No newspaper man ever is satisfied with the state of the Press in his town, and there is a common saying that "once a newspaper man, always a newspaper man," so I am proverbially still a representative of the Fourth Estate, which is the subject of my paper. We have at present three daily papers in this city, all of them journalistically a credit to the community, and all of them owned by outside institutions, organizations, or individuals. Criticism is often heard that this impairs the independence of the papers, and nullifies the initiative of the editorial staffs. This criticism is usually voiced by people not in the newspaper game, and sometimes by those who are on the inside. Being an inside outsider, or an outside insider, I believe I can offer a fair and rational judgment on this point, and am going to attempt to do so whether I succeed or not.

Alien ownership has not necessarily impaired the independence of the papers except on national issues. In the coming elections the alignment of our papers will be mostly determined by the whim or judgment of somebody away from Pittsburgh. Whether this is an advantage or disadvantage, I shall not attempt to decide. But it seems to me that the whim or judgment of a man or group of men in California or New York is just as valid and probably just as fair as the judgment or whim of a man or group in Pittsburgh. In fact, it is less likely to be biased by local considerations. A local owner is likely to be swayed by the interests or affiliations of his bank or his church, his friendship for some candidate, or the favors he has received from a political machine. A foreign owner is like God, far away, and pressure cannot be applied to him as easily as to the local publisher. He is more of an abstract principle than a personal-

1 Read at a meeting of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on February 27, 1940. Mr. Seibel is a well-known Pittsburgh journalist, author, and radio commentator, who is now librarian of the Carnegie Free Library of Allegheny. Ed.
ity whose poker parties or chronic indigestion may color his preferences or prejudices, leaving financial imperatives out of the question.

As far as local politics are concerned, absentee ownership is a blessing in several ways. The big boss, in regions remote, no longer interferes with the line-up of the paper on municipal questions. Our papers can be valuable guides and mentors in local politics, if the publishers are idealists with backbones. These men should be, or should become, civic leaders with a nonpartisan outlook. Pressure groups should be shown the door, whether they are labor unions, religious organizations, or private busybodies with little axes to grind. I know that this is an impossible ideal, and have never attained it myself. Frequently I have been more considerate and conciliatory toward readers or advertisers with special requests or complaints than I have been toward the owners or directors of the paper. That was no special virtue on my part. Most newspaper men, knowing how the wheels go round, are very independent. During some elections I have known as high as ninety per cent of the force or staff to vote one way, while the owners had directed the paper's policy in the opposite way. Newspaper men, as they should be, are men of more than average intelligence, and often use it. The rise of the American Newspaper Guild, founded in 1933, has helped to increase the independence, and therefore the initiative, of the profession in Pittsburgh.

Taking all these things into consideration, I would not say that our three papers represent any deterioration from the time when we had seven papers, plus one German daily of high standing. At that time, not too far back, we had some papers of exceptionally high standards. There was a time when the Pittsburgh Dispatch was one of the great papers of the country though it was distinctively a Pittsburgh institution. It was going along on the impetus of the O'Neill tradition. There was a time when the Pittsburgh Leader was one of the great papers of the country though it was a distinctively Pittsburgh institution. It was going along on the Nevin tradition. The same may be said of the Volksblatt und Freiheits-Freund, which was going along in the tradition created by the Neebs and the Hirsches.

We no longer have a great tradition anywhere, and the newspapers of the entire country have been mechanized and standardized in an alarming way. When I was a young man I could have sold a piece of
fiction or an essay to any of the papers for a cash sum. Even when I was an editor, I bought many individual offerings from local writers, among them Mary Roberts Rinehart and Willa Cather. Writers on historical subjects—like Richard T. Wiley, George Fleming, and Charles W. Dahlinger—could get preferential placement over national columnists who today dish us the same daily menu of ill-digested prejudices, ostentatious ignorance, and painful retchings to provide fun at any price. The moving picture industry, with its vast advertising patronage, did not fill pages with imaginary doings and sayings of obscure nonentities. Radio crooners were not written about as if they were opera stars from La Scala. Night club nudities had no rating as artistic luminaries.

In other words, our entire civilization, to use a much abused word, has become an affair of tinsel and tinkle, and thus it is reflected in our press. The press as a whole has deteriorated at least fifty per cent as a field of literature, and has come fifty per cent closer to the standards and practices of an amusement park. In thinly disguised ways it has also become a competitor of the lottery or numbers game. Contests that are really door prizes and comics that are funereal in their machine-made fun are the main circulation pullers used to swing the floating readers from one paper to another—they never stay very long. If they read one paper today because it conducts a poll for the most popular manicure, they switch to the other paper next week to get a carpet sweeper offered as a circulation lure.

Yet our papers are free to print what they choose, within limits of the common law, and so are immeasurably ahead of the controlled press of countries like Germany and Italy, where the newspapers now are used chiefly to convey the orders or insinuate the misinformation desired by the government to stir up or subdue the mob. Our country has its ready-made mob, as newspaper owners and radio spellbinders know, but it has not yet been mobilized like the European mob. Being of somewhat lower mental level than the pre-war European mob, it will be more easily misled when the art of the demagogue is reinforced by the science of the censor.

The ignorance, the prejudice, the hatred, the gullibility revealed in the "letters from readers" appearing in some of the papers is almost beyond belief if you are not a student of mob psychology.
We in Pittsburgh may well look somewhat mournfully toward the recent past when we had wits like Arthur Burgoyne, philosophers like Erasmus Wilson, scholars like Henry Jones Ford, trenchant writers like Morgan Gable, and perfect gentlemen like Charles W. Danziger at the helm of our papers. There were giants in those days, and there are giants still, but they are buried under heaps of rubbish and hidden behind bales of bosh.

Any newspaper that will endow an editor-in-chief to tell the truth without fear of any subscriber or advertiser will confer a vast boon upon the public and create a new golden era in journalism.

In the collection and presentation of news there has been marvelous progress since the day when the old Post announced a column of dispatches under the proud slogan, "Received by lightning, printed by steam." There is little propaganda or unfair presentation in the news services of the Associated Press, the United Press, or the International. Outside of the silly sillabub from Hollywood, the news is generally dignified and uncolored. War news from Europe at the present time, to my personal knowledge, errs on the side of reticence rather than on the side of "atrocities." Political news from Washington and other seething centers is only lightly loaded with partisan bias. Headlines would be much better if less sensational, but sensationalism is the spice depended on to sell papers. Local news often drifts into triviality, as when Wm. N. McNair was mayor and was encouraged to do clownish things in order to keep in the limelight. Pictures are too much in evidence, especially thinly draped figures of the "female form divine," which represent some editor's inchoate antediluvian strivings to fill the world with beauty unadorned. Perhaps this is underhand propaganda for the silk stocking manufactories.

Perhaps the most interesting journalistic prodigy in Pittsburgh is The Courier, founded in 1910, a Negro weekly edited by Robert L. Vann. It prints 170,000 copies every week, and reaches every state in the Union. During the Italian invasion it sent a special correspondent to Ethiopia, and it is now the only Pittsburgh journal that has its own correspondent at the European war front, with headquarters in Paris.

Our subsidiary and ancillary press has undergone vast changes and revolutions during the past century. At one time the Pittsburgh Bulletin was a literary and society weekly of very high rank. For many years as
a tremulous poet I could not write any poem good enough to pass the critical scrutiny of Editor George F. Muller. The Pittsburgh Index some years later disputed the preëminence of the classic Bulletin, and I succeeded in landing a serial story of humorous flavor with that publication. These two journals are now merged as the Bulletin Index, a weekly with some of the flippancy of Time and some of the diluted vitriol of the old New Yorker. It is becoming more circumspect as well as more trenchant, less superficial though not less lively.

It is probably too much to expect a renascence of the old-time local literary longings, when an obscure South Side weekly printed serially “The Phantom Coaches,” a historical epic in the vein of Sir Walter Scott, by Dr. E. A. Wood, a medical man eminent as philosopher and poet as well as dietitian. Many years later a journal called The Library was established by Charles (Chick) Clark, the scion of a steel magnate’s family, and had the distinction of printing some of Willa Cather’s first stories. She had come to Pittsburgh a little earlier to edit The Home Journal, published by the same company that issued the National Stockman and Farmer. The Home Journal was expected by its founders to displace The Ladies’ Home Journal, as The Youth’s Journal, which I edited for some time, was expected to displace The Youth’s Companion. Unfortunately we failed to wrest the literary hegemony from Philadelphia and Boston, and The Library did not shift the hub of poetic supremacy from Gotham, though it was probably the last publication in Pittsburgh to pay cold cash for sonnets and ballads.

Two widely circulated periodicals now reaching into special fields are The Scholastic, a high-class magazine for high schools, with over two hundred thousand readers, and The Pennsylvania Farmer, which reaches over one hundred and fifty thousand rural readers. There are a number of labor journals and trade papers, and every borough seems to be blessed with its local “Thunderer.”

In the field of the religious press, Pittsburgh enjoyed for a long time a splendid preëminence. The Presbyterian Banner was admirably edited and often contained contributions from clerics and professors that ranked high in scholarship. The Pittsburgh Christian Advocate, long issued by the Methodist Episcopal Church, had contributors of very high standing, as I modestly admit, having once contributed a lengthy poem in the approved manner of James Russell Lowell, setting forth a social and
political philosophy that I now have my doubts about. The *Pittsburgh Catholic*, oldest paper of that church in this region, always has ranked high as a journalistic exponent of its tradition. The Methodist Protestant and United Presbyterian denominations are still issuing series of widely circulated and well edited publications.²

Scores of other journals of ancient days, serving political dreams or partisan rancor, flared briefly and then were extinguished in oblivion. It would be an interesting inquiry to find out exactly who chopped down the *Tree of Liberty*. Sometimes I wonder who fired the last salvo from *Tom Whittaker’s Gatling Gun*. A few other publications had better not be mentioned by name because they have an unsavory memory. They were frankly pornographic scandal sheets intended to cater to the lowest instincts of the populace. If some garbage collector of the future comes across their decaying pages, he may find a bit of comfort in my testimony that the stories they told about anonymous leading citizens, living in streets that were named, had not the slightest foundation in fact. For some months I was proofreader of a printing company which set up one of these scandal sheets, and all the copy was reprinted from galley proofs that came from another city, the local editor merely changing the names of the streets and city districts, to impart a local fragrance to the imported asafoetida.

As a result of such experiences I believe hardly anything I see in print, very little of what I hear, and sometimes even doubt what I myself write or utter. I advise you all to cultivate the same habit of limited credulity.

Perhaps I should say something about the foreign press in our city, as I was for a few years managing editor of the German daily. But my memory goes back much further, for my father was a subscriber to the *Freiheits-Freundy*, or “Friend of Freedom,” and my grandfather was a carrier for the *Volksblatt*, or “People’s Paper.” These very revolutionary titles meant nothing, for both publications were rabidly Republican, just as the *Beobachter*, or “Observer,” was rabidly Democratic, as well as Catholic. The Catholics at that time were still in the vast majority Democratic, having been driven into that party by the Know-Nothing movement, a primitive Ku Klux Klan. But all the German papers had

² Since this paper was read, the Methodist Protestant denomination has disappeared in a union of all Methodists.
a high literary standard even in the eighties. There was no international copyright, and the editor could annex anything from European papers that pleased his literary fancy. I read in the Freiheits-Freund novels by Spielhagen, Heyse, Ebers, Lindau, and the best of German writers. Later the lady novelists like Marlitt and Werner became more popular, as the women still read the paper while the men went forth into the world and acquired the habit of reading the English papers.

Other foreign languages were represented in the journalistic field much later. When I assisted Felidio F. Canuti, one of our oldest Italian attorneys, in the launching of an Italian weekly called I Nostri Tempi, there was already one Italian paper in town, called Trinacria, the ancient name of Sicily, an island associated with the fame of Garibaldi. Now I believe the Stella di Pittsburgh and the Unione serve the Italian colony. But we have Hungarian, Russian, Polish, Bohemian, Slovak, Serbian, Croatian, Greek, Yiddish, and several Jewish publications of high quality, including the Criterion and the Outlook. The foreign-language newspapers, I can reassure timid Americans, are more vociferous in their patriotism than the American press, being closer to primitive and parochial passions.

Something should be said about the men and women who have gone from Pittsburgh newspapers into the field of literature, most of them in other cities, because we have neglected the business of book publishing which we should have cultivated since the days of Hugh H. Brackenridge, whose Modern Chivalry was soon followed by Zadoc Cramer's Navigators and Almanacs.

The one we know best of all, of course, is Willa Cather, who was a telegraph editor on the Pittsburgh Leader for a time. But about the same time Sophie Gates Kerr (Underwood) was here as woman's-page editor of the Gazette, and she is now one of America's best writers of popular fiction. Will Levington Comfort was here for some years as a columnist on the Dispatch before he wrote Routledge Rides Alone, but I do not believe O. Henry ever worked on any Pittsburgh newspaper, because I knew both O. Henry and the editors of the paper he is supposed to have been connected with.

A number of playwrights have also gone forth from Pittsburgh newspaper offices, first of them Bartley Campbell, the author of "My Partner" and "The White Slave," and in later years George S. Kaufmann
and Marc Connelly, both nationally famous for their work in collaboration with each other or anybody else. In more recent days George Seldes, who has written many significant books, started as a boy reporter at nine dollars a week, and worked on the Leader and the Post for years before he became an authority on international affairs and a critic of journalistic trends. And Neil H. Swanson was working on the Pittsburgh Press when he wrote The Judas Tree, followed by other historical novels.

When, on Christmas Eve in 1847, the printers, publishers, editors, and reporters of all the Pittsburgh papers sat down to a banquet which should have become an annual institution, the toastmaster, Neville B. Craig, proposed a toast to “The Memory of John Scull and Joseph Hall, the enterprising young men who in July, 1786, issued the first newspaper west of the Allegheny Mountains.” In that toast we can all join, for the paper then founded, which required ten hours to print an edition of seven hundred copies, has had a numerous progeny. It was printed and published on Water Street near Ferry, not far from the spot where the Central Police Station now is engaged in the attempted suppression of crime.

One of the early editors hanged himself and had Boyd’s Hill named after his tragedy. The remaining editor complained because “the encouragement of the public is fluctuating and uncertain.” He was willing to take subscriptions “in cash or produce,” but complained that very often he was “without means to buy a pound of beef.” He was even willing at times to accept wood or whiskey, to keep his enthusiasm warm. A few years later, when success was beginning to crown his efforts, he proudly wrote: “In my profession as a printer, I never forgot my duty as a man. I never printed for hire, nor for party, and for protection of worth and for exposure of vileness my press has ever been open, of whatever party the worth and vileness were.”

The papers of our day, so much more influential, representing millions of dollars in assets and good will, hundreds of thousands of readers of all sorts, huge mechanical establishments and networks gathering news from all parts of the world, may well bear in mind the simple words of that pioneer who never forgot “his duty as a man.” For “what is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?”