

North Shore

BY
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HAWKINS

PERSONALITIES.

Only out of professional courtesy to a colleague did Neil M. Clark of Winnetka consent to be interviewed. As a writer himself he prefers to have no particular personality, to lose his identity as an individual and become an interpreter of the contemporary American scene.

I found him to be a pleasant, brown-eyed, youngish man—decidedly young looking to be the father of two daughters at college. Barbara Clark is a student at the University of New Mexico, and Elinor Clark is enrolled at Denison university. Dick is a pupil at the Joseph B. Sears school in Kenilworth. The Clarks have lived at 408 Winnetka avenue since 1917.

Born On A Farm

Delving into the Clark past, I found that Mr. Clark was born on a farm near Columbus, O., and was graduated from Harvard in 1912. "That was a long time ago, wasn't it?" he smiled. The gap between the business of being born and of being graduated from Harvard he bridged by saying his family moved to Cleveland when he was 12 years old, and he spent his vacations working in his uncle's fence factory and hobnobbing with the workmen of various nationalities and learning types.

At the age of four, however, he had committed himself irrevocably on a choice of profession. "I want to be an author," he announced.

To Chicago Via New York

Thus in due time he became an author. You see, how simple it is. Make up your mind early, go to Harvard, and presto—Mr. Clark made a slight zig zag in getting to Chicago and turning writer, however. He went to New York as advertising manager of a firm which published children's books. He lasted six weeks. Then he saw an ad in the New York Times, which led to a meeting with Carroll Dean Murphy, who at that time was associated with the A. W. Shaw company in Chicago and later established his own advertising agency, giving it up recently to join the Erwin Wasey outfit.

Mr. Murphy brought young Neil Clark out to Chicago and the A. W. Shaw company. Before leaving New York, Clark wired his high school sweetheart, Pearl Himmelman, if she would like to live in Chicago. Like girls in love the world over, she wired back, "I'd live anywhere." Mr. Clark stayed with the Shaw company eight years and became managing editor of *System*, but in 1921 he decided to strike out for himself and free lance—in short, become an author.

Complicated Business

Authoring as a business is almost as complicated as the manufacture of steel or railroading. Mr. Clark very kindly opened up his ledgers and files and discussed his work in terms of percentages and output of words.

He keeps a record in a journal of each article as it is written, and in the back of this book he makes notations on the total wordage, percentage of articles sold, and so on. He estimates that he averages 200,000 words a year, once achieving 257,000—which is a quarter of a million. When contrasted with the New Deal billions, a mere quarter of a million words is a trifle. But when translated into the original ideas, the gathering of material, the actual typing, the reams of

copy paper, the postage stamps, and so on, his yearly output is not bad, not bad.

"Not A Creative Writer"

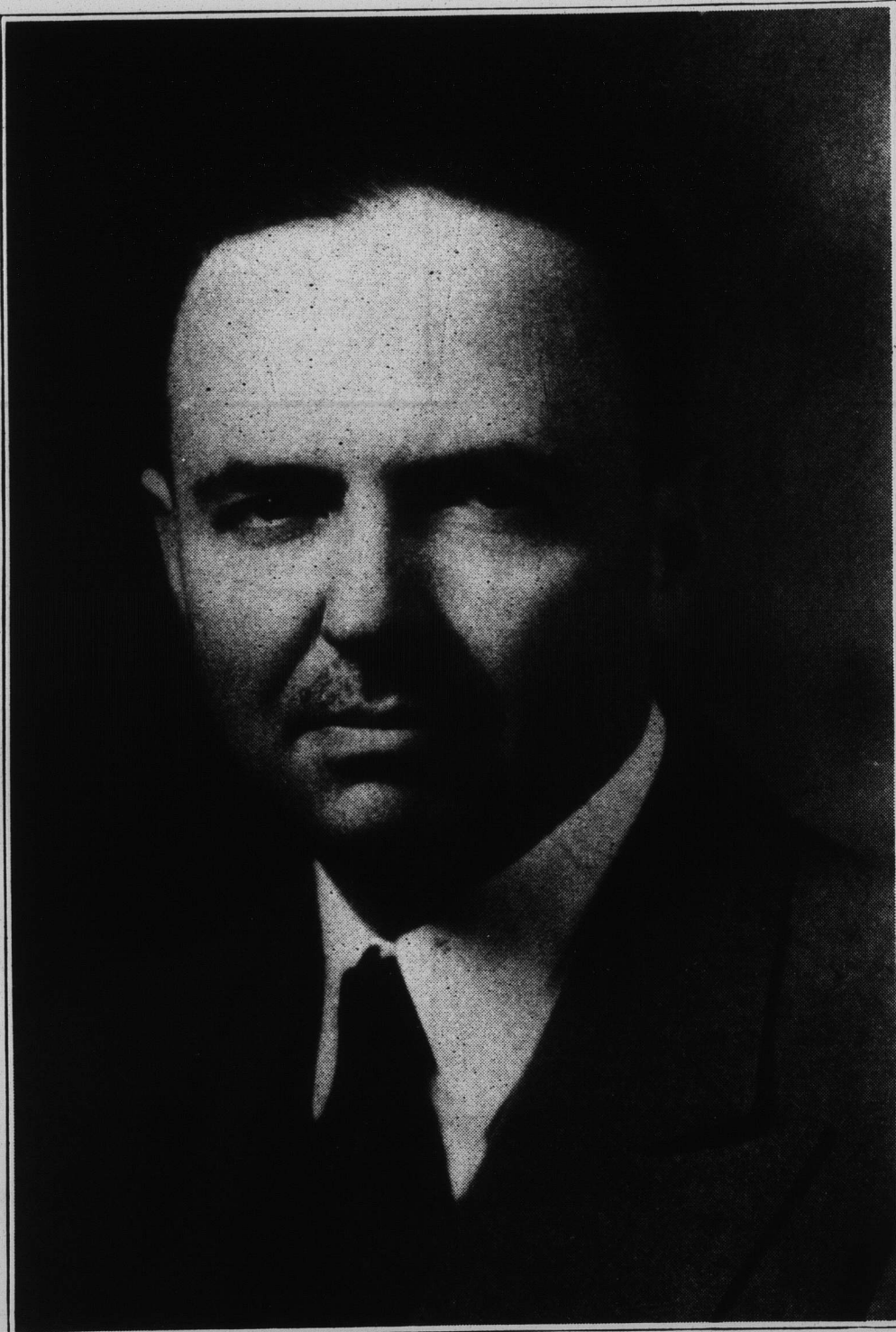
As to percentages, he confided that 6.56 per cent of his words remained unsold in 1921, 9.83 per cent in 1931. "My income in 1931 was much higher, though, than in 1921." Last year the percentage unsold was 12.74, practically identical with his spending the month of February in the writing of seven short stories. "I'm not good at fiction," Mr. Clark confessed. "I

by quoting the Milwaukee chap I talked to who showed me the marvelous precision of the Diesel parts by pulling a hair from his head and using it for measuring."

Mr. Clark writes a good deal for the leading farm magazines, *Country Home* in the Crowell family of publications and *Country Gentleman* in the Curtis group. He said that the Crowell editors will reply to a query, "It sounds good," but will not necessarily buy the completed article, whereas if the Curtis editors indicate an interest in the suggestion, they will slant the material and usually buy the article.

Also Does "Ghosting"

Ghosting is another pastime of Neil M. Clark. That term, dear reader, means some one else signs the article. He just did a chapter in the coming Frank Knox campaign biography.



Neil M. Clark

haven't any plot sense. Of course, I do write it and I sell quite a bit of it, but I'm not a creative writer."

Since Mr. Clark averages four or five articles a month and each of these takes considerable time to develop, he is kept on the jump. A recent article in the *Country Gentleman* on Diesel engines took him to Detroit to confer with manufacturers, into the farm area of Iowa and Illinois to talk with the consumers, to Milwaukee, and elsewhere for information about the manufacture, distribution, and use of Diesels.

"What was your slant?" I inquired.

Writes About Diesels

"I took the point of view that Diesels are not the answer to every motor problem, but they have their distinct uses. And I began the article

Altogether he has written for 50 or 60 publications, including the *American* magazine.

During the hey-day of the American's interest in business success stories, Clark, Merle Crowell or John Siddall, and Mary Mullett used to write practically the whole magazine, each doing several articles, only one of which appeared under the true names of the writers.

"In 10 years this policy of the *American* magazine ran its course," remarked Mr. Clark. "When you figure the *American* carried about 400 business success stories a year—and did so for ten years, you realize that there aren't 4,000 men in America worth putting on a pedestal."

We fell to discussing the deleterious effect upon some people of ill-advised

publicity, but as George Seldes would say, "You can't print that."

Prodigious Traveler

Mr. Clark has been in every state in the Union except Florida and interviewed all sorts of people, such as the railroad presidents in Chicago, university presidents, hundreds of business men. He was the first to interview Lowell Thomas, for instance. He likes best those oft-times obscure people who might be termed "characters," from whom he comes away in a glow. He flipped the pages of his journal.

"Ever hear of Carlos Montezuma? or the chap out in the Imperial valley?" and so on. I hadn't. Indeed, no one outside of their own circle had before he wrote about them. He mentioned "White Hand at the Window" as the story of a little crippled girl downstate who always waved at the train men passing the house.

Cites Merritt Interviews

We exchanged mutual glances of satisfaction, however, over my knowing about one of his favorites, Leonidas Merritt I had read "Seven Iron Men" by Paul De Kruif and knew the role of the seven Merritt brothers in timber cruising and discovery of the open-pit Mesabe range. Clark wrote about Merritt long before De Kruif discovered the drama of the iron ore industry in Minnesota.

Investigating Mr. Clark's output of 200,000 words a year would have kept me in his office indefinitely. I might even have beaten his record for an interview, which he made several years ago by appearing in a man's office at 10 o'clock Sunday morning and staying until 9 in the evening without a break for lunch or dinner.

As it was, he bared the secret of his filing system instead of citing experiences. I was greatly cheered to find he does not keep old files and books indefinitely. Six months is about the usual length of time. Ever since I interviewed Elmo Scott Watson and learned he had thirteen steel filing cabinets, full of clippings plus innumerable boxes, I have been depressed over not accumulating my own set of thirteen cabinets and x-number of boxes.

He's Reckless Chap

Mr. Clark is a reckless chap. When he moved from his studio in the Chimneys, he cleaned house ruthlessly and threw out quantities of stuff. In his office on the second floor of his home he has a desk, book case, and a divan. In the closet is an ordinary four-drawer wooden filing cabinet. He intimated that the attic held a few more files. Compactness and orderliness are his means of achieving peace of mind along with a variety of source material.

He showed me his set of folders. One is marked "ideas," another "waiting to be written," a third, "being written." The other three folders are marked respectively, "waiting to be sold," "published," and "destroyed." In the cabinet are the various folders on completed articles, some of them four inches thick with pamphlets and notes. In the top drawer of his desk are card files, filled with notations for use in fiction: characters, places, situations.

Outlines Problem

The chief problem of a magazine writer, according to Mr. Clark, is to keep the next article coming along while concentrating on the one in process. He likes to concentrate on one. So when he finishes it, there may be a lull before he gets going on the next. Like most writers he gets material for two or three different articles when following up a subject.

I asked him if he didn't write
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