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Moonlighting

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Moonlighting

For about a quarter of a century I added to my other duties that of a professional public speaker. It fitted in beautifully with the work of an editor, because I got out into the country, found what people were thinking about, what they were doing, and sometimes had my own writing criticized to my face—a healthy experience. When some group could afford to pay, and were used to paying, I charged a fee, having learned that in these cases, anything that comes without charge is suspect. When a deserving group wanted me and had no money, I spoke free.

For many years I made an annual swing around the country; it was confined to two or three weeks because I could spare no more time. I spoke to all the Ivy League colleges, male and female (except Bryn Mawr). I lectured at most of the great state universities. Several times I talked to teachers' conventions, covering an entire state in three successive days. I spoke at the seventy-fifth birthday celebrations for Frank Lloyd Wright and John Dewey, finding them both just as alert and acerbic as they had been all their lives.

When Clarence Chamberlin, an Iowa boy, flew the Atlantic in 1927, the Iowa Society of New

York gave a dinner in his honor at which I was a speaker.

When I spoke to a mass meeting against war, in the national capital, I was introduced by Carrie Chapman Catt, a grand old leader of the peace movement, who told the audience she had been a guest in my parents' home in Emmetsburg, and had dandled me on her knee when I was a baby. Thus reassured, those present gave me a royal welcome.

When I spoke to a student convocation at the University of Iowa, the meeting was held out-of-doors, and I looked into a sea of upturned good Iowa faces that seemed to go on forever. I got introductions as a native when I spoke in Sioux City and to the annual convention of the Iowa Federation of Women's Clubs.

The day I was scheduled to speak at Iowa State University at Ames, Hitler chose to invade the Low Countries. I spent hours being interviewed on the college radio, or talking to various college groups about the situation.

Several times I went back to my home town and spoke (on those occasions without fee). Having just come back from a tour of all the chief countries of Europe, I talked once on world affairs to a high school assembly at nine a.m.; when I finished my set remarks, the principal canceled all classes for the rest of the morning while the young people asked me searching and knowledgeable

questions. Because of the radio, they were amazingly well informed, by the standards of my generation.

On another occasion I spoke about the profession of journalism; two Emmetsburg sisters in my audience were enough impressed so that when they finished at the University of Iowa they came to New York seeking careers in that field. One of them landed on the staff of *Time*; the other, proficient in mathematics, got a job on the Manhattan Project, working, though she did not know it, on the atom bomb.

I had reminded my audience that another Emmetsburg high school graduate had also gone to New York, and became one of the two editors of *The Ladies' Home Journal*. Beatrice Blackmar, some years younger than I, attended the University of Iowa, had a college romance with Bruce Gould. After graduation and marriage they came to New York to seek their fortune in the big city. As they tell in their joint autobiography, *An American Story*, together they edited *The Ladies' Home Journal* for twenty-seven years when it was at the peak of its influence.

On another occasion I came back to Emmetsburg, spoke to a paying audience, and helped raise money for the new hospital, which in turn named one of its rooms for my mother.

At the age of fifty, I at last felt able to take time to pursue a lifetime hobby of mine—writing about

science and technology for a lay audience. For many years, I had been fascinated by this field of knowledge, and was a voracious reader of books and magazine articles about it which were within a layman's grasp. In the more than thirty years since then, I have written two books in this field, and scores of magazine articles, discussing medicine, physiology, biology, chemistry, astronomy, atomic physics, and many other subjects.

Since my own education in these fields had been outrageously bad, I early developed the technique of interviewing the best authorities, and then submitting my manuscripts to them in advance of publication. On viruses, I consulted William M. Stanley, on atomic energy, E. O. Lawrence, Enrico Fermi, and Harold Urey. On the causes of cancer I talked to Payton Rous, on radiocarbon dating and photosynthesis I corresponded with Willard Libby and Melvin Calvin. Because of my techniques of submitting material in advance, I do not believe there is a serious error in any of the hundreds of thousands of words I have written in this field.

When I began, on the eve of World War II, popular writing about science was shockingly poor in this country. It consisted, nearly two decades before Sputnik, chiefly of speculation whether there is life on Mars, and reports on weight-reducing diets, some of them extremely harmful. Today there has been a tremendous improvement

in this field, thanks to the realization of the important role science plays in our lives, the general higher standard of literacy, more responsible newspapers, and other factors. One of these is the National Association of Science Writers, of which I am now one of the oldest living members. This group has worked wonders in developing professional standards among science writers, in alerting the nation's press to the importance of science, and in pushing scientists—and the medical profession in particular—toward a realization of the public's right to know. It has fought for a better understanding of the role of the popularizer, better treatment of him by scientific organizations, and a better place for him in the press.

Although I left Emmetsburg sixty-four years ago, in all that time it is a rare week that passes without my dreaming of some spot in my native town, sometimes as it was then, sometimes as it is now.