

# Westbrook Pegler, Caustic Columnist, Dies at 74

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charged that a segment of the play, "A Case of Libel, shown on Mr. Sullivan's program was a distortion of a libel suit that Mr. Pegler lost to Quentin Reynolds, the writer, in 1954.

Mr. Pegler had been in declining health for the last three years following surgery for cancer of the stomach. His death was attributed to a heart seizure. He was operated upon recently for cancer of the colon.

## Denunciator in Chief

By ALDEN WHITMAN

In 29 years as a newspaper columnist—from 1933 to 1962—Westbrook Pegler established a reputation as the master of the vituperative epithet. There was scarcely a public figure who sooner or later was not included in his pantheon of malign and malicious individuals.

He roared in print against President Franklin D. Roosevelt, referring to him as a "feeble-minded fuehrer" and as "Moosejaw," and saying:

"It is regrettable that Giuseppe Zangara hit the wrong man when he shot at Roosevelt in Miami."

Mr. Pegler had in mind an assassination attempt in 1933, in which Mayor Anton Cermak of Chicago was killed.

Mrs. Roosevelt was labeled "La Boca Grande," the big mouth, and, after her husband's death in 1945, she was consistently called "the widow Roosevelt."

To Mr. Pegler, President Harry S. Truman was "a thimble-hater," an abuse that Mr. Truman returned in kind by describing the columnist as "a guttersnipe."

For 11 years, until 1944, Mr. Pegler's column, "Fair Enough," appeared in The New York World-Telegram, a Scripps-Howard paper, and newspapers throughout the country to which it was syndicated. His articles in 1940 exposing labor union racketeering won him a Pulitzer Prize.

These articles dealt with, among others, George Scalise, president of the Building Service Employees International Union in New York. In the resulting official scrutiny of his affairs, Scalise was sent to Sing Sing prison for 10 to 20 years for forgery and embezzlement. Scalise complained that he had been "Peglerized."

At the same time, in California, Willie Bioff, a movie union leader and convicted procurer, and other corrupt unionists were sent to jail after Mr. Pegler's newspaper exposures of their activities.

Switching the the Hearst-owned King Features Syndicate in 1944, Mr. Pegler changed the name of his column to "As Pegler Sees It." At one time it appeared in 186 papers, but by 1962 the total was down to 140.

James Westbrook Pegler came of a newspaper family. He was born Aug. 2, 1894, in Minneapolis, the son of Arthur James Pegler, who was credited,



Associated Press

Westbrook Pegler

with being an originator of the staccato "Hearst style" of writing a news article. The elder Pegler was later dismissed for a time from the Hearst organization for remarking that a Hearst newspaper resembled "a screaming woman running down the street with her throat out."

Young Pegler entered the newspaper business in 1910 as a \$10-a-week employe of The United Press in Chicago. "Bud," as he was called in those days, was described as "a raw kid, as freckled as a guinea egg."

His career was interrupted for two years of high school, before The United Press sent him first to St. Louis and then to Texas as a bureau manager.

In 1916, he joined the press agency's staff in London as a foreign correspondent.

When the United States entered World War I, Mr. Pegler enlisted in the Navy and served until the close of the conflict. On his return to the United States, he became a sports-writer for U.P., because, he said, he had noticed that "the big salaries in newspapers usually were paid to sports men." And, at the urging of Floyd Gibbons, the war correspondent, he changed his byline from J.W. Pegler to Westbrook Pegler.

As a sportswriter, Mr. Pegler developed a tough and rowdy way of presenting events, much in contrast to the prevailing style of coverage. It made him stand out, as did his choice of funny or fantastic events to describe.

In 1925, Mr. Pegler went to work for The Chicago Tribune, writing, for \$250 a week, a daily sports story that was syndicated around the country. On dull days he wrote about other topics, and this edged him by degrees into becoming a columnist of national affairs.

His first column, in Decem-

ber, 1938, created a sensation for its defense of lynching. "As one member of the rabble," it began, "I will admit that I said, 'Fine, that is swell,' when the papers came up that day, telling of the lynching of two men who killed the young fellow in California, and that I haven't changed my mind yet for all the storm of right-mindedness which has blown up since."

He survived the storm of public criticism, although he began to lose the friendship of many of his newspaper friends, including Heywood Broun, a fellow columnist, who called Mr. Pegler "the light-heavyweight champion of the upperdog."

In the early days of the New Deal Mr. Pegler was a supporter of President Roosevelt, but his attitude changed after 1936 to one of excoriation. Mr. Roosevelt was assailed for his proposal to increase the size of the Supreme Court, for welfare legislation, for his appointees and then for a host of other actions.

Other New and Fair Dealers came out of Mr. Pegler's typewriter no less scathed. Vice President Henry A. Wallace was "Old Bubblehead," Assistant Secretary of State A. A. Berle Jr. was a "blood-thirsty bull twirp; Justice Felix Frankfurter of the Supreme Court was a "fatuus windbag;" Fiorello H. LaGuardia, the reform Mayor of New York, was "the little padrone of the Bolsheviki."

Not even J. Edgar Hoover, director of the Federal Bureau

of Investigation, was immune. "A nightclub fly-cop" was how Mr. Pegler characterized him.

Those on the periphery of public life also felt the rasp of the columnist's displeasure. Elsa Maxwell, the party-giver, came to be called "a professional magpie," and Walter Winchell, a fellow columnist, was dismissed as "a gents-room journalist."

## Invented 'George Spelvin'

Mr. Pegler's style was free-swinging. He pictured himself as the average man, quick to wrath and slow to cool off. For this purpose he invented "George Spelvin, American," into whose mouth he placed a good deal of his livid prose. One example was this attack on Harold L. Ickes, the New Deal Secretary of the Interior:

"Hey, Ickes, you penny-ante moocher, tell us about the two times you put yourself away in the Naval Hospital in Washington for three dollars a day all contrary to law, and you a rich guy able to pay your way in regular hospitals as all other sick civilians have to do. Why you cheap sponger, you couldn't rent a hall room in a pitcher-and-bowl fleabag in Washington for three bucks a day. You know who paid the overhead on your hospital bargain, don't



you? Well, I did! And George Spelvin. We paid it."

Mr. Pegler's irascibility was aroused not only by persons and institutions he considered malevolent, subversive, Communist or traitorous, but also by natural phenomena that caused him discomfort. In this vein, he once fulminated against a rainstorm that kept him house-bound in Connecticut for several days.

Toward the end, Mr. Pegler was being edited in ways he disliked. The word "Ford's" was removed from "Ford's Fund for the Republic." An attack on former President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Henry R. Luce of Time magazine was killed as was a column that began, "There is something wormy about our State Department."

#### Charged Censorship in '62

The break apparently came when some of Mr. Pegler's unflattering references to the Kennedy Administration were blue-penciled. In a speech in 1962 to a Christian Crusade meeting in Tulsa, Okla., Mr. Pegler told the ultra-conservative organization:

"Much of our daily press is now under a coercion as nasty and snarling and menacing as Hitler's was in the first year of his reign. I will not speak of other newspapers, but of recent alarming experiences in the Hearst organization.

"I received insolent, arrogant warnings from King features that nothing unfavorable to the Kennedy Administration or offensive to any member of the Kennedy family will be allowed out of New York where the censors sit."

Mr. Pegler also attacked members of the Hearst organization by name, including William Randolph Hearst Jr.; Frank Conniff, the national editor, and Bob Considine, the reporter and columnist. This was apparently too much, for Mr. Pegler's contract was terminated on the ground that "too many irreconcilable differences on vital matters have existed between the parties to continue a workable relationship."

Earlier, however, Mr. Pegler had caused the Hearst organization embarrassment and the loss of money in a libel suit brought by Quentin Reynolds, the writer and an old friend. In 1949 Mr. Pegler wrote, among other things, that Mr. Reynolds had "a yellow streak for all to see" and that he had once been seen "nuding along

a road with a wench in the raw." He also implied that the former war correspondent held leftist political views.

In the resulting trial, in which Louis Nizer represented Mr. Reynolds, Mr. Pegler conceded that 130 statements he had made about Mr. Reynolds were not the truth. Mr. Reynolds was awarded \$175,001 damages against the columnist, the Hearst Corporation and Hearst Consolidated Publications.

At one point during the trial in 1954 Mr. Nizer stepped up to Mr. Pegler on the witness stand to show him a document. "Stand down there where you belong," ordered Mr. Pegler, pointing to the counsel tables.

"Please, Mr. Pegler," Federal Judge Edward Weinfeld interposed, "I'm running this courtroom. Don't tell counsel where to go."

#### Wrote for Birch Journal

After the trial Mr. Pegler's influence tended to wane. He also moved perceptibly to the

right. Following his break with King Features, he wrote a monthly article for two years for American Opinion, the organ of the John Birch Society.

In one article, according to Oliver Pilat, who wrote a critical biography of Mr. Pegler, the columnist "developed an entirely new contention that Americans with Jewish names who came from countries like Russia and Poland were instinctively sympathetic to Communism, however outwardly respectable they appeared."

Mr. Pegler gave up writing for the Birch publication when it rejected a piece he wrote about Chief Justice Earl Warren in 1964.

Mr. Pegler was quite candid about his hates, which multiplied with the years. "For myself, I will say that my hates always occupied my mind much more actively and have given me greater spiritual satisfaction," he once remarked.

#### Pen Not Always in Acid

Nonetheless, he could and did turn out an occasional humorous column, or one that was a deft piece of reminiscence or one that created an emotional impact for its hard-boiled treatment of a sentimental subject. Or he could be self-critical. One New Year's Day column, for instance, consisted of "I will never mix gin, beer and whiskey again" repeated 50 times.

At the start of his career as a columnist Mr. Pegler was a tall, slim, handsome man. But with the years he put on weight and extra chins and a fierce mien. He also developed a brusqueness of manner that put off those who sought to befriend him.

Mr. Pegler married three times. He met his first wife, Mrs. Julia Harpman Pegler, when she was a reporter for the New York Daily News. Their marriage in 1922 culminated a two-year romance. She died in Rome in 1955 at the age of 61. During most of their married life, the Peglers lived in New York or Connecticut.

He married Mrs. Pearl W. Doane in 1959. They were divorced shortly afterward. His third wife was Maud Towart of Cannes, France, whom he married in 1961 after he moved to Tuscon. Mr. Pegler had no children.

He also leaves a brother, Jack A. of New York, and a sister, Frances Pegler of Dania, Fla.

A funeral service will be held Saturday at 9 A.M. in New York at the Blessed Sacrament Roman Catholic Church, 152 West 71st Street. Burial will be in Gate of Heaven Cemetery near Elmsford.