

Bill Smiley - salty, syndicated scribe

This newspaper often has enquiries from readers about Bill Smiley. Where does he live? What does he do? What is he like? etc. This article by Shirley Whittington in Town and Country Publications, Elmville, will help to answer many of the queries about Smiley, who is almost a Canadian national institution among small town and rural people.

Once a week, an Ontario high school teacher hunches over his typewriter and stabs out a salty little column about things like mortgages, kids, taxes and the cruel Canadian winter. Bill Smiley, who seasons 150 weekly newspapers across Canada with his personal blend of sugar and spice, tells it like it is.

He comments on home life. "It is something to be borne, like varicose veins or ingrown toenails."

He talks about family hang-ups. "Momma's tolerance thins with the same rapidity as Dad's hair."

About his job, he says, "Show me a teacher in June and I'll show you a character with a crumpled shirt, a wrinkled brow and a desperate look in his eye."

He has this to say about the puzzling business of living: "The Sixties produced the millions of kids who are now a mystery and terror and bewilderment to the relics of the Frightful Forties."

To readers of his column, Bill comes across as a wise, irreverent and witty man. It's an honest projection. He writes the way he talks. Sitting in his favourite chair an uncomfortable straight backed job - he'll curl one hand around a drink and run the other through his thinning white hair. He listens, while conversation flows around him, then delivers a wry and usually definitive comment, in a voice as comfortable as a rusty porch swing. This wry unsentimental wisdom is the reason acquaintances from eight to 80 ask him for advice. This is why ex-students invite him to their weddings, and why every female he meets falls a little bit in love with him. And this is why a clipping from a Saskatchewan newspaper describes him as "by far our most popular syndicated columnist."

Bill was born in Perth, Ont., and was studying at Victoria College when World War Two began. He joined the RCAF, became a Typhoon pilot and took part in many dangerous missions, like hitch hiking 380 miles on a forty hour pass to see a girl. He regards this escapade with the same puckish spirit as the time he had to circle an airfield for a couple of hours with a live bomb hanging from his wingtip. The chaps down below wouldn't let him land until they had cleared away all the men and machines. "I landed", he says, "like a mouse in kid gloves walking on eggs. Then I ran like a bat out of hell, in flying boots, with a parachute bumping on my bum."

The high times were abruptly interrupted in 1944 when he was shot down over Holland and imprisoned by the Germans. He came home with a knee disabled by an S.S. boot, and with plans to complete his Honour English course at U. of T. There he met his dark-eyed wife, and he's been announcing ever since that she is the root of all his troubles.

They had only been married a few months, subsisting on love and very little money, when biology threw a spanner into the works. Ivy (Sussie to her friends) became pregnant and Bill developed T.B. After a year of separation - he in a sanatorium, she at home in Warton - they both resumed their college careers, burning the midnight oil with a baby son as well as a stack of text books. Bill had his eye on post-graduate studies in English with a view to teaching, but tragedy intervened.

Ivy's brother in law, the editor of the Warton Echo was drowned and there was nobody to take over the paper. Bill stepped into the breach and for years he lived "the happy harried life of a small town newspaper editor, rushing to get ads out, covering council meetings and Women's Institute meetings." In addition, he wrote a personal column, free from editorial and reporting restrictions. The little column caught on. Soon other editors were picking it up and some of them paid him as much as 50 cents a week for it. Before long over eighty weeklies were reprinting Smiley's Sugar and Spice, and the proofreading, mailing and billing became a family industry for Bill, Ivy and the youngsters, Hugh and Kim. When the Telegram Syndicate offered to market Bill's column, everybody was delighted. No more sticky tongues from licking envelopes and stamps!

Although he was established as an editor and columnist, the urge to teach lingered in Bill. Off he went to O.C.E. Ivy managed the paper, juggling interviews, news reports and the management of a home and family with cheerful efficiency.

He began his teaching career in Midland, where he is now head of the English Department of MSS. Lately he has joined the Argyle syndicate. The Telegram tried to retaliate by featuring another well known columnist in Smiley's format, but his loyal readers weren't fooled. As far as they're concerned, Bill Smiley is irreplaceable.

Proof of his readers' affection and involvement arrives in his mailbox almost every day. When he mentioned a few years ago that his daughter Kim was dangerously ill with hepatitis, a flood of letters arrived, with prayers for her recovery. When he said that, in his opinion cable TV was exploitation, he was visited by two officials from a large cable network, who suggested that perhaps he was only kidding and would



BILL SMILEY

like to retract or modify his statement in a later column. He wasn't. He didn't. Last year he wistfully remarked that he'd like to get away from it all and enjoy a summer vacation with his wife - perhaps in the form of an auto trip across Canada. Invitations flowed in, offering everything from deep sea fishing in the Maritimes to dancing under the stars in British Columbia. A column commenting on the BAHAI religion inspired a spirited if ungrammatical, reply from an irate Westerner.

For a writer like Bill, a colourful family is a definite asset. His wife, to whom he has referred variously as "the Old Lady," "the Battle Axe," or "the Boss," is in reality an intelligent and attractive lady who gets fan mail of her own. She's as interested in writing and reading as he is, and plays a mean game of chess. If occasionally she does something wacky, like setting the mantle piece afire at Christmas, it's all grist for Bill's mill.

Daughter Kim, a beautiful redhead with a blinding smile, is currently a student at Erindale College, where she is earning professional raves for her writing ability. Smiley's readers know all about her. They have been following her exploits through Bill's column, from her first music festival to her summer hitch-hiking adventures.

Hugh, Bill's handsome son, was also at university, and Smiley affectionately remembers columns about his piano recital, his summer working on the boats and the time he broke a finger Indian wrestling in Mexico.

Bill's attitude to his kids is a typical blend of sugar and spice. "Those selfish brats! Let them look after themselves. I'm going to enjoy life without worrying about a pair of rotten ingrates." As he says this, he writes out a healthy cheque to help with college expenses.

Is writing the column ever a chore? Yes, says Bill. "It has to be in the mail every Tuesday night, and every minute writing it is hard work. I hate it except when it's finished. Then I either feel the glow of knowing it came off, or a small work of misery starts eating away at me and I can't eradicate it until the next column."

Will he ever write the Great Canadian Novel? "There are quite a few of them around already," he says, "by fellows like Callaghan, Richler, Hugh Garner and Jack Ludwig. As long as I'm teaching, I won't have time to start anything so ambitious."

Because there are never enough hours in the day, Bill often has to turn down invitations to speak, or to conduct writing seminars. The few speaking engagements he has undertaken have proven to be memorable occasions for his listeners. To a high school graduating class he said, "Tonight I'm supposed to speak to you about good reading habits. The choice of speaker was a hilarious piece of miscasting." In 1971, he opened a speech to the top officials of the Royal Canadian Legion this way: "You must wonder what a ... piddling little one-time flight-look is doing addressing such an august body. And I wondered the same."

He has served on the panel of judges for the Stephen Leacock Award for several years, a role he enjoyed because it kept him abreast of developments in Canadian writing, a subject in which he is intensely interested.

His ambitions are stated in this snippet from an old column: "When I'm 85, I want to be known in the Nursing Home as 'that old devil Smiley, who pinches your bottom every time you pass his wheel chair.'"

In the meantime, every Tuesday night Bill returns to his century-old brick house and dumps the day's crop of unmarked essays or exams on the kitchen table. He settles himself at his typewriter with a drink, (anything wet - Coke, coffee, beer, tea,) and a smoke ("I'll smoke till I croak!") and percolates his weekly ration of wry comment. Then he starts rapping with the folks in Collingwood and Seaforth and High River and about a hundred other very important places in Canada.

OUR READERS WRITE:

Nassagaweya says nuts to taxes . . .

TAXES? NO!
Peanuts from Nassagaweya
This peanut shere is for your mayor, These peanuts grown in Nassagaweya, They're pretty small as you can see, But, match our income he'll agree.

We don't need to dig them up with axes, They don't grow huge to match the taxes, These little things we get for sure, For the Lord said we should not be poor.

The things we grow and place in store, Don't even pay the bills no more, It seems to be our human lot, To want the things we haven't got.

We wish that we grew dollar bills, To pay for all those fancy frills, We'd never be in all this muss, We'd just create a huge surplus.

Our whole technology lacks in sense, Some folks get rich selling us defense, But, the Lord would bless our humble needs, If we would only plant the seeds.



These peanuts prove that kindness grows, While hatred kills the lovely rose, We should never have to fear the nuts, Or take our pay in small Peanuts.

Victor Smith, R.R. 2, Rockwood.

Use Bibles as spiritual guide . . .

R.R. 2, Erin

Dear Sir:
I felt I should write a reply to Mrs. Marchmont's letter in last week's Free Press. I have always taught my children how the facts of evolution and the story of Genesis can be inter-related and they have no trouble with what is taught in high school. Nor do they wince at the term evolution. I have seen fear in the eyes of people who say evolution is nonsense.

It is a fact that mankind has existed during the last 2 1/2 million years. Also a known fact states that dinosaurs lived over 100 million years before this. How can we

firmly believe in a seven day creation? But if we take Genesis as a myth (a story that tells a truth) scientists will agree that the world probably came into being in the order mentioned there.

The statement about students being taught they are on the same level as animals is not true.

I think we have to get our thinking out of the Dark Ages, Mrs. Marchmont. Use our Bibles as a spiritual guide and not as a science text book or a crystal ball, and you will find little conflict with information taught in high schools.

Yours truly, Marie F. Harris.

Purpose to inform public

January 31, 1972, Box 180, Acton

Editor:

By now, many of your readers will be aware of the petition to Premier Davis requesting a public inquiry into the proposed hydro corridor.

It is not the intention of the Coalition of Concerned Citizens to impede progress. Neither is it the intention to have the corri-

dor imposed upon others. The purpose of the petition is simply to inform the public as to the reasons behind the proposed route and what further plans for expansion lie in store, thus dispelling the rumors and fears that always surround situations like this.

It should be stressed that all concerned persons may sign this petition regardless of where they reside.

Yours truly, Mrs. Marie Tizzard.

Indecent charges

A district man has been charged by Acton O.P.P. following an incident of Indecent Exposure, reported to police last week. The man was apprehended on Saturday.

incident at the Main S. laundromat several weeks ago. Other charges from another police department are also pending.

Acton O.P.P. have also laid another charge against the man in connection with a similar incident at the Main S. laundromat several weeks ago. Last week an Acton woman had informed police of the offense, witnessed by two girls.

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NASSAGAWEYA Township Council NOTES

At their regular meeting on Monday, Feb. 7, Nassagaweya Township Council:

—Approved a \$500 loan to the newly created Nassagaweya Library Board in order to pay the board's expenses until April, when the board expects to receive a grant from the provincial government.

—Read a letter from the Nassagaweya Women's Institute, which said the Institute would support any township by-laws regulating noise. The letter said that noise was a form of pollution and that noise was extremely bad in wintertime—coming from snow vehicles. Council remarked that snowmobile control was the responsibility of the province.

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- Schneider's **SANDWICH SPREAD ROLLS** 3 for \$1
- Schneider's **BOLOGNA** 1-lb. Pkg. 69¢ lb.
- Can. No. 1 Fresh—Smoked (Our own) **SIDE BACON** 59¢ lb.

Crown 2-lb. Bottle (Save 10c) **CORN SYRUP** 39¢

Rosedale (Save 50c) **PEAS** 14 oz. Tins 6 for \$1

Nabob— (Save 30c) **COFFEE** 1-lb. Bag. 79¢

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