

Some 60,000,000 read her advice. Some who didn't thought of her as Whistler's Mother with a Typewriter. Actually she was often in revolt against convention and she kept abreast of her times for 55 years as a reporter and advisor extraordinary. She was

Dorothy Dix, Common Sense Philosopher

By HARNETT T. KANE and ELLA BENTLEY ARTHUR

A PECULIARLY American phenomenon—possible perhaps in no other country—was Dorothy Dix, a woman who turned advice, usually the cheapest thing on earth, into a guiding principle of life, an occupation and a fortune.

No other man or woman of the 20th century had a career like that of this tiny-framed individual with sharp eyes, sharp nose and a wit that matched her native wisdom. Dorothy Dix lived on and on to 90, spent nearly fifty-five years in counselling her world, and left an estate of \$2,500,000.

Probably no writer who died in recent memory has earned so much from his writings alone. It may also be true that, whatever her place among critics and book-reviewers, no other writer had quite so much influence on the average people around her.

Year after year Dorothy Dix had some 60,000,000 readers. She became a national byword, "mother confessor to a nation," "America's dean of women," chuckled over in musical comedy lyrics, caricatured in slick magazines, subject of comment by everybody from Will Rogers to Ogden Nash to Ernie Pyle. At times Miss Dix received as many as 1,000 letters a day, and the Postoffice frequently used a truck to deliver her mail.

Unlike most writers, Dorothy Dix became a figure pointed out on the streets, whispered about as she passed through hotel lobbies, sought out in one or two cases by American presidents. She was hailed by the curious who ranged from heads of medical and bar associations, asking permission to call, to troops of Japanese Girl Scouts, waiting hours for her train to approach during one of her world tours.

When the Lynds made their authoritative survey of "Middletown," they found Dorothy Dix nearly everywhere in the supposedly typical American community, from streetcar to beauty parlor to pulpit, where ministers quoted her repeatedly. The surveyors said:

"This is perhaps the most potent

single agency of diffusion from without, shaping the habits of thought of Middletown in regard to marriage, and possibly represents Middletown's views . . . more completely than any other one available source."

Though she was reputed to appeal primarily to women, nearly half of her Niagara of letters came from men. Thousands of business men admitted that, after the front page and financial news, they also read Dorothy Dix. Youths who planned suicide wrote her close-to-the-final hour notes, asking for reasons why they should go on living. Others made less momentous inquiries—how to eat a stuffed to-

Harnett T. Kane and Ella Bentley Arthur are co-authors of the current best selling book, "Dear Dorothy Dix."

mato, how to go to bed on a Pullman and also, how to get along with a wife.

It is difficult to realize the remarkable span of her life. Born on the Kentucky-Tennessee border during the war of North and South in 1861, she was given a slave as a baby. She lived on through Reconstruction, the Victorian and Edwardian eras, the tinselled early 20th century of Harry K. Thaw and the young William Randolph Hearst, the flapper days of saxophones and John Held Jr., depressions, two world wars and their aftermaths.

Her first writing began in the mid 1880s; her first column appeared in 1895, preceding the Katzenjammer kids and all other American comics and features. She stayed in harness until the late 1940s.

And curiously Dorothy Dix appears to have kept abreast of her changing times. Few who received her replies to letters had any realization of age or hardening of her arteries. The peak of her career, the fullest flood of her letters, came during World War II, when she was in her mid eighties. She took it calmly in stride.

Among many who did not read Dorothy Dix, including literary groups, the impression seemed general that she served as a kind of Whistler's Mother with a Typewriter. Very pale lavender and very old lace, said the sophisticates. The fact is that Miss Dix was quite different. For much of her career she was an unconventionalist.

An analysis of thousands of her columns, her private notes and personal replies to readers indicates that in large degree Miss Dix kidded, or tried to kid Americans into (1) different modes of behavior or (2) acceptance of the situation in which they found themselves. She joked and prodded the country into acting as she thought it should act.

She came to majority in a day when a Lady was a Lady, who must uphold triumphant Ladyhood at all costs. Also, Mother was always right; and when a lady found trouble before her, she Held Fast, and lived on in a mist of self-righteous nobility.

On all of this, back in the 1890s, Dorothy Dix began a small, determined war. She got her start, she said later, by doing the unprecedented, "telling women the truth about themselves." Life, according to Miss Dix, could be and likely was, a tough thing. The most certain road to unhappiness was to expect too much of it. There was a time for suffering, perhaps, but also a time to get up and do something about it.

IN essence, then and later, Dorothy Dix told America that the way to get along in life was to do the best you could in most cases, but accept the rest. To quote a comedian: "You'll never get out of it alive." And also—here she bumped against one of the great folk-beliefs of the country—she admitted that mother could often be quite wrong, injure her children as well as herself.

Profound philosophizing, startling revaluations? No. Nevertheless, against the background of her times and setting, what Dorothy Dix said



Photo by Hardy S. Williams

This favorite picture of Dorothy Dix was taken at the peak of her career, although she remained an active columnist for two more decades into her late 80's. Few today remember that she was also in her day a famed reporter.

had a certain freshness and meaning for millions, from department store girls to middle-class housewives and to successful merchants with daughters who had become "problems." During a large part of her career the brisk little Southern woman smiled or chuckled as she preached a kind of healthy, unfashionable sanity.

When a wife whose husband had just returned from the war received a card intended for him from a woman who told him they must now "forget their months of happiness," Dorothy Dix gave prompt advice to the wife: Don't bring up the matter; for her own good let the wife forget that she had ever seen the card.

When a girl who had not married described the way she was "torn" between the suggestion that she have her baby adopted, and the strength of mother love, Dorothy told the writer to let mother love go. An

adopted child carries little or no stigma and has a chance in life, Miss Dix noted. Until society changed materially, the illegitimate one would carry the stigma.

Repeatedly, when plain girls wrote that they wanted to know how to get a husband, Dorothy Dix gave counsel that to some might have seemed like iced water in the face. She told them: "Forget it." Man has conquered the oceans, the skies, the elements, but he had "failed to invent any device to make a boy go to see the girl next door if he doesn't want to go." If men did not go to a girl, Miss Dix advised her to stop wasting time and energy and "put all that lost motion and force into her work, where she will get better results."

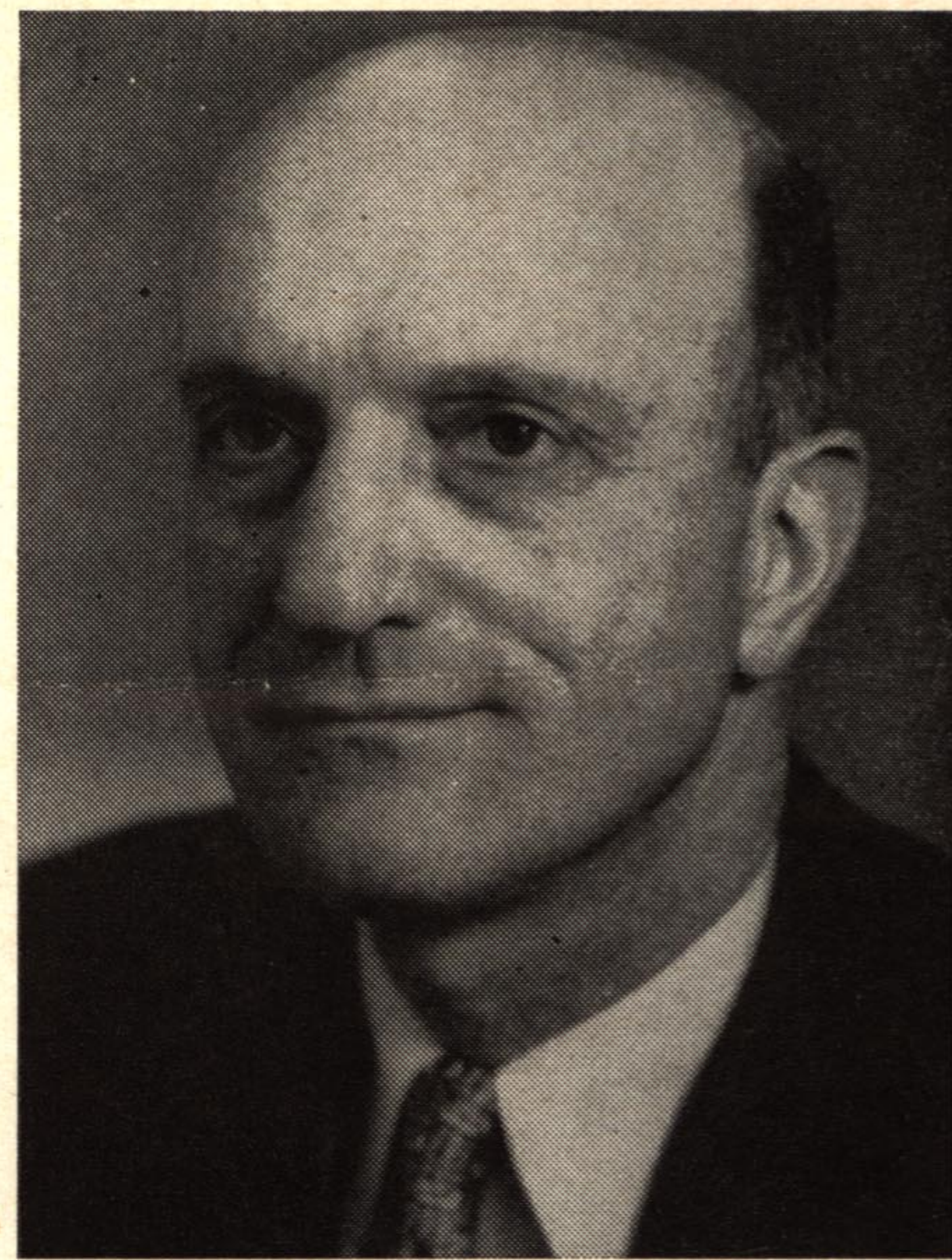
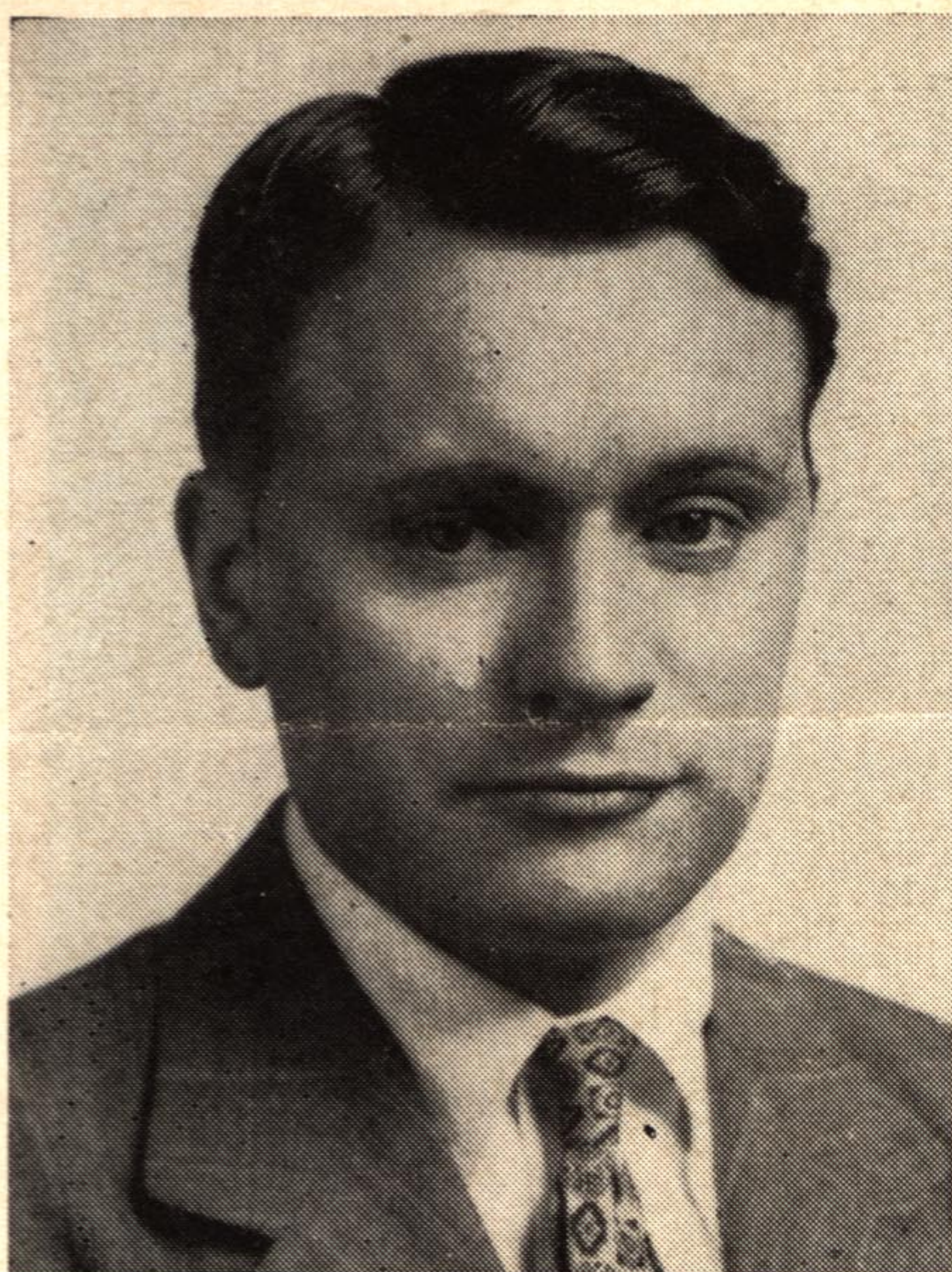
GET a job, she told the less handsome ones. "Work is the consolation prize God gives us when we miss

getting the thing that we want most." But she added a further consolation: men are contrary creatures, and the business girl who ignored them might get one. "Pursue them, and they flee from you. . . . Let them realize that you can get on quite well without them, and it piques their interest."

As a result of such comments, early and late, certain more or less idealistic folk called her a cynic, a tough old biddy; and one national magazine sniffed that Miss Dix had something of the mellow philosophy of a bawdy house madame. Others thought her simply too pragmatic, her eye too far from life's Finer Things.

Often people wrote to her, in fury or in helpless contempt, enclosing one of her columns, ripped to pieces. A retired minister snapped: "You are chopping away at the foundations of the American home, destroying our

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These three noted newspapermen were elected Fellows by the journalistic fraternity at its recent Denver convention. From the left, they are James B. Reston, Washington correspondent of the New York Times; Louis B. Seltzer, editor of the Cleveland Press, and James S. Pope, executive editor of the Louisville Courier-Journal and Times.

Winners of Sigma Delta Chi Honors

A NEWSPAPERMAN who has been in the forefront of the battle for freedom of information, one of America's best known and most respected reporters and an editor whose skill and energy both as a journalist and a civic leader have won him the unofficial title of "Mr. Cleveland" have been elected Fellows of Sigma Delta Chi.

They are James S. Pope, executive editor of the Louisville *Courier-Journal* and *Times*; James B. Reston, Washington correspondent of the New York *Times*, and Louis B. Seltzer, editor of the Cleveland *Press*. They were the unanimous choice of the professional journalistic fraternity for this major 1952 honor during its recent Denver convention.

The fraternity also honored a veteran publisher when it elected E. Lansing Ray, editor and publisher of the St. Louis *Globe-Democrat*, national honorary president for 1953. Mr. Ray succeeds Arthur Hays Sulzberger, publisher of the New York *Times*, in this position.

"Jimmy" Pope was specifically cited, in addition to his newspaper career, for his "unflagging devotion and untiring work toward continued freedom of the press and interchange of information at local, state, national and international levels."

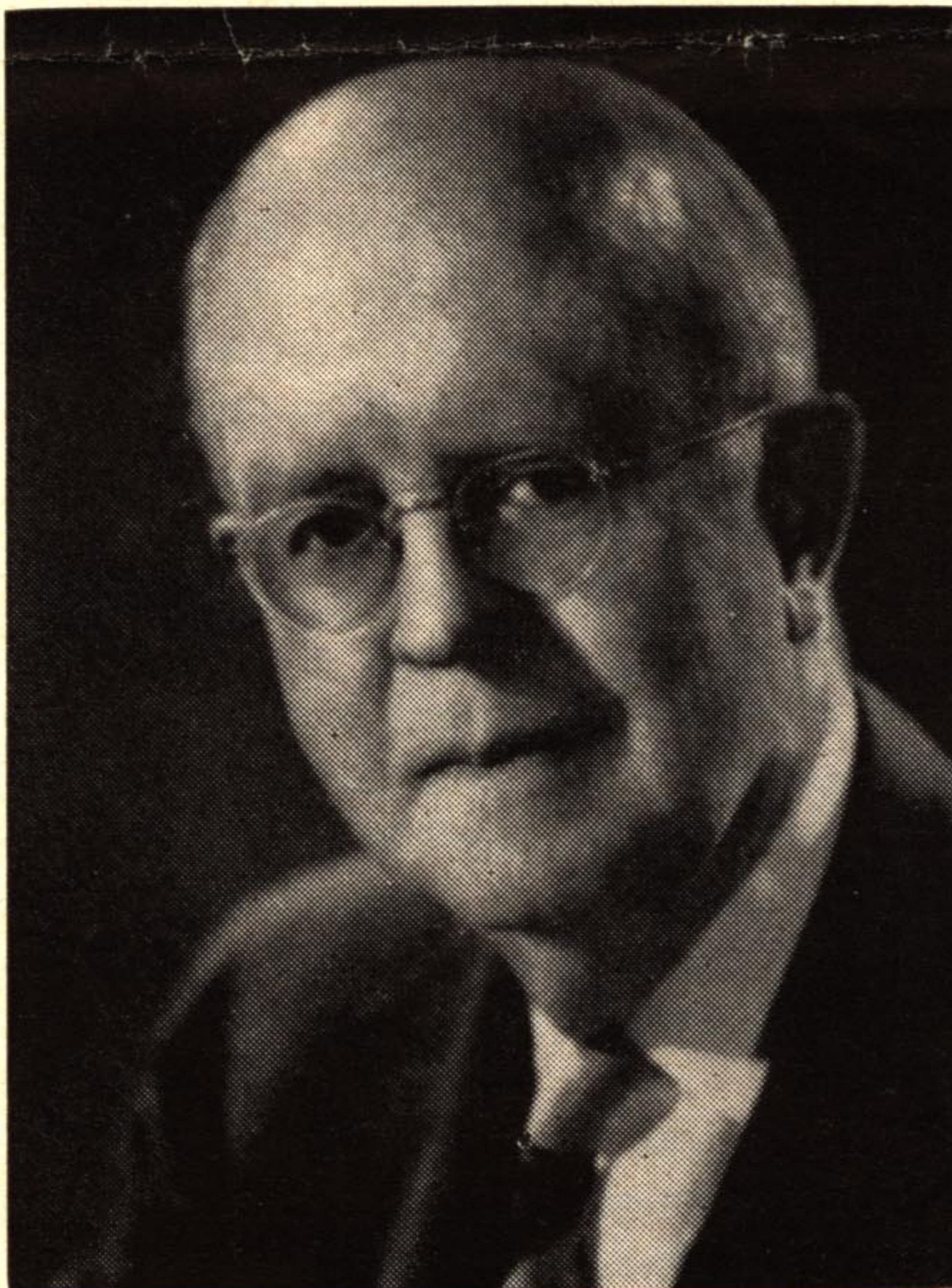
He has given a great deal of his time and energy as chairman, during the last two years, of the committee on freedom of information of the American Society of Newspaper Ed-

itors. His targets have ranged from justices of the peace to the White House.

A native of Georgia, Jimmy Pope attended Emory University and worked at trades ranging from railway clerk to automobile distributor before he became a newspaperman in 1926. In fourteen years on the Atlanta *Journal*, he was reporter, city editor and managing editor, winning a Rosenwald foreign travel fellowship in 1937.

He went to Louisville in 1940 as

E. Lansing Ray, editor and publisher of the St. Louis Globe-Democrat, is the new honorary president of SDX.



managing editor of the *Courier-Journal*, rising two years ago to the executive editorship of that newspaper and the *Times*. During World War II he served in the Office of Censorship.

James "Scotty" Reston has had his share of exclusive stories as a foreign and Washington correspondent. But his citation as a Fellow also points out that "his principal distinction lies in the clear insight into the complex affairs of government, politics and foreign affairs which he gives in his stories."

His writing is singled out as an example "of the development of the current concept of interpretive reporting, a development which many serious students of journalism believe to be the outstanding step forward in journalism in this century."

A native of Scotland, Reston was brought to this country as an infant but returned to Scotland for six years of schooling before attending the University of Illinois where he was graduated in 1932. He reported first for the Springfield (Ohio) *Daily News* and then for the *Associated Press*.

He went to the London AP Bureau in 1937, transferring to the *Times'* London Bureau in 1939. He was called back to the *Times'* Washington Bureau in 1941 and is still attached to it, although his assignments have taken him far and wide. Among his many reporting honors was the Pulitzer Prize for national reporting in 1945.

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Dorothy Dix, Common Sense Philosopher

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institutions." To all such criticisms, Dorothy Dix shrugged. She had grown used to them.

One of her first columns in the 1890's brought a swift response from a New Orleans man: the woman should be hanged; she was telling other women too much about the opposite gender, and she certainly knew a great deal on the subject! On the other hand, she became accustomed to the complaint by women that she was a "traitor to her own sex" who sided too often with the men.

IN essence Dorothy Dix advocated a kind of "middle way." Carefully she would point out an ideal solution, give hints out of her own experience as to ways to reach that solution. Then wryly, perhaps ruefully, she would note that the ideal might not work out at all. In that case, the ladies (or the gentlemen) had best dry their eyes, take what came and take it with grace, since they had to take it in any case.

Meanwhile the counsellor usually salted her words with humor, brightened them with a touch of the funny-bone. When an over-solemn club-woman, preparing a "paper," inquired as to which kind of woman Dorothy considered the happiest, Miss Dix replied: "The one that begins every sentence with 'John says.'"

Another wrote that her husband appreciated a good meal more than he did her. The lady thought she fed him quite well; yet for her, affection for her food was not enough. Miss Dix advised: "Go on feeding the man steak and forget your yearnings for mush. . . . A well-fed man is an amiable one, and easy to handle. Nothing ties a man to his own fireside so tightly as a heavy meal that makes him as disinclined to go out and hunt adventure as a gorged snake."

When a widow told of her difficulty in making new male acquaintances, Dorothy suggested she hunt a fine, large, "co-educational" boarding house. "If you want to catch fish you must go where the fishing is good. There's no use angling in a dry stream. A widow who lives alone in her own house is as sequestered from men as if she were in a nunnery or a grave. . . . The woman who wants to marry must emulate the mounted police. . . . It is enterprise that does it."

Another woman, who described herself as a beautiful redhead, was about to be married, but had a problem: Should she tell her fiance that she had a full set of false teeth? Miss Dix replied: "No, marry him, and keep your mouth shut."

A young man wrote that he had taken his girl out driving, to cock-tails, dinner, dancing and riding again, but did not kiss her good night at the door. Should he have done that? To this Dorothy Dix answered: "No, my boy. You did enough for her."

Yet she admitted that she was occasionally stymied by notes such as this one: "Dear Dorothy Dix, please send me your definition of a perfect lady. I must have it by this weekend." . . . And meanwhile, of course, came the streams of tragic notes, from men whose sons had robbed banks, women who planned to leave their husbands for other men, bitter letters, bleak letters. To these she wrote earnestly, simply, offering what she called "the best advice I have on the shelf."

WHAT produced this oracle, this woman to whom other Americans listened as to no other guide? She admitted that she had no great educational background; she finished a "female academy" and then a single term at a girls' college, taking from them a "smattering of the ologies and isms" and a graduating dress that she called a "dream." Nor did her original tastes or interest indicate anything in the direction she eventually followed.

Born on a plantation as Elizabeth Meriwether, she lived most of the first quarter century of her life in a small Tennessee town. Of the outside world she was, she said, completely ignorant; her first train trip was a nightmare of embarrassment. But then Elizabeth married and everything changed—apparently for the worst. Her husband, George Gilmer, was a man about ten years older, unstable emotionally, as "difficult" as any she was to write about.

Within a few years Elizabeth Gilmer was in her own private hell, miserably sick, close to a breakdown, facing the need to earn a living for herself, her husband and others. Later she would say that nobody could tell her of any sorrow or despair that she had not known. And she was in her

thirties—late for a woman to start a career.

But now she met another woman, the kindly publisher of the New Orleans Picayune. Winning a chance, she did "everything" at the paper, from obituaries to stray poetry. Then the paper needed a lady columnist, fast, and there was Elizabeth Gilmer, who became Dorothy Dix; and a new era had started in American journalism.

From the start she tried to give her readers, she said, "strong meat and not omelette souffle"—but always, as noted, with a chuckle, a seasoning of humor. Her work drew notice, and she went on to New York, to lead a double newspaper life, continuing as counsellor at the same time that she became *sob-sister* extraordinary.

Arthur Brisbane hailed her as the greatest reporter, man or woman, of her time. For a time it appeared that nobody could hack up his wife or poison his mother unless Dorothy Dix covered the incident. From the bench a judge interrupted a murder case: "Miss Dix is here; the trial may proceed."

After twenty years of crime reporting, Dorothy Dix quit that phase, to give her full time to her letters from readers. Her appeal broadened; her columns appeared in one city after another; her friends at various times were O. Henry, Irvin Cobb, Sherwood Anderson and also, oddly, Hetty Green, another feminine money-maker.

Anderson, reading over her original letters for days, said they had the plots of a thousand novels. O. Henry paid her the ultimate tribute—she liked his kind of people, and understood them, he said, and that made a real person, one to his tastes.

For nearly forty years, meanwhile, Dorothy Dix remained with her husband, until, after growing steadily more of a problem, he stormed out, leaving her. In time he entered a mental hospital, where he died. Had he been a more stable individual, a man with whom she could have had a normal life, there might have been no Dorothy Dix.

ONCE she wrote: "If one cannot have the rose, one takes what is near the rose." Dorothy Dix took what was near the rose, and made a great deal out of it.

Out of her personal life, a life that few understood, she drew a certain compassion, an understanding of others; and she never lost her wit or her balance. Some of those are qualities that many writers, as well as others, could acquire with profit.

Bylines in This Issue

FOR the journalist, as for any other writer, copy is where you are smart enough to see it. Nowhere does this apply more than to the freelance journalist whom many might consider to be a vanishing American in this day of well-staffed newspapers and magazines and of syndication.

Richard L. Neuberger, whose byline may appear in the same month in the highest-browed magazine of opinion and the biggest popular "slick," affords a ringing negative to his own question, "Is the Independent Journalist Obsolete?" (page 12). His article, based on one of the outstanding talks made at the recent convention of Sigma Delta Chi, tells how he finds copy for his prolific but talented typewriter.

An Oregonian who prefers to stay there—his reasons for liking his home town of Portland made the *Saturday Evening Post*—Dick is northwest correspondent for the *New York Times* and a former reporter and special writer for the *Oregonian*. He is also a liberal Democrat who was recently reelected an Oregon state senator while his wife kept her seat in the lower house of the legislature.

Dick attended the University of Oregon and served as a captain in the Army during World War II. His wide scope as a free lance writer is nowhere better demonstrated than in the articles he has written for *The QUILL*. They have ranged from an attack on the one party newspaper to a spoof on the use of "cheesecake" in magazines that was reprinted by *Reader's Digest* and carried far and wide.

A LEADING figure in national politics and the editor and publisher of a noted pair of newspapers helped make memorable Sigma Delta Chi's dedication of an historic marker at the site of the martyrdom of Elijah P. Lovejoy, abolitionist editor. Their talks in Alton, Ill., last November appear on page 10—"Two Tributes to Elijah P. Lovejoy."

Governor **Adlai E. Stevenson** of Illinois, recent Democratic candidate for president of the United States, is a lawyer by profession but he comes of a newspaper family. His great grandfather founded the *Bloomington (Ill.) Pantagraph* and Stevenson is a part owner of this highly regarded daily. Between his graduation from Princeton University and the taking of a law degree at Northwestern University, he worked on its staff.

Barry Bingham is editor and president of the *Louisville Courier-Jour-*

nal and *Times* and president of radio station WHAS in Louisville. A graduate of Harvard University, he reported for the Louisville papers before becoming publisher in 1937.

He served as a Naval officer in World War II and more recently as a top ECA official in Paris.

EVERY journalist knew Dorothy Dix as the columnist who, as **Harnett T. Kane** says, ran advice, the cheapest thing on earth, into a fortune before she died at 90. But many never knew that before she began advising syndicated millions about their problems, she was one of the top reporters of her day.

Nor did her countless readers know that behind the witty, often unconventional, common sense of her writing lay the experience of a tragic personal life.

Mr. Kane and **Ella Bentley Arthur** are especially qualified to write "Dorothy Dix—Common Sense Philosopher" (page 6) as authors of the current best-selling book on her life, "Dear Dorothy Dix." Mrs. Arthur was Miss Dix' confidential secretary for twenty-four years.

Kane, New Orleans newspaperman before he quit in 1942 to devote his full time to other writing, is the author of a dozen books. He has been an exceptionally successful writer since his first book, "Louisiana Hayride," grew out of his reporting of the Huey Long era in Louisiana politics. All, including "Queen New Orleans," "Natchez," "Plantation Parade," "Pathway to the Stars," have made best seller lists.



ELLA BENTLEY ARTHUR

A graduate of Tulane University—as a student he won the annual \$100 prize given by Miss Dix to a journalism student—he began reporting for the *Item* as a sophomore and in

thirteen years covered every field.

He says his secret of writing is "the application of the seat of the pants to the seat of a chair"—he works regular hours, from, as they say in back country Louisiana, "kinsee to kain't-see."

Mrs. Arthur, who collaborated with Kane in the current article and in the book on Miss Dix, is well known in New Orleans as a poet and as a member of newspaper family.

THE picture on the cover of this issue of *The QUILL* was caught at the conclusion of a forum on freedom of information at the recent Denver convention of Sigma Delta Chi. Two of the panel members happened to continue discussion in front of a large copy of the Constitutional amendment guaranteeing, among other basic rights, a free press. They are V. M. Newton (left), managing editor of the *Tampa Tribune*, and Blair Moody, U. S. senator from Michigan who was appointed to Capitol Hill after years there for the *Detroit News*.

RECENTLY the editor of *The QUILL* received a questionnaire from an educator who is contrasting textbook usage with actual current practice. The questionnaire offered a choice among as many as three different ways of capitalizing, abbreviating or punctuating common words and phrases. The editor was tempted to answer that he needed all three—his newspaper's style, *QUILL* style and his own preference.

On page 9, **Donald Freeman** looks back on his own copyreading days and peers into some of the quaint inconsistencies of newspaper style and usage in "You Meet Such Interesting Rules." Readers of his articles have come to expect a tart wit from this young newspaperman. His current contribution—his sixth to *The QUILL*, by the way—is no exception.

Don is now radio and television editor of the *San Diego Union*, a post for which he left the *Union's* copydesk recently. He went to California several years ago (and remains mildly cynical about its climate) after reporting sports news and reading copy on three Chicago desks, those of the *Herald American*, the *Sun* and the *Tribune*. He has continued to put his gift for a phrase into articles and short stories for magazines.

A graduate of Northwestern's Medill School of Journalism, Don edited an Army newspaper between tours of Chicago rims. He reports that he is continuing to write a newspaper column on popular music and to correspond for *Downbeat* and *Variety*.