

## Edwin T. Meredith: Founder of *Better Homes & Gardens*

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Carol Reuss

*Iowa is not normally thought of as a publishing center, yet many millions of copies of important U.S. magazines flow through the presses of Meredith Corporation in Des Moines each month. Among these are two, Successful Farming and Better Homes and Gardens, that are edited as well as printed in Des Moines, thanks to the imagination and energy of their founder, Edwin T. Meredith, and his successors. Meredith's leadership in publishing is described in the following article, which is part of a study of Better Homes and Gardens begun by Dr. Reuss as a graduate student at the University of Iowa School of Journalism.*

EDWIN T. MEREDITH WAS 17 YEARS OLD when, in 1893, he began working part-time in the mailing room of his grandfather's Populist newspaper, *The Farmer's Tribune*. He had completed the education offered by the Cass County School by then, and had left his parents' farm home to go to Des Moines to study business at Highland Park College. He took the job at *The Farmer's Tribune* at his grandfather's invitation and he also waited tables at the college to earn extra money. Before long Edwin had more responsibilities on the paper so he quit college to work full-time on *The Farmer's Tribune*. Two years later he married Edna C. Elliott and "Uncle Tommy,"<sup>1</sup> as grandfather Meredith was

<sup>1</sup>Misunderstanding of the relationship between Edwin T. Meredith and his grandfather, whose nickname was "Uncle Tommy," abound. Thomas Meredith, the grandfather, immigrated to the U.S. in 1855 and settled in Cass County, Iowa, where he bought land and rose to prominence and relative wealth. He had three

called, presented the couple with four or five \$20 gold pieces and control of *The Farmer's Tribune*—with the challenge “sink or swim” penned to his note.<sup>2</sup>

Young Meredith's first plan was to make *The Farmer's Tribune* a non-partisan farm paper with state-wide circulation. His own farm background stimulated his interest in farming and in publishing material that would help to improve farming and the farm family's life. While formulating changes in the newspaper, however, Meredith developed plans for a farm publication with broader distribution and editorial and advertising potential, and in 1902, he began *Successful Farming* magazine. In 1904 he sold his interest in *The Farmer's Tribune* to H. G. McMillan, United States attorney in Cedar Rapids and owner of a Lakewood farm, who moved it to Sioux City. This left Meredith free to concentrate on *Successful Farming* and other political, civic and business activities.

When *Successful Farming* was begun, three rooms in a building at Fourth and Grand in Des Moines were sufficient for the two Meredith publications: E. T. Meredith's office, the mailing room, and the composing room. Type was set by an outside shop and printing done by Western Newspaper Union, located on the first floor of the building.

By 1912, the company—“Meredith's” to the people of Des Moines—had expanded several times and all operations were moved to a new plant at 1716 Locust Street, still the location of Meredith Corporation. There were more than two hundred employees at Meredith's then, many of them women who worked nine hours a day (a few less on Saturdays) stuffing envelopes for subscription and advertising promotions and opening the returns. *Successful Farming* used dozens of circulation and sales promo-

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sons—Thomas Oliver (father of Edwin T.), James and Oliver—and a stepson, Henry Bishop. The elder Meredith received controlling interest in *The Farmer's Tribune* in partial payment for financial contributions to Gen. James B. Weaver's presidential campaign in 1892. Weaver was co-founder and editor of the paper. In 1957 a Meredith Publishing Company booklet, “This Is Meredith's,” confused “Uncle Tommy's” identification. *Time* indicated a similar misunderstanding in “How To Get Readers,” Apr. 4, 1949, and so did the *Des Moines Register* in its story of E. T. Meredith's death, June 18, 1928. Peter L. Peterson, who has studied the political contributions of E. T. Meredith, has greatly assisted in verifying the above.

<sup>2</sup>Letter, L. H. Mugge to Carol Reuss, January 5, 1970.



Courtesy Iowa Historical Department, Museum and Archives Division

*Edwin T. Meredith*

tion schemes, including many contests and subscription premiums. Meredith and his staff developed a keen sense of what reader interests were and they worked hard to maintain enthusiastic reader response and acceptance.

E. T. Meredith's enthusiasm for publishing was not satisfied by *Successful Farming*. In June 1913 he launched a trial balloon for another magazine by inserting a small advertisement headed "Cash Prizes For Letters About Gardening" in *Successful Farming*. The advertisement was similar to others used to announce *Successful Farming* contests to readers. It was un-illustrated and ostensibly it solicited gardening ideas from readers. Midway



through the copy, however, was an announcement for a "bright, clean inspiring, helpful and attractive monthly magazine . . . for all who have gardens or raise fruit."<sup>3</sup> The magazine described in the 1913 advertisement as *Garden, Fruit and Home* was not published even though the advertising copy implied its existence. The money collected for subscriptions as a result of the advertisement was returned and the plans were temporarily filed.

The idea was revived in 1920 and mockups were prepared for a magazine for homemakers. Again none was printed because even though the World War I curb on consumer goods was over, a national business recession was eminent so publishing would be extremely risky. Then Meredith was named secretary of agriculture in President Woodrow Wilson's Cabinet, which took him away from his Midwest publishing headquarters.

He returned from Washington early in 1922 and records indicate that he went from the train directly to the dining room of the Meredith plant. It was lunchtime and as Meredith entered his employees greeted him with a standing ovation. The year was one of pessimism because of the country's economic problems and Meredith's presses, installed as *Successful Farming* prospered, were not running to capacity. Still, Meredith believed that the time was right to publish more magazines. Within months, two new publications were added, *The Dairy Farmer* and *Fruit, Garden and Home*, which was renamed *Better Homes and Gardens* in 1924.

The first of these magazines was purchased in 1922 as *Kimball's Dairy Farmer*. It had a circulation of less than 50,000 in 1922 when Meredith and his staff began to renew it as a publication of national scope. After five years he merged it into *Successful Farming*.

*Fruit, Garden and Home* was totally new—home, not farm oriented. Although Meredith had previously assigned staff members to experiment with his ideas for the magazine, he immersed himself in developing plans for it. By April 1922 he was ready to begin selling *F G and H* and the *Des Moines Register* published news of it on the front page. Meredith planned to begin publication in September with an estimated 150,000 circulation. He anti-

<sup>3</sup>"Cash Prizes For Letters About Gardening," *Successful Farming*, June 1913, p. 45.

culated 500,000 subscribers in a year, a million in two years. Pilot issues were published in July and August, and the first paid issue was published—52 pages—in September.

When Meredith announced the new magazine in April he did not have an editor for it. The *Successful Farming* staff would be augmented for the new publication, he said. Men interested in the top editorial position contacted Meredith but he told them "Just at present we do not have our plans definitely formed, and will not wish to take on much expense until business opens up in the fall."<sup>4</sup>

Meredith considered himself managing editor as well as publisher of the new magazine. At one point, he wrote to firms that sold art to ask them to submit possibilities for covers. In identical letters he explained that although he thought the new magazine would not be as well printed as *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, or *House and Garden*, "we expect to make it a first-class journal for the average family."<sup>5</sup> He added: "We expect to devote considerable space to the canning and preservation of fruits and vegetables, their uses as food, and the manner of serving them. We expect also to have articles on interior decorating and beautifying the home, which would appeal to and be within the reach of the average family. . ."<sup>6</sup>

The color illustration for the first cover of *Fruit, Garden and Home*, published with no credit other than the signature of E. M. Wideman on it, was purchased for \$45 from B & K Studios of Chicago.<sup>7</sup>

Meredith often described the new magazine's potential for service to what he termed the "average family" in correspondence and conversations although he didn't use the word "service." He wrote to a Chicago advertising executive: "We expect to build a practical, helpful paper for the very large number who have gardens and average homes, a field not now covered, rather than a paper exclusively for the exclusives."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Letter, E. T. Meredith to J. B. Kirbye, Apr. 28, 1922, University of Iowa, Special Collections, Meredith Papers (hereafter Meredith Papers).

<sup>5</sup>Letters, Meredith to "My dear sir" (to selected photo and art agencies), April 25, 1922, Meredith Papers.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup>Undated note in Meredith's hand, Meredith Papers.

<sup>8</sup>Letter, Meredith to Paul Faust, May 6, 1922, Meredith Papers.

With *Fruit, Garden and Home*, Meredith was striking out for a truly mass audience, the growing number of middle-class Americans who were settling in urban and suburban homes—homes on lots large enough to stimulate interest in gardening, homes using many products that could be advertised to *FG and H* readers. Like *Successful Farming*, this was to be a how-to-do-it publication stressing good living, but this time in cities and towns.

When Meredith hired Chesla C. Sherlock to edit *FG and H* during the summer of 1922, it was evident that the magazine had two strong men at the helm. Meredith was a penetrating, innovating, enthusiastic, forward-looking salesman-publisher, a national figure who was increasingly in demand for civic, political, and business consultations and endorsements, and Sherlock was an imaginative, productive, idealistic writer-editor. The two of them combined talents to develop the magazine Meredith had long envisioned. Reader participation was the key, Meredith and Sherlock the catalysts. Their ambition was backed by the impressive sales-circulation-production organization that Meredith had nurtured since the turn of the century.

The magazine, however, was not easy to sell that summer. R. R. Ring, Minneapolis advertising representative, wrote: "The advertisers and agencies here are very favorably impressed with the July issue, but they are not inclined to spend money in a new publication. We are featuring the fact that you are behind the publication and every advertiser will get his money's worth from the start. . ."<sup>9</sup> For some time Meredith's reputation and money, built with *Successful Farming*, continued to support the new publication. It was not until 1927 that the new magazine showed a profit.<sup>10</sup>

By fall 1922, the magazine was being mailed to 150,000 subscribers each month, the non-rural Americans who E. T. Meredith felt had need of his new national magazine and the products that could be sold from its pages. Editor Sherlock was beginning to mold issues with ingenious combinations of service and sentiment, with information and enthusiasm for the "better" home.

Meredith maintained a strong interest in all of the departments of his new magazine. He continued writing the column, "A

<sup>9</sup>Letter, R. R. Ring to Meredith, July 20, 1922, Meredith Papers.

<sup>10</sup>Letter, Ken Hill to Reuss, January 13, 1970.



Chat With The Publisher," until May 1925, using it to promote the magazine and to introduce new features to readers. In August 1922, for example, Meredith announced the inauguration of the Home Building Page: "It has been our thought that a home planning service for small families—bungalows, cottages, and houses that can be constructed more economically than the average places usually shown in similar services—would be worth the most to our readers. What would you like to see on this page?"<sup>11</sup> Plans for the two bungalows illustrated in the issue were available for two dollars, and what was to become a popular service to readers was established.

In September 1922, Meredith informed readers that his goal of 150,000 subscribers had been reached and he asked each one to add two or three more subscriptions so that the magazine could achieve a new goal of 500,000. The next spring he asked readers to solicit subscriptions so he could spend circulation promotion funds "for extra editorial features each month."<sup>12</sup> Two-thirds of the renewals sent in during September also included a subscription for a neighbor, he told a Philadelphia advertising executive that fall.<sup>13</sup>

Meredith was equally aggressive in the advertising sales department and he often made calls with his representatives. One report about Meredith's sales acumen alleged that he personally sold 100,000 lines in the first issue of the magazine—a figure disregarded by Meredith Corporation because the first issue contained less than 10,000 lines of advertising.<sup>14</sup>

Meredith's concern for readers was periodically relayed to Sherlock. He was convinced that the magazine had to maintain rapport with home-dwellers to survive. When Sherlock published an article in one of the pilot issues describing methods used by a celery farmer to blanch the stalks, Meredith sent a memo saying "hold the suggestions down to what individuals might do in a comparatively small way on a small ground." He told Sherlock to

<sup>11</sup>Meredith, "A Chat With The Publisher," *Fruit, Garden and Home*, August 1922, p.3.

<sup>12</sup>Meredith, "A Personal Letter From The Publisher," *Fruit, Garden and Home*, April 1923, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup>Letter, Meredith to F. Wallis Armstrong, November 27, 1923, Meredith Papers.

<sup>14</sup>"How Meredith's Builds," *Printer's Ink*, Apr. 28, 1961, p. 42, and letter, Mugge to Reuss, August 26, 1970.

seek "general articles . . . , carrying somewhat the interests of the articles in the *National Geographic* magazine."<sup>15</sup>

He later asked Sherlock to develop an article on home tools, explaining "*Fruit, Garden and Home* readers are the very type who would be the best customers for Simmons Hardware, Adkins Saws, etc., and that such an article would, therefore, be of considerable interest to our readers."<sup>16</sup> Meredith saw his magazine as a composite of editorial features and advertising that maintained its audience by presenting useful ideas and information from all sources. By the next year, incidentally, free lancer Dale R. Van Horn was supplying monthly articles on home tools.

A Meredith associate, T. W. LeQuatte, had predicted even before *Fruit, Garden and Home* began publication, that the name was a stumbling block to advertisers, many of whom were not convinced that a magazine with such an all-encompassing title could sell their products. The magazine's sales representatives also reported opposition to the name. Skeptical New York agency people, one representative wrote, facetiously tagged the magazine "Heaven, Hearth and Mother."<sup>17</sup> J. Walter Thompson, retained by Meredith as advertising and public relations counsel, warned that gardens were a vogue, a passing fancy, so the garden designation should be removed from the title.<sup>18</sup> Editor Sherlock said "no" to the idea because at the time flowers, gardens, landscaping, and fruit articles were filling about one-third of the editorial space in the magazine. He suggested "Lawn, Garden and Home" as a possible improvement.<sup>19</sup> For months questions and suggestions were raised but no one seemed to have an acceptable substitute for *Fruit, Garden and Home*. Finally, during a summer sales meeting in Des Moines in 1924, the title *Better Homes and Gardens* was announced. The August 1924 issue was the first to bear the new logotype.

While Meredith's wide interest in and away from the company sometimes limited his participation in the magazine, he always examined the new issues soon after they came off the presses and

<sup>15</sup>Letter, Meredith to Chesla C. Sherlock, August 14, 1922, Meredith Papers.

<sup>16</sup>Letter, Meredith to Sherlock, December 15, 1922, Meredith Papers.

<sup>17</sup>Letter, Martin Ficke to Reuss, October 4, 1969.

<sup>18</sup>Genevieve A. Callahan and Lou Richardson, interview with Reuss, San Francisco, October 9, 1969.

<sup>19</sup>Undated note bearing Sherlock's initials, Meredith Papers.



marked percentages on the pages, or drew large X's through them, according to his evaluation of their reader service and appeal. His was an intuitive kind of quality check on the issues, but it seemed to accurately reflect readers' interests. He developed some of the most successful subscription promotion letters the company ever used. One particularly effective opening line, "Houses have personalities that they acquire from the people living in them," continued to be used even after Meredith's death.<sup>20</sup>

For a little longer than five years Chesla C. Sherlock led the small *Better Homes and Gardens* editorial staff and developed the magazine from E. T. Meredith's original plan. Gradually, though, the warm relationship between editor and publisher deteriorated. By Spring 1927 Sherlock intimated to some of his associates that he and the magazine were about to separate. In May he had an encounter with the publisher that ended with Sherlock's resignation. When Meredith subsequently heard that Sherlock had told some editorial contributors about their differences, he told Sherlock to leave.<sup>21</sup> Sherlock went to *Ladies' Home Journal* and Meredith appointed two women, Lou Richardson and Genevieve A. Callahan, both long-time staff members, to head the editorial department while a search was begun for a new editor.

Meredith's qualifications for the job were definite. He told Fred Bohlen to "Keep in mind all the time that we do not want anyone who has lived in New York, Philadelphia, or some eastern section all his life."<sup>22</sup> Meredith and Bohlen were opposed to a woman editor, and Meredith wrote these specifications in a memo:

While I do not put great emphasis on a man's church connections, I do believe that a man who has been actively interested in Y.M.C.A., and takes an active part in church work, would naturally have a greater interest in home, home life and the encouragement of right living on the part of our subscribers and the doing of those things that would benefit the family, than would an individual who did not have this church interest and who was more on the order of the theatre and cabaret type. I think this is a good point to keep in mind in considering any applicants, and everything else being equal, take the one with the church interests.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup>Mugge, interview with Reuss, Des Moines, September 16, 1969.

<sup>21</sup>Letter, Meredith to Fred Bohlen, May 19, 1927, Meredith Papers.

<sup>22</sup>Letter, Bohlen to R. F. Rogers, June 23, 1927, Meredith Papers.

<sup>23</sup>Letter, Meredith to Bohlen and Lawrence E. Lane, May 13, 1927, Meredith Papers.

(Meredith, himself, was not noted for church attendance.) Elmer T. Peterson, newspaperman, magazine free lancer, and home-owner-improver was named editor.

Soon after the search for an editor was completed, E. T. Meredith's health became enough of a concern to force him to complete rest, and for a month he stayed away from the office. For Meredith, less than exhaustingly complete participation in anything was impossible. His stature as a successful businessman and his knowledge of farm, commercial, and political issues was such that every year hundreds of individuals and organizations across the country and abroad sought his advice and his presence, and he gave both. While Meredith's enthusiasm was massive, his physical endurance became more strained each month as the pressures upon him increased. In spite of his susceptibility to high blood pressure attacks and repeated warnings to slow down, Meredith continued to exert personal influence on *Better Homes and Gardens* as well as state and national politics and every other activity that interested him. His personal appeal was genuine and influential, as is indicated in a letter from C. B. Nash, then advertising manager of American Sanitary Manufacturing Company and a personal friend as well as business client, indicates. Nash wrote:

I thought you might have been along in December or January, so we might have a visit. We have made a lot of changes in the house and yard since you were here last and we are all very keen to have you pass upon them, because what we have done is very much in line with what you are advocating in *Better Homes and Gardens*.<sup>24</sup>

Edwin T. Meredith was only fifty-one years old when he died in June 1928 but by then the pattern for *Better Homes and Gardens* was established and his publishing company in Des Moines was prospering. Son-in-law Fred Bohlen, selected by Meredith to guide the company, was groomed and ready to take over and expand the operations from Meredith's plans.

Bohlen was a Chicago sales representative for *Successful Farming* when Meredith summoned him to Des Moines in 1923 for increased participation in the management of the company. He worked closely with Meredith and after the founder's death he was named president. He remained the chief executive officer of

<sup>24</sup>Letter, C. B. Nash to Meredith, January 13, 1928, Meredith Papers.

the company and chairman of the board until 1968, when Darwin Tucker succeeded him as president. A superb salesman, like his predecessor and mentor, Bohen did not attempt to change the rationale of *Better Homes and Gardens* from its home service orientation. Instead, he wisely supported it and by 1970 the magazine's circulation neared eight million.

Until 1946 the Meredith family owned the Meredith enterprises. As Meredith Corporation, it is publicly owned and composed of six major divisions, one of which continues to publish *Better Homes and Gardens* and *Successful Farming* and dozens of Special Interest Publications developed from the magazines, as well as numerous home project plans that are sold through the magazines.

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## Book Reviews

*The Hoover Presidency: A Reappraisal*. Edited by Martin L. Fausold and George T. Mazuzan. Albany: State University of New York Press. 1974, 224 pp.

During the past decade Herbert Clark Hoover has received increasing attention from historians. One result of this new attention has been the reassessment of Hoover from fresh perspectives rather than within his usual role as a foil for Franklin D. Roosevelt. *The Hoover Presidency: A Reappraisal*, a collection of essays originally presented to a conference on Hoover at the State University College at Geneseo, New York, is a welcome addition to the recent scholarship.

In an essay on the election of 1928, Donald R. McCoy finds that Hoover fashioned an astute campaign strategy which emphasized Republican accomplishments during the 1920s and projected Hoover as the candidate best equipped to manage the prosperity everyone was confident would continue. McCoy's contention that Hoover won the election because he was "a man for the times" is a healthy counterbalance to the usual interpretation that Democratic candidate Alfred E. Smith lost the election be-



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