

# THE VIRGINIA TEACHER

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## OPPORTUNITY IN JOURNALISM

**W**HAT are the prospects for young people in journalism?

The fields in which I have had experience include the newspapers and magazines. I shall attempt to draw out of this experience something which I hope will have value to you as you may consider journalism as a life work.

The first question you must consider in connection with any occupation, aside from the pecuniary approach is: Will I find scope to utilize happily whatever native qualities and training I am able to bring to the tasks which may be available? This is the question which any ambitious young person, facing a decision as to his or her life work, must decide with reference to any occupation.

What does journalism offer gifted, well-trained practitioners?

Journalism is an industry and a profession affected with the public interest. It calls for special qualities in its practitioners and by custom and law because of the public interest involved, it is allowed special privileges and immunities.

Journalism in all its varieties and forms, from the ancient town crier to the modern radio broadcaster, from the hand bill of the primitive days to the contemporary metropolitan newspaper and national magazine, is first, last, and always an appeal to public interest. Other trades and professions have their public as well as their private aspects, but the very essence of journalism is its public appeal.

In this, I think, lies much of the power-

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This talk was made before the Virginia Intercollegiate Press Association at its annual convention, held in Wilson Hall, State Teachers College, Harrisonburg, Virginia, Friday evening, November 1, 1935.

ful attraction which journalism exercises upon so many of its followers. The newspaper man and the magazine writer are eternally conscious of being involved in public affairs. The approach and contact may be, and better are, merely those of the scribe who records what others are doing or saying or thinking. Nevertheless the reporter, writer, and editor are in the very routine of daily employment engrossed in the major concerns of the community, state, or nation. This, I am sure, yields a feeling of dignity and of importance to the task, not to the individual, which is one of the permanent satisfactions of any kind of employment.

Mind you, I don't imagine, as you leave school and college and seek work, that you will consciously give much thought to this matter. Your primary interest will be to find a job and, conditions being as they are, you won't ask too many questions. The situation of young people in search of employment has not been happy these past few years. I hope that now, with light breaking in so many directions, the way will be easier. Whether jobs are scarce or plentiful, personal qualifications must be considered with especial care if you are considering journalism as a life work.

On the strictly business side, newspapers and magazines do not differ greatly from other commercial and manufacturing enterprises. A man or woman with a talent for business is as much at home in the counting room of a newspaper as in similar employment in a department store or factory. On the production side the newspaper or magazine makes its special demands.

The natural journalist likes to write. Writing for such is a pleasant activity, desirable in itself, and not mere drudgery. Of course the physical act of transferring words to paper is laborious. I remember

talking to Booth Tarkington some years ago about a prospective novel. He said in his whimsical fashion that he promised himself that each story would be the last. "I promise myself that if you will just finish this I will never ask you to write another," is my recollection of his way of putting it. Naturally, however, he does write another and another. Ideas, characters, situations, and plots ferment in the mind of a writer. He must put words on paper. An inner necessity drives him.

Not all naturally gifted writers enter journalism. Some of the best do not. Many expend their gifts in writing letters to friends. In others the capacity dies from the lack of use. I am sure, however, that pleasure in writing and the capacity to use words with skill are essential to the satisfactory practice of journalism. So I say that if you don't like to write, don't bother with journalism. Other vocations will doubtless offer you greater satisfaction.

If you do like to write, then journalism may have much to offer you. Granted the gift for clear and attractive expression, what sort of training is best? My answer is the best you can get of almost any type. I am not impressed by the schools of professional journalism. I am not opposed to them. If I were prescribing a course for a prospective journalist I would suggest the most thorough general education possible. I think the general courses which lead to graduation in our colleges are quite as useful as courses designed especially for journalists. Some history and economics, sufficient acquaintance with at least one of the sciences to understand the methods and spirit of scientific research, all the literature that can be absorbed without excluding these other courses, and much practice in writing—these seem to me to be the essentials of an education for journalism. The purely technical instruction can be quickly imparted in a newspaper.

The actual technique of journalism is not complicated or difficult to learn. The cub

reporter on an American newspaper is taught two simple things. He learns first to discover the news angle, or the focus of public interest, in whatever he sees or hears or reads. He next learns to compress into his first sentence or paragraph the item of greatest interest or novelty in his material. Unlike the procedures which must be mastered before a novice is ready to practice law or medicine or dentistry, no prolonged study is required to master the basic skill of the reporter. Beyond the reporter's activity lie other tasks, superficially more complicated, but actually plain enough. It is for this reason I think that strictly professional courses in the technique of journalism are unnecessary.

Beyond the preliminary stages the journalist has need of all the information, all of the training in research methods, all of the understanding and background which the best of the colleges can impart. For the situations with which journalists must deal cover the whole field of human knowledge. The reporter must be able to interpret and, obviously, he must understand if he is to be intelligible to others.

The field in which the journalist operates is very wide. The newspaper, and especially the small city newspaper is, I think, the best proving ground. On a smaller newspaper the beginner gets precisely the same training in fundamentals which he might obtain, if any had time to bother with him, on the larger metropolitan journals. The small paper in addition offers the opportunity for varied assignments. This does not happen on the metropolitan press. If a beginner because of family or business favoritism is given a post on a large city daily, the chances are that he will be set at some task out of sight and left there indefinitely. Months or years later he may still be telephoning unimportant news items from some police station remote from the newspaper office to a re-write man who does all the actual writing.

This occurs not because city editors are a

malevolent breed but because the necessities of metropolitan journalism are too insistent to permit the risk of failure. City editors must send out reporters about whose competence there can be no question. The ambitious young journalist, accordingly, is in my opinion, well advised to seek his first experience in the smaller communities in which work is less specialized and the pace less rapid. He will there get varied opportunities to develop and to show whatever talents he possesses.

The opportunities open to a journalist depend upon his luck and his qualities. Of the two I think the latter more important in the long run. When I was a reporter in Chicago twenty-five years ago I knew a group of other reporters whose subsequent careers exhibited a wide range of possibilities. Francis Hackett, the Irish author of *Henry VIII* and of *Francis I*, had just turned book reviewer. By his own admission Francis was a wretched reporter, but by general acclamation a brilliant book reviewer. He became one of the distinguished biographers of our time. Carl Sandburg was a better reporter. His metropolitan newspaper experience began on a small paper devoted to labor causes. As an avocation he wrote poetry. Some of his poems were good enough to win prizes. This minor fame brought him larger journalistic opportunities and he, too, turned to biography. His life of Lincoln, not yet completed, is a first rate achievement. I remember, also, a bizarre young reporter who turned out to be Ben Hecht, brilliant as a writer of plays for the theatre and for the motion picture industry. Floyd Dell, the novelist, was also a member of the Chicago newspaper group of that time.

Many of the friends of my earlier days in New York also turned from daily journalism to the more ambitious fields of literature. Maxwell Anderson, co-author of *What Price Glory* and author of numerous other memorable plays, got his training in San Francisco and afterwards on the

old *New York Globe*. Lawrence Stallings, Anderson's collaborator in *What Price Glory*, was a copy reader on the *New York World*.

I cite these names, not to suggest that all newspaper reporters turn out to be novelists or playwrights or biographers but merely to indicate what did happen to a few of the more gifted newspaper men of my generation. The fact is that journalism is an expanding field and the sense of public interest and the literary skill which are developed are useful in many fields. During the last few years the motion picture industry and radio broadcasting have drawn heavily upon the newspapers in recruiting their own ranks.

Most men and women who enter newspaper work expect to continue at it, and the majority do. Roark Bradford, author of the stories on which the play *Green Pastures* was based, was the Sunday editor of a New Orleans newspaper until a change in policy pushed him out of his editorial chair. Out of a job, he tried his hand at short stories with such success that he no longer had to depend on newspaper work for a living. But the majority who remain find interest and scope for their talents in the newspaper or magazine.

I need not recite to you all the different varieties of writing which go into the press. I may say, however, that some of the best writing which has been done in the United States was published in the newspapers and of course in the magazines. The best of O. Henry's stories were written for the *New York World*. William Allen White's finest utterances are generally published as editorials in the *Emporia Gazette*. Don Marquis, of the old *Sun*, was and is one of the best stylists in America. Henry Mencken's eloquence was written for the *Baltimore Sun*.

It is an error to assume that newspaper writing is inferior to that which, for example, goes into books. There is a difference between the journalistic manner and

book style, but day in and day out in the news columns and on the editorial pages of a great number of newspapers excellent writing appears. Some paper or magazine will offer hospitality to the best work any writer can offer.

A newspaper man has the opportunity to use all of the skill and all of the intelligence he possesses. He may, it is true, want to write things which are better suited to book publication or to magazine use than to the daily press. Many daily newspaper men and women, too, do write books as an avocation. Walter Lippmann frequently turns from his newspaper column to the preparation of a book. But subject to its limitation of form, space, and subject matter, the newspaper welcomes the best which any writer can produce.

The reason that journalists tend to disperse into so many allied fields is found in the immense development of the power of public opinion in all our affairs. The reporter begins to try to ascertain what interests readers. As he practices his profession he learns to observe the tendencies of public opinion and of public taste. Everything in this present civilization depends upon what the millions and hundreds of millions think, feel, believe, and desire. Politics, business, all of our majority activities are determined by the tastes and preferences of the masses. Consequently, men and women who have trained themselves to be sensitive to the shifts and currents of public feeling find various demands for their services.

Although the good journalist is a reporter, and an unprejudiced reporter if he is really a good journalist, he need not be embarrassed by his principles. A man or a woman may have to resign a particular job because of a clash of opinion with others but other posts are to be found. I think, furthermore, that if you go into the history of many American communities, you will discover a striking correspondence between the community and its favorite journal. I

am sure, for example, that Kansas City is a better place because of the services which the *Kansas City Star* has rendered during half a century. Colonel Nelson, founder of the *Star*, has been dead many years, but the policies he established go on. William Allen White projected his good-natured wisdom over his little home city of Emporia.

You can from your own knowledge multiply such examples and you can find illustrations of the opposite tendency which I shall discreetly refrain from listing. As you scrutinize the field, however, you are sure to be impressed by the part played in our life by well-edited small newspapers.

The part played by any newspaper or magazine in the community or nation is a reflection of the character of the men who produce it. It is possible to achieve, for a time at least, a commercial success by base methods or by good ones. I think that those who appeal to the wholesome interests of their readers build on more solid and more enduring foundations than do those who seek circulation and revenue without any scruples other than those suggested by the box office or the counting rooms.

Thus I think that it can fairly be said that the work done by the late Adolph Ochs, publisher of the *New York Times*, during nearly forty years, stands out as one of the finest achievements of his generation. Mr. Ochs was not a writer. He was not an editor. Early in his career, however, he convinced himself of the soundness of one great principle of journalism. Recognition of that principle gave him personal distinction and brought vast success to the *New York Times*.

The principle is simple and plain. Mr. Ochs believed that newspapers ought to print the news without bias or prejudice. This seems obvious enough, but it was not widely recognized a generation ago. Under Mr. Ochs' ownership the *New York Times* sought to print all the news that's fit to print.

Whether Mr. Ochs or his friends or

his political associates liked the news or disliked it was to him an irrelevant circumstance. The record of the event was the important thing.

Under ordinary circumstances, when passions do not run high, no great courage is required to print the news. In extraordinary circumstances when powerful people want the news suppressed or imperfectly told, great courage may be required. The *Times* was fortunate in the men Mr. Ochs was able to bring to its direction. Carr V. Van Anda, Managing Editor from 1904 until 1932, is a modest and self-effacing man and one of the great figures in American journalism. Mr. Van Anda made brilliant use of the opportunity put at his disposal. Under his management the *Times* became the most complete newspaper in the world.

The example of the *Times* had far-reaching consequences. Not only in New York but in many other American cities other newspapers were compelled to print the news dispassionately. Mr. Ochs' success led to a general recognition of the value of news as such. This, I think, is a great and enduring achievement.

I recall an early experience of my own which exhibited glaringly the opposite and earlier point of view. During the spring of 1914 an ugly episode occurred in Ludlow, Colorado, as an incident of a bitterly contested coal strike. Women and children of the tent colony were burned to death. As editorial writer for the *Rocky Mountain News* I protested against these killings, and with others wired President Wilson asking that federal troops be sent to Colorado to enforce peace. After we published the news of the killings at Ludlow, I was visited by a large committee of prominent citizens who protested against the printing of such stories. We were hurting the reputation of Colorado, I was informed. With more zeal than tact, possibly, I asked if the killings rather than the news account of them were not responsible for whatever injury Colorado's reputation might suffer. Obviously,

such news could not have been suppressed in a free country and it ought not to have been suppressed in any country. Thanks to the demonstration made by the *New York Times* there is little inclination anywhere now to suppress important news.

Newspapers and magazines are, under the law, given great freedom because from the very beginning of the Republic the importance of providing information to voters was recognized. Self-government depends upon an informed electorate. The newspapers and magazines have historically had the responsibility of collecting and distributing this information so essential to the Republic.

Within my own experience I have seen freedom of the press reinforced from another, and to me, an unexpected quarter. As you know, newspapers and magazines, besides being institutions affected by the public interest, are highly competitive commercial enterprises whose principal revenues in many cases are derived from advertising rather than subscriptions.

What the newspaper or magazine sells to the advertiser is a share of the reader's attention. So what the publisher has to offer depends almost wholly upon the degree of interest which readers offer. Readers are quick to sense any constraint under which editors operate. Readers hold no mass meeting to adopt resolutions in favor of a free press. They simply cease being readers. Interest in the publication flags and circulation drops. You may, if curious, look up the circulation of German publications before and since the advent of Herr Hitler. When the remaining liberty which the German newspapers and magazines had was abrogated by the Nazis, the German people en masse stopped buying the servile publications.

Happily, nothing similar has ever happened in this country. By more subtle methods, however, it has been discovered that those publications which in fact exhibit the greatest degree of editorial sincerity have,

by the same token, the highest reader interest. Since readers bring to such publications the most alert attention, advertisers benefit proportionately. So by this process an economic bulwark to the freedom of the press has been created. This development seems to me to be auspicious because, as I see it, all of our civilization rests upon economic foundations. When we have discovered that a free press is not only politically desirable but commercially profitable, our liberty has by so much been fortified.

I have dwelt in such detail upon this matter of the freedom of the press because I am sure that a free life is the happiest life, and I know that those among you who may be considering what journalism has to offer you as a life work want to know what actually lies ahead.

Subject to the qualifications concerning personal qualities and interests which I have indicated, I think that journalism in its various forms offers extensive opportunities. Within limits, remembering always the comments of Solomon that the race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor yet riches to men of understanding, those who enter journalism have generally the opportunity to go as far as their talents, their industry, their ambition, and their character will take them.

Talent, of course, is essential. Nobody except those with unusual musical gifts ever played a violin or a piano brilliantly. All the training and all the practice in the world would not make a Fritz Kreisler out of a musician of no more than average talent. The best baseball coach in the world could not create a Babe Ruth. So is it in writing in all of its forms. We can express no more than is within us.

But in journalism and the allied arts there is room for those of many degrees of talent, provided that talent is enriched by industry and ambition and steadied by the sound judgment of a good character.

Just in what direction the young journal-

ist will travel as he or she ripens and gains experience it is impossible to foretell. Those of certain bents of mind will turn to writing novels or short stories. Those with pleasant voices may find themselves at peace in front of the microphones of the radio studios. Others may become press agents or dialogue writers for Hollywood. Some will go into politics and I hope will bring to public affairs courage, wisdom, and intelligence of the sort which have made so useful a public servant of Senator Carter Glass, your neighboring editor.

I don't mean to suggest that you will not or should not remain in the practice of journalism as you mature, nor do I mean to imply that other fields are more interesting or more important. The most interesting task in life, I think, is the chance to do well and happily the thing for which you are especially qualified. We don't always learn that until we are well on to the end of the road. But you can be very sure that once you are able to break into the ranks, and admission is not so easy now as it was when I was let in, you will have the chance to do your best. Inevitably the field of journalism will expand in the years to come. The individual reporter and editor will face vicissitudes as papers change and one institution retreats while another advances, but on the whole there will be growth and expansion.

I hope I have not displayed too enthusiastically our journalistic wares. There are many other exciting things to do in this world of work upon which you are entering. To me, perhaps, because I lack the training of a scientist, the activities of those engrossed in fundamental research seem most glamorous and inviting. In numerous fields there is boundless opportunity for achievement and for service. Journalism is merely one among many. If it does beckon to you and you do respond, you will find long and interesting roads to explore, and I hope you will find happiness along the way.

—WILLIAM L. CHENERY