

Magazine with a Mission

by Leo Burnett

Chairman, Leo Burnett Company, Inc.

PHYSICALLY, Reader's Digest comes as close as anything I know to Instant Reading

—easy to pick up, easy to carry, easy to plunge right into, easy to absorb, but awfully hard to stop reading once you have started—something like eating popcorn.

And, I warn you, it's habit forming.

It's impressive that The Digest goes to 16 million families in the U.S. and that it is published in 14 languages, including Chinese, circulating in every free nation, reaching 75 million people every month.

However, I can't quite get these figures through my head.

Just to please me

I prefer to believe that DeWitt and Lila Wallace get up this fine little magazine for me—and me alone.

All month long they and their colleagues screen articles, put them through the chambré and scour the world for stories—just to please me.

They type it all up, walk over to a little printer in Pleasantville they know and watch him ink up the press. When they are through they have one copy—and they mail it to me.

To perceive my Reader's Digest in any other terms seems ridiculous. For The Digest addresses itself to my secret aspirations. It admonishes my singular weaknesses. It tickles my very special funny bone.

Even back in the early Twenties when The Digest was published in a neighbor's barn in Pleasantville, it apparently had a purpose beyond that of condensing articles from a wide variety of sources and reprinting them in a handy-size pamphlet.

Born with a mission

Significantly, I think, the lead article in the first issue (February, 1922) was titled, "How to Keep Young Mentally," describing the philosophy of Alexander Graham Bell.

So you might say the mission of The Digest at the outset was "How to get more out of life."

Over the years it seems to me that one

great overriding purpose has emerged, namely, dedication to the proposition that

—collective solutions to problems start with individual human beings and individual efforts.

—that one-manpower or one-womanpower is the strongest force on earth.

Part and parcel of this is a rededication to grit, gumption, decency and good solid horse sense.

Although a crusader of the first order, it does not ride on a white charger or carry a spear.

It does not preach, but helps me come to my own conclusions.

Not for low-brows

The Digest is not merely a "nice" magazine, which writes only about "nice" subjects. It can be tough as hell, and often is.

There are probably many savants who look down their scholarly noses at it. But to anyone who believes that The Digest is for the simple-minded or the low-brows, I recommend another look. Apparently there are no subjects too knotty or abstruse for its editors to tackle, from the most advanced technology to foreign affairs. They only make it seem easy.

The only disparagement of The Digest I have ever heard is from the wag who warned that an avid reader of it might "know too little about too much," and you can't help wondering what two constant readers might say to each other.

Back from the printers

Well, DeWitt and Lila Wallace have just been over to the printers and have sent me proofs of the July issue.

Exposing myself to the danger of knowing too little about too many things, I found it interesting to learn that the black rhinoceros, a leftover from the prehistoric age, is the world's most valuable animal and faces extinction because of the ignorant notion that a ground-up rhino horn is a powerful aphrodisiac

—that in the laboratory we are on the verge of creating an actual living cell.

—that it is easy to drown with a life preserver unless you have exactly the right kind and know how to use it.

—that discount houses don't always offer the best bargains.

—that scientists have uncovered some basic clues to the mystery of cancer.

I was fascinated by the story of Jeane Dixon, the famous seeress in Washington, D. C., who predicted the assassination of President Kennedy; and by the story of Rudolf Nureyev, the incredible Russian dancer who escaped from his Soviet guards in Paris in 1961.

I was properly admonished by the article entitled, "The Vanishing American Father" and I was glad to be brought up-to-date on the pros and cons of the so-called "Air Force" low carbohydrate diet.

I was inspired by the winning fight of Jockey Johnny Longden against arthritis.

I cringed when I read "Save the English Language," but was relieved to learn that the Pentagon and the Treasury Department share with us advertising people some of the blame for the corruption of our mother tongue.

The conscience of advertising

In the article entitled, "Smokey the Bear and His Friends" I was proud to have the story of the public service contributions of The Advertising Council told so thoroughly and interestingly.

I was moved by the need for a spiritual renaissance as expressed in the philosophy of Albert Schweitzer; and my convictions were bolstered by the story entitled "Let's Not Kid the Kids," exposing the fallacy of running away from aggressors, a policy preached at "teach-ins" by many leading university professors.

I found the usual abundance of nuts and raisins in such regular features as "Toward a More Picturesque Speech," "Quotable Quotes," and "Laughter, the Best Medicine."

If you too are a regular reader of The Digest, I urge that you should steer clear of me, because I am almost sure to tell you something interesting I have just read in the last issue.

Leo Burnett

Thirty years ago in Chicago, Leo Burnett and seven associates formed the Leo Burnett Company and set out a bowl of red apples on a table in the reception room. Today the advertising agency is listed among the ten largest in the world, has more than 1,000 employees and maintains offices in Chicago, New York, Hollywood, Toronto, Montreal and London.

Among Mr. Burnett's many extracurricular activities are the Mayor's Committee for the Economic and Cultural Development of Chicago and The Advertising Council, of which he is a director and a past chairman. At his suggestion, Reader's Digest is making a donation to The Advertising Council in return for his analysis of The Digest's editorial content.

