

AMERICA S SMALLEST NEWSPAPER

By JAMES S. POOLER

MEARS, Michigan (pop. 220), supports the nation's smallest newspaper, but supports it under protest. The protests range from simple name-calling to the favorite Mears sport of knocking Editor Swift Lathers from under his bowler hat. There have been twenty-seven such major assaults in the twenty-eight years since Lathers founded his four-page Mears *Newz* in western Michigan's Oceana County. Nevertheless, no citizen dares miss a copy and 1810 people in thirty-seven states pore over the 5½-by-7½ inch pages every week. The Mears *Newz* is celebrated in metropolis and hamlet, in drawing room and kitchen — wherever, in fact, that it appears.

The reason for this popularity, incredible to the uninitiated, is Swift Lathers himself. Swift is the spirit of Richard Gordon Bennett at a whistle stop, a pre-Winchell snoop, a poet in prose, a curator of humanity, zookeeper of mankind and the most assaulted editor in the history of vigorous journalism. He

describes himself as the "Defender of Civilization at the Crossroads," "A Fireball Rolling Down the Pages of Oceana County's History" and "The Perambulating Conscience and Gardener of the Dune Country." The most articulate of his enemies calls him "a Peeping Tom who thinks he is Thoreau."

Swift Lathers is fifty-two now and his eyes blink badly but he misses very little of the life around him and he is spry enough to scramble about Oceana County fifteen miles a day on foot to get the news. He uses the rural doings of Mears, Hart, Pentwater and Shelby (a cluster of little towns in the thinly-settled county) as a sounding board for his own views, which are pertinent enough to get his one-man newspaper rated among the six best weeklies in the country.

The headlines in the Mears *Newz* reflect Swift's concern for civilization, if one agrees with the editor's definition of all civilization as "just Mears on a more elaborate scale."

Something always is "ripe in the land of Mears." It may be that "Roman Candle Remnants Are Ripe in the Land of Mears," or perhaps "Wishbones and Feathers" are ripe, or "Hearts and Paper Lace," "Mittens and Snow Images," "Beach Umbrellas," "Inaudible Frogs," or "Soapy Windows." Whatever the season has to offer, it is ripe in Mears.

Under the headlines, Swift carries on his perennial battle. His earthy touch has dealt with politicians, school teachers and small-town morals; petty grafting, closed roads, billboards and the United States Post Office; sand scooters, dog snatchers and censorship; the great State of Michigan and a short-weight butcher. Swift will loiter to tell a little boy how to grow up and, with the largesse which sometimes consumes him, he will give all the world's graduates and his circulation a commencement address, *gratis*.

Herewith is a sample of Lathers journalism, a discourse which rambles from one column to another of hand-set type with no pause for breath or paragraphing:

The coming of December snow reminds Ed Behnke of the time he came home last winter in a sleet storm and found the backyard so slippery his mother had to throw him the clothes line to pull him in. Bob Wilson nearly

broke a leg chasing Ruth Minch and had to have an X-ray taken. Max Field wants skunks. Never mind skinning them, Max will do the skinning. Max Field wants coons also. Bring in the coons and Max will do the skinning. (adv.) Little Point Sable lost another of its long-time residents in the sudden passing of Dr. Edward F. Kenyon, 71. Dr. Kenyon was a splendid neighbor with a generous, tolerant soul, free from intrigue and animosity. He wore a spiritual garment that was the incarnation of Christianity and he wore it every day. . . . I saw C. A. Van Amberg in the hardware store buying some big spikes. Could it be that his tenement building is falling apart? Nathan, my son, you are five years old now and I see you playing blocks by the register with your brother, Sylvan Dale. I have given you little red cars and trucks and a tin merry-go-round for your birthdays. Now I would give you a philosophy of life to get through the world and a formula of simplicity to solve all your problems. . . . When you grow up I want you to have a house all your own. Perhaps you can build it yourself. I must get you a hammer and saw and send you over to the speckled hardware to buy some nails. If you learn to make bird houses this year, you can be building dog houses when you are ten, cottages when you are fifteen and real homes when you are twenty. It won't make any difference to me if you never drive an automobile but I want you to have a set of chessmen and a bookcase and two good feet that will take you for long walks by the hemlocks and the brooks with pebble bottoms. Simplicity of amusements will do more than save your shining silver dollar until it grows into a home. Books and chessmen are far safer playmates than guns and speedsters. They will fill your mind with riches. . . . Consider me at

my age. What do I need? What do I want? Firewood, food, shelter from the wind, a shelf of books, chess and two good feet that will let me walk 15 miles into the solitudes of the dunes, along the shore and through the forest. And a stone in a great meadow where I can sit down and think and solve the universe. . . .

Swift Lathers' life is as simple as that in its essence, but the practical business of making a living comes hard. He must get \$2.40 a day out of Oceana County, a feat roughly comparable to floating a German War Loan in Coventry. The Mears *Newz* requires \$4 a week for operation and the remaining \$12.80 goes to operate his family: a wife and six little shavers, whose names — Thelma Celine, William Rush, Forest Glen, Nathan Quick, Sylvan Dale and Fleet Birch — reflect their father's imaginative love of nature.

Yet Swift has done well by his own definition. He began with 300 subscribers and no reputation at all, setting his type in an old cider mill. In twenty-eight years, he has acquired a subscription list which would be many times longer if he did not purposely limit it, a forty-year-old typewriter with a six-row keyboard to help his composition, and a reputation both local and national. He changed his paper's name from *News* to *Newz* because a resorter told him the former wasn't

distinguished enough. Aside from all this, Swift and the *Newz* haven't altered.

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No one knows how big a subscription list he might have compiled because one day, when the circulation hit 2740, Swift made himself immortal among editors by voluntarily cutting the list in two — literally, with a pair of scissors employed at both ends. Everybody whose name began with a letter up to D or after S stopped getting the Mears *Newz*. That left Swift free to do complete justice to Oceana County and to homestead a sand dune. He always wanted to go as far west in Michigan as he could and settle a sand pile he could call his own.

Swift chose to homestead in the worst of the depression. He wrote glowingly at the time about how a man could feed a family on a half dollar a day, "walking seven miles to the store to buy two pounds of oatmeal for a dime, two pounds of sugar for 14 cents, a loaf of bread for nine cents, a small can of condensed milk for a nickel, a five cent orange for the baby and a pound of onions to ward off disease and promote the general welfare." Thus he lived as a man of property, even if

the winds kept shifting it around beneath him.

This homestead led to one of his biggest battles. Just at the moment when Swift Lathers had proved that a man could make his own castle, the State declared that all the dune country would become a state park. Editor Lathers sent the commonwealth reeling with two well-directed editorials concerning the rights of the little man. The State of Michigan forthwith went plaintively into the courts of the United States Land Commission and pleaded its case. The Land Commission told Swift he had better stop annoying the State. When the smoke had cleared away, the Commission was left to reflect on its historic sins against the Indians, recalled by Swift, and the battered State of Michigan found itself dragged into the court of the Secretary of the Interior. Round two was Swift's. Michigan might have its state park, but it would be kind enough not to trespass on that half-mile stretch that is Editor Lathers', the estate of the little man.

No politician in Oceana County sleeps well on the eve of election. Swift is given to getting out 3000 extras on such nights and dispatching them by bicycle couriers. He has upset so many political apple-

carts that he blames a whole series of attacks on him a decade ago on the fact that defeated candidates encouraged the citizenry in the belief that a bounty had been put on Lathers. Swift wore a club under his shirt for three years, circumnavigated all cars parked on the highway, and he remembers that Forest Glen hadn't been talking long before he picked up the phrase, "Papa, they're outside the house again."

Everybody, everywhere, can identify himself with the lonely crusader of Oceana County. You've had trouble getting stamps? So has Swift, who also couldn't get his late mail nor his weekly out on time. So it's a Federal monopoly, eh? They think they can close the Mears Post Office at five o'clock. Washington, D. C., begged, "Swift, please quit," and the village postmaster came over to plead: "Anything you say, Swift, but please let me off on Sundays. I'm a church-going man."

Time has brought the editor's most begrudging enemies to the left-handed compliment that "Swift's not as dumb as he looks." And the Mears *Newz* has brought them to say, as one white-haired lady of Hart: "It's an awful paper for us folks living here. Scandalous! And the type's so small I can't read

it without my glasses." Swift's crusading results frequently in violence, but the violence is usually of a revealing character. Consider one of the more common incidents:

Swift had referred to the village bakery several times as "The Bun Shop" and the baker, with the ready suspicion of *Newz* readers, chose to believe the phrase had a nasty sound. He warned Swift. "Call my bakery 'The Bun Shop' once more and I'll hit you right over the head with the rolling pin." An hour after the next Mears *Newz* was out, Swift was in "The Bun Shop." He and the baker surveyed each other. "Yes?" said the baker. "Yes," said Swift. The baker curved his right and raised a mouse under Swift's left eye.

"That wasn't what you said you'd do," reminded Swift, a man who sticks to the facts. The baker dove for his rolling pin and Swift dove for the front door. Two weeks later, the baker had looked in his dictionary and was overcome with remorse. He and Lathers cooked up one of the editor's numerous barter deals — fifty pies would square the misunderstanding. Later, more remorse smote the baker and he ordered five thousand bread wrappers from Swift. Of course, they were labeled "The Bun Shop."

More serious was the time Swift

got himself kidnaped. He had been running a series on "high life in high society in Hart" and one night a committee of gentlemen grabbed him as he stepped off a train. It looked mighty suspicious to the station agent when they threw Swift into a car and drove away. He tagged along and saw the kidnapers take the editor to a desolate shack, uncoil a rope and roll up their sleeves. They had begun to threaten when a car turned on the highway, its lights flashed in and the committee fled. When Lathers staggered outside, there stood the station agent.

"Good gosh, Joe," Lathers panted. "Why didn't you run for help?"

"I was just waiting to see if they did string you up, first," the agent explained.

Small wonder that the word "tranquillity" creeps often into Swift's editorial musings. It is one of his dreams. "I want everybody to be happy. I want everybody to work," he wrote in an anniversary issue. "I want to see Mears as a city set to music. Some day I shall find the perfect system. Some day the atmosphere of hate and prejudice will dissolve away. Some day I shall find the blue sky of tranquillity."

Meanwhile, Swift will continue to defend civilization every Friday.

► *Does the American Negro share the benefits of American democracy?*

HALF SLAVE, HALF DEMOCRAT

BY EDWIN R. EMBREE

HITLER has claimed that he patterned his handling of minorities in Europe on our treatment of Negroes in America and there is just enough truth in that Nazi slur to shock every decent American. But what Hitler tries to cover up is the difference in direction.

While he has crassly reversed the clock of civilization, we in America have been slowly moving toward more tolerance and freer opportunity for all peoples. The abuses and discriminations that Negroes still suffer are too well known to need repetition here. I want to point out some items on the other side of the shield: the heartening progress that Negroes themselves have made during their two brief generations of freedom and the changing attitudes which show that America is still marching toward democracy.

At the time of emancipation, almost all Negroes were ignorant, poor, unkempt, lacking in every aspect of a free, strong people. The few "free persons of color" had been subject to such duress and

restrictions that most of them were little better than slaves. The Emancipation Proclamation suddenly liberated the whole race. But no edict could in itself create the essential marks of free men: education, health, economic prosperity, self-reliance. All these had to be won by the freedmen themselves through hard and painful effort. And in spite of handicaps, they have been achieved to a remarkable degree in the amazingly brief period of seventy-five years. I list some of them in briefest outline:

Literacy, which could be claimed by a scant 5 per cent of the four and a half million slaves and "free persons of color" at the time of emancipation, has swelled to over 85 per cent of the thirteen million Negroes in America today—a literacy rate higher than that for the total population of all but about a dozen countries of the world. Negro children, who seventy-five years ago were denied access to education by the laws of many states both North and South, are now in school in steadily rising