

## Chapter 16 - *THE PATHFINDER*

Another Magazine...I choose Myself as Editor...Dealing with the Newspaper Guild...What is Objectivity?...Pathfinder's Bias...New Departments...Staff Characters...Sued for Plagiarism...End of Pathfinder

*Pathfinder*, an unpretentious weekly of news, comment human interest and odds and ends, had been published from Washington for fifty years. The million subscribers were mostly small town people. When rising costs and shrinking advertising made the magazine unprofitable in the early years of World War II, it was offered for sale. Wanting to reach such an audience, the Pews bought the property in 1943 and turned the operation over to *Farm Journal*.

After nearly three years of experiment and small progress, Graham Patterson was persuaded to make *Pathfinder* into an all-out news weekly after the patterns successfully established by *Time* and *Newsweek*. Printing was transferred to the Donnelley Chicago plant from which *Farm Journal* was published, teletypes were installed, the staff considerably enlarged, a good reference library acquired, researchers and photographers employed.

The editor resigned, and a new one was engaged. Until this time, aside from contributing an occasional editorial upon request, I had shared no responsibility at *Pathfinder*, but I was partly to blame for the new editor. I checked his references with former employers whom I knew, and who spoke well of his performances as a writer and sub-editor.

He turned out to be a disaster. In a few weeks he had the Washington staff in turmoil. He issued edicts without discussion, threatened dismissals, and behaved like a dictator. The alarmed staff responded by petitioning the National Labor Relations Board for an election, in order to become a chapter of the Newspaper Guild. They could protect themselves from arbitrary management and could negotiate with their employers. "Wheeler," Graham said after this news, "will you go down to Washington and size up this situation? And get us a new editor?"

A few days at the *Pathfinder* office led to two conclusions. One was that a tangle of misunderstandings had been created which time, patience and considerate dealing might alleviate. The other had to do with the fascinating character of the editorial opportunity. "If you will agree," I told Patterson, "I will be the new editor.

I felt free to propose this. Two years earlier, I had promoted Carroll P. Streeter to the *Farm Journal* managing editor's desk. He was doing the job so competently that I no longer needed to watch the details, and he didn't mind responsibility. Patterson agreed.

After the offending editor was fired and the production routines observed, the major task was to become acquainted with the staff and to try and win their

confidence. It consisted of editors, writers, librarians, researchers, secretaries, filers, and telephone operators. They were young, mostly under thirty, eager, personable and willing to work. Several of the young men were not long out of military service. Most had had some newspaper experience. Nearly all the copy producers wrote with skill, a few with exceptional ability. The prospect for making *Pathfinder* into a highly readable, popular magazine looked favorable.

The election to determine whether the staff should belong to the Newspaper Guild was only a few weeks ahead. If the Guild won, it meant that we would be dealing thereafter with a labor union, holding contract negotiations, and facing rigidities regarding promotions, dismissals and other normal management prerogatives. Personally I felt that "professionals," such as our writers and editors, should not be hampered by a union's leveling influences. The law, however, included them along with janitors, clerks, secretaries and telephone operators, as potential Guild members.

My efforts to counteract the Guild idea failed. The election was nearly, though not quite, unanimous in the Guild's favor. "We might have trusted you," one of the boys said, "but we felt that we didn't know much about the owners and the people in Philadelphia."

Except for the time-wasting annual contract negotiations the Guild proved to be only a minor nuisance. In the negotiation meetings I sat between two fires. Our top writers, I felt, were not being paid enough. Editorial staff salaries, in fact, were always to be a point of continuous disagreement between Patterson and myself. He had the responsibility of holding the budgets as low as he reasonably could, while I wanted to pay our best writers at least as much as they could hope to earn elsewhere. As to the minor employees the only policy was to pay the going Washington rates, which we did.

One year I managed to get Patterson's consent to offering the Guild quite substantial advances for our top people, actually a little more than the Guild had demanded, while continuing the customary rates for others. The proposed beneficiaries naturally were delighted, but not the Guild's outside-Washington representatives who were party to the negotiations. They denounced me for trying to split the *Pathfinder* chapter. Such a side effect I would not have minded, but it had not been the primary intent

Another year the Guild proposals were so vague and indefinite at the first contract meeting, that I told the committee to shape up their demands, unite on what they really wanted, and come back next week. The young man who was chapter president asked to postpone the meeting, and then for still another week. After we had found agreement a month later, the young president told me confidentially of the difficulties he had encountered in getting the members to meet and to reach decisions. "I never knew before," he said, "why executives are paid so much more money."

The investment already placed in equipment and staff seemed to require that *Pathfinder* work its way forward along the general news magazine formula. While I thought that approaches more fundamental and more human were desirable, the practical problem was to try to fuse them into the news reports. Then, as now, Washington was a major source for news of national significance. To report such news truthfully and meaningfully was a challenge.

Few, if any, of the staff people were old enough to remember living under any other than the Roosevelt and Truman administrations. This fact, their college backgrounds, and their healthy young ideals inclined them to place much faith in the good intentions of government and in its ability to carry out such intentions.

At an early staff conference, the nature of news and its proper treatment for the *Pathfinder* audience became the topic. "We should be objective," every voice agreed, meaning of course that we should present news fairly and without prejudice. No one could quarrel with that; but one could ask how objectivity was to be achieved. The *New York Times* was promptly cited as an example of objective journalism. "The *New York Times*," I suggested, "may consider itself objective when it presents two sides of the same lie; two versions of the same untruth. Should it not be our purpose to dig out the truth, so far as we shall be able to do so?"

That this was a formidable challenge there could be no doubt. A few of our leftishly inclined young people, however, began to grasp the fact that human experience has generated some general principles that are guiding lights; and to comprehend that the real truth seldom offers two sides.

To emphasize our fundamentals, both to the staff and to our readers, I wrote a brief statement which ran in each issue on the contents page with the title, "*Pathfinder's* Bias"

We favor the American ideal of freedom for individuals. We oppose statism and totalitarianism in all forms. We believe we can best support freedom by printing facts without bias, because we think that all the facts are on the side of freedom.

Then as now, I thought that New York and Hollywood were over-reported, the rest of the country under-reported, and Washington badly reported. If we could achieve more penetrating, better-balanced treatment of governmental news, and print more significant material from the nation at large, I believed that we might produce a different and more truly national magazine.

Al Knight, a news veteran with a pliable mind and good eye for what we sought, took on the job of reading newspapers from all over the country and passing on

promising tips. With the aid of "stringers", news workers employed in various locations -- we were able to add local color and meaning.

New departments were established, each having one to three columns per issue. "Resources" was devoted mainly to conservation news, wildlife, soil, water, forests and minerals. "Good News" sought to select items reflecting human decency, in contrast to the prevailing newspapers' abundant reports of crime and disaster. Another department specialized in material of concern to women other than fashions and recipes. For humor we had "Bypaths," usually two columns of fun in rhyme, joke or cartoon, edited by Robert D. McMillen. Added to this we occasionally printed "World Wit," selected from foreign publications to show what other nations thought funny.

Instead of an editorial page we had a signed two-column feature by Dr. Felix Morley which usually dealt with American concerns abroad. Always as much inclined to editorialize as to edit, I introduced "Along the American Way," usually in two columns. This was an effort to connect the current news with economic, political and human fundamentals; the quality probably did not always rise to the intent.

Oldest among the staff members was Tom Wisehart, whom I had known when he worked with the *American* magazine. Tom was a skilled and persistent interviewer, never abashed by high office, who came through with much of our best Washington reporting. For a time while he was suffering matrimonial complications I assigned him to a Reno base, from which he produced pages of excellent western news. Wisehart later was to write the best life of Sam Houston that has appeared.

A quiet and unassuming chap who wrote fluently but seldom seemed to get under the surface of his topics was Allen Drury. More than once, whether he knew it or not, his job was in jeopardy when we considered upgrading the staff. A few years later he would be writing such best selling novels as "Advise and Consent" and "A Shade of Difference."

It was perhaps to be expected that in the search for talent whenever replacements were needed, we should have acquired some unusual specimens. One plausible and likeable Irishman seldom failed to come up with a well-done story, an obviously padded expense account, or a request for advances on his salary to meet the exigencies of his sick wife. Pleading for an office key to be able to work at night, he managed to impregnate one of the researchers. Another character, middle-aged, a brilliant writer, created minor turmoils by accusing fellow-workers of mysterious conspiracies against him.

The job of producing a page of significant short prognostications, printed in typewriter style type, fell to a staff man whose work had been reliable. Suddenly we were confronted with a suit for plagiarism from Willard Kiplinger, whose

Monday Washington letters were highly successful. The evidence was incontestable. Our man, time after time and line after line, had reproduced Kiplinger material. I called Kip and protested against the suit, saying that a mere telephone call from him would have alerted us. He was adamant. Too many were doing the same thing, and his attorneys were instructed to sue wherever they found a case. The incident was closed by paying a \$3,000 attorney fee to one Thurman Arnold. It was hard to believe that our young man had deliberately stolen the Kiplinger material; he seemed too intelligent to have used any of it, especially verbatim. He could offer no explanation and, of course, had to leave.

The advertising world determines the fate of mass magazines. Most of that world was blind to the buying power and responsiveness of consumers in countryside America. Despite editorial advances and the hard work of our advertising sales forces, *Pathfinder* ended each year with a deficit. Economies, including fortnightly instead of weekly publication, could not bring the figures into balance. Carroll Streeter took over the editorship and brought in new approaches, including a change of name to *Town Journal*, as a companion to *Farm Journal*. Finally, rather than face continuing losses, the publishers terminated the operation and concentrated efforts on *Farm Journal*. *Pathfinder* joined the lengthening list of magazines that disappear into oblivion.