poor man's Plato from Missouri

By SAUL PETT, AP Newsfeatures Writer

As it must be to all men, a spontaneous, unrehearsed evening on the town—a night out with the boys—comes occasionally into the life of Hal Boyle, the columnist.

Thus, on a recent evening of warm friendship, Boyle was overstaying his leave at Pat Moriarty's Chop House. The phone rang several times and each time Boyle, with the characteristic cowardice of overdue husbands, shouted to the owner:

"Pat, if that's my wife, tell her I just left."

Hours later, Boyle arrived home and learned, with a wide-eyed look of sublime innocence, that there had been dinner guests long since departed. In forceful terms, Frances Boyle delivered a lecture on thoughtless husbands. And then the phone rang.

Boyle said, "Frances, if that's Pat Moriarty, tell him I just left."

This, of course, is classic Boyle, pure Boyle, the legendary Boyle who invaded North Africa throwing candy from his jeep to the natives and shouting, "Vote for Boyle, son of toil. Honest Hal, the Arabs pal."

There are other Boyles, most of whom creep into his daily AP column, which appears in more than 500 papers and is probably the most widely printed in America.

There is Boyle, the thinker or "poor man's philosopher," Boyle, the moved and moving poet, the clown, the brooder, the mystic, the sensitive, defenseless child, the hatless, hateless student of humanity, the father, the husband, the son, the Walter Mitty Boyle with a secret dream of telling somebody off just once, the collector of odd facts, the gentle wit who turns the foil on himself, the loving Boswell of the GI, the faceless and the frustrated.

There is the gay, the folksy, the gregarious Boyle, the organizational Boyle who serves on committees, collects for office Christmas parties, farewell parties and funerals. The physical Boyle concerned about his 46 years, his 200 pounds, his broad, broken nose, his thinning, brown hair. The naive Boyle who thinks he will weigh 170 again, the proud Boyle who, on losing a single ounce, introduces himself as "the new tiger man."

And always, in a partly hidden room, there is the Boyle with the half-sung heartsong, the sweet sadness, the dreams that got away, the vague loneliness, the Boyle eternally aware that every man born of woman must die, that each new day is both an arrival and departure, that even Peter Pan would have grown old writing a daily column.

By a mysterious, suspenseful chemistry, these separate Boyles somehow manage to coalesce every weekday into the written word. And the words, over the years, have added up to a Pulitzer prize and other awards, to columns dramatized on television and reprinted in magazines and anthologies, to the respect of fellow writers and the devotion of his readers who yearn, sigh, laugh and cry with him, readers who frame columns on their wall and have others engraved on personal greeting cards.

Harold Vincent Boyle spends 22 hours a day, awake or asleep, thinking, worrying about his column and two hours actually writing it. Boyle at the typewriter is a horrible sight. It is the time, he says, when "you just take a cold chisel, put it to your head, and start quarrying."

Boyle at the typewriter, with 60 or 90 minutes to go, is taut, silent, stiff, intense, measuring each word carefully, writing, X-ing out, rephrasing, sweating into a shining simplicity.

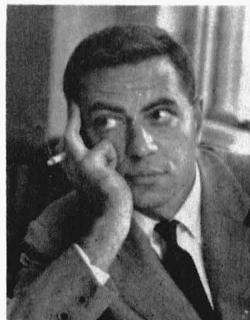
He can't work without chewing murderously on his cigar, stopping compulsively to comb his hair or take a deep breath like a pitcher nervously eying the batter and that small strike zone. Only a writer knows how small that strike zone is.

This is Boyle who sees nothing, hears nothing, hasn't a friend in the world, is a child alone in a forest of dark terror. This is where all retreat, all delay, all distraction must end. This is the wall, and Boyle writes every moning with his back to it.

"I've got to get a few columns ahead, get a backlog," says Boyle, the optimist.

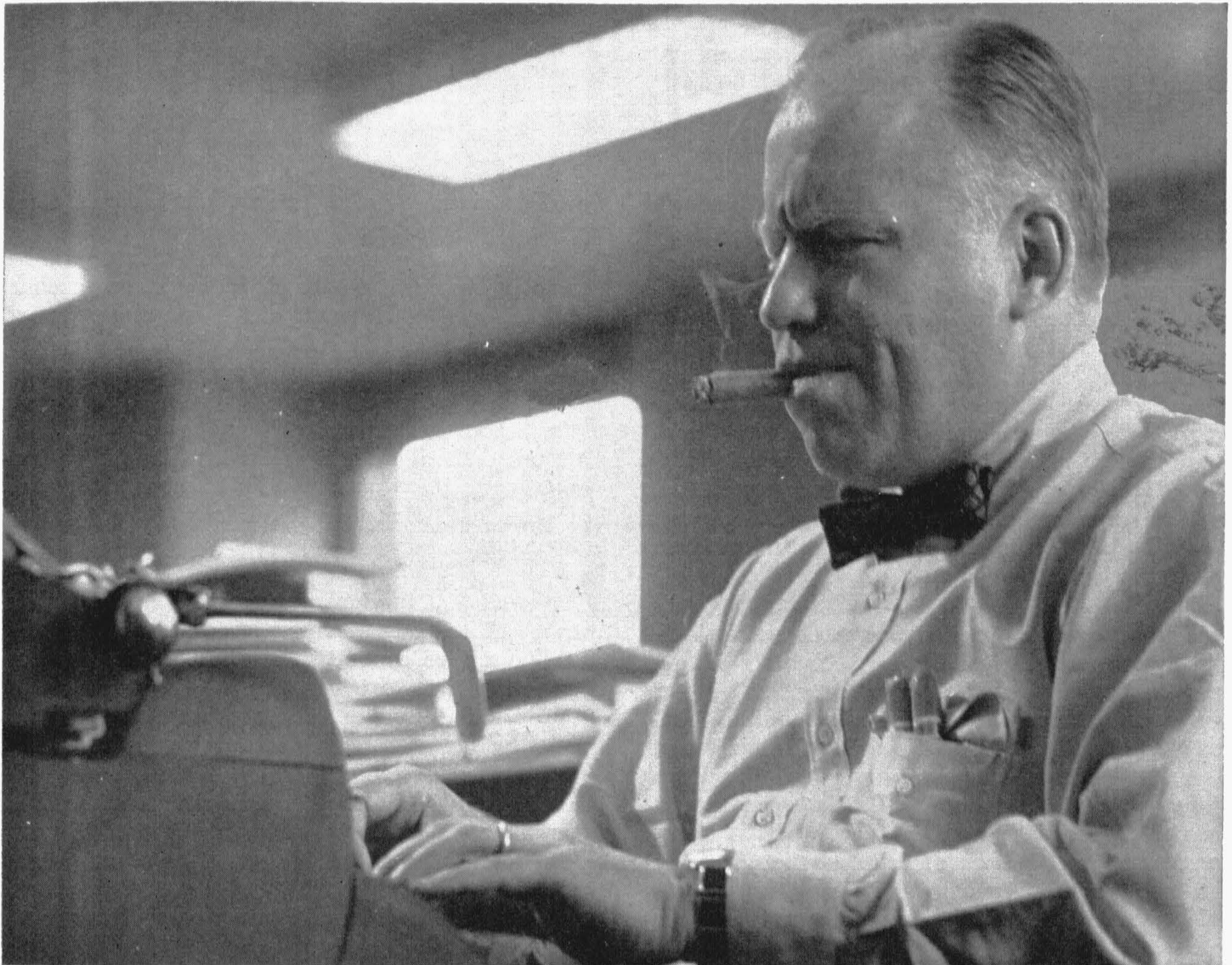
"I can only write on deadline," says Boyle, the realist. "Emily Dickinson said, 'wine is the gift of screws.' I find the deadline squeezes the best out of you in a hurry."

From the screws of deadline and the torture of self-doubt has come a kaleidoscopic procession in print



SAUL PETT

It took a couple of M. U. grads to make this story, which is reprinted by permission of the Associated Press. Hal Boyle won A.B. and B.J. degrees in '32. The author of this profile, Saul Pett, is B.J. '40 (Mrs. Pett, the former Leonore Green, is B.S. in Ed. '40). Saul, who has been writing features for the AP since 1946, does an occasional column for Boyle. He spoke at Journalism Week last year about his Antarctic experiences when he accompanied Admiral Byrd on "Operation Deep Freeze" in 1956-57.



Associated Press photo.

hal boyle

—portraits, vignettes, fables, home-made proverbs, holidays remembered, interviews, personal experiences, faded dreams, lingering hopes.

A GI dead in Normandy, "at final ease stretched in eternal langor." . . . In South Carolina, "a tar-papered shack wearying a hill." . . . Of October, when "everything that walks the earth feels an amber thrill." . . . Of the triumph of an Irishman on St. Pat's Day, when he hears "the deep, deep music of living, the low, sad rhythms of eternity . . . the high song of the turning spheres, the dim lullaby of the worm in its cocoon. . . ."

Of a childless couple named Boyle yearning for a baby . . . Of looking into the mirror on your 40th birthday, searching for the boy that used to be, finding "all that was left of him was his eyes—two blue pools of doubt, two wells of childhood reluctant to cloud over." . . . Of the time Internal Revenue called for an explanation and Boyle tried to plead "temporary insanity. . . ." Of the adoption of a daughter (Tracy Ann Boyle is now 4), trying to make her realize she was a chosen child, picked out from all the earth's millions.

But Tracy Ann refuses to absorb the meaning of adoption. "Sometime, though," Boyle concluded, "she will ask a question. But not now. Not now."

These well-ordered phrases are born every morning at a monumentally disordered desk, usually piled more than a foot high with unopened mail, papers, books, magazines, forgotten shopping lists. Boyle always has a fancy explanation for the clutter.

"Rather have the chaos on the desk than in my head." Or: "A clean desk is the sign of a frightened mind."

This, of course, is malarkey. A clean desk requires a decisive owner. You must be able to decide whether to file, answer or throw away a letter. Boyle loathes decisions.

The Boyles live simply in a four-room Manhattan apartment overlooking the East River.

The Boyles own no car because Hal never learned to drive one. But they do have two bathrooms—a fact which Hal cites as a milestone in his life and uses to explain his attitude toward money.

"What more does a man need?"

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he asks. "I don't need a lot of possessions. I'm just a boy from Kansas City, the son of a butcher. I'm afraid of the impressive and suspicious of the elegant. I know only one headwaiter by name and, after 20 years in this town, he has just learned mine. At home, where I grew up, there were seven of us waiting to use one bathroom. Now I have two. How many more does a family need?"

His hobbies are "brooding and watching people and trying to understand them," thinking up titles for books he'll never write, shopping for suits he won't buy until Frances sees them, counting the columns left to do before retirement, and day-dreaming.

"A writer is always making up little dreams in which he's the hero or the villain. But he always stops short, when he dreams the villain role, for fear he may be caught. The only revenge I take on people is in my mind. At the last moment, even in my dreams, I have to show them charity.

"My fears? The biggest thing I have to fight is a feeling of insufficiency—that I won't be able to muster the talent to do the work the way I'd like. Also, I have a fear that people will think I'm ridiculous, or a loud-mouth, or a showoff, when actually I'm afraid most of the time.

"Hates? I hate people who throw their weight around, who try to rob a man of his dignity. Will Rogers used to tay, 'I never met a man I didn't like.' I can't say that.

"But I can say I never met a human being I didn't feel sorry for. I think this is a hard world and I think every human in it, at one time or another, has a hard time. The thing I admire most is people who face life with courage, loyalty and a sense of humor."

Boyle caught the writing virus relatively late. Growing up in Kansas City, he first wanted to be an engineer and "go around the world in high leather boots, building bridges and dams." Then a druggist because of the ice cream and the "smell of old drugstores." Then a cartoonist, a doctor and a teacher —"I'd still like to be a teacher because it's the most inspiring occupation I know except motherhood and I'm not built for that."

Then a poet, novelist, and finally a newspaperman — "because I thought it would be romantic and still do, some days."

In high school, Boyle jerked sodas for a druggist. As Boyle began to eat up all the ice cream profits, the boss began searching for other fields for Boyle to conquer. It was the druggist who knew the chief copy boy at the Kansas City AP office. It was the druggist who suggested Hal might want to look him up.

Boyle started with the AP as office boy in 1928, departed long enough to earn degrees in journalism and English at the University of Missouri, worked as reporter for AP in Kansas City, St. Louis and New York, and took off as a war correspondent in 1942.

He landed with Patton at Casablanca and Sicily, Clark at Salerno and jeeped with the First Army from Normandy to the Elbe, moved later to the Pacific war zone and returned in 1950 to combat in Korea.

It took several weeks to realize he had won a Pulitzer for his war reporting in 1944. Among other awards, the one Boyle is most proud of was given to him by the Veterans of Foreign Wars for his coverage of Korea—most proud because Gen. Omar Bradley made the presentation with these words:

"There are few men who understand the American soldier and how he feels as well as you. There are even fewer who can write about him with such interest, such understanding, such compassion."

He has covered both ends of a world war and the worst of a small war. In war and peace, he will tell you with the pride of a geographic name-dropper, he has travelled in 63 countries and is ready to document the boast at the first raised eyebrow.

While he is not famed as a methodical planner, he does think a man should pick his own epitaph.

His own choice: "Safe at Home."

A model of the University of Missouri's Columns and an outline map of the state are used in building an identification sign at the entrance of the University's South Farm near Columbia. Checking the sign against the original plans are J. E. Smith, Jr., professor of floriculture, John H. Longwell, College of Agriculture dean, and Fred Venrick, Portland Cement Association field engineer. Smith drew up the original design of the plan and Venrick supervised construction. Dean Longwell said similar signs will be built at other experimental farms and fields.