

The Literary Club
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The Dean

It's been more than a half century now, but whenever his former students gather, they never mention Jerry O'Sullivan by name. It's simply The Dean. Always. An academic who years later occupied O'Sullivan's old office once asked, with more than a hint of envy, "Why do you people always refer to him as The Dean?" Why? Because, as one of my classmates summed up, he bestrode our small universe like a Colossus and left an indelible mark on several generations of talented journalists around the country.

Jeremiah Leo O'Sullivan was born on the Kansas prairie as the 20th Century was dawning. The American press was emerging as a pivotal force in the life of the nation and Jerry O'Sullivan yearned to be part of it. His ambition led him to Milwaukee, drawn there by the reputation of a colorful Jesuit priest with ink in his veins.

That priest, John Copus, had grown up an English Protestant and as a young instructor at Gadshill he had met Charles Dickens. That chance encounter fired his desire to write but he chose to pursue his dream not in Victorian England but in Canada, where a brother had started a country newspaper. By the time he reached his early 30's, he had several novels to his credit and experience writing and editing small-town newspapers. Yet he remained unsettled until a religious conversion led him to the Catholic priesthood and to Marquette University. There, in short order, he established the third professional journalism school in the country. Father Copus believed that the press, next to the pulpit, could be the most powerful influence for the good and so he wanted his students to be imbued with principles undergirding their vocation in order to combat the low standards

of the yellow journalism of the day. In 1914, Jerry O'Sullivan became one of the four members of Copus' first graduating class.

The new graduate, although ever the straight arrow, nonetheless was eager to invade the fever swamps of daily journalism. Newspapering in those days was a game for the young. Age was no barrier to rapid advancement. Because he exhibited his trademark leadership skills from his very first appearance in the newsroom, it wasn't long before Jerry O'Sullivan found himself serving as city editor of a Milwaukee daily. From this post, he soon attracted the attention of the operators of the United Press, which had been founded a decade earlier by Cincinnati's E.W. Scripps for the avowed purpose of fighting the wire-service monopoly of the Associated Press. The UP was a feisty, rag-tag outfit with a "deadline every minute" mentality and a fierce competitive spirit. Its motto was "to get the news and get it first." So O'Sullivan signed on as a Midwest bureau chief, charged with training and directing reporters for this breakneck work. Over time he had a hand in mentoring the likes of Marquis Child, Earl J. Johnson and Carl Victor Little, all of whom were destined for fame in the hurly-burly world of Twenties and Thirties journalism.

At one point, he was housed in a small newsroom with the soon-to-be-famous J. Westbrook Pegler and would later use that experience to impress upon his students the sweat required to achieve effective writing. Pegler, he recalled, would sit at his desk by the hour, dreaming up a hypothetical big story – say, the outbreak of a world war – and then deciding how he would go about writing the lede (the opening paragraph). It would not be unusual, The Dean said, to see Peg run 60, 70 or more versions through

his typewriter until he had painstakingly crafted what he considered the perfect sentence to capture his imaginary picture.

Once, when O'Sullivan was directing news operations in UP's central division, he sent Carl Victor Little to southern Illinois to cover the story of a deacon suspected of a murder. The next morning Little filed a story by telegraph containing what was purported to be the deacon's confession. O'Sullivan, skeptical because the story didn't say how the confession was obtained, called Little.

"Whom did this fellow confess to?" he asked.

"To me, stupid," Little replied and slammed down the receiver.

So O'Sullivan, now more skeptical than ever, called the county sheriff in an effort to verify the story. The sheriff said it was all true, that Little had talked his way into the deacon's cell and persuaded the accused to make a full confession.

O'Sullivan also had a hand in developing the skills of a pair of Chicago police reporters, Robert T. Loughran and Harry Heydenberg, whose talents for gaining the trust of sources became legendary. In 1919, when Chicago White Sox players were accused of throwing games in the World Series against Cincinnati, a grand jury was convened. Once a decision was reached to indict them, one juror slipped into a phone booth to tip Heydenberg with the news, giving O'Sullivan's bureau a two-hour beat on the story that shook the world of sports.

It was 1924 when Jerry O'Sullivan, now based in Kansas City, was tiring of the daily grind. He was a high-minded man grown weary of chronicling the tempests and the trivial. So when he received an offer from his alma mater to return to Marquette to teach, he jumped at the chance. He telegraphed his resignation to his UP boss in New York,

Karl Bickel. Bickel resisted, urging him to stay. O'Sullivan fired back a reply on the trunk wire of the news service that would become famous in UP lore:

HOURS TOO LONG PAY TOO LITTLE LIFE TOO SHORT I QUIT – jlos

Throat cancer had claimed the life of John Copus but the foundation he had laid for journalism education at Marquette was starting to take root. Among other achievements, the program had admitted the first female students in any Jesuit college in America. Copus thought that the presence of women would clean up the atmosphere of newsrooms and generally lift ethical standards. He had put in place a core curriculum, strong in the liberal arts and thin on the purely vocational techniques he thought a student could get in a short stint in any newsroom. It was an approach that greatly appealed to Jerry O'Sullivan, who proved an immediate success in the classroom, inasmuch as it combined his own academic bent with his real-world experience. Within four years he was named dean, a post he would occupy for the next 33 years.

By the time my generation came along in the mid-1950's, The Dean had put the school on the map. Although it was the smallest of Marquette's 10 colleges, it enjoyed what was arguably the biggest national reputation. It drew students from two-thirds of the states. The media landscape was seeded with alumni who excelled on newspapers and in the newer fields of radio and TV. One graduate, Don McNeill, stole The Dean's secretary when he went off to Chicago to gain fame with the "Breakfast Club" and its 4 million radio listeners. Another became president of the Green Bay Packers. A whole cadre of them went to Washington. Some stayed in journalism, one rising to head the White House press corps and another the New York Times' Washington bureau. Others strayed into that amorphous world of public service; there was a vice-president at the

World Bank and another who helped to write the War Powers Act. Several more eventually became CEOs of major media companies.

The Dean was a tall, imposing man with an unforgettable laugh -- a series of gasping snorts really. One student compared it to a dying quail. From his second floor office, that laughter would come “cascading down the stairwells like a waterfall.” The door to his office stood open and he was unfailingly available to students with support, encouragement and, at times, cash from what in retrospect was a meager salary.

Through the years, the O’Sullivan name was well known and respected in both academic and media worlds. The Dean stayed in touch with his former newsroom cronies by slipping away with them on an afternoon to play cards – bridge or poker – at the Milwaukee Press Club or to lunch on finnan haddie at the Milwaukee Athletic Club. He was a friend and confidant of the powerful in Milwaukee and Wisconsin. His professional contacts ranged far beyond. When his promising students were interested in jumping straight into the big leagues out of school, The Dean was on the phone to tout the youngsters’ talents to his editor friends. He probably did this against his better judgment because he counseled us that true happiness in the Fourth Estate could best be found not in the bright lights but in small towns such as Eagle River, Wisconsin, where one could run a weekly paper and still have plenty of time to fish, one of The Dean’s favorite pastimes. A pair of brothers, both graduates, took his advice in the 1950s and made a fortune there.

Among fellow academics, he was seen as one of the field’s pioneers. When Phi Beta Kappa rejected an effort to admit journalists, arguing their education was too technical and not academic enough, he and several other deans throughout the country

founded their own Kappa Tau Alpha, which became one of the first of the national honor societies. O'Sullivan served as its second president. He was not a man easily thwarted.

More than anything else, he was dedicated to educating the whole person. To do this, he kept refining the curriculum he inherited so as to deepen the students' understanding of the transcendental values embedded in Western civilization. Rather than loading hours onto a journalism major, he kept these requirements to the academic minimum so as to enhance a solid core of the liberal arts courses he thought a journalist most needed – generous doses of literature, history, political science, philosophy, basic natural science and the like. He scoffed at the softer social sciences.

Freshmen were pushed to write, and to write more. We were required to master sentence structure, parts of speech and word usage. Deceptive assignments, such as a short essay describing with utter clarity how to tie a pair of shoe laces, tested our mettle. (If you think that's easy, try it some time.) In our first year, we focused on such texts as Mortimer Adler's *How To Read a Book* and Newman's *Idea of a University*. We were challenged to write companion essays comparing and contrasting romanticism with classicism.

For as long as he served as dean, he himself always taught the beginning reporting class for sophomores. That meant more writing, much more. His standards were high and his approach demanding. He preached the absolute need for honesty, courtesy and decency. He relished recalling the time he went to a hotel to interview Ida M. Tarbell, the muckraking reporter. He called her room to announce he was on his way up, only to be told, "Young man, I am coming down. The interview will take place in the lobby."

As a teacher, he struck some as being aloof and even gruff. When a student would sometimes ask a question speculative in nature, he would growl: “My name is Jeremiah but I am not a prophet.”

He had assembled a small faculty of mostly able teachers, all of them with more academic trappings than he himself possessed. His was a mere bachelor’s degree. The faculty followed the same script, though, and it was the one with the O’Sullivan stamp. The Dean wanted his students to understand not just how to do things but why.

The Cold War was raging when our class was immersing itself in this education. Some of our classmates had just returned from the front lines in Korea. Military service loomed ahead for the rest of us. Across the campus was cast the long shadow of Joe McCarthy, a graduate of our law school. Political acrimony abounded and one heard “pinko” or “Commie” epithets being hurled at will. At least to his students, The Dean was careful to hide his political leanings but it wasn’t hard to guess where he stood, so fierce was he in his support for free speech, a free press and a constant insistence on fair dealings. He invited to his classroom his friend Dorothy Day, the New York peace activist and radical. During one visit in the 1960s, she told the men to tear up their draft cards, which happened to be a federal offense, but nothing more came of it.

In the O’Sullivan scheme of things, work on student publications provided the real-world learning that the classroom didn’t. As has been true from eternity, we students were always testing the limits. In 1957 I served as editor of the twice-weekly campus newspaper, the Tribune, and fancied myself as putting a professional stamp on its contents. So we all salivated when my roommate turned up one day with a purloined copy of a directive that had been posted on the bulletin board of O’Donnell Hall, the

newest women's dorm. In it residents were advised to temper their good-night smooching on the front steps because it was creating a veritable midnight traffic jam in clear view of Milwaukee's main drag, Wisconsin Avenue. The ukase had been issued from on high, from the desk of the formidable Mabel McElligott, the dean of women. It hardly took a course in Journalism 101 to recognize the situation had all the elements of hot news – pretty girls, sex, and the faint whiff of scandal on a prim Catholic campus. For us, the challenge was to get the story into print. For all of its professional conceits, the Tribune remained a censored publication. Before each issue went to press, the editor had to carry page proofs to the office of the university's public relations director for his line-by-line inspection of the contents. He claimed the practice was to backstop grammatical lapses and the like, but we knew better. He was there to shortcut any youthful indiscretions. So to finesse this barrier, we conceived an elaborate plot. We prepared two front pages – a cleansed version for him to see and another emblazoned with the lead headline in big, black letters, "No More Kisses for MU Misses." Early the next morning the latter was the one we slipped to the university's printers before any administrator was the wiser. The ruse worked. Soon outside news services were picking up the juicy tidbit. We were making national headlines. It seemed everyone was laughing – at us, or with us. Dean McElligott wasn't, however. She was furious. It wasn't long before we heard that retribution was being threatened by the university's VP of student affairs, who was a martinet and no friend of ours.

Early the next day I received a summons to report immediately to Dean O'Sullivan's office. I could only guess what awaited me. It turned out that Fr. Edward O'Donnell, the Marquette president, had been in New York for an important meeting at a

foundation when he watched a morning newscast snickering over the Milwaukee item about attempts to outlaw good-night kisses at the dormitory bearing his name. That was all it took for his chief aide back home, the VP of student affairs, to explode. As The Dean was relating to me the consequences of our little caper, I could see dark clouds gather. But when I began to utter abject apologies for causing The Dean so much grief, he turned on me with a scowl. “Don’t let the bastards scare you,” he said in that memorable O’Sullivan bellow, and proceeded to use the situation as a teaching moment I never forgot. If you’re going to be an honest broker in the tough world of daily journalism, he pointed out, you can’t afford to be thin-skinned because you’re bound to ruffle feathers in high places.

Such was the legacy of J.L. O’Sullivan. Some years later, after he had retired in 1962, I happened to be invited back to the campus for an awards ceremony. I didn’t expect to see The Dean because I heard he wasn’t doing well. As I walked into the student union building on a cold Milwaukee day, though, there he stood, looking drawn and shrunken in his big overcoat. Although feeble, he said he wanted to be there to see one of his boys recognized.

I still have a photograph of the two of us standing together, a picture I treasure from a half century ago. It is a reminder of a mentor who left an indelible impression on my life, as he did on so many others.

Sources:

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