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Mencken Interviewed

H. ALLEN SMITH

THERE WERE SOME pleasurable moments during my career as a columnist. Thinking back over the six months, two names pop into my mind: H.L. Mencken [was one]. During the nineteen-thirties whenever he was in New York, I was always getting under his feet. I'd interview him once a month if I could get an okay from the boss, and the boss usually approved because Mencken was always good copy.

Now that I was a columnist, choosing my own assignments, I decided it was time I did another Mencken interview—this time in his native habitat. . . . I found Mencken waiting for me at the offices of the *Baltimore Sun*. It was a steaming day—104 degrees in the shade. I had not seen Mencken in six years. I was startled when he walked into the room—shocked at the swiftness with which age had taken hold of him. He still seemed robust and alert, but age was showing in his face. He was well aware of it too. Several times during our long talk he spoke of the short time he had left.

I have at least one reason for hoping to outlive him. I have been written into his last will and testament. Readers of the Mencken memoirs will recall the story of the great Baltimore fire of 1904. At that time Mencken was city editor of the *Herald* and with the rest of the staff had to flee the newspaper's building when the flames took hold of it. Sometime later he returned to the gutted structure and man-

aged to reach the floor where his desk had been. The desk was now no more than a layer of ashes on the floor but, prodding around in this mess, Mencken found his old copy hook—black and twisted but still intact. That copy hook has been one of his cherished mementos of the old days and, with all the audacity of an autograph nit, I once asked him if I might have it when he is finished with it. By letter he notified me:

That copy hook will become yours the day I am translated to bliss eternal. I have left orders that my carcass is to be stuffed and deposited in the National Museum at Washington. I had planned to ask the taxidermist to put the copy hook in my hand, but that request is now canceled and you will get it in due course.

We had planned to go out to the Mencken house in Hollins Street, but it was altogether too hot to move around so we settled down in an office there at the *Sun*. Mencken has written extensively about the three-story brick house, sandwiched in between buildings of the same approximate design, where he has lived almost all his life and where he has always done the major part of his work.

"The neighborhood has been going down steadily," he said. "In the last few years the Okies have been moving in. They are the mountain morons from Appalachia, and most of the old-timers of the neighborhood are moving out as these morons come in. Not me. I've lived in that house since 1883, save for the five years of my marriage. I intend to stay as long as I last. I

H. Allen Smith (1907–76), a humorist who wrote more than three dozen books, found celebrity with his third, Low Man on a Totem Pole. Smith terminated his syndicated column, "The Totem Pole," in 1941 after six months because its deadlines were too demanding. Therefore, the Mencken interview this account describes must have occurred sometime in late summer. Smith's reminiscence of his interview with H.L. Mencken appears in "Memoirs of an Ex-Columnist," from Life in a Putty Knife Factory (Doubleday, Doran, 1943).

may not last long, but that's where I intend to finish out my days."

He lives at the house with his bachelor brother, August, an engineer who is about ten years younger than Henry. August looks a good deal like "Harry" and is an author in his own right, having produced a recent book concerned with famous hangings. The brothers keep a couple of household servants and Henry has a secretary—a lady of middle years who comes in mornings, takes dictation, and goes home to write it. Mencken describes her as possessing asbestos ears.

He's a prodigious worker and his home is a veritable warehouse of raw materials for his labor. His mother never threw away any piece of paper with writing on it, and her literary son, engaged in recent years on autobiographical projects, has had a stupendous cargo of source material to aid him in setting down his reminiscences. It has not been necessary for him to visit the public library or the newspaper morgues to ascertain the price of hominy in 1883. He even dredged up the doctor's bill for his own birth. A certain Dr. Buddenbohn assessed the Menckens ten dollars for fetching Henry Louis on a September Sunday evening in 1880. I contend that was the biggest ten dollars' worth this country ever got.

During the last few years Mencken has been furrowing through these acres of material and writing his autobiography in sections. Thus far three volumes have been finished—*Happy Days*, *Newspaper Days*, and *Heathen Days*, and any person who can read those books and succeed in disliking their author—well, that person has a hive of maggots for a brain.

There in Baltimore I was interested, chiefly, in the kind of life Mencken is leading these days. He said he's still having fun.

"The chief pleasure I get out of life is my work," he said. "I get no pleasure in games. I hate sports. The one thing I love to do is travel, but a man can't travel any more. I don't want to see South America. I might get down there and get stuck in one of those rattraps. I've been everywhere and I think I know people in every town in America. It becomes a tough proposition for me to go to a town and try to see it and soak it up. People I know in each town want to entertain me and it's hard to get out of such things. What I really like to do is just wander around the streets and look at the morons."

Mencken is still the moving spirit of the Saturday Night Club—a small group of amateur musicians which has been holding weekly meetings since 1905. They gather in a room in a downtown office building and start playing their music at 8:15 p.m. Mencken plays second piano and they usually keep going until ten o'clock, at which time they adjourn to a beer resort for the remainder of the evening.

"I'm the only original member left," he said. "There are no written regulations and no officers. To become a member a man has to meet with unanimous approval. No guests are permitted to wander into our concerts. A member may bring a guest but he's got to be sure of his man and he's responsible for the guest's behavior. A guest is not permitted to criticize the music. He can sit and listen to it, but he can't say he likes it or dislikes it. If he says anything at all about it, we throw him the hell out."

Mencken no longer writes regularly for the *Sun*, though he is on the board of directors. He has no office at the newspaper and my meeting with him took place in the office of the publisher, Paul Patterson. Mencken generally rides a trolley car from his home to the *Sun* building. Many years ago he owned an automobile, but something happened. . . .

“It was in 1918,” he explained. “I drove my car up in front of the *Sun* building one morning and stopped at the curb, just as I had been doing for months. A cop came up and said, ‘Hey, you can’t stop here.’ I said, ‘Like hell I can’t!’ He said ‘Like hell you can!’ I said, ‘Why the hell can’t I stop here?’ And he said, ‘We got new rules. We got a parking law went into effect this morning.’ Well, I looked at him a minute and then I said, ‘Nuts to that,’ and got in the car and drove it around the corner and sold it. I’ve never owned a car since that day.”

After a couple of hours the time came for me to leave. I had to catch an airline coach at the Lord Baltimore Hotel across the street from the *Sun*. Mencken went with me. In the elevator he spoke almost affectionately with the Negro operator, asked about his health and the health of his family, and said, “I missed you around here the other day. I thought maybe you were in Europe fighting the Huns.”

We walked across the street and stood at the entrance to the hotel.

“I’d go in with you while you make the arrangements about the coach,” he said, “but maybe you already noticed that the chiropractors of America are having their convention in this hotel. You know how I have handled the chiropractors down through the years. I wouldn’t be safe in

there. They’d ambush me in thirty seconds if I stepped into that lobby. They’d throw me to the floor and dismantle my spinal column and play marbles with my vertebrae.”

So we stood there and talked for about ten more minutes and then he left, swinging briskly up the street, nobody paying him a bit of mind. I stood and watched him. To me he was the greatest man in Baltimore, in Maryland, perhaps even the United States. Yet there in the heart of Baltimore scores of people passed him without giving him a second glance. He had on a flat straw hat and a dull business suit and there was a black cigar stuck in his face. He didn’t look like a great man. He might have been a plumber, taking a day off and heading for a Rita Hayworth movie. He stopped at the corner where the traffic light was against him,

and turned around and saw that I had been watching him. He raised his arm and waved good-bye, and I tingled all over like a high-school girl being introduced to Victor Mature.

I went into the hotel and up to the transportation desk where I had to wait a few minutes. A Baltimore taxi driver was standing at my elbow. I asked him if he knew H.L. Mencken.

“Sure,” he said. “Newspaper guy. His column ain’t as popular as it used to be, though. He’s again Roosevelt.”



The Nation, July 1, 1925