The sooner Magazine

OKLAHOMA ALUMNI NEWS

The Point of a Woman’s Viewpoint

Saving Our Women from the Killing Kindness of Mr. Bok

By Mrs. Walter Ferguson, ’07, Author of a “A Woman’s Viewpoint”

Just between ourselves, when I was given this assignment by our editor, I smiled and I shivered. Could I honestly call myself a newspaper woman? Most of my experiences have been in the kitchen and the nursery. I am, after all, only a very lucky person who writes “pieces” at home.

I acquired my newspaper career and my husband at the same time. To the University of Oklahoma I am grateful for both. Before our marriage I had scarcely been inside a newspaper office and certainly knew nothing of the effort that goes into the making of a paper. In those glamorous days, our sole asset was all immense cocksureness, and our newly purchased weekly “The Republican” at Cherokee, Oklahoma, for which we had proudly given our note at the bank.

And next to husband and family upon whom to pour out your affection, let me recommend a country newspaper. There is something vital and inspiring about such a business. One soon begins to feel that the struggling and feeble little sheet is issued with such labor each Thursday, is a living thing. One may swell with pride and complacency over a big daily that comes miraculously off the great presses several times a day. But one loves a country paper.

Into it go bitter endeavor, painstaking care and a bit of one’s heart. It is not a history of county or state, so much as it is the account of the everyday living of common men—“the short and simple annals of the poor.”

I soon learned to sit with bereaved mothers who had buried their babies, to listen to the ambitious plans of the county politicians and to weigh the merits of all candidates for the post office. There, within the confines of the unpainted building that housed the press, the type cases and the subscription book that was ours, it was easy to learn that all people are fond of praise. The lowest man glows with pride at the mention of his humble calling. No person lives who is above liking to see his name in print.

We taught ourselves to remember the school children, the number of bushels of wheat certain of our best farms yielded on good years, and how often any given man had successfully run for office. The editor is, in truth, one with each of his readers and can soon become, if he wishes, not only the Mentor but the Friend of the community.

From the wobbly desk in the grimey office, we saw the war come and go. Barrels of propaganda, first for peace then for mobilization, came pouring from Washington to the country press. Finally the boys marched away to the blare of bands and tearful farewells were retold at length in the columns of the paper, to be fondly cherished by proud relatives. Heroes were created over night, and many an obscure lad who fought bravely got his only notice and his only reward in his home town weekly.

The hysteria mounted and waned. Having gone through the experience of seeing just how easily the minds of men and women are influenced by printed matter from the federal bureaus, it is going to take a long time for me to get worked up over another war, I care not what it is over. Too many sins were committed in the name of Liberty. Out of our arbitrary county councils of defense, necessary perhaps in those strenuous times, grew the Ku Klux Klan of unhappy memory. And in our small sphere, we saw a third of our subscription list lopped off, because Mr. Ferguson had written a spirited editorial commending the government for setting a price on wheat.

It was during those first years in a country town that I, hardly more than a raw school girl, observed that when it came to public prints and private conversation, the women did not get
Every single act of our lives was regulated and planned for us, and as for voting, though it was agitated, the idea in our part of the world was abhorrent.

From the righteous wrath which this condition bred, evolved the “Woman’s Column” in the Cherokee Republican, and there I must confess that I printed recipes for a time in order not to appear high hat. I was firmly convinced however that the time had come to give the men a dish of their own medicine.

One learns to know people very intimately in a little town, you must remember. Exactly how each man treats his wife, whether he is stingy or generous, stubborn or lenient, arrogant or kind. There is Eastern Star to attend and the ladies aid society and the sewing circle. We did not play bridge in those first days in small towns. The watchful preachers saw to that. But those other things offered intimate glimpses of women and their problems. Collecting the monthly accounts, or looking for news items, gave an excellent opportunity to see how patronizing certain men could be to women, and to learn that the more ignorant the man the more sure he would be to consider himself a superior creature by God’s will. Lengthy arguments were to be heard about that. The male reigned supreme in his barber shop and forward persons who preached equal rights needed some stern masculine discipline. The great adage of those days was “Woman’s place is in the Home.” And sometimes I believe we struggled so desperately to get out because we had to listen to that so often.

But Mr. Bok and his henchmen were not faint in their praise for the good, meek woman. She was a cross between a slave and a saint, a sort of white female Uncle Tom. Her life was to be such a lovely example of goodness that sinful men could get into Heaven only by hanging to her apron strings, because the old-fashioned he-man who loathed in pool halls and saloons, firmly believed that women should lead the way when it came to being good. They gracefully yielded to her first place in moral behavior.

O point out the errors of that inconsistent attitude, became my weekly delight. And what fun it was. The labors of those formative years was bountifully rewarded by that and other things. Not only did I learn painfully and slowly to write a column such as it is, but I grew to understand, some of the strange behavior of mortals. I learned to penetrate reverently into the secret places of women’s hearts and to grasp feebly a few of the queer aspirations, the unusual ambitions, and the sublime sorrows that move men. If I got from my ten years experience in a country newspaper office nothing but that, nothing but the knowledge that “things” in this world are entirely non-essential and that only “people” count, I should feel myself amply repaid.

AFTER we moved to Oklahoma City, I did nothing for a few years save keep house, look after the children and attend club meetings. And how I missed the little newspaper and how I envied those who had a nice place in the press to speak their minds. One soon becomes spoiled about that and nothing is so insidiously seductive as the airing of one’s opinions.

During these years however another great truth thrust itself into my consciousness, and I hope I have made it my own forever. It is, that the world gets along very nicely without your opinion or mine. Indeed in all the chatter that goes on, they are seldom missed.

Later, thanks to the acquaintance and friendship of Mr. George B. Parker, now chief editorial executive of the Scripps-Howard newspapers, I
began writing a daily column for the Oklahoma City News of which paper he was then editor, and shortly afterwards became contributor to all the other Scripps-Howard papers.

And those things that I learned in Cherokee served me well in other places. For I found that people are much the same everywhere. Time changes them very slightly. Today's man is moved by the same events that touched his forefathers, while the real and deep things in women's souls have never altered, nor ever will. The fundamental emotions of life are changeless. The joy and heartaches of today are akin to those of yesterday. The city man beneath his more resplendent exterior is exactly like his country cousin. The pride of the young mother is as old as Eve, and first love as beautiful in the slums as in palace gardens.

At first I hesitated whether I should "razz" the men as I had done with such glee in the country. These city men in the mass, you see, were strangers to me, whereas those on Main street had been my friends. There is a difference. But why pass up a lark merely because the heart quails a bit? That only makes the game more fascinating.

So I put my bravest foot foremost and set myself out to champion the cause of woman. And the men in Pittsburg howled just as loudly as the wheat farmers of northwestern Oklahoma. The bachelors of Baltimore, after some fun-poking, became as hot under the collar as those in El Paso, Texas. Irate husbands were just as irate in Terre Haute as in San Diego. And everywhere the women were pitifully grateful. I have saved all the letters that have come to me and I have literally thousands of them from all over the country expressing thanks for some defense of their sex.

It was of New York City I was most afraid, of course. Perhaps everybody who writes dreams of the day when he will have a column in a Manhattan newspaper. I attained that happy state because Mr. Scripps and Mr. Howard, decided to buy one there. And you can readily see how a country dweller might have trembled in her shoes. One doesn't go slap bang into New York City expressing one's worthless opinions without a quiver. For we have all somehow gathered the idea that New Yorkers are far wiser than the rest of us. But only a few of them are.

The average New Yorker is like an Oklahoman or a citizen of Kalamazoo. And he will write letters to the columnist with whom he disagrees with an abandon that does your heart good. Seldom a day passes but I get a letter with a New York post mark, regarding some subject whose sole inspiration came from Tulsa.

Before I close let me whisper a little secret in your ear. I am not so delighted with the new freedom of women. Because we, who have sworn to array ourselves upon the side of the downtrodden, are confronted by a puzzling situation. We find there is nothing more to shout about.

And today, scarcely more than fifteen years after I began writing about the shortcomings and inconsistencies of the men of Alfalfa county, I may have to right about face. I am now beginning to feel sorry for the men. Will the time ever come when I find it necessary to turn against my increasingly arrogant sex? Who knows.

But whatever happens, I hope I can retain my small column. The world appears very interesting from that vantage point and existence an absorbing thing. There is but one great experience for each of us, after all, newspaper women, business women, homemakers—just living. In such a fascinating world as ours, that is enough.

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