nearly always during The News' existence at least one rival paper; the present one is the Hardin County Enterprise.

When Mr. Sommers moved The News into his own building in 1902 he installed a new press, a Babcock Reliance, which was tapeless and much faster than the Campbell, its predecessor. The Babcock served until two years ago when it was replaced by a Cranson, with a speed of about 1,500 an hour, that being the speed to which it must be geared down to be consonant with the working tempo of the feeders.

The circulation of The News is now about three times what it was when Mr. Sommers first became editor. The advertising, exclusive of legal, is about five times as much, running regularly around 80 per cent, as much as it can carry conveniently. It is interesting to note that during the week of the editorial golden jubilee the paper was taxed to carry all its advertising, there being even more space sold than for the corresponding period of last year when business had not sunk quite to its present low level.

Reminded again by that fact of the paucity of profitable newspapers in Kentucky when he came here in 1878, Mr. Sommers remarked that now nearly all Kentucky newspapers more than make expenses, and that 30 or 40 are actually operating at a profit.

Tall, hoary, iron-visaged, trimly mustached, erect in carriage, slightly nervous, the 77-year-old pioneer journalist is talkatively reticent about himself, paradoxically as that reads. That is, the parries questions about himself by talking about others whom he has known in the field of journalism, saying that ". . . there isn't anything about me that is likely to interest anybody!"

"Two remarkable men in Kentucky journalism," he prefers to recount in his even, steady, firmly convincing voice, "have been Sam Roberts who came to Lexington from Canton and

established the Leader, making a success of it financially and in the influence which he wielded through its columns, and Urey Woodson, of Owensboro, who converted the Messenger from a semi-weekly to a daily; he deserved success because he was one of the best newspaper men in Kentucky."

"The Louisville Times and Post," he digresses still further from the subject of himself, "both were established since I came to Kentucky. Both were started with good editors. Emmett Logan, of the Times, was the brightest paragrapher the state ever knew. Richard T. Knott, of the Post, next to Waterson, was the best editorial writer in the state."

The Elizabethtown News, he "has been told" and everyone else knows, has the distinction that its editorial page and editorial paragraph column are quoted from more than any other paper's in the state.

The writer, apropos of this fact, interposed that it was not at all unusual for his (Mr. Sommers') friends, Dan M. and A. A. Bowmar, also veteran Kentucky journalists, to quote from The News columns.

"That's because they're good editorials, not because we're good friends," he rejoined confidently.

The name, Harry A. Sommers, truly has become known all over Kentucky and far beyond its borders for his editorials. Yet, news to chronicle, Harry is not his name.

"Henry Augustine is my name," he informed the writer, "that Harry is only a nickname. My mother used to call me that after my father at home and my brother picked it up, and calling me that here while associated with me in business, others heard it and picked it up, and it evolved into Colonel Harry. But Henry's my name."

Colonel Harry Sommers, then, as he is known, has been and is a man of diversified interests, although primarily and eternally a journalist. He was elected president of the Kentucky Press Association, meeting at Paducah in 1891. Last year, 40 years afterward, he attended the meeting in Paducah and delivered an address at the association banquet.

He served 14 years as vice-president of the Federal Land Bank in Louisville, was president of the Kentucky Good Roads association many years, he called the first Good Roads meeting, and was the only one to make speeches to amend the state constitution to obtain state aid for the highways. He is president of the Kentucky Sunday School association, he has been from its inception at the beginning of the war, and still is, chairman of the local chapter of the American Red Cross.

He has been most active in political affairs until very recently; he served one year as Washington correspondent for the Louisville Times (because

he was acquainted with so many occupants of the press gallery, and with so many statesmen); he managed William Jennings Bryan's first campaign in Kentucky, being state chairman of his organization. But during all his activities he did not neglect The News. Even when traveling abroad for four months on one occasion he wrote letters back regularly and by that method guided its course.

Because of impaired vision, Mr. Sommers has not read a newspaper or magazine during the past seven years. Yet, he has kept up with everything that is going on by having news and other matter read to him by his secretary. Aided by an uncannily precise memory, he is better and more accurately informed on current events and matters than is the most persistent reader ordinarily met with.

"As you know," he said for the only time that he betrayed to the writer any semblance of possessive gratification in his success, "I am dean of Kentucky journalism, and my 54 years as an editor marks the longest period of anyone as an editor in Kentucky."

His unassuming and matter-of-fact attitude toward himself and his work is more appositely expressed in the conclusion of his April 8 editorial, remarking his golden jubilee as editor:

"This is not a reminiscence, neither is it a valedictory. It is simply an anthem of rejoicing that the editor, through the providence of God and the indulgence of the public, has lived to celebrate with this issue his fiftieth anniversary as the editor of The Elizabethtown News."

Notwithstanding all that service, Mr. Sommers still does not consider his work completed. He still writes six columns of editorial matter every week three columns for each issue. He is not a disciple of retrospection and resting on laurels. He would probably deny that he has any laurels.

"I don't believe in looking back," he vouchsafed, "I believed in work, in always looking ahead, no matter how far you get. As long as I can I am going to keep on working. I suppose the last thing I'll ever do will be to write!"

The annual Clean Up, Paint Up and Fix Up editorial deserves an immense amount of thought and much careful preparation. It is just as important to dress up your town as it is for the citizens to dress up. The town loafer may get by on character. The ramshackle building may have historical associations which make it interesting; but if there is lack of character in an unkempt citizen, a run-down building or dirty streets and alleys, they are about as detrimental to a town as anything could be. When you write your editorial combating these plagues, see that it contains real gospel exhortation.

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Look Ahead

THERE is a new day before us; a day of change; a day when we must part company with much of the past; must put aside our worn out tools; must learn new habits of thought, new ways to do things. So shall we rebuild.

Let us keep our faces turned toward that morrow with minds open, alert. No tears for "the good old days"; the days to come will be different but better.

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