

Chapter 13 - THE COUNTRY HOME 1930-39

New Magazine, New Editor...Thomas H. Beck...Article "by Henry Ford"...Economic Explanations...Air Explosion...In Canada...I Become Editor...The Blue Jay...The Blue Ribbon Farm Market"...Fourteen Chicken Livers...Colors Go Wrong...The Country Correspondent...The Blue Ribbon Fades...Up and Out to a New Opportunity

Publishers, as well as editors - and other human beings, are not so wise as never to make mistakes. The Crowell Publishing Company, to which *Farm and Fireside* belonged, was then the second largest magazine publisher in the United States. The Curtis Company stood first. Crowell issued the *American Magazine*, for a dozen years or more a highly profitable property. *The Woman's Home Companion* ranked second to the Curtis *Ladies' Home Journal*. *Farm and Fireside* was eclipsed in revenues by the *Country Gentleman*, the Curtis farm periodical. Rivalry between the two companies was most intense in the weekly field, where *Collier's* sought to catch up with the better established and more widely accepted *Saturday Evening Post*

The president of Crowell, Thomas H. Beck, had one obsessive purpose; that was to overtake the Curtis lead. A flamboyant salesman, he liked any sort of bold gesture, personal or business. For example, he was a passenger on the first commercial trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific flights. From selling soap to selling automobiles he had advanced to selling advertising space, and outselling the competition was his constant goal. He cared little about what the magazines printed as long as we kept pace in the advertising and circulation races with Curtis.

Once when I remarked that certain policies *Collier's* was supporting during the New Deal would lead toward Communism, his reply was, "So, what? If we have Communism, Curtis will be under Communism, too, won't they?"

In 1929, Beck decided that *Farm and Fireside* was not riding the waves of the future. "Firesides are out of date," he said. "Everybody has radiators now." To make a dramatic change, he had directed that after more than a half century, *Farm and Fireside* should adopt a new name, new garb, and new purposes. It was to become a "shelter" magazine, appealing to the building material and home construction industries, while retaining its agricultural character. After debating scores of suggestions for new names, the one decided upon was *The Country Home*.

George Martin, whose personal depression had preceded that of the stock market, could summon no interest in the big change. From a speakeasy at four o'clock one morning he telephoned Beck that the new magazine could be located wherever in his anatomy Beck chose, and that Martin was resigning. Understandably the resignation was accepted.

The new editor was Thomas E. Cathcart, who knew little and cared less about agriculture. He had been a clever producer of advertising promotion material, and actually was not a bad editor, though he proved to be a rather difficult one. He recognized good writing. His usual method, when a manuscript had been submitted by one of the staff, was simply to say, "Rewrite it." How it should be rewritten, or what was wrong, he found it difficult to explain. The eventual result usually, however, was something a little better. Almost any first draft can be improved.

Cathcart and I were not exactly simpatico, though he tolerated me and I managed to get along with him. The first issue of *The Country Home* appeared in February 1930. The succeeding years were not the best for building up advertising images in a new magazine. We were not doing too well, and I felt that Tom would be more happy with some one else in my place. These were not good times to be out of a job, and so I tried to continue to be essential. One of his ideas called for "big name" signatures in the magazine. Most of all, he wanted a piece under Henry Ford's by-line. A well-known and conscientious Midwest free lancer was assigned to the job. After two weeks of effort he reported that he had been unable to see Mr. Ford. Cathcart then sent not one but two New York writers to Dearborn. They returned with a manuscript. When it was circulated to the staff, I reported to Cathcart that it was a fake; that the boys had not seen Mr. Ford, and proved it by showing from my files on Ford that the article was made up from quotations out of other Ford statements. "If you really want a Henry Ford piece," I said, "I'll go out and get it."

This was Cathcart's chance to get rid of McMillen. If I failed, as three others had already done, here was an excuse that he could justify to the higher-ups for a staff change. "I will go out to Detroit tomorrow night," I promised him. "I may be back this week, or some other week. Ford may be in Dearborn, or Georgia or in the Upper Peninsula, and I may have to wait until he returns."

From Detroit I telephoned William J. Cameron, who handled Ford's public relations. "What do you want him to talk about?" Cameron asked. "Education," I said. "All right, he will see you. Come out tomorrow morning by ten, and some time during the day he will be with you."

I knew that Mr. Ford would talk to people he knew about a topic that was concerning him at the moment, and that he had recently been thinking about educational ideas. By the next afternoon I had spent two or three hours with him, and had the material for a provocative article. Returning late in the day to my Detroit hotel, I found a wire from Cathcart. "Where is that Ford Story?" It was with a certain glee that I could reply, "It will be on your desk the day after tomorrow."

The piece was written that night and a draft mailed to Cathcart. Cameron approved it next morning without change. *Country Home* had its Ford signature, and *Reader's Digest* reprinted it.

Franklin D. Roosevelt was governor of New York and being talked about for the presidency. His was another big name Cathcart wanted. So I went to Albany. "What do you want me to talk about?" the governor asked when I came to his office. "Reforestation, I suggested; this was a rural topic in which he had shown interest. Beforehand I had prepared by reading the current authorities. He gave me a point that made a useful lead, a couple of anecdotes, and then said, "You seem to know just as much about this as I do. Why don't you go ahead and write the article, and let me see it.

Next day, sitting on a sofa at the governor's mansion, he read the piece I had prepared overnight, wrote "OK, FDR" in a corner of the first page, and that completed the interview.

Some months later another article for his signature was done after an equally brief interview. A statement about the effect of certain land retirement legislation was modified after being checked with statehouse sources, but the piece was approved in much the same casual manner. In a note of thanks for the published copy, he wrote, "The only thing that disturbs me is the suggestion in your box that I might become a candidate for president."

Another experience from four years earlier came to mind. After a talk with W.M. Jardine, then Secretary of Agriculture, about the possibilities of research to find industrial uses for farm products, he urged that the idea be presented to Herbert Hoover, then his colleague in the cabinet as Secretary of Commerce. To this I gladly agreed, providing Jardine would make the appointment, which he did.

Hoover listened to my exposition. Whether or not it led to the \$50,000 item in his next Bureau of Standards budget for work on farm wastes, I never knew. He began asking questions about general farm affairs. He brought out some correspondence and copies of statements which he had made. As the talk went on, I said, "Mr. Secretary, you have made several remarks here that I believe would be interesting to our readers. Would you mind if I try to write them down and submit the manuscript for your approval?" "Sometimes I think I have already said too much about agriculture," he laughed. "But go ahead, and let's see what you come up with."

Having heard that he was scrupulous about the wording of his statements, I stopped in the outer office and obtained copies of whatever was on file there that might be useful. A long night's work produced a synthesis, nearly all in language he had used previously, but which set forth the points we had discussed. When he read it next day he asked when we would need the article. I named a date about five weeks ahead.

"You have done a good job putting this together," he said, "but some of the figures you have used are a little out of date. Let me put it in my pocket and work it over a little. You will have it on time." A day ahead of the date set the manuscript was on my desk. I found in it exactly one paragraph which had not been changed.

Features on complex economic subjects, constituted much of the work in the Cathcart period. One, for instance, attempted to explain what the Reconstruction Finance Corporation meant to farmers. The mail that followed this article was slim, but one letter came from Joseph P. Knapp, the principal owner of the Crowell Publishing Company. The letter noted a figure in my article that referred to so many millions of dollars; the correct amount, Mr. Knapp only and he of all people noted, should have been in billions. I had omitted three ciphers. On my first chance to deal in figures that required ten digits, I had muffed it!

Well before the Roosevelt administration began, Dr. George Warren, farm economist at Cornell University, had proclaimed that commodity prices, including those of farm products, would rise if the price of gold were to increase. An ably organized publicity campaign supported Warren's viewpoint. This was, to the ordinary reader, an abstruse subject upon which he could not easily form an opinion. I undertook to explain the matter. Warren would give me no help. I learned later that he was under White House instructions not to talk. From study of his books and earlier statements and from interviews with his colleagues, I managed to arrive at some understanding of his proposals, and wrote an article.

The manuscript was accepted, but it was not immediately used. When time came to make up the November 1933, issue, something urged me to insist that the article be put into print. Advance promotion then announced the article to the Associated Press and other agencies. Our publication date was Monday, October 25. On Sunday night, October 24, President Roosevelt announced the upward change in the price of gold from \$20.67 an ounce to, as it was settled a little later, \$35 an ounce

Country Home had the only current explanation in print of what the change was intended to accomplish. We did not offer the magazine on newsstands, although a few news dealers subscribed and resold their copies. These were all gone in Washington and elsewhere before noon on Monday. Whether it was a good article remained in doubt after letters were received from the principal advocates of the change and also from its best known opponents, both commendatory!

A trip during this period produced an incident or two. The initial destination was Winnipeg. An experiment in handling milk as a public utility invited inquiry, as did another in public medicine. A seat had been reserved on a United Airlines Boeing two-engine plane leaving New York at four in the afternoon. Meanwhile, having made a dinner appointment in Chicago, I changed this so as to leave at two --

service then provided a flight every two hours. Toward midnight when I climbed into the limousine at the Chicago Palmer House a gentleman in the back seat was moaning over the early edition of the *Tribune* spread out on his lap. He was headed, he said, for his first airplane flight. The headlines reported that the Boeing, from which my reservation had been changed, had exploded over Indiana with the loss of all aboard. "I oughtn't to have bought this paper," the old fellow groaned

After a night flight by Ford tri-motor I was given a cot in the St. Paul airport for a short sleep before going on to Fargo in a Hamilton six-seater. From Fargo the craft was a four-seater. After Pembina, at the Canadian border, I was the only passenger.

"Monday the deer season opens," the pilot announced before we took off. "There's a woods up here a ways that I want to scout. I'll look out the left side. You look out the right. We may see if any deer are there." Air schedules at that time, like radio timing a few years earlier, were still informal. We saw no deer.

After Winnipeg I went to Regina and employed a driver to take me some 75 miles up-country to where a township had hired a doctor to look after its people. This was a pioneer experiment for North America in public medicine, and we wanted to tell about it. A few miles out of town the chauffeur reported that the doorman of the six-story Regina Hotel had told him I was from New York.

"I've read that there in New York there's a building that's over fifty stories high," he said. "Is that true?" "Yes," I told him. "It is actually 102 stories high, more than 1200 feet." He was properly amazed. "Gosh! That's higher than our hotel in Regina, ain't it?"

He was a careful driver, who had not only never seen a high building but had never seen a real hill. Whenever we approached a "draw" he shifted the Cadillac into low gear.

We found the township doctor, who said he liked getting paid regularly, and some of the people who said they liked his services. This was, in a way, thirty years ahead of Medicaid.

Despite its slick paper, color printing, house plans big names and other innovations *Country Home* did not prosper. The management decided that after all it should be a farm magazine rather than another "shelter" publication. One early autumn morning in 1934, Beck called the two of us to his desk and announced that I was to become editor and Cathcart editorial director.

When we returned to our 11th floor offices I asked Cathcart how he interpreted the news. "Well," he said, "if I am to be editorial director, I expect to direct."

"O.K.," I said, "and if I am to be editor, I shall expect to edit. If I need any direction, I'll call upon you."

With this understanding I took charge. Cathcart was shortly returned to the advertising promotion field where his abilities were best fitted and where he was happiest. Later he became promotion manager for *This Week*, a national newspaper Sunday supplement.

The first dollar I ever earned from writing had been paid me by *Farm and Fireside*, back about 1910, for a short article in which the blue jay was condemned as a thief, a robber, predator and nuisance. I had not then become a real conservationist.

The first caller to appear in the afternoon after I had taken the new chair was announced by my secretary. "Mr. Silas Bent wishes to see the editor," she said. Mr. Bent was well known. He had long written a column for the New York Times editorial page as well as several books and many magazine articles. He had just come from having a good lunch and was glowing with an idea. Since moving to the country in Connecticut, he explained, he had discovered that blue jays loved peanuts. He wanted to write us an article advising farmers to provide peanuts about their premises to attract the jays.

I tried not to laugh. Thousands of farmers that year were so short of cash that they could hardly afford a nickel bag of peanuts for the kids if they went to the county fair. "Mr. Bent," I told him firmly, "this magazine has taken a stand on the blue jay subject. It is against them. I was responsible for that stand and do not now propose to reverse our position." Then I explained, and we had a laugh together.

In a day or so it occurred to Beck to ask what I proposed to do with *Country Home*. "I intend to make it important to the 35% of farmers who earn 80% of the agricultural income," I asserted. "Jesus!" he exclaimed. "Say those figures again! How do you know they're right?"

The agricultural papers for long years had had trouble persuading city-based advertising people that farmers had any real purchasing power. The census figures time after time indicated that farmers averaged much less cash income than town and city people. But in 1930 the census had asked some new questions and, for the first time, had figures to show, as I had said, that 35% of farmers produced 80% of the output and received 80% of the farm income. Not only that, but the counties in which these more prosperous farmers were located could be identified. A Department of Agriculture economist, O.E. Baker, had worked over this data and in pencil had prepared tables which set forth the information in simple form. An old friend of mine, he had given me Photostats of his tables. I had carried the Photostats in my coat pocket on the hunch that they could some time be used to advantage. Now I laid them before Beck.

Tom Beck was no man to let an idea dangle. Before I had had time to begin changes in the magazine he called in an advertising agency and our promotion people, and appropriated \$150,000 to emblazon "Farm Market A -- The Blue Ribbon Farm Market" in the trade press and in mailing pieces to advertisers.

"Before this goes too far," I suggested, "let's see how our circulation map jibes with the maps of the counties where these top farmers live." The examination showed that there were many such counties where competing magazines had more subscribers than we did. "Don't worry about that," the circulation director said. "We'll go right to work in those counties." They did, but there will be an addendum to the story.

Revising the editorial content and character moved along rapidly. Serial fiction was immediately banished, partly because the space was needed for better material, and partly because I thought the day had passed when monthly story installments attracted readers. I knew and engaged writers who could write what was useful and interesting to farmers and could write it clearly. Photographs of genuine farm interest were used freely. Short articles were given preference; we tried to avoid that "continued on page 54" line. When a controversial topic was timely we tried to present it effectively and fairly. We wanted as much heart and humor as we could find room to print.

The "household" department presented a problem. On a farm, the whole family takes part in the business, and the farm wife is no less important than the farmer. The editor I inherited for this department was an able woman with every qualification except that she had no knowledge whatever of farm living. I scrutinized every line of copy she prepared or passed, to make sure that nothing unsuitable got by.

When a recipe came over my desk that called for fourteen chicken livers, I called the lady in and told her it would not do. "Why not?" she asked. "Don't all farmers keep chickens?" "Yes," I told her, "most of them do, but they can't get fourteen chicken livers without killing fourteen chickens, and they won't want to do that." We shortly found an Iowa farm girl, a graduate in home economics, to take over the department.

To make the most of our color printing, which no competitor commanded at the time, I engaged Edwin Megargee, a top animal artist, to prepare a series of paintings of purebred animals and fowls, cattle, horses, hogs, sheep and poultry. These were to be given full-page space, along with articles by Sam Guard, the country's outstanding livestock writer.

Joseph P. Knapp, our controlling stockholder, also owned a separate large printing company. This company had obtained the rights to a new color process, called gravure, much cheaper than our traditional letter-press method which

required four separate plates to produce a four-color print. Mr. Knapp decided that the gravure process was ready for magazine use, and that it should first be introduced in *Country Home*. So far was the process from being ready that my beautiful portraits of red Duroc hogs came out purplish and the dignified Angus cattle appeared in red or yellowish, to the astonishment of every cattleman who knew they should be solid black. I had to suspend the series.

The need to make *Country Home* better known, a household word if possible, in all rural areas of the nation seemed urgent. Neither mere circulation sales effort nor special advertising could accomplish this economically. I devised a plan that was intended to obtain considerable publicity for the magazine directly, and at the same time to gain the goodwill of local, weekly newspapers. We announced modest cash prizes, any cash in those mid-thirties was attractive, for writers of the most interesting and readable "crossroads correspondence" to be submitted either by the writers themselves or by the editors of their papers. The trade press gave the contest liberal publicity. Hundreds of entries poured in.

The winner, by unanimous decision of the competent judges, was Mrs. Elizabeth Mahnkey, who wrote for a weekly in an obscure Missouri Ozark town. We were about to send Mrs. Mahnkey her modest check when Tom Beck learned about the enthusiastic response the contest had produced and saw potentials we had not envisioned. "You're shooting at an elephant with a flea gun," he snorted. "Send her a thousand dollars! Bring her to New York and take her to Washington!"

Tom was right, for Mrs. Mahnkey was a hit in New York. A delightful, sensible, unpretentious but bright grandmother, she met every occasion with grace and poise. Twenty hard-boiled and cynical reporters came to her Sunday afternoon press conference, expecting to write funny stories. She soon had them sitting at her feet. In the scores of columns written about her doings in New York and about her observations not a single line ridiculed her. She was a Grandma Moses of her kind before Grandma Moses became known. She met Mayor LaGuardia and Al Smith, attended night court, and by invitation wrote columns for one or two of the big papers. Characteristically, when she had lunch with us at the somewhat pretentious outdoor restaurant of the Hotel Chatham, one of the few such places then available in the town, she said it was "like eating at home on the back porch." Mrs. Mahnkey gained bales of publicity in New York and across the nation for the *Country Home*.

The \$150,000 campaign to tell the advertising world about "Farm Market A", that 35% of farmers who earned 80% of farm income, made a lively splash. Some important advertisers who had avoided the farm field became interested in reaching the farmers who could buy their products, and *Country Home's* orders for space enjoyed a healthy growth.

Then, out came the July 1, 1936 Audit Bureau of Circulations report. The A.B.C. is maintained by periodical publishers to examine the records of subscriptions and newsstand sales and to publish semi-annual findings. The publishing industry had suggested it to counteract the ancient tendency to exaggerate circulation figures. At first glance, our report was gratifying. The circulation department had, indeed, built up our numbers in the several "35%" counties where we had needed to make a better showing.

The A.B.C. not only analyzed the circulation and its location, but disclosed how much went to rural villages, to recipients on rural routes and how much went into larger towns. Scrutiny of these facts brought to light the awful fact that not only one but two of our strongest competitors, *Farm Journal* and *Country Gentleman*, each had more actual RFD farm circulation in the "35%" counties than we did.

What had happened? Our subscription solicitors in these key counties had found it easier to stay on the sidewalks than to slog their ways down the rural routes. They sold the magazine, but sold it to town people.

Consequently no conspicuous rise in advertising contracts for 1937 took place; they may have declined. I was "promoted" to editorial director. The conversation in Beck's office, where Hubert Kelly learned he had the job of editor, gave no more indication than the one in 1934 as to how the duties of editor and editorial director were to be distinguished. I told Kelly that as he had been named editor all the decisions should be his; if he wanted any advice or counsel I would try to help. At his request I continued to write the editorial page. Otherwise about all I found to do was to make speeches. Feeling more or less like a sign hung out the window, I looked around for a more useful spot.

While in Texas in early '39 a *Dallas News* editor handed me an Associated Dispatch reporting that *Farm Journal* had bought *The Farmer's Wife* of St. Paul. I wired the publisher, Graham Patterson, that he now had everything he needed for a great farm magazine except an editor, and that I would be in to see him shortly. The two magazines together would have two and a half million circulation, just the kind of opportunity I wanted. By mid-March I was on the new job, in time to oversee the first issue of the combined publications. Publication of the *Country Home* was terminated a few months later; I had moved just in time.