

## CHAPTER VII

### Wandering Through the Years

WHEN I GOT OUT of college I was all set to be a poet. I might have succeeded in this glorious ambition if I had been born thirty years later, when the formless stuff that now goes by the name of poetry (and which consists of one metaphor explaining another) came into vogue. But, my ideals had been Shelley and Keats and Byron, and I soon realized that my muse was not up to it. Besides, I acquired a wife who needed regular sustenance. Therefore, I turned to teaching as a career; that promised some regularity of income. "Security," however, had not in those days attained in the hierarchy of values its present apogee, and in my case the spirit of adventure was too strong. Within a year teaching, for which I had been trained, became wearisome; especially so when the principal told me that while he could not find fault with my methods, I had better conform to the Department's regulations, particularly for one day next week when the district superintendent would be around. This kind of conformism, which is inherent in bureaucratic management, irked me and I decided to quit. Because I thought it would give me a chance to do some kind of writing, advertising struck me as a field worth trying. I tackled one kind of job after another for a year or so

and finally settled down to writing copy for a Chicago mail order house.

I met up with some tunesmiths, composers of popular songs, and as a side line I wrote lyrics for a number of years. Thus I became familiar with a practice that in recent years has become known as "payola"—payments made by manufacturers of discs to radio and television operators for the playing of them. In the early years, when the aim of publishers was the sale of sheet music, "payola" (it had not got that name yet) consisted of gratuities to vaudeville artists for the playing or singing of songs the publishers had selected for "hits." After all, having songs heard was, and still is, the only way of advertising them, and vaudeville performers reached the largest audiences. Some of the better known performers were put on the publishers' payrolls, and in a few cases the performers insisted on having their names appear on the songs as co-authors and, of course, on sharing in the royalties.

Competition among the publishers for the services of these performers raised the gratuities to the point where profits on even "hits" did not offset the expense; even less known vaudevillians demanded a share of the largess. As a result, the publishers made an agreement among themselves to put limits on the amount paid to these singers and musicians, and some publishers, realizing that sometimes a song would catch on its own merits, without this expensive "plugging," decided to discontinue the practice altogether. It was the economics of the situation that brought them to their senses. They did not invite governmental interference in their business, and a politician who had attempted to get headline mention by suggesting an "investigation" would

## WANDERING THROUGH THE YEARS

have been laughed at. It was generally conceded in those days that government had no warrant for injecting itself into "payola."

From four to seven years was about all I could take of any occupation throughout my life. I went at each job I undertook with verve, mastered it and when it became routine I lost interest and went looking for something else. So, after writing mail order copy for four years I came to New York with the intention of doing advertising work for a clothing house. But, World War I came on, the house I was with acquired a government contract and I was shunted from advertising to running a factory. Since everybody was certain at the time that the war would last only six months, I assumed that my factory assignment would be temporary. As it turned out, one government contract followed another, and I found myself immersed in production problems, which I found rather interesting. A strike in the clothing industry changed my course; the manufacturers' association acquired a factory in Springfield, Massachusetts, and I was selected to run it. The plant was eventually taken over by one of the firms in the association and I remained as manager.

During this five year spell only one incident deserves comment. One morning about twenty-five employees, out of a total complement of 750, did not show up for work; rather, they showed up on a picket line, consisting of about one hundred marchers. We had heard rumors of a union being organized among the employees, but the picket line was the first actual demonstration. I called together all the remaining employees, outlined the situation and told them that we would continue to operate the shop if they voted for it; their decision seemed to be unanimous and we continued

operations as usual. But, knowing something about union methods, I asked the police authorities to give us protection, particularly protection for the workers who wanted to work. This was assured us. On the second day of the so-called strike one of our workers was molested by a picketer; the latter was quickly hauled into court, properly lectured by the judge and told that the next demonstration would land him in jail. One striker visited the home of a worker and threatened his wife with dire consequences if her husband continued on the job; he was given a six months jail sentence and put on probation. Such protection was all that was needed, and within a few weeks the union gave up. Which demonstrates this fact: that no strike can be won by a union if the government carries out its primary function, the protection of life and property; or, conversely, that a union must be allowed by the authorities to commit acts of violence in order to succeed in their purpose. I have found that collective bargaining means, to the union, collect what you can, by force, and bargain for the rest. All of our labor troubles stem from the inability or unwillingness of the authorities to do their duty: the protection of life and property. Realizing this, employers are reluctant to jeopardize the lives of their employees, or to court destruction of their property, and so, at the first sign of trouble shut down their plants; and this, of course, is what the unionists aim for in committing acts of violence.

My fortuitous licking of the union — the famous Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America — made me something of a character in industrial circles and I was invited by the Harvard Graduate School of Business to lecture on the case. This was in 1923, a few years after the Bolshevik

## WANDERING THROUGH THE YEARS

Revolution, when the intellectuals of the country were hoping for "something good" to come out of the "Russian experiment." In my talk, I pointed out that the Amalgamated was a Marxist union, bent on abolishing the wage system rather than effecting an improvement in the conditions of its members; this was a picture quite different from that presented a week earlier by Sidney Hillman, president of the union. And though I cited from the constitution of the organization and gave instances of the ideological orientation of its leaders, my audience (consisting of young men preparing themselves to take over the management of industry) did not like my capitalistic point of view; their questions were hostile, as were the glances of the two professors present. Even in those early days, Harvard was leaning perceptibly toward Marxism.

Well, after five years of managing this plant, the urge to go into business for myself got hold of me. I did quite well in this venture for about seven years, and then the depression fell on me with all its fury. The odd thing about this experience was that I knew the depression was coming—my understanding of economics warned me of it—but I could not bring myself to curtail operations in preparation for it. My business had been prospering, I kept plowing my profits into capital expansion, always looking ahead and always hoping that the depression was some time in the future. When it hit me, I was financially unable to meet the impact. This only proves that economic understanding is one thing, and economic timing is quite another. That's why economists are such poor prognosticators.

Depression or no depression, I had a living to make. So did everybody else, and for all the talk of dire distress I

never heard of anybody starving to death, nor was the destitution as unrelieved as the politicians made it out to be. Somehow, people got by, not by the ministrations of The New Deal, which were quite ineffective, but by their ingenuity and their industry. I got a job as a travelling salesman. I had had little experience at this kind of work and, being city bred, was quite unfamiliar with the problems of the farm territory to which I was assigned. But, by dint of hard work and attention to details I managed to last at the job for four years; I even increased the volume of business done in the territory by the firm. One device that I inadvertently hit upon helped me no end in my selling. Just by way of "visiting" with my customers, I managed to get some ideas on economics and public affairs into the conversation, and I noticed that this interested them. Some of them were prepared with questions when I called on them and this would set me off on improvised lectures before we got around to talking business. Sometimes I was asked to address the local civic club. The four years I spent on the road were profitable in various ways.

But, I tired of selling. About that time the struggling Henry George School of Social Science was in need of a director and I decided to take the job. It proved to be something that I had spent my life preparing for. What talent I had at advertising stood me in good stead in promoting enrollments and at raising money; my business experience helped me to manage the impecunious institution; my knowledge of Henry George and economics in general made me a fairly good teacher; my zeal for "the cause" supplied me with energy. I got along swimmingly for about five years, training teachers (all volunteers), getting up new courses,

## WANDERING THROUGH THE YEARS

writing syllabi, raising money and, to my joy, editing a school paper called *The Freeman*. The last two occupations, raising money and editing, were my ultimate undoing. This needs some explaining.

In *The Freeman* I took delight in attacking the New Deal and Mr. Roosevelt, mainly on economic grounds. That went well until Mr. Roosevelt started preparing the country for war, in 1939. Prudence should have prompted me to avoid the war issue, but prudence was never one of my virtues, and I continued to hammer away at the war measures right up to Pearl Harbor. In the meantime, I had got a man of means to put a considerable amount of money into the school. The trustees, a group of business men whom I had made trustees, were quite willing to let me have my way when there was no money in the bank, but now that there was a monetary stake in the institution they began to get worried about my anti-war editorials. Besides, a couple of them were engaged in government work and did not relish being put on the spot. So, I was ousted. I learned a lesson from this experience that has caused me to reassess my previous estimate of the behavior of men dedicated to a "cause"; namely, that men do not generally act on principle, but are primarily motivated by considerations of convenience and profit. The trustees were as much opposed to the war as I was but thought that we "should keep quiet" for the duration; that is, their convenience and profit replaced principle.

A couple of years later I started what proved to be the most gratifying venture of my life—a paper of my own. Several publications for which I had written occasional articles had either closed up shop or had changed their

editorial tune to suit the ears of their readership; it was war time. Desperately anxious to express myself, I decided to launch a vehicle of my own. Some friends concurred in my decision, underwrote subscriptions for their friends, and thus came into existence a monthly broadsheet called *analysis*. It was a venture in personal journalism, something that had long gone out of style. For seven years I managed to keep it going, rubbing along on outside work mainly, and having a good time writing for myself and for some four thousand readers.

It was a curious experience. Once a young lady wrote me that she was quitting *analysis* because I had put Hitler and Stalin to bed in one sentence; she thought there was considerable ethical difference between the two. One man wrote that he found my attacks on the New Deal rather offensive, but because he liked the style he was renewing his subscription. Some readers intimated that I was in the pay of Hitler, Göring & Co., others suggested that I was being subsidized by the National Association of Manufacturers; meanwhile I wistfully wished that somebody would help me pay my board bill. I was called a communist, a fascist, a reactionary, a radical, a nihilist, and, what was nearest to being descriptive, a damned fool. These critical comments and cutting epithets called to mind a remark made by a friend on the practice of reading. He said, "Most people look at printed pages but make no effort to read them; the letters on these pages serve only as pegs on which to hang their preconceived notions." This seems to be true even of book reviewers.

When a fellow consigns his thoughts to the keys of the typewriter he hopes that something will come out which



## WANDERING THROUGH THE YEARS

will convey these thoughts to somebody. The question he cannot forget is, "*Whom* am I writing for?" For, except in the case of a private diary, kept to refresh one's memory or to indulge one's nostalgia, all writing presupposes reading. The author, then, must consider the education, the mental capacity and the receptiveness of a particular readership. When you write a letter to Aunt Jane you select ideas and shape your language to suit Aunt Jane, which is quite different from the ideas and language you put into an application for a job. When you write for a wide audience you aim your shots at a composite person, a creature of your imagination, which must be quite unlike any one of your readers. You cannot possibly know the prejudices of all your readers, the emotionalisms that block their understanding, and cannot take them into consideration in framing your sentences; the best you can do is to appeal to their reason, their sense of logic, and rest your case.

There is another question the writer frequently puts to himself: "*Why* am I writing?" If the answer is "for money" then he has no problem except that of mastering the necessary skill. That detail taken care of, all one has to do is to study the market and start manufacturing for it; studying the market involves the reading of mass publications and ascertaining what kind of stuff the editors want. The job is quite similar to shoemaking, running a grocery store or operating a bank. Success comes to those who serve the largest market.

But, if the writer answers his "why" with "because I have something to say" he starts with a premise that prejudices his purpose. Maybe nobody wants to hear what he has to say; maybe what he has to say is two steps ahead of the

capacity of his expected audience or proves upsetting to their mental complacency. Thus, what chance for publication in a law journal would a thesis have if it undertook to prove law to be a fraud and lawyers to be charlatans? The doctrinaire socialist could hardly stomach an argument for the free economy.

The writer who "has something to say" is under obligation, then, to write "for himself." He must write his piece and hope for a readership. And he must pray that it will be large enough to at least pay the cost of printing and postage. That is true even if the editor of a publication will take a chance on running his piece; if what he has to say does not interest or entertain a sufficient number of readers, the editor is on the spot.

And so, I wrote "for myself" for seven years, after which I merged *analysis* with another struggling publication (which was also out of sympathy with the going order), known as *Human Events*. There was at least a living to be had out of the merger, and for four years I continued to write pretty much as I pleased for that publication. Then came a two-year editorship of *The Freeman*—a name that kept popping up ever since Albert Jay Nock first used it on the masthead of his intransigent publication of the 1920's. Some of the essays written during these years appeared in a compilation called *One Is a Crowd*; others are included in this book.