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Walter Crawford Howey: Fort Dodge's Most Famous Journalist

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Hildy Johnson, a crack reporter for the Chicago Herald-Examiner, has said his farewells and moves to the door of the pressroom. He and his fiancee are leaving Chicago to be married in New York. But the voice of Hildy’s boss, managing editor Walter Burns, stops him.

“Hold on! I want you to have something to remember me by,” Burns exclaims.

He gives Hildy his watch, which has Burns’ name inscribed on it.

“If you’ll look inside, you’ll find a little inscription: ‘To the Best Newspaperman I know.’ When you get to New York, you can scratch out my name and put yours in its place, if you want to.”

Protesting at first, Hildy finally accepts the gift and a lump comes to his throat: “Well, this is the first and last thing I ever got from a newspaper.”

The couple leave, and when they are well out of earshot, Burns calmly walks to the telephone, heaves a huge sigh, and speaks:

“Duffy,” he says to a subordinate at the newspaper’s office, “listen. I want you to send a wire to the Chief of Police of La Porte, Indiana . . . That’s right . . . Tell him to meet the twelve-forty out of Chicago . . . New York Central . . . and arrest Hildy Johnson and bring him back here . . . Wire him a full discription . . . The son of a bitch stole my watch!”

This scene brought down the curtain on The Front Page, a Broadway hit of 1928 and made into a motion picture in 1974. The original sent many shocked theatergoers on their way vowing that they would never allow their sons to become journalists.

How true-to-life was the play’s portrayal of the irascible Walter Burns and a rowdy band of newspaper reporters? Very accurate—if you’re speaking of cut-throat Chicago journalism in the early 1920s. And what about Walter Burns? Was he real, or was he a fictitious character dreamed up by playwrights Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur?

Answers MacArthur, “I worked for him for ten years in Chicago. His real name is Walter Howey.”

Walter Crawford Howey, born in Fort Dodge and editor of one of its newspapers while in his teens, stormed into Chicago at the turn of the century where his bravado and guile earned him eminent positions in the Hearst newspaper organiza-
The final scene from the original 1928 Broadway production of Front Page. Osgood Perkins (on right) played the role of Walter Burns, Howey’s alter ego. Lee Tracy was reporter Hildy Johnson and Frances Fuller portrayed his fiancee (Culver Pictures).

Walter Howey, prototype of the swaggering, news-mad Walter Burns, barked his way into American folklore.

Howey is one of the great legends of American journalism. His bombastic carryings-on while managing editor of the Chicago Herald-Examiner inspired Hecht and MacArthur, two former Chicago journalists, to dramatize him in their play. Indeed, he was the ruthless, unpredictable Walter Burns who outsmarted his star reporters and rival newspapers and who could finagle with the best of politicians.

Walter Howey grew up in a strong newspaper town which was home for two vibrant, competitive dailies—the Fort Dodge Messenger and the Fort Dodge Chronicle. The newspapers were constantly at one
another's throats in an effort to capture the local readership. It was an atmosphere that was a microcosm of the Chicago newspaper world that he would later enter.

Howey was born in Fort Dodge January 16, 1882, the son of Frank Harris and Rosa (Crawford) Howey. His father helped operate a store that handled drugs, paints, and wallpaper directly across the street from the Messenger.

After completing his early education in the Fort Dodge public school system, Howey briefly pursued further education in art before entering journalism. He was a student at the Chicago Art Institute from 1899 to 1900 before returning to his home city.

Charles F. Duncombe, publisher and editor of the Chronicle, saw enough potential in young Howey to make him editor of the daily, even though Howey had barely reached 18 years of age. Duncombe's calculated risk was rewarded in just a short time.

Howey's sixth sense for smelling out a news story was first displayed not on merely a local basis, but on a story of international importance. He scooped the state and the nation on the death of President William McKinley in 1901.

The President had been shot by an assassin in Buffalo, New York, and lived eight days before succumbing to the wound. During this period, Howey wrote the story of McKinley's death in advance, plus the life story of his successor, Vice President Theodore Roosevelt, and had them set in type.

"I got hold of a servant at the house in Buffalo," said Howey, "and told him I'd give $10 to the first person there who would telephone me the minute the Presi-
he moved briefly to Des Moines as a "cub" reporter for the Des Moines Daily Capitol under Lafayette Young, a well-known editor. As Howey later recalled, Lafe Young was impressed with the energetic youngster and offered Howey the editorship of a small-town Iowa paper that Young had just acquired. Howey at the time wanted to be a reporter for a big-city newspaper and had no thoughts of being an editor, so he declined the offer.

Despite his refusal, Howey long remembered Young's advice. Young told Howey, "A man must study for an editorship almost as long as one would study for the priesthood. You are thinking only of the fascinating adventures in the newspaper business. Did you ever think about the responsibility of an editor to his readers?"

Even though Howey was eventually to discard Young's advice that "the best editors are seldom seen and never heard," the young man did heed the counsel which placed emphasis on pleasing the reader.

Within a few months, Howey moved on, bursting onto the Chicago scene with a flourish. As the New York Times said, "One summer day in 1903, Walter Crawford Howey came out of Fort Dodge, Iowa, determined to make a tumultuous impact on journalism. He did. Young, flamboyant, with an iron drive, he descended on Chicago, his arrival signaling the beginning of one of the most raucous eras in Midwest newspaperdom."

The Iowan, just 21 years old, bluffed his way into his first job in Chicago. He later described how he accomplished it:

The Daily News was my first stop. I went in and said to the editor, "I hear George Ade is sick." That was the first big writer I could think of. "There's nothing the matter with George Ade," said the editor. "Never mind," I said, "is anybody else sick? I'm a versatile writer." "No," he said, "but I could use a reporter who knows the town. Do you?" "Every alley in it," I assured him. "Then you know the corner of Madison and Monroe?" "Who doesn't?" "Fine!" he said. "Get going." I ran out and asked the first cop, "Where's the corner of Madison and Monroe?" "Where's the corner of Madison and Monroe?" "Not in this world," he answered. "They both run east and west!"

Undaunted by this technicality, Howey later returned to the newsroom with a hair-raising description of events he had seen—at Madison and Monroe—complete with full names and addresses. The editor was impressed.

"You're hired," he said. "I don't want you to be too honest, anyway."

Reporter Howey stumbled onto a story later in 1903 that turned out to be one of the biggest in Chicago's history—the Iroquois Theatre fire on December 30, in which nearly 600 people were burned or
trampled to death. How he discovered the fire was a matter of luck, but how he handled its coverage was a brilliant display of skill.

Returning to the office on that winter day, he was startled when a manhole in the street opened and out popped a knight in armor and three elves with wings. They turned out to be a group of actors who had escaped the burning theater by way of an underground passage. Howey, showing remarkable poise for a young reporter, established a post in a nearby store, from which he telephoned his paper the first news on the disaster and directed the efforts of other Daily News reporters. It was a preview of the talents that were to make him one of the most sensational news editors in America.

Howey later worked briefly for the Chi-
cago Evening American, and then moved to the Inter-Ocean, where, as city editor, he made newspaper history with a daring first—a full page of photographs. His reward, when the bills came in, was being fired.

When Howey joined the Chicago Tribune as its city editor in 1907, the mood of journalism in Chicago was beginning to change. A man who worked as a cub reporter during this time described the atmosphere.

In those days there was a fresh, frontier approach to public morals which reached a high point in the fang-and-claw ethics of the daily press. It was commonplace for newspapers to plant spies in rival editorial offices and saboteurs in pressrooms; to kidnap and jail rival reporters on trumped-up charges; to hijack murder suspects and key witnesses from one another—and from the police.

Thus, Charles MacArthur exaggerated only mildly when he said that The Front Page was an understatement of the times. The play, which opened on Broadway in 1928, was a melodrama set in the pressroom of the Chicago Criminal Courts building. Hildy Johnson, who comes to bid his reporter cronies good-bye, is delayed when Earl Williams, an escaped murderer whose stay of execution has been ignored by corrupt officials, falls in through the window. With the help of Walter Burns, Hildy hides Williams in an old rolltop desk until the paper can expose the civic corruption. They are caught by the sheriff, but Burns blusters their way out of the predicament. Such a set of circumstances was not only totally believable, but actually mild when compared to events that occurred in Chicago.

Money spoke big in those days, and press lord William Randolph Hearst, publisher of many large newspapers, had plenty to spend. After Howey quit the Tribune in 1917 following an argument with the paper’s owner, Hearst offered him a job as editor-in-chief of his Chicago Herald-Examiner. Howey’s new salary of $35,000 a year was four times what he made as city editor of the Tribune.

The arrival of Howey marked the beginning of a competitive news conflict between the morning rivals, the Herald-Examiner and the Tribune.

Howey’s first move was to declare war on the Tribune, which he called “The World’s Greatest Snoozepaper.” He then shanghaied Frank Carson, the Tribune’s day city editor, by inviting him out to dinner, getting him drunk, and then guiding his hand while he signed two papers—his resignation from the Tribune and a contract with Hearst.

The Herald-Examiner reached its peak of power in 1919 when it was the only Chicago paper to support the winning mayoralty candidate, William “Big Bill” Thompson. MacArthur describes the aftermath:

Mr. Howey’s reward was a newspaperman’s dream. Two city patrolmen and a sergeant were stationed in our city room and were subject to the orders of the paper’s reporters. We went out and arrested people whenever we had to. Our private interrogation headquarters was at a nearby hotel.
Our policemen would keep rival photographers from taking pictures at the scene of a crime, and we got one exclusive story after another.

The other papers howled with rage but what could they do? Walter had the resignations of half a dozen city officials in his desk to be used at his convenience.

Many legends exist about Howey and his bold actions as editor of the Herald-Examiner. "Howey would sit at his desk and make monkeys of all of us," said Ben Hecht, who worked for the Tribune. "If he couldn't scoop us, he'd invent a switch or an angle for the story that outfoxed us."

In one incident, a little girl was reported to be locked in a bank vault in Galena, Illinois, the time lock on. Howey knew that time locks could be picked, so he called the warden of the state penitentiary at Joliet and said, "Have you any good safecrackers?" The warden replied with pride, "Certainly. The best!"

Howey persuaded the warden to lend him the safecrackers. He rushed four of his best reporters and photographers to Joliet, where they joined the safecrackers on a privately hired train that roared into Galena. The safe was opened in no time, but there was no girl to be found inside. Others may have shriveled away in embarrassment, but not Howey. He played up the Herald-Examiner's role, centering his lead story on how the hardened criminals fell down on their knees and gave thanks when the little girl was not there. The newspaper's bold headline proclaimed: "Humanity is a Wonderful Thing."

On another occasion, the Tribune took the bait when Howey planted a well documented story that an Indian heiress was in Chicago and had to marry an American by midnight in order to inherit a fortune in Bombay. Howey even arranged to have her married to a dying bum (a madeup stooge). After the Tribune and others splashed the story, the Herald-Examiner explained the stunt and gave thanks for the plug on its upcoming Sunday serial about a Bombay heiress.

He often employed subterfuge to embarrass his paper's rivals. Howey once wrote an editorial lavishly praising the Herald-Examiner's enterprise and human-
itarianism in sending relief to an Illinois town struck by a cyclone. He had a dead-pan copy boy take it directly to the Tribune composing room with the instructions: “Must. Colonel McCormick.” (McCormick was publisher of the Tribune.) The tribute led the Tribune’s editorial page for half the press run before being discovered.

At the Herald-Examiner, Howey often followed the practice of grabbing the first edition and boarding an elevated train. Once aboard he would open the paper and comment to a train passenger about a particularly “hot” front page local story. He would get reader reaction from one or two men and the same number of women and then would take another train back to the Loop. At the newspaper office, he would often have his staff rewrite the story, stressing or clearing up points that his elevated friends had mentioned in discussing the story.

“Humanity is a Wonderful Thing” was a formula for news that Howey practiced throughout his career. Another formula was the repentance of “wayward souls.” “It is the simplest thing on earth to create circulation but it took me years to discover the secret,” Howey said. “People are more interested in the repentance of a wayward soul than they are in themselves.”

The repentance theme was employed by Howey when Hearst sent him to Boston to become editor of the faltering Boston American in 1922. Hearst told Howey to add 50,000 circulation to the American and he gave him six months and a generous budget to do it. Howey found a familiar wayward soul—a woman who, in a hold-up, had killed a policeman and was awaiting execution. Howey convinced her that she should repent her sins—exclusively for the American—in return for a handsome sum of money for her daughter. The story of her life of crime and her repentance unfolded daily in Howey’s paper, and its circulation shot up by 54,000 in six days.

Howey was managing editor of the American for two years, and in 1924, he went to England for Hearst to study newspapers published by Lord Northcliffe.
Upon his return later that year, Howey’s ideas for a picture newspaper led to the establishment of Hearst’s New York Mirror.

Unlike the fictional newsman Walter Burns, Howey was a solid production man. He carried a printer’s union card and owned 17 patents, including inventions for making engravings and covering methods of transmitting pictures and messages by wire. In 1931, his invention of an automatic photoelectric engraving machine was unveiled in Washington in the presence of Hearst editor Arthur Brisbane and officials of the Federal Bureau of Engraving. Howey developed the sound photo for Hearst in 1935; this machine transmitted halftones by ordinary telephone. His inventions, an outgrowth of his belief in the importance of pictures, hastened the nationwide use of wirephotos.

The remainder of Howey’s years were spent supervising Hearst publications and working as Hearst’s editorial assistant. Howey was editor-in-chief of Hearst’s three Boston papers—the Evening-American.
An, *Daily Record*, and *Sunday Advertiser* (1939); supervising editor of *American Weekly* magazine in New York (1940); and editor of the Chicago *Herald-American* (1942). He divided his time among these three jobs. In 1944, Howey was appointed special editorial assistant to Hearst.

Hearst revived the Howey touch in 1948 in an effort to build circulation of the Chicago *Herald-American*. Arriving at the battleground, Howey looked for a repentant soul. They were hard to find, so turning to another formula, "Humanity is a Wonderful Thing," he directed his efforts toward a housing shortage in Chicago.

A little girl wrote a letter to the editor of the Chicago *Herald-American* that said: "Please help me find a home—I have never slept in a bed." Howey's critics contended that when she wrote the letter, Howey was at her side guiding her arm. He published the letter and a photo of the girl looking into a store window at a child's bed. Chicagoans had to buy the paper every day to learn the plight of the little girl. Among those reading the heart-breaking stories was Hearst himself, who wired Howey $10,000 and said, "Please buy the little girl a home. You're breaking my heart."

Howey's life ended on a tragic note. In January 1954, he was badly injured in Boston when a skidding taxi pushed a mailbox onto him. Ten days later, his wife died of pneumonia. Howey was slowly resuming his duties as editor of Hearst's Boston newspapers when he died of the auto injuries on March 21, 1954.

The Walter Burns-Walter Howey mold of journalist is almost an extinct species today. It was dying even at the time of Howey's prominence. Hecht and MacArthur perhaps were speaking truth, not fiction, when they wrote in *The Front Page*: "Schools of journalism and the advertising business have nearly extirpated the species. Now and then one of these boys still pops up in the profession and is hailed by his editor as a survival of a golden age."