

# 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 Fyghful 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 peckish 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 (Susie 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 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 far more 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.

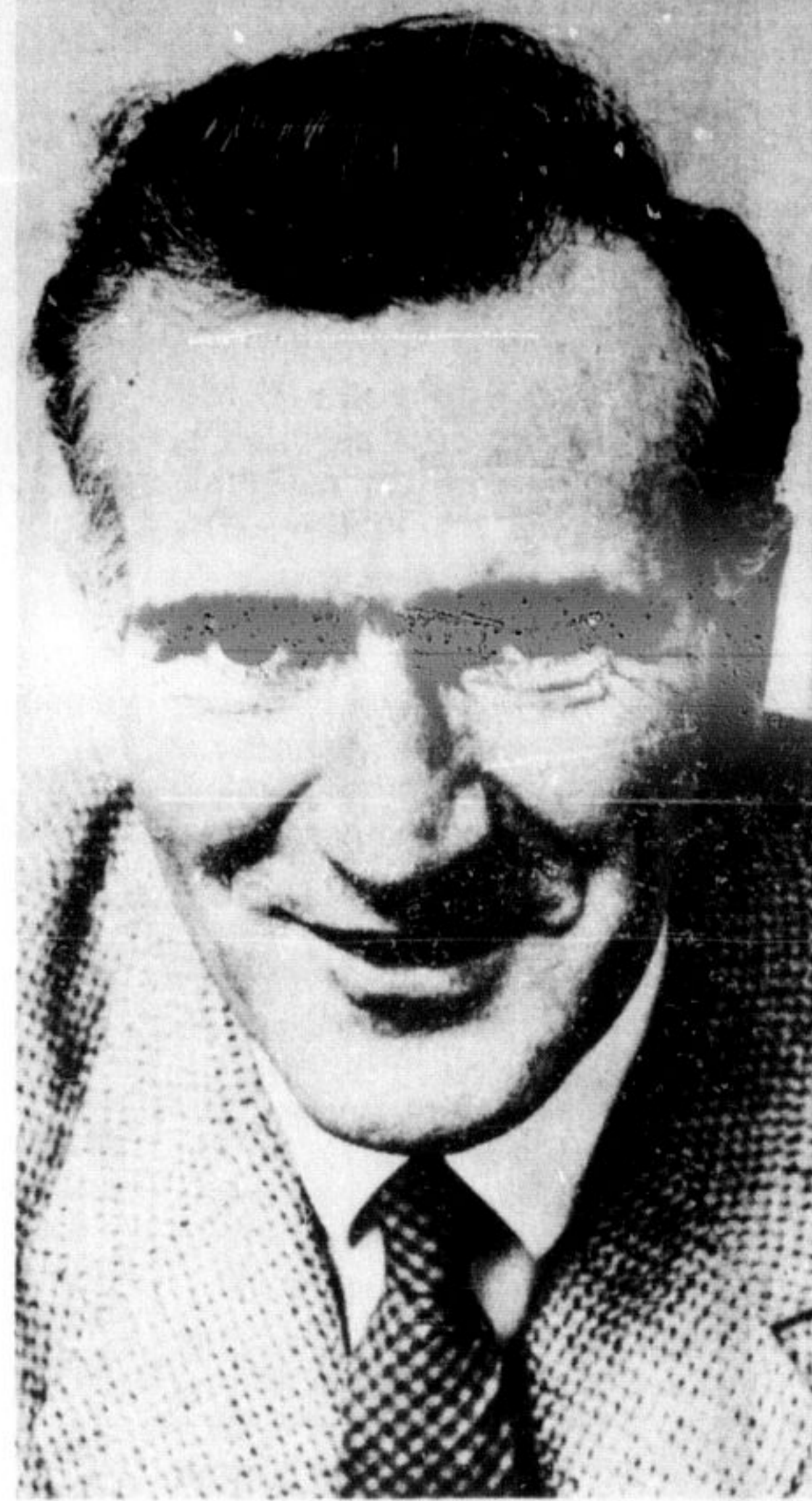
Hugh, Bill's handsome son, was also at university, and Smiley aficionados remember columns about his piano recital, his summer working on the boats and the time he broke a finger Indian wrestling in Mexico.

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-foot is doing addressing such



BILL SMILEY

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 Seaford and High River and about a hundred other very important places in Canada.

## Ask park in Esquesing

Esquesing planning board will make the decision on an application for operation of a park on land at Lot 17, Con. 1, owned by Norman Douglas, R.R. 1, Acton.

Township council told Mr. Douglas they had two other such applications waiting to be processed by the board and his request would be included on the agenda. They agreed to send him the decision.

Mr. Douglas said he owned 145 acres of land, mostly bush, and he had been advised by a professor from the University of Guelph that the land was useless for anything else. Twenty-two acres are cultivated.

Saw Dept. The applicant said he had already been to the Department of Tourism. They advised him to see council first, he told the reeve when informed he must see the Department first.

"They work in mysterious ways," muttered the reeve, noting the Department had previously told council it was the other way round—Department first, then council.

Mr. Douglas said he wasn't sure yet what form the park would take, but he envisioned a place for trailers and tents to set up in the rocky, forested area.

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## OPTIMIST CLUB NEWS

Considerable time has passed by since our last report (it just takes some people a lot longer to get over Christmas and New Year's) so it is about time to catch up with some of the activities of the club.

On Dec. 2 our special guests of the evening were Mr. Opi from Campbellville and Mr. Moir from Toronto, both representing the Air Cadets of Canada. They spoke to us about the Air Cadet Corp, and the role it plays in Canada today, also mentioned was the possibility of forming an Air Cadet Squadron in Milton. Since their visit to us, Boys' Work Chairman Don Simons has accompanied Mr. Opi to the Optimist-sponsored St. Catharines Squadron and also to the Hamilton Squadron, to see what facilities are needed to start a squadron. Anyone interested enough to help with the formation of a Unit here in Milton should get in touch with Optimist Don.

Our last meeting of the year was on Dec. 16 and was the annual Christmas dinner for the ladies. Optimist Mike did a terrific job of arranging the program for the evening. After an enjoyable dinner, carols were sung and a festive atmosphere prevailed which was highlighted by a visit from Old Saint Nick himself. Parcels were given out and a large Christmas card, from all of the husbands to all of the wives (and girl friends) was presented to Optimist Lou's wife Alice, who returned it to us for our scrap book. A pleasant evening of cards followed and was enjoyed by all.

Sunday, Dec. 19, was the annual Christmas party for the children of the members, held in the Boyne Community hall. Optimist Mike led the youngsters (and oldsters) in carol singing and some old time movies were shown by Optimist Bill McInnis which were enjoyed by all. After this approximately 40 children received gifts from Santa Claus, after which pop and ice cream was dished up by Santa's helpers.

A sincere vote of appreciation goes out to Chairman Pete, Optimist Mike and Don and the entire committee for the work put into this program.

During the month of December three new members were inducted into the club; they are Earl Daly, Harvey Zimmerman and Barry Eberley. Congratulations are in order to all three who are already working on different projects in the club.

I am also pleased to report that the children who were in the hospital over Christmas were once again looked after.

Our first meeting of the new year was held on Jan. 6 and plans were made to enter a float in the Winter Carnival parade on Feb. 12, also on the agenda was the plan already made for our oratorical contest to be held in March.

Also planned was a celebration of our fifth anniversary, a dance and buffet to be held on Feb. 5 at the Sportsmen's Club on the mountain.

The December 50-50 draw was made and the winner was Barry Fletcher of Milton. The draw was down from the November draw, possibly due to the hectic holiday season, but we hope to be back up over the \$200 mark for January. These 50-50 draw tickets are available from any member of the Optimist Club.

Will sign off for now and hope to keep you better informed on the Club activities in this new year.

The best dental insurance is your investment in regular home and professional care. You can prevent most dental disease with such care. Feb. 6 through 12 is Dental Health week in Ontario.

## Plan annual for Chamber

Planning for the annual meeting on Feb. 29 occupied most of the discussions at last week's February meeting of Milton Chamber of Commerce directors. The event at Holy Rosary Hall features a dinner, annual reports, election of officers and a dance.

Guest speakers are to be George J. Forrest and Frank O. Maltby of Polymer Corporation Ltd.

Directors learned the Rotary Club has agreed to change its regular meeting place and attend the Chamber dinner that evening.

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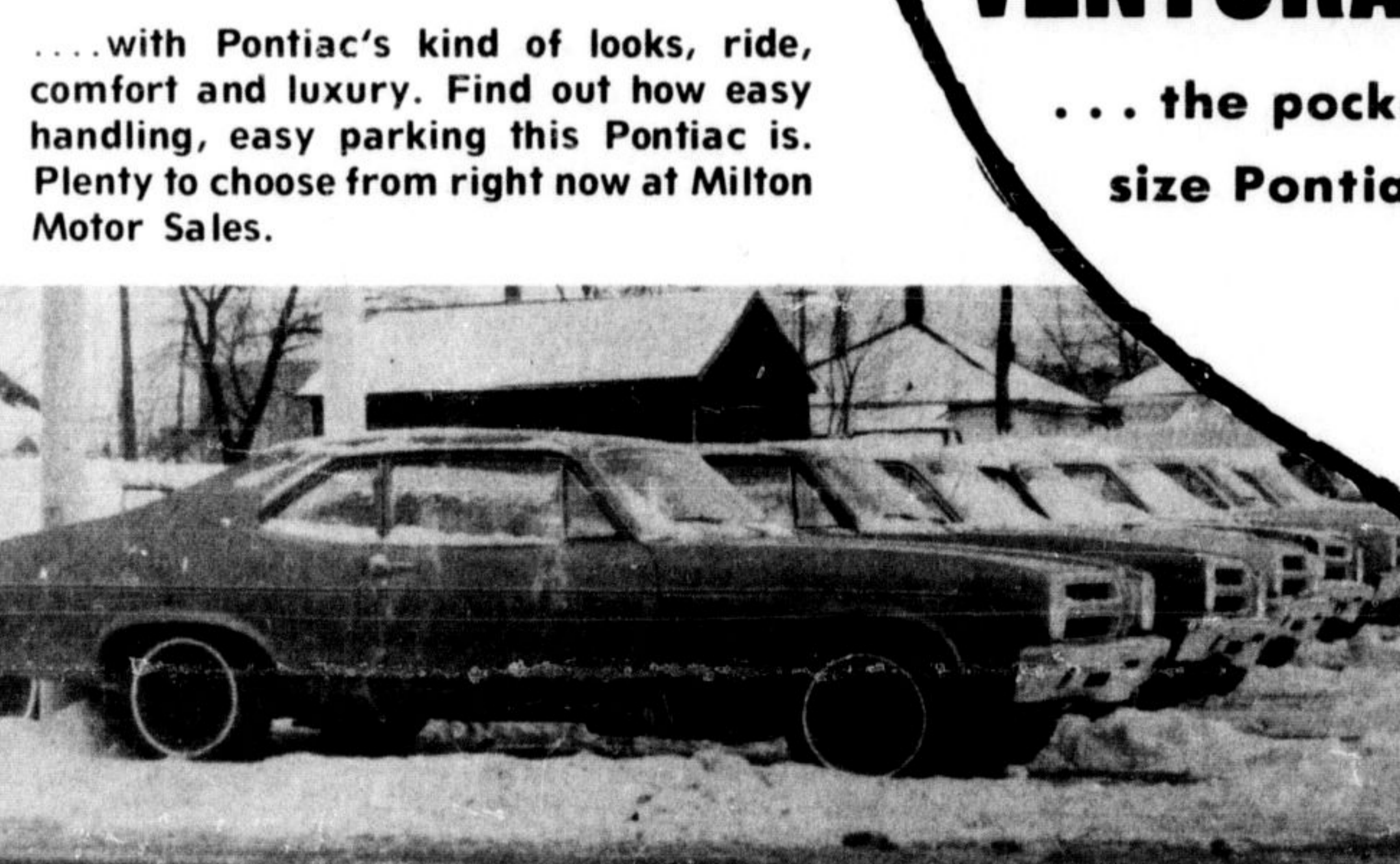
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