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Sherwood Anderson : an experiment in journalism

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SHERWOOD ANDERSON: AN EXPERIMENT IN JOURNALISM

BY

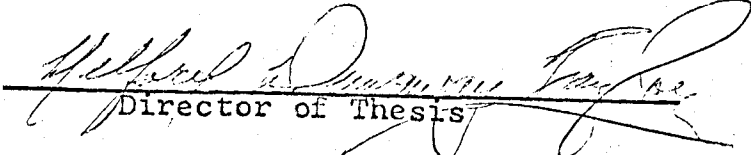
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A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY
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FOR THE DEGREE OF
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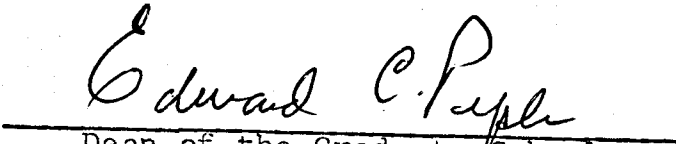

Dean of the Graduate School

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INTRODUCTION

James Schevill in his Sherwood Anderson His Life and Work describes Anderson's plunge into journalism as "an episode unique in American newspaper history, the first time a mature writer of important stature had been completely responsible ofr the contents of two country papers."¹ Although it has been generally acknowledged that Anderson's journalistic experiments are unique and make a significant contribution to the history of American journalism, these areas have never been analyzed in any detail by students of his work. This thesis will explore in depth the nature of Anderson's journalistic experiments and evaluate his achievement in the history of American journalism in the 1920's.

Anderson first came to Marion, Virginia in 1925. He was immediately drawn to this area of "sensually rounded mountains, woods and streams and upland valleys where the reserved and independent mountain people lived in cabins on tiny farms."²

¹James Schevill, Sherwood Anderson His Life and Work (Denver, 1951), p. 247.

²Walter B. Rideout, "Why Sherwood Anderson Employed Buck Fever," The Achievement of Sherwood Anderson, ed. Ray Lewis White (Chapel Hill, 1966), p. 128.

Marion, the county seat of Smyth County, was the typical small Southern town containing two banks, a movie house, a small girls' college, a tan brick courthouse, two hotels, and white pillared houses with wide lawns and other symbols of prosperity--an environment far removed from the urbane culture of big city life of which Anderson had been a part since 1904 when he married Cornelia Lane.

His decision to settle in Southwest Virginia was based on several obvious reasons. Primarily, he sought escape from a period of depression brought on by an inability to utilize his creative powers. His sense of frustration and despair was reflected in a statement made on a trip to Paris in 1927, "Everything I have written seems dead stuff I work on a novel for a week, then throw it away. I write a short story, It seems nothing"³ He was particularly disturbed over his contract with Horace Liveright, his publisher, who was paying him \$100 weekly in advance royalties in return for a book a year. Even though he had little to do but write, he found himself incapable of doing it.

³David D. Anderson, Sherwood Anderson(New York, 1967), p. 102.

Eventually, he was forced to break off from the Liveright contract.

Just prior to his coming to Virginia, he had produced a large amount of work from which he had reaped clear profit. With the royalties from Dark Laughter, he was able to purchase a tract of land about twenty miles from Marion and to complete a house in the fall of 1926. In Miss Elizabeth, Elizabeth Anderson, his third wife, notes that the building of Ripshin gave him a kind of satisfaction that no other activity had been able to do, but a satisfaction not from "contemplation of the finished product, just as he could find no satisfaction in the mere fact of his earlier books."⁴

A release from this period of creative frustration came in a surprise turn of events. At the local Smyth County Fair, he learned from a fellow townsman that two small country weeklies were for sale. According to Walter B. Rideout, "Here was an opportunity to throw the black dog off his back, and Anderson took it."⁵

⁴Elizabeth Anderson and Gerald R. Kelly, Miss Elizabeth (Boston, 1969), p. 152.

⁵Rideout, p. 128.

The purchase of the Smyth County News and the Marion Democrat proved a happy accident for Anderson. In the role of country editor, he was to find all his energies absorbed and an opportunity to develop close associations with the common people. Most of all, the discipline required by newswriting provided the much needed impetus for the resurgence of his creative powers.

Anderson's plunge into journalism caused a great stir of public reaction. Many of his critics considered it a kind of literary suicide--a writer of decided prominence electing to become a recluse in the backwoods of Virginia. However, it soon became clear that he had support from people all over the country, especially young journalists who were eager to break away from the restrictions of big city presses.

Anderson's ideas about the papers were both practical and revolutionary. From the start, he chose to experiment in his journalism. His news articles were often a mixture of fact and opinion; he also had a tendency to develop his stories in general rather than in specific terms. Frequently, he would omit initial summary paragraphs, content

to let his news stories wander along in his characteristic style.⁶ Viewing his papers as a cultural medium, he chose to print classic pieces of literature, poetry, and his own short stories. Obviously, he had great faith in his audience's ability to respond to his kind of paper. He strove very hard to keep his papers close to the people and to make them a vehicle for expression of their ideas. At the same time, he viewed news writing as having intrinsic artistic value. It is clear that Anderson viewed his newspaper career as an artistic challenge and an opportunity to assert his individuality in a field of endeavor fast becoming both mechanized and standardized.

⁶Schevill, p. 248.

CHAPTER I

ANDERSON AND THE JOURNALISM OF THE 1920's

Anderson's venture into journalism came at a time when the newspaper world was experiencing the upheaval of great change. The 1920's was a period marked by an increasingly rapid pace of life, a condition reflected in the big city newspapers of the period. Newspaper publishing had become big business. A great increase in both paper size and circulation made necessary more elaborate and costly mechanical equipment. The age of the machine had come to the American newspaper--huge perfecting presses, the linotype, the autoplate, color printing, and such processes as the half-tone and rotogravure were all in use. As the papers became increasingly more mechanized, a large portion of their contents also became more standardized.¹ This change was due in part to the press associations and in part to the newspaper syndicates. The establishment of such agencies as the Associated Press, the United Press, and the International News Service meant that coverage

¹Willard Grosvenor Bleyer, Main Currents in the History of American Journalism(Boston, 1927), p. 390.

of an important event like the outbreak of World War I would bring essentially the same news to all parts of the country. The tendency to consolidate newspapers, especially evident in the morning field because of the increase in evening papers, was shown in the career of Frank A. Munsey. Through consolidation and reorganization, he practically eliminated six newspapers in New York alone.²

At this time, the small weekly paper was at the height of its success. A 1914 census listed 14,500 weeklies.³ From the first, the function of the weekly newspaper was to present local news, and de-emphasize national or international happenings. Phil C. Bing, author of The Country Weekly, one of the many handbooks for country editors which appeared during this time, wrote that "the gathering and presentation of local news should be the first great function of the country editor."⁴ To him, almost everything became news--weather, crops, road conditions, parties, love affairs, illness,

²George Fox Mott, New Survey of Journalism(New York, 1950), p. 35.

³Phil C. Bing, The Country Weekly(London, 1917), p. 5.

⁴Ibid., p. 23.

deaths, births, and religious revivals. These small papers acted as great public news and opinion outlets for their communities, and therefore, performed an invaluable service. Thomas D. Clark in The Rural Press and the New South has said of this service, "Inside the locality of a paper almost every problem that could confront a community was publicized and discussed."⁵ Though small and local, the accomplishments of these country weeklies should not be underestimated. In the words of Phil C. Bing:

It comes nearer to fulfilling the purpose for which it was established--that of telling the news about its own community and of neighboring communities--than any other kind of paper can possibly come. It has no other field to cover and can deal intensively with local and county news.⁶

Obviously, it took no great amount of formal education to fulfill the role of country editor. Generally, "an ability to read and write and to use plenty of horse sense; personal courage; and the facility to work with one's hands"⁷ seemed to have been the main requirements.

One of Anderson's clearest condemnations of the

⁵Thomas D. Clark, The Rural Press and the New South (Baton Rouge, La., p. 1948), p. 11.

⁶Bing, p. 7.

⁷Clark, p. 3.

national publishing situation is found in an article entitled "The Boss Makes a Speech" in the Smyth County News. In an effort to show the practice of too many newspaper editors, he wrote, "Do not disturb the dear public. Do not stir anyone's minds. Be careful. Be cautious. . . ." ⁸ Subsequently, Anderson observed these newspapers were marked by "infinite dullness and an ensuing stifling of individuality and creativity." ⁹ In another newspaper feature article entitled "Lazy Newspapers," he further defined what he felt a newspaper should not be and what, in fact, he felt many of them had become:

In this particular issue there are 187 lines of live news and 25 inches of editorial matter. There are about 8" about sports. That's all. All the rest is canned stuff. Canned stuff is sent out from Chicago to weeklies like ours and sold to editors at \$1.00 a page. It is got up by people who want to sell more pineapples, who want you to eat more of this or that, or spend your money for this or that. ¹⁰

Initially, at least, Anderson's plunge into journalism was a reaction to the bigness and sameness in the publishing world. As he looked about him,

⁸ Smyth County News, August 29, 1929, p. 1. (hereafter cited as News)
⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ News, August 13, 1931, p. 8.

particularly at conditions in the publishing business, he saw much to disturb him. He felt these conditions reflected the greater problems of the machine age in general. Clearly, he felt the need to take action, to do something concrete about the conditions that bothered him. According to W. D. Taylor, "Anderson was not satisfied with recording the plight of men and women caught in the clutches of a machine age. Perhaps more than any writer of his generation, he was interested in finding solutions to the problems created by modern industrialism."¹¹ With this in mind, he turned to the country weekly as his small, yet personal solution to these problems.

As a newspaper man, he saw himself in a position to help eradicate this "stifling of individuality and creativity."¹² In an interview in the New York Times Magazine, he pointed out the value and opportunity newspaper work offered: "There is a great deal of craftsmanship in the country editor's work A country paper still has the quality of a thing made

¹¹W. D. Taylor, "Sherwood Anderson," Virginia Cavalcade (Spring, 1970), p. 43.

¹²News, August 29, 1929, p. 1.

by hand. It never drives you with the same relentless fury that seems to inspire great machines."¹³ He felt strongly that modern man has got to catch up to the machine, to make this mechanization work for him, but he was also strongly aware that it was easier to get machines that print more newspapers than to try to put something into them. Thus a desire to use the newspaper to meet the challenge of the machine age led Anderson into the business of publishing a country weekly.

From the start, Anderson's conception of his role as country editor was well-defined even though he had few preconceived notions about what a newspaper should be. In an article entitled "The Life of a New Country Editor," he wrote:

Running a country weekly is not running a newspaper. We are not after news. If anyone wants news, let them [sic] take a daily. We are after the small events of the small townspeople's lives. . .

The country newspaper is the drugstore; it is the space back of the stove in the hardware store; it is the farmhouse kitchen.¹⁴

¹³Mildred Adams, "A Small Town Editor," New York Times Magazine, September 22, 1929, p. 3.

¹⁴News, February 16, 1928, p. 5.

According to his third wife, Elizabeth, this role as country editor was also "enormous fun for him."¹⁵ In Miss Elizabeth, she describes his day in the following manner:

We moved into a small apartment over the printshop and Sherwood made himself a part of the everyday life of the town. He went to all court trials, rode around with the sheriff, went to sheep shearings and auctions and came to know all about the people¹⁶

Although Anderson became fully enmeshed into the everyday life of his region in his attempts to keep his papers local, he made clear he intended to use his editorial column "What Say" to express himself in his own way on the life about him and life in the outside world. He also hoped to make the papers into a kind of forum, by opening them to all sorts of opinions, believing "a home paper like this should be the voice, not of one section of the community but of all sections."¹⁷

From the first, Anderson approached the papers with an urge to experiment. In a letter to Ralph Church, he wrote, "There is a kind of interesting

¹⁵Elizabeth Anderson and Gerald R. Kelly, Miss Elizabeth (Boston, 1969), p. 181.

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 181-182.

¹⁷News, November 3, 1927, p. 1.

experimental thing about it [his newspaper efforts] too. I try to give the fancy a little play, create in the town imaginary figures of people and situations."¹⁸ His papers show an almost total disregard for the school rules of journalism. Miss Elizabeth describes this quality of his papers in the following:

It was fascinating for me to see the happenings about town transformed in Sherwood's mind and be printed as his own deeply personal view of what had happened. Quite often it was widely separated from the mere facts. He cared nothing about 'journalese' or the tradition of telling 'who, what, where, and when' in the first paragraph. His articles were constructed along the lines of short stories, with an initial 'hook' to interest readers and a gradual buildup to a dramatic impact.¹⁹

Several examples from the Anderson papers should help to make clear the nature of his experimental newswriting. A good case in point is a short news story under the headline "Midnight on Nick's Creek." It begins in mysterious fashion, very much akin to an Anderson short story, "It was midnight of Friday, the 8th, out along Nick's Creek."²⁰ He then proceeds to relate the events in his own

¹⁸Howard Mumford Jones & Walter B. Rideout eds., Letters of Sherwood Anderson (Boston, 1953), p. 183.

¹⁹Elizabeth Anderson, p. 182.

²⁰News, March 21, 1929, p. 1.

dramatic fashion, ignoring the need to state the facts near the beginning. He describes four men out walking across the fields, until they finally came to a farmhouse with a light showing under the door. The following quotation reveals this suspenseful quality:

Sir Oliver and George covered the rear, the Sheriff and Hi went up to the door and inside.

They found Doug Barberly and John Reedy, two young men, sitting beside the kitchen stove. On the stove was a still, a wonderful still to Hi. 'I never saw anything like it' says Hi. 'It was made out of shiny metal and it rang like a bell when you tapped it.'²¹

The style of this news story is surely not the typical style of a country newspaper; rather it is more akin to that of the fiction, especially the short stories, Anderson could write so well. Perhaps the most revealing way to comprehend the nature of Anderson's journalistic experiments lies in a comparison of Anderson's treatment of an event with national significance such as the Hoover defeat of Smith in the 1928 Presidential campaign with the treatment of this same event in several other comparable papers of the day.

²¹Ibid.

Chosen for the comparison were the Bedford Bulletin, the Northern Neck News, and the Waynesboro News.

The first two papers, like Anderson's Smyth County News, were published as weeklies; the latter came out every three days. Anderson's front page election article is large and impressive, but strikingly absent are factual details as the following quotation reveals:

In the field of industry, there has already been a quick reaction to the election. Markets are steady and on the upward climb. Industry will be reawakened. The uncertainty of last year is gone.²²

His lack of concern for facts is made especially clear in the following part of his account:

The election is so full of Republican details--state after state is carried. It is impossible to list them all.²³

In decided contrast to Anderson's account is the more factual and explicit discussion in the Bedford Bulletin as revealed in the following excerpt:

Enough returns were also received from Bedford County by 10 o'clock to show a Smith majority of about 200 or more, complete returns now giving Smith 1,440 and Hoover 1,119, a majority for Smith of 321.

²²News, November 8, 1928, p. 1.

²³Ibid.

A large number of ballots were thrown out because of defective marking, either purposely or through ignorance.²⁴

The account in the Northern Neck News is a much shorter article than either of the former, possibly because it appeared on page four. Although it contains the major facts, it does not go into the detail of the Bedford article as the following passage reveals:

Herbert Hoover has been elected President of the U. S. by a vote that has swept the East and the West and broken the Solid South.

It is apparent that he has achieved an overwhelming victory over Gov. Smith, his Democratic opponent and that his electoral majority will exceed that given to Warren G. Harding or Calvin Coolidge.²⁵

The Waynesboro News discusses the election in terms of a strictly local view as shown in this short quotation:

In the sweeping defeat of Gov. Alfred E. Smith of New York for the Presidency by more than 5,000,000 votes at the time of this writing and by some 444 electoral votes against 87, with some still in doubt Waynesboro made its contribution.²⁶

²⁴Bedford Bulletin, November 8, 1928, p. 1.

²⁵Northern Neck News, November 9, 1928, p. 4.

²⁶Waynesboro News, November 9, 1928, p. 2.

The article then proceeded to divide the town into sections, and to list the votes in each district.

Basically, Anderson's treatment of this national event was quite different from that of the other three papers. In his characteristic simple sentence and climactic build-up of ideas, he chose to describe the election in general rather than specific terms, concentrating on the overall effects of the national event. By contrast, the Bedford paper's lengthy front-page account is developed by the use of many statistics such as a list of all the states carried by Hoover and the total number of votes cast in each Virginia voting district. Both the Northern Neck and Waynesboro papers' less comprehensive articles make no attempt to discuss the national or local effects of the election, the major difference between them and the Anderson account.

Anderson chose to experiment in his papers because he had great faith in his audience's ability to respond to his kind of paper. That he felt close to his readers and, in fact, needed this closeness, he made clear in a New York Times Magazine interview:

A country paper is such a personal thing, so much a matter of give and take between the editor and his readers, that if I began writing for a wider group of people I didn't know, I'd lose the intimate sense of talking with the people and my paper would be no good to anyone.²⁷

Anderson's unique method of newswriting is difficult to define or describe accurately. Part of his appeal was surely based on his perceptive awareness of the significance of little things and an ability to make them take on a peculiar kind of interest for his readers. Mildred Adams has said of this method:

Under his pen the theft of a horse takes on dimension and background Rotary meeting and mountain weddings his imagination plays upon like a flickering finger of light, pointing up a bright spot here, defining a shadow there, bringing it all into pattern and proportion.²⁸

Anderson's journalistic experiment came at a time when the newspaper world was undergoing tremendous change, particularly with the increasing mechanization and standardization, which were becoming so much a part of the publishing business.

²⁷Adams, p. 3.

²⁸Ibid.

The small weekly paper, which was not greatly affected by these changes, was experiencing great success in the communities it served, but it was flat and unimaginative and filled with stereotyped news. Here, Anderson saw a decided opportunity to innovate. Furthermore, this plunge into country journalism offered the opportunity to assert individuality and to combat the forces he saw at work in the publishing field. The unique journalistic style and format he employed make his papers interesting studies in newspaper technique and surely worthy of treatment in critical studies of his literary art and achievement. To Anderson, the publishing of the two small country papers represented a creative act, which came at a period in his life when he so desperately needed the fulfillment of artistic creation. In all of these areas rest Anderson's contributions to the American journalism of the 1920's.

CHAPTER II

NEWSWRITING AND ARTISTIC CREATION

A second phase of Anderson's journalistic experimentation involved journalism and creativity. A desire to remain objective by dealing only in factual material and observance of the elements of structure in newswriting had both led to a dearth of creativity in the journalistic world of Anderson's day. Traditionally, journalists, especially country journalists, have been content to record the facts, primarily to give an accurate record of what happened in the world around them. Most news stories also followed a rather rigidly controlled structure, commencing with a lead which summarized the who, what, when, where, and why of the situation and following with the body which was an elaboration of this lead. This kind of stereotyped newswriting greatly disturbed Anderson.

From the first, he made it clear that he felt newspaper writing could involve creativity. In what is probably the clearest statement of this view of newswriting, an article entitled "The Boss

Makes a Speech," he wrote:

Newspaper writing is writing. News paper men are inclined to deny that. They are only dodging. Newspaper writing can be as direct, as noble, as fine as any other kind of writing. It is a record--bad or good--of the passing pageant of life.¹

According to James Schevill, in Anderson's view, creative writing differed from creative journalism only in one sense. "One was a more complex, individual experience," Schevill wrote, "the other to be carried out on a simple, social scale. In both the primary requirement was integrity . . ."² Thus in the vein of the true artist, Anderson tried to write for instead of down to the people he wished to reach. He made very clear that he wanted his readers to look at life squarely, to face its facts and become better, clearer people as a result--hence the reason for printing some of his Winesburg stories. Therefore, he felt an editor who is guilty of suppressing his thoughts was actually patronizing his readers--a mistake which he did not wish to make.

¹Smyth County News, August 15, 1929, p. 1, 4.

²James Schevill, Sherwood Anderson His Life and Work (Denver, 1951), p. 248.

Although one of his main goals as a creative journalist was to maintain a high level of integrity in his papers, he, nevertheless, was also aware of the need to maintain a certain detachment. In an article entitled "The Life of a Country Editor," he touched upon this distance:

More and more he is growing familiar with it. [his town] The threads of his life run through his fingers. He knows, what does he not know?

And the people of the town, knowing what he knows, a little afraid, keep passing and looking at him. He is just a little outside their lives. He is something special. He writes. That alone sets him apart.³

Very early in his newspaper career, he realized that a newspaper man cannot always express his views freely and fully, and that a successful journalist must be able to detach himself from the happenings of his community to report objectively on these events. Like the detachment of the most creative artist, this journalistic detachment can come in many forms. For Anderson, the creation of imaginary reporter characters and a well-defined journalistic voice proved a solution to this problem.

Perhaps the most important example of Anderson's creative approach to journalism was the invention

³News, February 16, 1928, pp. 1, 55

of the character Buck Fever. Buck, the son of Malaria Fever, came from Coon Hollow, where his family kept a general store and was associated with the firm of Fever and Ague. His creator Anderson developed Buck as a strong and handsome young fellow, who was conscientiously studying his grammar and "looking all over" for news. Buck's humorous descriptions of local events and persons served efficiently as a journalistic mask for Editor Anderson, who found much to laugh at in the small community. The following quotation from one of the "Buck Fever Says" columns reveals these qualities:

Did you see the Scarlet Fever stuff written for our paper by Dr. Ward. It was hot stuff all right, warning people about scarlet fever, but no use warning them to death. That Dr. Ward is getting to be the best warner we ever had around here. Just setting up the piece gave Joe Stephenson the pip.⁴ He hasn't got over it yet. . . .

Beneath the light, fun-loving tone is a telling comment on one of the local physicians, who was probably an alarmist. In the words of Walter B. Rideout, Buck "slyly or raucously pokes fun at the eccentricities and foibles of the townspeople as

⁴News, February 2, 1928, p. 1.

he recounts the events of the previous week."⁵ It is clear that Buck served a very useful purpose in the Anderson papers.

In addition to the invention of Buck Fever, Anderson's creative approach to journalism was responsible for the development of several other imaginary characters. There was Hannah Stoots, the young woman who developed a more than passing interest in Buck, and a sort of romance was carried on between them in a series of letters. Also, he invented a Mrs. Homing Pigeon, a "genteel lady who was much concerned with culture and public affairs,"⁶ a fellow named Al Jackson from the New Orleans swamplands, who discovered that "there was a branch of the Jackson family tree growing right in Marion."⁷ All of these fictitious characters permitted their creator a far greater freedom to express his views and also added the creativity of the artist to the two small papers.

⁵Walter B. Rideout, "Why Sherwood Anderson Employed Buck Fever," The Achievement of Sherwood Anderson, ed. Ray Lewis White (Chapel Hill, 1966), p. 133.

⁶Elizabeth Anderson and Gerald R. Kelly, Miss Elizabeth (Boston, 1969), p. 183.

⁷Ibid., p. 184.

Another striking quality which reflected the artistic creativity of Anderson is the well-defined journalistic voice employed in many of the articles. Although he was generally accepted and even popular with his fellow townsmen, it is also clear that he sometimes found their provincial way-of-life and interests amusing. He was not above "poking fun at" these activities when the occasion arose. An excellent example of this type of newswriting is a front page article on chicken stealing. Almost in the style and tone of a mock-epic, the article reads:

Lock your chicken house. Load your gun. Let the dog out at night.

When caught . . . our own idea is to bring them [the thieves] up for trial before Squire McClure. The Squire is death on chicken thieves.

Keep a sharp lookout. We appreciate Smyth County fried chicken ourselves . . . and besides we sympathize with Squire McClure and think chicken stealing is one of the meanest forms of crime.⁸

Beneath the mock-serious tone, the reader can easily sense the amusement of Editor Anderson as he playfully described this incident. This trivial chicken stealing event reveals his technique of masking his true feelings behind a journalistic voice.

⁸News, February 16, 1928, p. 1.

Use of this technique was widespread in the Anderson papers. A dispute over nineteen steers belonging to a Mr. Staley and their use of a Mr. Wilkinson's pasture brought forth another striking example of this journalistic voice at work for Editor Anderson. The article begins in the following manner:

The great steer trial between Mr. Henry Staley and Mr. Roscoe Wilkinson at the court house. Early in the morning a great concourse of steer experts began to assemble in the court room. The cattle men were out in force. When the trial began none of the fair sex was in the court room, all had delicately withdrawn.

' . . . Both men look fit,' Mr. Sam Kent said when they entered the arena, each followed by a group of seconds and supporters.⁹

The situation centered on Mr. Staley's suing Mr. Wilkinson for \$181 rent for the pasturing of nineteen of Mr. Wilkinson's steers in the 190 acre pasture behind the golf course the preceding summer. Mr. Wilkinson had a counter claim for damages. With such phrases as "steer heaven" and "Everything was O. K. with the nineteen steers,"¹⁰ Anderson slyly poked fun at the events of the trial.

⁹News, March 21, 1929, p. 1.

¹⁰Ibid.

Using the exaggeration and occasionally pompous language of the satirist, he was able to comment on those events which amused him.

This journalistic voice, so evident in many of the news articles, was another significant means Anderson used to create distance between himself and his readers. It was also clearly an example of the kind of creativity Anderson sought to instill into his journalism.

Although this creative approach to news-writing was extremely important to Anderson the journalistic experimenter, it represented far more to Anderson the literary artist. The newspapers had, at least temporarily, solved an artistic problem for him. In a letter to Marco Morrow, he wrote, "In a sense this whole thing is a sinking of myself back into life. It is a great sea, this thing we call life, and I like swimming in the sea. I have been in the desert too long."¹¹ Through his association with the papers, his creative imagination, so long stagnant, had been reactivated.

That he took the same pride in his newspaper work as he did in his literary efforts he also made

¹¹ Howard Mumford Jones & Walter B. Rideout eds., Letters of Sherwood Anderson (Boston, 1953), p. 179.

very clear. In a "What Say" column, he wrote:

We cannot expect to revolutionize life here. I would however like it if everything done in this shop could be done partially for the pleasure of doing it well.

This at least will be our aim.¹²

To Anderson these papers became an important part of his artistic accomplishment. Through his experimentation, he was able to inject into them the qualities of creativity and individuality he felt were missing from so many papers of his day. The nature of his achievement is well-described in these words of George Fox Mott, "Insofar as the journalist brings to his newspaper writing insight and imagination he approaches literature."¹³ Essentially, this is what Anderson hoped to do and did.

¹²News, November 3, 1927, p. 8.

¹³George Fox Mott, New Survey of Journalism(New York, 1950), p. 304.

CHAPTER III

THE COUNTRY WEEKLY AND COMMUNITY CULTURE

A third significant phase of Anderson's journalistic experimentation involved his community's cultural level. As conceived by Anderson, cultural activity was probably at a minimum in the small town of Marion and its environs. Because he saw his newspapers in a position to disseminate knowledge of all types, he early set about the task of making them literary adventures, which would bring his country readers into much closer touch with the world of ideas.

The Marion-Smyth County community which became Anderson's home in 1926 was the typical Southern rural environment. In 1930, the population of Smyth County was 25,125 with the town of Marion, the county seat, having 4,156 inhabitants.¹ Because land was from the very beginning the most readily available commodity, the area's oldest and most important industries were farming and grazing. Reflecting the eighteenth century settlement of

¹Goodrich Wilson, Smyth County History and Traditions (Kingsport, Tenn., 1932), p. 282.

the region by a Scotch-Irish family named Campbell, the population was predominantly of Scotch-Irish stock. In matters of religion, the Presbyterian church claimed the largest membership with a smattering of Baptists and Episcopalians. The people grouped themselves into three small towns: Marion, Chilhowie, and Saltville, as well as in the surrounding valleys and lowland farms.

From the beginning the rugged mountain terrain had exerted a powerful influence on the development of the community. The following quotation describes the area's isolation:

In the 1920's Marion, Virginia was still a small mountain town of some four thousand residents. It nestled quietly among the mists of the Southwestern Virginia hills and was largely unaffected by what went on in the outside world. The automobile was just beginning to open the town to the world at large; but the railroad offered easier access than the automobile. . . .²

This isolation had served to increase the provincialism, which was, in the words of Thomas D. Clark,

²W. D. Taylor, "Sherwood Anderson," Virginia Cavalcade (Spring, 1970), p. 42.

"the most outstanding quality of Southern country life between 1865 and 1920"³

The people were backward in other ways too. Illiteracy was widespread, and editors like Anderson were to find their attempts to raise their readers' cultural and educational levels frequently thwarted by the population's inability to read their publications. Also, these mountain people were superstitious and stubborn--not eager to accept new people or ideas.

Yet, in spite of all these drawbacks, Anderson was strongly attracted to both the region and the people. He frequently expressed these sincere feelings of admiration in the newspaper:

Few towns on this old earth are as happily situated as our sweet town of Marion. Hills and wooded heights climb up in all directions. . . . It is a country of pure bred cattle, sheep, hogs, dogs It is country for the city man to visit. Artists who have been here may have been deeply stirred by the shapes of our hills and the riots of colors in the fall. Marion is a town neither too good or bad. Men and women sin and pay the price of sin. There are trials in the courthouse. Blockaders, moonshiners are caught and pay the price of being

³Thomas D. Clark, The Rural Press and the New South (Baton Rouge, La., 1948), p. 70.

caught. We have our liars and our honest men. It is an intensely human place, be sure of that.⁴

Fully aware of the ignorance and backwardness of many of his paper's subscribers but strongly drawn to the "intensely human" qualities of the people, Anderson launched his career in journalism as a kind of cultural and educational experiment. He believed strongly in the value of self-education particularly in the role reading could play in it. Rejecting the formal kind of learning of colleges and universities, he wrote that "some of the greatest fools and the most pig-headed of men were so filled with book learning that nothing human was left in them."⁵ In his view, the most important kind of education for anyone to receive was an increase of knowledge about human life. Thus he hoped to stir in his readers a curiosity about life, to awaken in them an interest in things unknown and faraway. He felt much of this could be accomplished through reading of high quality as indicated in the following excerpt from his "What Say" column:

⁴Smyth County News, August 23, 1928, p. 1.

⁵News, November 10, 1927, p. 8.

It is the mistake of uneducated men to think that such things as book readings are a waste of time. Well much reading is a waste of time, novel reading for example . . . But there is another kind of reading that equips a man . . . Is it not possible if I know something of the past, in these valleys, I will know more of the present? . . . It is possible to get this feeling of intimacy with a whole state, a nation, a civilization. The right kind of reading has a broadening influence.⁶

To carry out his plan for cultural and educational enlightenment, he followed several courses of action. First of all, he wanted to put "some good solid reading" into the papers and make them true literary adventures as well as recorders of local events. He began to print poetry and pieces of classical literature, particularly that of Russian origin--a strange phenomenon for a small country weekly newspaper. A brief list of some of these stories would include "Fear" by Baroness Marie Louise Koskub, "District Doctor" by Turgenev, "Her Lover" by Maxim Gorky, "The Darling" and "The Bet" by Chekhov, and "Love" by Maupassant. Most of these stories are simply and directly written and contain little plot development; instead they depict one moment of revelation or understanding of truth which

⁶News, December 1, 1927, p. 8.

comes to a character as a result of some experience he has undergone. Generally, they exhibit the superior craftsmanship of the master story-tellers who wrote them and were the kind of quality literature Anderson hoped to bring to his readers.

He also reprinted many of his own stories, which have a close resemblance to those by the foreign authors he used. Among his stories included were "A Man of Ideas," "Sophistication," "Milk Bottles," "Hands," "Soliloquy," and "Alice."

Much space in the papers is devoted to such literary efforts. Much of the poetry he used was the work of little known poets. The most frequent poems to appear were those by Jay G. Sigmund, an obscure American poet of the period, with whom Anderson had corresponded.⁷ In a tone of pessimism, Sigmund's sometimes clumsy attempts express such rural virtues as reward for hard work and respect for the world of nature.

⁷Miss Elizabeth states that Anderson himself was the author of the Sigmund poems, but my research has shown that Sigmund lived from 1885-1937 and was the author of several volumes of poetry, none of which achieved fame.

In addition to making his papers literary adventures, he sought to give his readers some historical perspective. He wished to acquaint them with their past both in the immediate area and outside it. To this end, he had an article which traced the various crafts perfected in the region, another which described the tradition of the county fair and its importance to the people, and a book-length work entitled Wilburn Waters (reprinted chapter by chapter), "dealing intimately with the whole early life in this section of the country."⁸ Other columns entitled "Early Days in this Section" dealt with crops raised, social customs such as the town stocks and the daily arrival of the stage coach. He also reprinted a series of letters written during the Civil War by a Captain W. T. Choate to his family. To bring his readers into even closer touch with the past outside their region, he also used excerpts from the famous seventeenth century diary of the Englishman Samuel Pepys.

In addition, he used several other methods to bring his readers into closer touch with the world of culture. His "What Say" column often centered

⁸News, November 21, 1929, p. 2.

on discussions of places, people, and events far removed from his country readers. He was particularly interested in increasing their understanding of and appreciation for the arts he so much admired. In one article, he discussed modern painting, particularly the work of the artist Cezanne. Noting the impossibility of ever fully explaining a painting because of the innate complexity of art, he wrote:

I have had great men speak with contempt of a great painting by a great master, because it happened he could not understand it. How many smells can a hunting dog perceive that you cannot? A musician may be able to perceive fifteen tones in a single sound. You are simply tone deaf, sight blind, smell dulled.⁹

He continued by noting that modern art in the beginning was confusing to Paris and New York. It took time to be understood even in those places.

Another "What Say" column centered on a visit to the Metropolitan Museum in New York City. Of this visit, he wrote, "[it] gives you a deep feeling of joy. It makes you understand a little of what the great men of the world were up to as they worked away. Each in his own place, trying to make beauty live in

⁹News, October 25, 1928, p. 2.

the world."¹⁰

Often this column would simply talk about a foreign country or even another American city unfamiliar to his rural readers. An example would be his description of a trip to New York City. With the skill of the true artist, he presented its crowds, theatres, stock market, and waterfront, all in very real fashion for his country readers so far removed from big city life. He took great care to remove the glamour from this kind of existence as he noted the weary looks on the people's faces and their almost frenzied activity. In his view, life in a big city left the individual in a vacuum. In another column, he might take his readers to a foreign country like Holland or Russia for a discussion of their social customs and culture. Throughout the papers, there were travel accounts of his many trips around the United States.

Another means Anderson chose to foster the growth of culture was use of the papers to urge support for local cultural events or organizations. One of the biggest recipients of his publicity was the Marion Town Band. In the papers, he waged

¹⁰News, December 6, 1928, p. 8.

a lengthy campaign for contributions to this worthy organization. He began one article with the question, "What is a town without a good band?"¹¹ but continued by pointing out that you cannot have a good band in debt. He urged the town to match the \$100.00 gift of Otto Kahn, a wealthy New Yorker, who had shown much interest in helping the band. In another issue, he printed the names of those persons who had made contributions to it. Another article reported on a band concert which so impressed one female spectator that she sent a dollar to be presented to the band. With a touch of the Anderson humor that the papers so often display, he described his reaction to her gesture, by simply saying, "We took the dollar. There are advantages to being connected with a band when beautiful ladies are so subject to music."¹² Furthermore, he reported the band presented a fine concert, quite a tribute to the newly organized group.

¹¹News, December 22, 1927, p. 1.

¹²News, July 18, 1929, p. 1.

In one article, he gave extensive coverage to the grand opening of the Lincoln Theatre. Anderson pointed out that the \$150,000 playhouse, the finest in all Southwest Virginia, would mean much to Marion because it showed that the town was alive and progressive. The article concludes with an invitation to the Marion citizens to take full advantage of this important new cultural center.

The establishment of a print shop library was another means Anderson used to promote cultural activity for the citizens. Elizabeth Anderson gives the following description of this event:

Sherwood moved nearly a thousand books into the printshop and operated an informal lending library. He was especially delighted when the wife of a local workingman began reading Dostoyevsky. He enjoyed watching the faces of the people who came in when they saw the colored prints of Cezanne or Van Gogh he had hung on the wall. They would stare for an instant, scratch their heads and look away, pointedly making no comment.¹³

Throughout the papers, he periodically published a list of newly acquired books for the library with brief comments as to their content or plot. Everyone was urged to make full use of the print shop library.

¹³Elizabeth Anderson and Gerald R. Kelly, Miss Elizabeth (Boston, 1969), p. 181.

His attempts to overcome ignorance and intolerance must surely have met with resistance. That he early developed a healthy respect for these proud and stubborn mountain people was quite evident. The cultured and sophisticated writer who came to educate these ignorant country people often found himself the receiver of the education. Elizabeth Anderson related an amusing incident which clearly shows this side of Anderson's relationship with these people. In the building of his mountain home Ripshin, one worker had proudly chiseled his name in big, clumsy letters in the center of a magnificent stone arch. Anderson flew into a rage when he saw it, and violently cursed the worker. Quietly picking up his belongings, the worker said nothing and started off down the road. Ashamed of himself, Anderson followed him. Anderson reported the conversation between them went as follows:

'He quit. Said I shouldn't have talked to him like that in front of all the others.'

'What about those terrible letters on the rock?' I [his wife Elizabeth] asked. 'Will we have to take them all down again?'

Sherwood shook his head. 'No, he's coming back on Sunday when there's nobody here

to chisel off the lettering.

Know what else he said? He asked me if I write books and I said yes. Then he asked me if I put my name on my books.' Sherwood paused a moment, then added, 'There wasn't a damn thing I could say to that.'¹⁴

Through his newspapers, Anderson hoped to broaden his community's knowledge of the vast world outside their small locality. The degree of his success is impossible to calculate, and yet the very fact that he attempted such an undertaking is indicative of a certain kind of success. The words Anderson used to describe the efforts of the great masters,--"Each in his own place, trying to make beauty live in the world"¹⁵--are an appropriate comment on his efforts in behalf of knowledge. His plan to bring culture to the small backwoods mountain community must be considered a unique part of his journalistic experimentation.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 150.

¹⁵News, December 6, 1928, p. 8.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Anderson's experiments in journalism as country editor of the Smyth County News and Marion Democrat should not be overlooked in any summation of this author's significant work. His attempts to bring creativity and individuality into journalism, to combat the bigness and sameness at work in the publishing field, and to provide cultural opportunities for his country readers are unique in the history of American journalism. These years in Marion were probably among his happiest and, in a sense, most successful of his life. During this period, the two newspapers became an important part of his artistic accomplishment. In a period of low creative output, they successfully absorbed his energies and provided a much needed impetus for artistic creation. The discipline required by newswriting proved a valuable assist to the writer, who, a few months, previously, had failed to produce any quality work. These newspapers represent some of Anderson's most truly creative efforts and

more importantly, a triumph of the creative artist
over the forces of monotony and greed.

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