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Francisco

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WHAT WAS A NEWSPAPER?

According to what used to be called “a generally informed source,” roughly 130 newspapers appeared in the first ten years of San Francisco’s history as an American city. Most of them disappeared during the same ten years. None of them is alive today.

We don’t know much about their professed purpose, but we can assume that most of them were highly personal, intensely partisan and given to extortion, slander and defamation of character. One publication called *The Californian*, which fortunately expired long ago, announced in the year 1868 that it would henceforth eschew blackmail and the disparagement of public men and institutions.

“Our first step is to purify the Augean stables,” said *The Californian*, “and set up a new flag with the motto, ‘Decency and propriety above all things.’ There will be no more attempts to create panic about earthquakes, or try, by implication, to throw doubts or clouds over our moneyed institutions...It is a mutual admiration society, and everything shall be lovely henceforth.. These are our principles, and we hope the public will like them – they ought to, for they have had to stand much worse.”

What twinge of conscience prompted this outburst of irony I do not know. There had, indeed, been one pretty heavy earthquake that year, but it mostly affected Oakland, and it produced one memorable cartoon by Ed Jump that shows many familiar San Franciscans flying around happily in mid-air. So the motive for the pledge may have been some real or imaginary threat of violence against the publisher. In those days, the editor and the publisher were usually the same man. Both designations were dangerous..

J.F. Dunne of the *Police Gazette* was stabbed to death for reasons now obscure. William Walker, a Southerner with aristocratic pretensions, wrote imperialistic editorials here in San Francisco before heading to Central America to conquer Nicaragua, where he was executed for his intentions. Ed Gilbert, the founding editor of the *Alta California* was killed in a duel over politics by John Denver, for whom the capital of Colorado was later named. Charles deYoung, one of the brothers who founded the *Chronicle*, was shot and killed by a son of the Mayor, Isaac Kalloch. And, a couple of decades later, Charlie de Young’s brother, Michael H., was shot and wounded by none other than Adolph B. Spreckels, one of the sons of the sugar king, Claus Spreckels. Adolph was tried and acquitted on grounds of temporary insanity, although there were suggestions about indicting him for poor marksmanship.

The most celebrated victim was an adventurer from Baltimore who called himself “James King of William” because William was his father’s name and he thought that was an improvement over plain old Jim King. King founded a paper called the *Bulletin* in October, 1855

It was a bad year for San Francisco. The gold rush was running out. Miners were quitting and sailing home, and the people who stayed in California were feeling edgy and cantankerous. A bank that King had started went broke. King had a lot of grudges to get off his chest, against politicians, lawyers, Jesuits, rival bankers, and so on. In the pages of the Bulletin he regularly unloaded on these favorite targets, daily, for about eight months until another editor and publisher, one James Casey, accepted King's public invitation to shoot him during his customary afternoon walk along Montgomery Street. King died, and his assassination promoted him to one of San Francisco's celebrated journalistic martyrs.

The Bulletin survived the death of James King, although James Casey did not last long. He was hanged by the Vigilantes. Thomas King, James's brother, ran the paper for a number of years, and then the Bulletin passed through the account books of numerous owners. By the turn-of-the-century the Bulletin was still around, having outlasted even the Alta California -- the oldest, most reliable paper in town.

In the gloomy, depression years of the 1890s, however, the strongest paper in readership and local influence was no longer the Bulletin but the Examiner, which called itself, with some justification, "The Monarch of the Dailies." The Examiner was the property of a soft-spoken but extremely aggressive genius named William Randolph Hearst. Willie Hearst, whose employees called him "The Chief," had taken over the paper in 1887 when his father, who had made millions buying and selling mining properties on the Comstock Lode, went off to Washington as a United States Senator. Its rival in the morning was the Chronicle. The Chronicle -- always conservative, always Republican, always interested in the business and cultural life of the city, always the property of its founder, Michael H. deYoung and his descendants --- had a daily circulation of 80 thousand copies. Below the Chronicle in circulation and influence came the Morning Call and then the good old Bulletin. At the time of the great earthquake and fire in 1906, there also was a small, South-of-Market paper called the Daily News, which was soon to be purchased and expanded by the Scripps-Howard newspaper chain, into the San Francisco News ---- one cent a copy. The News, although it had a relatively brief career, was a distinctive paper, because it aspired to be the voice of the working class. For many years the News bragged that it did not cross Market Street.

[The Call was an exceptionally weird case. It was founded way back in the gold rush days (December, 1856,) and Mark Twain wrote for it, briefly, during his newspapering days. Over the years it passed through so many owners that its heritage was like the impenetrably complicated royal succession of Schleswig-Holstein. Since the Call doesn't exist in any form any more, I won't go into it except to say that in the year 1913, after passing through the hands of one Loring Pickering, Charles Shortridge (the owner then of the San Jose Mercury-News,) John D. Spreckels of the sugar family, M.H. deYoung of the Chronicle and F.W. Kellogg, a newspaper murderer from the mid-west, it eventually wound up in the possession of the acquisitive Mister Hearst. In September, 1913, Hearst changed the Morning Call into an afternoon Call --- same staff, same name, bigger headlines. That gave the city five quarrelling dailies --- way too many, as it turned out.]

Around that time, many publishers began to detach themselves from the odious and perilous tasks of editing the papers they owned and to hand over the dirty, toilsome, hazardous functions --- the production of headlines and news copy and other gray matter between the ads ---

to paid editors. That way, the publisher could devote his energies to socially acceptable functions such as joining clubs, building profit centers and meddling in politics, while the hired editors became the voices and faces publicly associated with the institution known in those days as “the press.” Often, the paper would speak with two conflicting voices – one for the causes the editor favored, the other for the political candidates preferred by the publisher. The Chronicle was well known for its peculiar practice of endorsing candidates known to be opposed to policies paper had advocated in its editorials.

[The term “media,” apparently originated among advertisers as a single word covering magazines, radio, billboards, and, later, television and the World Wide Web. In some people’s minds, “media” no longer refers to leisurely forms of written communication like daily newspapers. So far, the term has not been stretched to include telephone messages, bulk rate mailers, Dear Friend postcards or other old fashioned forms of political persuasion..]

In the century between 1910 and 2010, three very distinctive, and distinctly different, newspaper editors made their mark --- or, rather, put their marks --- on the press --- and even the “media” in San Francisco. Each of them had his own idea of what a newspaper was, or ought to be, and most of the time the publishers cooperated.

The first was Fremont Older. For almost forty years – from the late 1890s until his death in 1935, Fremont Older was in charge of a daily newspaper --- first, the Bulletin; next, the Call; and, finally, a fusion named the Call-Bulletin, wrought by Mister Hearst, who by that time owned them both.. Fremont Older was the city’s public scold, our conscience, our raging bull of moral indignation He was known nationally as San Francisco’s knight-errant. TIME Magazine, when it was only six years old, called him, in its characteristic, front-loading style: “Fearless, ambitious, fight-loving, Editor Older.”

The next was Paul C. Smith, who became the executive head of the Chronicle in 1935 --- the very year that Fremont Older died. The two events were not connected. Smith was age 26, going on 27, poorly educated and inexperienced. He had reached the ripe age of 44 when he left the Chronicle, but many people still remembered when he was called The Boy Wonder.

The third was Scott Newhall, who replaced Smith as editorial head of the Chronicle in 1952 in a palace coup. Newhall’s nineteen years as the public face and voice set the Chronicle on a new course that some believed was the salvation of a weak paper and others saw as the destruction of a local treasure..

In their physical appearance, background and behavior, the three men were about as different as adult white male Americans could be.

Older was tall --- over six feet two --- rangy, with a mustache that was notably huge and droopy even in that time of huge, droopy mustaches He had the penetrating, distrustful look of a bald eagle, maybe a stormy petrel. He smoked cigars -- twenty a day -- and he drank bourbon. His aspirations were narrow, fixed and sometimes vindictive. He worked every day, stubbornly and courageously pushing his causes.

Smith was short, red-haired and perky -- a fox-terrier, or perhaps even a fox. He smoked cigarettes, a lot of cigarettes, and drank Scotch, a lot of Scotch. He was known as of a genial host, a bon vivant, a persuasive speaker. He took pride in having been called both a Communist and a Fascist although, like his newspaper, he was usually a moderate Republican. .

Newhall was handsome, pouty, stocky. His eyes were noticeably blue and noticeably baggy. He had an artificial leg and lurched along with a purposeful, swinging gait. Newhall did not drink. He took pills. He sometimes went for days without sleeping, exhausting his wife and his playmates with his demands for attention and diversion. Successful in all his stated goals, he lost interest in the daily struggle and left the paper feeling disappointed and betrayed.

As to their aspirations and their style, they had even less in common.

Older was volatile, grouchy, changeable, private, pessimistic. He wanted to make the Bulletin the vessel of God's wrath, the enemy of corruption, the upholder of virtue in a wicked city.. Down at his ranch house in Santa Clara county, he and his beautiful wife sometimes entertained ex-convicts, prostitutes and alcoholic derelicts that Older hoped to mend. They sat outdoors in the twilight and told sad stories of the death of kings. Older was haunted by feelings of sympathy for the victims of his pen.

Smith was charming, flashy, convivial, conspicuous. He liked to tool around in a 16-cylinder Cadillac convertible equipped with a siren and red lights. He lived in an enviable apartment on the east side of Telegraph Hill, with a stunning view, and he avidly collected celebrities, impressing them with the Chronicle, the city and himself, not necessarily in that order.. In time, his collection of celebrities became more interesting to him than his newspaper. He never married. The most common opinion of his private life was that he was asexual.

Newhall was imaginative, creative, cynical, restless. Having begun his career in journalism as a photographer, he never became an ace reporter or a clever columnist. His skills were in the reductive editing of the Chronicle's weekly news summary, "This World" and in spotting and exploiting the talent of other writers. .The so-called "hard news" that filled the main pages of traditional daily papers did not hold his shifting interest. He preferred fresh ideas, sassy writing, oddball opinions and, occasionally, innovations of pure mischief that were calculated to cause indignation and attract new subscribers.

Of the three, Older was the only one who fit the matrix of a traditional editor. John Bruce, a long-time city editor of Chronicle, said of him:: "To his own staff he was the most beloved editor who ever accepted a punch on the jaw in exchange for warranted libel; to men of small civic decency he was an ordeal; to the trade he was a legend before he became history. Hundreds sincerely hated him, thousands honestly loved him." Older's close friend the muck-raker Lincoln Steffens described him as "big, tall, willful [and] very temperamental." And Bruce Bliven, the long-time editor of the New Republic, wrote: "To understand Fremont Older is to understand San Francisco."

With all due respect for Bliven, who knew and admired him, I would suggest that Older was too tightly focused to stand as the metaphor of a sophisticated and hedonistic city. Although he loved going to the theater, Older had no taste for art, literature, music, architecture, landscape, or the civilized nuances of urban society ----- wines, foods, conversation, anecdote, gossip, celebrity . Older's readers were required to share his obsession with local political issues. He was a journalistic equivalent of President John Adams, who wrote: "I must study politics and war, that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy...geography, natural history and naval architecture, navigation, commerce and agriculture, in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry and porcelain."

Born on a farm in Wisconsin, Older went to work for a printer at age twelve. He had read something about Horace Greeley and decided he wanted to be a great editor; so he followed Greeley's widely misquoted advice to go west. He worked his way to San Francisco as a tramp printer, knocked around the city for a while, looking for a job, and, at about 16, went up to Nevada and worked for the Territorial Enterprise in Virginia City, where he lost a week's wages gambling and left town in disgust with fifty cents hidden in his shoe. These were the kind of experiences that customarily shaped a lad to be a newspaper reporter before there was any graduate school of journalism.

At age 22 he was running a paper in Redwood City and serving as a correspondent for the Alta California, a respected but fatally ill newspaper.. Soon after Older moved up to the city as a reporter, the Alta succumbed to the competition of the Examiner and quietly died. Older went over to the Morning Call, which Hearst hadn't bought yet, and became its city editor.

To a man of Older's frontier mentality and punitive disposition, San Francisco was prime for a cathartic dose of municipal reform. The mayor, the supervisors and other city officials were greedily receptive to bribes from utilities, transit companies and railroads seeking franchises. The police department was rotten through with payoffs from saloons, gambling halls and houses of prostitution. The city government was rich with corruptible, semi-autonomous boards and commissions that dispensed permits in return for unmarked cash. .

Older was inspired by the ideals of Good Government reform were sweeping other American cities. He needed a platform, stronger and more aggressive than the Morning Call from which he could sell progressive doctrine to San Francisco: a new charter, an honest mayor, municipal ownership of public utilities, punishment to the givers and takers of bribes. He would emulate the great muck-rakers (as President Theodore Roosevelt called them) who were beginning to publish their investigations in McClure's and other magazines: Lincoln Steffens on "The Shame of the Cities," Ida Tarbell on Standard Oil; Charles E. Russell on the beef trust; Upton Sinclair on the meat packing industry.

The old, established Evening Bulletin was practically dead, with a circulation of only 9000 copies, yet it still remained., in many ways, the most forceful and politically astute of all the daily papers. There was a new publisher, a Canadian-born lawyer and would-be civic reformer named R. A. Crothers, who had bought the paper from the estate of his late brother-in-law and was itching to get into some good, circulation-building fights. In 1895 Crothers lured Older from the Call and made him managing editor of the Bulletin. Older was forty-eight. He had about thirty years of newspaper work behind him and almost another thirty ahead.

Crothers risked physical attacks and libel suits well as plenty of money to support Older's crusades. Older piled on the screaming headlines, lurid exposes and gruesome pictures to entice new readers to the paper. To illustrate his aversion to capital punishment, he printed a horrifying, page one photo of a young man with a rope around his neck and the headline, "Young Weber Hangs." To illuminate his views of the Social Evil, he ran a series of articles six days a week for seven weeks called "The Story of Alice Smith – A Voice from the Underworld." Alice drew 5000 letters. Older followed it with "The History of 'Sam' Leake, Recounting Experiences of as Noted Man in his Redemption from Drink."

He built a great staff of writers to pick away pound away at his chosen villains and fill the paper. Among his top reporters at the Bulletin: Ernest J. Hopkins, Edgar T. "Scoop" Gleeson.

Other staffers: Robert L. Duffus, the editorial writer; Rose Wilder Lane, the feature editor (daughter of Laura Ingalls Wilder, the author of the "Little House" books); Kathleen Norris, the novelist; Maxwell Anderson, the playwright. The reporters worked at a row of desks facing a blank wall. There was no copy desk. The writers read their own or one another's copy and wrote headlines for their own stories. Kevin Starr, in his volume on the Progressive era in California, comments: "For Fremont Older, journalism was a near-religion...[He] loved the feel of type, the smell of still-wet ink on the proof pages he insisted on personally correcting, even as a senior editor, sitting in a glass-enclosed booth out in the city room for all his reporters to see, a constant cigar clamped aggressively in his teeth."

Under Fremont Older, the old Bulletin became virulent, blunt and repetitive. A lot of well-intentioned San Franciscans found it simply tiresome. The Bulletin itself once printed a little squib describing the frustration of an editor (presumably Older, himself,) who went to his club after work and watched one of his fellow-members reading first the war news and a divorce report on page one, glancing at the headlines on the inside pages, passing up the editorial page, plunging into the sports section -- then laying down his paper and going in to dinner.

Many of Older's targets were relatively small game -- saloon keepers and pimps on the Barbary Coast, crooked building inspectors, purchasable police; and their protector, the indifferent, permissive Mayor P.H. McCarthy. Like Scott Newhall's attention-seeking stunts half a century later, many of Older's so-called crusades were based on the journalistic principle that news is where you make it. Their justification was to goad the lazy public to clean house. The real purpose of a thundering story about minor graft was a healthy increase in readers. In the words of one reporter, the Bulletin in the 1890's was a sanctuary of "power that masked itself behind republican simplicity and cunning (and) represented resistance and weight and conservatism."

The "Good Government" crusade of the early 1890s peaked in San Francisco with the election of James D. Phelan in 1896. Phelan was wealthy, socially prominent, and a Democrat. He pushed through a new charter that was in line with all the canons of progressive reform. The city was empowered by the new charter to take over public utilities such as street railroads, water service, power and light. The old board of ward aldermen was replaced with an 18-member board of supervisors that was supposed to be more resistant to corruption. As it turned out, the new board was just as vulnerable as the old one. Abe Ruef, the Republican boss who was the shameless conduit of boodle from the business community to City Hall, joked that the new supervisors were so hungry they would eat the paint off the walls. Older said they wouldn't pass the Lord's Prayer without money.

Phelan's reform administration was put to rest by the election of Eugene E. "Handsome Gene" Schmitz, the head of the musicians' union, as mayor in 1901. Schmitz was a violinist with wavy black hair, a thick black beard, dignified manners and no apparent qualifications for the job. He had been selected as the candidate of the revived Union Labor party by the manipulator Abe Ruef, backed by the conscienceless Examiner. Schmitz and his Union Labor party, controlled by Ruef, rolled over opposition from both the Republican and Democratic parties, as well as Fremont Older.

Gavin McNab, a reformist leader of the local Democratic party, said later: "The night Schmitz was elected, every burglar alarm in San Francisco went off automatically."

Schmitz was re-elected two years later over the opposition of the Bulletin and again in 1905, opposed by both the Bulletin and the Chronicle. When the results were announced, a cheering crowd marched through the downtown streets, and the majestic clock tower of the Chronicle's building at Kearny and Market Streets was set afire by skyrockets. The shabby, upstairs offices of the Bulletin across Market Street were spared.

Older went on publishing almost daily charges of graft linked to the Schmitz-Ruef regime. Scarcely any other subject, national or international, took precedence over reports of the ruinous condition of the streets; the improper awarding of paving contracts; the concessions to a rock quarrying company that was blasting the sides off Telegraph Hill; the pay-offs in the granting of liquor licenses; the failures of the police to control gambling and prostitution, the blatant corruption in the granting of public contracts; and, above all, the sinister history of the "municipal crib," at 620 Jackson Street -- a so-called "lodging house"--- that had been constructed by a friend of the mayor over the protest of a city building inspector, who stated that it was obviously intended as a house of prostitution. The building inspector's report was pigeonholed by the Board of Works. During the later investigations of municipal graft, it was disclosed that Abe Ruef, himself, collected one-quarter of the profits on the rental of compartments to prostitutes and split his take fifty-fifty with Mayor Schmitz.

The events of April 18, 1906, diverted the attentions of everyone, even Fremont Older, who spent the night of the earthquake camping with his wife at the beach. The moral cleanup resumed as the streets were being cleared of rubble. Older found a patron in his friend Rudolph Spreckels, the sugar heir, who put up the money for a professional investigator and a special prosecutor from out of town to bring charges to the Grand Jury. The resulting indictments and prosecution proved the substance of Older's allegations. The public attention launched the political career of one of the prosecutors, Hiram Johnson of Sacramento, to statewide political leadership that led to the Progressive electoral reforms in California in 1910. Older, of course, supported Johnson's reforms.

But the outcome of the trials was disappointing to Older and painfully unjust to the accused. The jury disagreed on the charges against the head of the United Railroads, who had poured money on Schmitz, and the case was dismissed. Schmitz was never brought to trial. Ruef, alone, was convicted and sentenced to prison for 14 years.

Older was overwhelmed by a feeling of regenerator's regret. He personally apologized to Ruef, who had taken all the blame for the graft that poisoned the city. He told a reporter: "I was vindictive, unscrupulous, savage...I said to myself, 'You've got him...you've won. How do you like your victory?...Well, my soul revolted. I thought over my life, the many unworthy things I have done to others, the injustice, the wrongs I have been guilty of, the human hearts I have wantonly hurt....'"

Older had one more intensely fought crusade to pursue, his last and most frustrating. He became convinced that the radical labor leader Tom Mooney, who was accused of planting a bomb that killed ten and wounded forty during a parade celebrating military buildup in 1916, had been convicted and sentenced to death on the basis of perjured testimony. Two weeks before Mooney was scheduled to hang, [December 13, 1918] the governor commuted his sentence to life in prison. For the next sixteen years, Older was obsessed with gaining a full pardon for Mooney, whose associate, Warren Billings, was ultimately released.

Older's crusades had begun to annoy his publisher, R.A. Crothers. Older's defense of Mooney was the breaking point of his patience. Advertisers were boycotting the Bulletin. Crothers told Older, in effect, to lay off or get out. Older accepted a long-standing offer from the hated Hearst to go over to the Call, the very paper he had been fighting throughout his years at the Bulletin. Hearst promised he could bring all his causes with him, including his unpopular defense of Mooney,

In leaving, he took occasion to reiterate the policies he stood for and to promise they would guide the Call as they had the Bulletin:

- *Municipal ownership (of public utilities)

- *Investigation of municipal corruption and the connection between special privilege and corrupt policies...

- *For minimum wage and eight-hour day for women.

- *For initiative, referendum and recall.

- *For the [Hiram] Johnson policies of political and economic reform incorporated in California law during Johnson's terms as governor.

- *For the abolition of capital punishment.

- *For prison reform and a better understanding of the causes of crime... so that scientific methods might eventually be substituted for stupidity and brutality.

- * For understanding the problem of prostitution and similar problems in the light of the latest sociological research.

- *Equality before the law for rich and poor.

- *Fair trial for [Tom] Mooney and the other bomb defendants in order to remove the frame-up from the courts of California.

- *A square deal for the workers and frank discussion of their problems and aims.

The Bulletin had 100,000 circulation when Older left it in 1918. Within a year, the Call, which had formerly lagged the Bulletin by several thousand copies, led it by 12,000. Hearst scooped up the remains of the Bulletin and melded them into the Call-Bulletin, an afternoon newspaper, with Older at its head.

Older still editorialized and worked to free Mooney; he still railed against capital punishment. But he lost interest in the new forces of change – the militant labor movement, the stand-fast position of business and finance --- that were driving San Francisco toward a dark and fatal conflict on the waterfront, a general strike and years of class tension. .

Older wrote in a letter to a friend: "I might become more excited about the situation if I hadn't learned through experience that power is never intelligently used, no matter who acquires it..."

At 77, ill and morose, Older said of his fellow-man: "They follow like sheep and turn like wolves." He said: "I no longer bubble with joy when a baby is born into this world, knowing life as I do." He said: "The best place to find gratitude is in the dictionary."

He died at the wheel of his car on a trip to Sacramento to take his wife to a flower show. He stayed in the car, thinking, while his wife looked at camellias. At his funeral in "Woodhills," his home in Saratoga, there was a display of flowers from Tom Mooney, who was still in San

Quentin. Abe Ruef, whom Older had sent to prison -- and then, later, had fought to free -- was at the service, and wept.

Older's stated principles---- rigid, clear, unambiguous --- continued to guide a certain school of old fashioned newspaper editors and publishers. Similar concerns with power and corruption are the underlying rationale for much of what is nowadays called "investigative reporting," including segments of "Sixty Minutes" and many television documentaries. In the light of later experience, however, some of Older's reform principles seem naïve, and he appears to us as a humorless, stubborn idealist without much interest in or sympathy for journalism as an agent of civilization.. No one ever called him "Mister San Francisco."

In the very year of Fremont Older's death, 1935, Paul C. Smith, another self-educated, coarsely precocious frontiersman of a very different stripe, bounced out of nowhere as executive editor of the Chronicle Smith was 26, going on 27 years old. He was much the youngest person ever to hold that position, and easily the youngest editor of a major newspaper in America. It was inevitable that he should be dubbed "The Boy Wonder." As with all Boy Wonders, his unearned success, his transparent ego and his cock-robin air created envy, skepticism and hostility.

In his autobiography, "Personal File," Smith recalled his "first shocking discovery" that he was not "universally liked around the paper."

"Some people disliked me even more after they came to know me. Occasionally, I even discovered that some people believed they had to know me really well in order to really dislike me properly."

Smith's friend Lincoln Steffens, who was living in Carmel, warned him that being appointed editor was a tragedy – "for journalism and for you. It's a tragedy for journalism because you're too young, you don't know enough to be an editor. And it's a tragedy for you, because having become an editor so young, you will never have a chance to learn anything."

In Paul's opinion, the Chronicle had been a narrow organ for the point of view of a few powerful advertisers. He declared he would resist publishing editorial material merely to promote advertisers.

"In my view, a newspaper's function was to communicate information, ideas and entertainment, and to do so from just one narrow viewpoint within the community was in violation of a faithful trust."

Nobody could disagree with that generality, but Smith was no more successful than his predecessors in excluding press releases from businesses, resorts, airlines, nightclubs, manufacturers –even churches---that advertised in the Chronicle..

Getting started, he tangled with the directors of the business and mechanical departments, who resisted his suggestions for improving their performance. As he recalled it, he usually got his way. He had the charm, the persuasive delivery that comes from absolute self-confidence. He was not afraid of anything or any body, so he could always be himself. He wanted everyone, down to the copyboys and typesetters to call him Paul, whether or not they liked him. He let it be known that he had been a poor orphan, drifting along on his own, from early childhood, and had learned to be tough and decisive.

When he came to write his memoir, many years later, with the considerable help of Scott Newhall's talented wife, Ruth, it turned out that many of Paul's memories of his early life were unreliable. He said he was the bastard child of a forty-year-old woman who had first deserted

him, then later told him that he had been born, literally, in the gutter in Seattle and was the son of a titled Englishman who had died. Ruth Newhall put all this down to permissible fabrication, based on a dearth of facts. Paul remembered some sketchy schooling in Wyoming, a semester or two in Oakland. Down in Pescadero on the coast of San Mateo County, he finally had finished high school. He knocked around in Canada, (where he probably actually had been born) working in the wheat harvest, looking for gold. He worked as a logger, a prospector, even a coal miner. At 18 [in 1927] he persuaded some businessmen in Ashland, Oregon, to back him in opening a sports shop and giving lessons in golf, which he learned to play out of a book. From there, resuming his wandering, he landed a job with the Anglo-California Bank, which sent him to New York City.

The more-or-less provable part of the story was that in 1931, when Smith was making the princely salary of \$18,000 a year in banking, he threw over that job to go to work as a \$100-a-month assistant editor on the financial page of the Chronicle. By and by, he chucked that and took off to rove around Europe as a free-lance reporter. He interviewed Hitler and Mussolini before responding to a plea from the Chronicle to come back and become financial editor. The former President Herbert Hoover had noticed and liked his writing.. Hoover offered him a job as his personal secretary; but when Smith asked for a release from the paper, the publisher George T. Cameron outbid his friend Hoover and offered Smith the editorship of the paper.

Any resemblance between the lives and the purposes of Fremont Older and Paul C. Smith is purely accidental. Smith hated howling headlines. He was uninterested in the labyrinthine intricacies of municipal politics. He did not believe in the purpose or the efficacy of newspaper crusades. He wanted to make the Chronicle a mirror of San Francisco's culture, tolerance, good humor and intelligence, a sophisticated example to the world. He took as a model the brilliantly written and edited New York Herald Tribune but also promised to make the Chronicle the New York Times of the Pacific Coast. No one really believed him, but the conceit was ingratiating. Paul was, in truth, a short-interest-span reader who would not spend several hours a day reading the good, gray Times. He admired the boiled-down, departmentalized news coverage and the brisk prose of TIME Magazine, the New New Thing in American journalism. He succeeded in applying that technique to the Sunday section he created, called, characteristically, "This World."

Smith was optimistic, idealistic, sometimes naive. Once he asked the most powerful lobbyist in Sacramento, Artie Samish, who was known in those days as the Secret Boss of California --- to do him a favor: get a resolution for One World through the legislature.

Samish asked: "What the hell is One World?"

Smith explained that it was something Wendell Willkie was keen about. Samish understood that "It concerned a world federalist union or some damned thing. I don't know what it was all about, but if Paul Smith believed in it, that was good enough for me."

With Smith, much of what made a good newspaper was a matter of style: the discriminating selection and compression of news, the careful choice of type-faces, the photography and design; the excellence of writing -- and, above all, the recruiting of talented editors and reporters. Some of those recruited by Smith became the paper's star reporters and columnist. Others, like the stars of Older's Bulletin, made their fame after leaving the paper to become editors, novelists, politicians, academics.

Searching for fresh talent, Smith hired Herb Caen, a twenty-year-old reporter from the Sacramento Union in 1936 as a radio columnist. It turned out to be Smith's brightest moves, although Caen once dismissed it as "not the hardest trick of that or any other year." Smith told him other, more experienced men were after the job. Smith said: "I'm hiring you because you're the first guy I've met in this business who's younger than I am." It was Caen who told the story.

Two years later, Smith gave Caen a couple of weeks' tryout doing a daily column on night life, a local imitation of Walter Winchell's nationally syndicated column of New York City gossip. Caen's column quickly outclassed Winchell, grew into a six-times-a-week kaleidoscope of all that was important, funny, surprising, charming or tragic in the city. Thousands of San Franciscans considered it essential daily reading. An item in Caen's column could be more influential than a mention in any other publication in California. .

Smith claimed credit for hiring Stanton Delaplane in the same year. Delaplane was a witty stylist, a master of the sentence fragment, the pungent quote and the poignant phrase. He won a Pulitzer prize in 1942 for his stories on the secession state of Jefferson in far northern California and one county in Oregon, a series that walked a knife-edge between satire and compassion. After World War II, Delaplane was given a column that was principally about his travels, his daughter and his cat. It was lovable and funny but never essential reading, and when Caen deserted the Chronicle in 1950 to spend eight years writing for the Examiner ---- at double his former salary ---- there was no writer on the staff, no writer from anywhere, who could attract the devoted fans that Caen took with him.

While Smith was trying to engrave his personality on the paper, a strike by lettuce pickers in the Salinas Valley turned violent. Smith saturated the valley with reporters and then went down to Salinas himself and wrote sympathetically about the strikers and scathingly about their employers. He compared the police tactics of the employers to Fascism. This editorial bias led a few advertisers to boycott the Chronicle. Smith defied them by reporting the boycott on page one. The coverage of the strike and Smith's role in urging the employers to negotiate got national attention.

The lettuce strike story was the beginning of the reputation of the Boy Wonder as a fighting liberal and the Chronicle as a changed paper, neither of which was precisely true. The editorial page remained Republican, conservative and generally unexciting. Smith's attentions were drawn from local issues to national politics. He took leave to work in the campaign of Wendell Willkie, the internationalist from Indiana who won the nomination of the Republican Party in 1940 to the dismay of conservatives opposed to involvement in Europe's wars. Willkie was defeated by Franklin D. Roosevelt. Smith, facetiously calling himself a "war monger," came back to San Francisco and tried to position the Chronicle in favor of American intervention against the Axis. He gave full play to national and international news to keep the war constantly in the consciousness of his readers.

"For this I was roundly damned," Smith wrote, "and even some of my own organization thought I was slighting the local news."

Immediately after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Smith headed for Washington, D.C. as a lieutenant commander in the Naval Reserve. He was disappointed that his first job was in public relations – a move, as he put it, "from a swivel chair in San Francisco to another swivel chair in Washington." After less than a year in the Office of

War Information, he resigned his commission and re-enlisted as a private in the Marines. Back home, this was widely regarded as evidence that Smith's ego mania had deteriorated into madness. His combat experience in the Pacific Islands was entirely real. He won a Silver Star and came home looking older and sadder. Those close to him realized that he had lost his boy wonder zeal to raise himself and the Chronicle to world renown.

Back in his fabulous flat, his old extravagance resumed. He bought suits a dozen at a time, smoked incessantly, ate irregularly, slept little and drank his buddies down in straight Scotch.

"My income had gone above fifty thousand a year," he wrote in his book, "but I had always had an invincible compulsion to live like a millionaire ... Because of the spectacular view, I usually took luncheon guests to my apartment despite the fact that I paid dues regularly at five San Francisco clubs."

His apartment once again was a like a movie set, a romantic image of San Francisco at its most seductive. He brought back his two-man, live-in staff, Jimmy the bartender, Clifford the cook. His place was, in his words, "the sort of happy establishment women invariably envy a bachelor." His hospitality ranged from intimate dinners to buffets for 150.

"After working hours, I found myself increasingly interested in what went on outside journalism, in all sorts of people from the world at large. I remember Danny Kaye and Admiral Nimitz, Joan Fontaine and Carl Sandburg, Clare Luce and Louis B. Mayer, Earl Warren and Mike Cowles, and always old friends like Herbert Hoover and the deYoung family."

To all of them, he was Paul, the editor of the San Francisco Chronicle.. Everyone who was anyone wanted to have lunch with Paul. As Scott Newhall put it: "Like when you're in India you visit the Taj Mahal." Paul loved to mix and match his famous guests on the principle that celebrities will put up with any sort of opponent as long as the opponent is another celebrity. He seated Lincoln Steffens next to President Hoover, paired Dorothy Parker with Clare Luce, and Noel Coward with Harry Bridges, Paul's favorite radical labor leader, the one the immigration people were always trying to deport as a Communist. Paul belonged to Hoover's camp, Cave Men, at the Bohemian Club's Grove encampment on the Russian River. He enjoyed teasing the other gentlemen over their evening cocktails by advancing deliciously radical ideas.

But his passion for the newspaper had burned out. In his chats with younger members of the staff, many of whom he had recruited to the paper as copy boys, he shared his old dreams of the Chronicle as a beacon of honesty and moderation in a greedy and quarrelsome world. To many he remained an idol, even those who realized that he had lost touch and was allowing the paper to drift downward, out of his control

Then, in November, 1952, after nineteen years of having his name and his personality virtually synonymous with the Chronicle, of being the personification of San Francisco's relaxed and worldly charm, of being the crazy, wonderful Paul whom everyone wanted to meet --- Smith lost his job. The owners of the paper, the extended family of Michael H. deYoung, forced him out by demanding that he rein in his own expenses, save money and cut staff in ways he would not, or could not do. They turned over the control of the paper to the eldest of Michael deYoung's grandsons, Charles de Young Thieriot, who had been running the

Chronicle's television station, KRON, profitably for ten years. They would hire a new editor to take over Smith's job --- but in a position subservient to the publisher.

The change of leadership at the Chronicle would cause a profound change in the definition of what a newspaper was, at least in San Francisco. But the chief players in the maneuvers that led up to the showdown on the Friday after Thanksgiving, when 37 editorial employees were fired during Smith's absence, treated the subject guardedly in their memoirs.

Smith wrote "While I liked and admired Charles Thieriot:...I realized that it would be difficult for me to cede authority to him...When he was named assistant publisher I realized that my time at the Chronicle was drawing to a close."

At this point in Smith's minutely detailed story, there is a gap. He does not tell about his meeting a few days later in the third floor newsroom with all the remaining staff, some of whom were crying. He told them he was trying again to buy the paper from the deYoung trustees, who had turned him down before. He was assured of financial backing. He would never permit this cruel purge.

In the next paragraph of his autobiography, we find him driving east in an open car, broke and jobless, to seek his fortune in New York.

Some of the remaining staff ---- those who had been passed over in the Thanksgiving Week blood bath -- hoped that the likeable and liberal managing editor Larry Fanning would take over. Fanning had been running the paper, day to day. On hand, too, chief copy editor William German and the City Editor, Abe Mellinkoff..

But it turned out that Scott Newhall, the capable and personable Sunday editor had been waiting in the wings. Concerned about the lack of leadership, which he blamed for the weak circulation of the Chronicle, Newhall had sent a memo to the publisher, George Cameron -- known to all as "Uncle George"--- saying, in effect, that he would quit, himself, if they didn't make changes in the direction of the paper.

In an immense oral history that he recorded with the interviewer Susan B. Riess of the Bancroft Library's Regional Oral History Office at UC Berkeley, Newhall discussed his motives:

"I felt so deeply about the Chronicle. I mean, really, the Chronicle was my own, it was my life. Hearst was still ahead of us. They were rich, and we were losing. I felt this could be done and I thought, I'd like a shot at it." On reflection, in the next day's interview, he added: "I've already mentioned how things really just finally got to a terrible situation. Paul would not fire the people. And I don't say I disagree with him at all. He just wouldn't. And he left."

For a while, the changes instituted by Newhall and Thieriot were relatively minor and cosmetic and did not affect the tone of the paper. Most of the changes were internal. In less than a year, Newhall fired the managing editor, Larry Fanning, and gave that position to Gordon Pates, who had been Newhall's second on the Sunday paper. At Charlie Thieriot's instigation, the paper began carrying a news summary -- "Top of the News" -- on page one, a useful innovation many other papers have adopted. The historic motto "The City's Only Home-Owned Newspaper" went to the waste basket and the Chronicle began to style itself "The Voice of the West."

But Newhall had the instincts, the talents of an advertising man, and he believed the paper must create its own stories to attract attention. There were historic precedents. Young

Willie Hearst had showed how to make sensationalism more sensational. He had sent a couple aloft to get married in a gas balloon. He had assigned a woman reporter to fling herself off a bay ferry to test the life-saving equipment. He had manufactured an entirely imaginary earthquake that had destroyed Boston. In the midst of this fun, he had given an interview in which he called his policy "intelligent sensationalism." and argued it was the only way a newspaper could hold its own against the romantic attraction of novels and plays.

To Scott Newhall, the point of running a newspaper was to capture an audience, most of whom, as he expressed it, were simple boobs, seeking amusement more than information. Reading for enlightenment, for education was too much work, and not fun.

In the summer doldrums of his second year, Newhall planned the least objectionable, and most entertaining, of many campaigns to capture new readers. It was called Emperor Norton's Treasure Hunt, and it unleashed thousands of excited families, carrying trowels and shovels, on the parks and open spaces of the city in search of a buried medallion worth \$1000. Each week the paper published tantalizing clues, written by Ruth Newhall and helpers from the staff, including reporter Tom Benet. Scott recalled that circulation popped up by ten percent on days the clues appeared.

Less appreciated was a brand new column called "Beauty and the Beast," written with considerable editing by a former hairdresser named Henry "Scoop" Spinelli under the nom de plume "Count Marco." The Count counseled women on such keen issues as how to dress, behave and take baths with their husbands. Nowadays, Spinelli's advice would be recognized as a gay man's satire on traditional newspaper columns of advice to women on how to please men. At the time, it amused many readers and infuriated others who complained that the Chronicle had lost dignity. Whatever respect was left for the paper's historic sobriety faded when Newhall promoted a phony crusade against nudity in animals. Over the years, he sponsored an independence movement in the obscure Caribbean Island of Anguilla; sent a feature writer to report on a space program in Zambia that included swinging through the trees; sent another reporter to East Africa on a failed mission to buy a slave girl who would be publicly freed in United Nations Plaza; and --- at his most misunderstood and ridiculed --- aimed a series of heavily promoted articles complaining about the quality of coffee in San Francisco's restaurants and hotels. The headline "A Great City Forced to Drink Swill" was quoted and misquoted around the world and convinced outsiders that Newhall had finally gone completely mad. He was having fun again, mocking the ponderous, self-important journalism of such papers as the Examiner.

While he was at the Chronicle, Newhall was not given to enunciating lofty principles. He had enough trouble fending off -- or shrugging off --- the denigration of journalism professors, the derision of his neighbors in Berkeley and the contemptuous jibes of other newspaper editors like Ben Bradley, the editor of the Washington Post. Newhall told interviewers that his single goal was to drive the Examiner out of town by any legal means. This fixation he attributed to his having been turned down when he applied for a job as a photographer at the Examiner when he was 19 years old. No one believed this, either.

Urged along by a sympathetic interviewer in his oral history, he offered an explanation a sort of apologia for the stunts that had overshadowed his true talent in nurturing such writers as Art Hoppe, Lucius Beebe, and Charles McCabe, maintaining and strengthening the

Chronicle's traditional attention to art, music and architecture; and, above all, grabbing at the opportunity to bring the irreplaceable Herb Caen back to the Chronicle.

"Naked animals." Newhall said, "Anguilla, Fat Venuses, camel races --- all that stuff is a way to build attention and readership in the paper. But it has nothing to do with the real thrust of journalism.

"No paper can be a force for good or bad if it has no readers, if it has no currency, if it is not read and appreciated and heard. By some of these offbeat techniques the Chronicle was able to attract the attention of not only some sophisticated readers --- who were not always necessarily totally in a laudatory frame of mind --- but also a lot of credulous, regular, average people.

"I suppose every editor if he's worth anything has to have some kind of a mission. Every editor is a messiah no matter what they say. Some messiahs want you to follow their path and other messiahs -- it's closer to my own attitude -- simply set up a situation so the readers or the people can make up their own minds or discover for themselves that there is more than one answer to everything, that's all."

The Chronicle's exhausting and expensive promotional campaign appeared to pay off about 1965, when its circulation passed that of the Examiner, making it for the time being the leading---if most unfairly scorned --- paper in Northern California. In the same year, the Chronicle and the Examiner signed an agreement for joint publication that seemed to dilute the independence of both and to obviate the long competition for supremacy.

The agreement, known as the JOA, was reached in a series of more-or-less private, more-or-less friendly talks between Charles Thieriot and Randy Hearst, who were long-time friends. Its terms struck outsiders --- and even a few within the owning family of the Chronicle--- as a betrayal of principles for immediate profit.. The Chronicle, having virtually succeeded in Newhall's dream of destroying the Examiner, now agreed to split the profits of both papers fifty-fifty and to cut costs by printing in the same plant. Each would edit and publish its own paper. They would jointly own a corporation that would print, distribute and sell advertising for both. Six days a week, the Chronicle would publish in the morning and the Examiner would appear in the less desirable afternoon.. On Sundays, the two would issue a combined edition, widely known as the Sunday Hermaphrodite. It consisted of the main news sections of the Examiner wrapped around the feature sections of the Chronicle, wrapped around a Macy's ad, wrapped around the funnies, wrapped around the want ads, and so on. Opening it was like peeling away the layers of a giant onion.

Newhall, understandably, saw the Joint Operating Agreement as a bitter end to his favorite game. Instead of killing the Examiner, the Chronicle would keep it alive, at least for the duration of the Agreement. Only the employees of the Ex-paper, as Herb Caen called it, could regard this as desirable. Newhall spent much of his final year as editor on a trip to England to pick up a historic vessel for his favorite enterprise, the San Francisco Maritime Museum.. He bowed out, clearly unhappy, in 1971 and took a job as editor of the monthly San Francisco Magazine, the plaything of Jack Vietor, an amiable dabbler in journalism and social drinking. Vietor showcased Newhall's savage humor for six months, after which Newhall quit to run for mayor of San Francisco.

The mayoral campaign was a fiasco --- a "horrible experience," Newhall recalled. "I had a dreadful time." Somebody, probably Scott himself, devised a photographic campaign poster that

melded the faces of his opponents --- Joe Alioto, Harold Dobbs and Dianne Feinstein --- into a single grotesque head labeled “Big Joe Dobbstein” to suggest the similarity of their politics. Newhall ran fifth in a field of seven candidates. Hardly any voters knew him, of course, except for the few who remembered that he had treated them as boobs and had ruined the Chronicle..

Scott and Ruth sold their house in the Berkeley hills and moved to Piru, in Ventura County, near the town of Newhall, which was named for Scott’s paternal ancestor. They remodeled a Victorian mansion (which later burned down) and had fun writing for Scott’s own paper, the Newhall Signal, which he had bought [in 1963] as a hobby and future outlet when work began to get boring at the Chronicle. From the pages of his new plaything, Scott launched an obviously Quixotic campaign to persuade the northern part of Los Angeles County to secede from the south. He wrote editorials, filled with venom, about Mayor Alioto, in far away San Francisco, who had trounced him in the mayoral campaign. He called Alioto the Grand Duke, the Doge and Il Magnifico and blamed him for everything that was disappointing San Francisco.

“While ‘Il Magnifico’ held court in his City Hall fortress, skyscrapers rose like giant sequoias and towered over San Francisco and the waterfront crumbled into ruin. He provided jobs for his blue-collar workers by digging holes and trenches in city streets, until much of the downtown area was cratered like the moon. The streets filled up with gypsies, fortune-tellers, vagabonds, drag queens, cutpurses, muggers, homicidal maniacs and old fashioned beggars. Street crime is a common pastime.”

The printed and bound transcription of Scott’s oral history ---five-hundred and sixty-three pages long --- was launched to the public at a large reception at the Cal library in November, 1990. Ben Bagdikian, then the dean of the Graduate School of Journalism, presided. Bagdikian, who regarded himself as the chief critic and gadfly of the Bay Area press, had once called Newhall the “evil genius” of San Francisco journalism. Now he made an obsequious recantation. The word “evil” did not apply to Newhall, he said. --- only the single word “genius.”

Newhall died two years later, aged 78, in a hospital in Southern California that had been named for his great-grandfather.

Paul Smith took a well-paid job in New York with the Crowell-Collier company, where he presided over the death and burial of three magazines, notably the doomed weekly Collier’s, the first of its breed to die of television. Smith suffered horribly from an affliction ---probably an anal fissure – that made it acutely painful to walk, stand or sit down. At 55 he had a stroke that put him into a wheel chair. He came west again and lived for a while in a garden cottage at Scott and Ruth Newhall’s home up near Grizzly Peak. Ruth Newhall helped him write his book. He died at the Veteran’s Hospital in Palo Alto in 1974.

Under the Joint Operating Agreement, the newspaper whose destiny both Smith and Newhall had shaped for better or worse continued to publish for thirty-five years of respectable sobriety. It was still ridiculed by people who remembered only the crazy stunts. Michael de Young’s descendants clashed in fratricidal fury over who should be in charge, and in July, 2000, the faction that wanted to get out of the newspaper business triumphed. They sold the Chronicle to the privately owned Hearst Communications Corporation, and Hearst passed the Examiner and its familiar old spread-eagle logo with a \$66 million subsidy to the Fang family, who turned it into a give-away tabloid. It now belongs to Philip Anschutz, a Denver publisher, who also owns an Examiner in Baltimore and an Examiner in Washington, DC They are all very much alike.

Left alone, freed of competition within the City, the Chronicle has shriveled to 24th in the top 100 newspapers in the United States, according to figures released last March by the Audit Bureau of Circulations – just behind the San Diego Union-Tribune and a notch ahead of the Newark, New Jersey Star Ledger. Every surviving major newspaper in the country except the Wall Street Journal is losing circulation, but the old Chron has been one of the hardest hit of the survivors. In the Bay Area it circulates far below the triumvirate of papers owned by the Media News Group --- the San Jose Mercury News, the Contra Costa Times and the Oakland Tribune.

There is no doubt about the cause of this disastrous decline. It is the disruptive technology of the internet that has re-defined the meaning of news to mean “instant information from everywhere.” There is no printed publication that can deliver information with the immediacy of the internet. For those who have long believed that the local daily newspaper was the cement that bound a community together, it is no comfort that SF GATE, the Chronicle’s on-line service is the fifth largest in the United States. The community it serves includes browsers in India and Japan and San Diego and San Jose, too. It even carries news of San Francisco to one and all around the world.

The essayist Richard Rodriguez wrote recently about the twilight of the American newspaper. He called his article in Harper’s Magazine “Final Edition.”

“When a newspaper dies in America,” he wrote, “it is not simply that a commercial enterprise has failed. If the San Francisco Chronicle is near death ---- and why else would the editors celebrate its 144th anniversary? And why else would the editors devote a week to feature articles on fog?---it is because San Francisco’s sense of itself as a city is perishing...

He concludes:

“In the growling gray light (San Francisco still has foghorns), I collect the San Francisco Chronicle from the wet steps. I am so lonely I must subscribe to three papers --- the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times, the San Francisco Chronicle. I remark their thinness as I climb the stairs. The three together equal what I remember.”

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