

To California

The Santa Clara Valley seemed like Paradise in 1907. It extended along the shore of San Francisco Bay and beyond, with a range of low mountains to the east and another, parallel to it, between the Valley and the ocean. In the spring the whole area was a carpet of pink and white blossoms from the fruit orchards for which it was famous—prunes, apricots, cherries, and others. Like any Iowan, I marveled at the mild climate, where flowers bloomed the year around, and the winter was called the rainy season.

Today, of course, as is true of so many other places, the beautiful Valley has been half-ruined by overpopulation. Many of the orchards have been put to the bulldozer for subdivisions, air pollution is a menace, and the peaceful back roads are six-lane highways hopelessly clogged with traffic.

Stanford University was itself something of a backwater, with only about 1,800 students, and a faculty so small I could know most of the members by sight, and several very well. (Today the University has nearly 12,000 students, half of them doing postgraduate work, a faculty of proportionate size, some of them Nobel Prize winners, and

all the troubles that afflict universities everywhere.) But in my day it was essentially a small town, and my Emmetsburg training was valuable. I knew how to get along in a small town, which is itself something of an art, and one many city people never learn.

Two things stand out in my four years of college; the more important was that I met the girl I was to marry. I was a senior when she came to the University as a freshman; we promptly fell in love, and were engaged before I graduated. Since we spent most of our time that year getting to know each other, how we did any solid studying, I don't know—and I'm not sure we did.

The lesser matter was that I began serious work as a newspaperman. I felt I should earn some money to supplement the \$40 a month from my cousin. Before I had been in college very long, I managed to land the job of campus correspondent for *The San Francisco Bulletin*.

In doing so, I was beginning to satisfy an ambition that went back some years. My mother had been the "town poet" of Emmetsburg, who wrote jingles for every public occasion. At the age of twelve or thirteen I was writing stories and essays; I won two competitions for children in national magazines and had the thrill of seeing my name in print. Single-handed, I started a high school paper; I not only wrote it all, but I solicited the advertising that helped keep it going for a few issues.

Spending a Christmas vacation in Des Moines with my sister, ten years older than I and now a married woman with two children, I forehandedly got a letter of introduction to the owner of *The Register* from an Emmetsburg friend of his, my maternal uncle, Edwin Ormsby. He assigned a copy boy to show me through the plant. I marveled to see the printers at work, the forms being made up, the big room redolent of printer's ink. I did not dream that I would spend the rest of my life with that smell in my nostrils.

The San Francisco Bulletin, when I got my job on it, was engaged under its crusading editor, Fremont Older, in one of the greatest fights against municipal corruption in American history. I was privileged to see some of that fight from inside the paper's editorial ranks, since I not only wrote news from the campus during the college year, but spent my summers working as a cub reporter.

San Francisco during those years was enormously corrupt. The boss of the city was a little lawyer, Abe Ruef; the mayor was his henchman, big, handsome Eugene Schmitz, who had been an orchestra leader in a local theater. The city had a Board of Supervisors of eighteen men, of whom seventeen were happy to accept their share of the loot extorted from businessmen by Ruef. The eighteenth for some inexplicable reason was honest and was regarded as a weird phenomenon by his fellows.

Fremont Older was the only important newspaperman in town who chafed under Ruef's reign of corruption, and who tried to stop it. It involved not only smalltime crooks, gamblers, keepers of houses of prostitution, and the like, but many of the elite of San Francisco society—owners of street railway lines, public utility companies, and many types of big business. The grafters had one simple scheme to stop Older—they tried to kill him. Gangsters were hired to do this, but several attempts misfired. In one attempt the corruptionists' men got him into a drawing room on an overnight train to Los Angeles, intending to shoot him and throw his body out a window when the train was on a trestle over a deep canyon; but his presence was discovered by accident and a sheriff's posse rescued him in the station at Santa Barbara.

During these years I was living in two worlds. At Stanford I was, like any other boy in his late teens or early twenties, trying to grow up and adjust to the adult world. On *The Bulletin*, I saw the ferocious struggle of the tall, bald-headed, mustachioed editor to clean up the city; like the whole staff, I worshiped him. He had a profound influence on my later life.

Before I was out of college, Older had won; the graft ring was smashed, the evil men turned out of office, one of them—Abe Ruef—sent to prison. At the same time the State of California was shaking itself free from domination by big corporations,

notably the Southern Pacific Railroad. One member of the San Francisco graft prosecution staff, Hiram Johnson, became governor and helped push through a notable series of reforms, copied all over the country. Later Johnson became a United States Senator from California.

With my sheepskin in my suitcase, I left my fiancée at Stanford, with three years more to go, and headed for Los Angeles, where most of my family were now living. This was like being back in Iowa again. Southern California, as I have suggested, was full of Middle Westerners, so omnipresent that only tiny remnants of the old Spanish culture remained.

Our annual Iowa picnic, usually held in a park in nearby Long Beach, used to attract a hundred thousand ex-Iowans. A map of the state was laid out in the park, with a pennant for each county in its proper geographical place. Friends and neighbors clustered around their own banner for a day-long party, with quantities of fried chicken, baked ham, sweet potatoes, apple pie, ice cream, and oceans of coffee. Other Middle Western states held similar annual celebrations.

I rejoined my family, and started out looking for a job, since my fiancée and I hoped to marry as soon as she was out of college. To anticipate a little, she came down at the end of her junior year to visit my family and me (those were the days of incessant chaperonage). As I was now working,

earning \$25 a week, I suggested we get married and that she take her fourth year at the University of Southern California, where I had made a place for myself as a part-time member of the faculty, teaching English. We did this, and looking back, I am convinced that it was a happy decision. On the eve of our fifty-ninth wedding anniversary, I am still waiting for her to do something wrong (and she may be waiting for me to do something right).

I got my first job when I dropped in at the largest clothing department store in Los Angeles, Harris & Frank, to solicit an advertisement for the Stanford humor magazine, *The Chaparral*, of which I had been editor in my senior year. When one of the owners said their advertising man had just quit, I volunteered to prepare the ad myself on speculation. I did so, it was accepted, and the partner in the firm asked if I knew the advertising business. I felt this was no time for truth-telling and assured him I did. I was hired on the spot, to go to work in three days at \$25 a week.

I went to the public library, drew out all the books there on advertising, read them day and night, and at the appointed time I went to work. It was two years later that I talked my fiancée into an immediate marriage; the firm gave me an extra day for a honeymoon, and raised me from \$25 to \$30 a week. After a year or so, when I began to get bored with advertising, I invented out of whole

cloth the idea of a Department of Journalism at the University, where, as I have said, I was already moonlighting part-time as a teacher. I sold the plan to the president and we opened in the fall. I was the only full-time teacher (at \$2,000 a year), the other courses being taught by friends of mine on newspapers or in advertising.

With an incorrigible habit of holding three or four jobs at once, I had become Southern California correspondent for several trade magazines, chief of which was the hugely successful *Printers' Ink*, "the bible of advertising." As a delegate to a convention of advertising men I made my first visit to New York, and dropped in to meet face-to-face the editors for whom I had been working. Hardly had I returned to California before I got a letter asking me to come east as a member of the staff, at a fifty per cent increase in pay. I accepted, and my little family and I (our son, Bruce, Jr., was now about a year old) left for the terrifying prospect—to a young man only ten years out of Emmetsburg—of the Big City.