There's more truth than humour in the question raised by a child, as he hands his poor report card to the critical mom or dad—especially the dad. Maybe the kid is thinking: "Seems to me I've heard that Dad's report card now and then wasn't so hot . . . yet he has made good and isn't such a bad poppa after all. So why bull me out now?"

The Birmingham Eccentric

SECTION D

Thursday, January 10, 1957

EDITOR'S NOTE: Some months ago, an attractive young lady who lives in Pontiac appeared in our editorial office and said she wanted to write our history for one of her Wayne State University class assignments. We said we'd be flattered to have her do so. She is Donna Anderson, a Wayne January graduate. In our estimation, she has come up with one of the most interesting accounts of The Eccentric's 78 years we've ever read. Here it is:

DONNA ANDERSON

THANK YOU

To George R. Averill and G. William Averill and their staff in Birmingham—for their friendly welcome, helpful comments and suggestions—for the use of their office and equipment—for the informative, entertaining and outstanding Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Edition. And—for keeping the lights out in the rear of the office on Fridays so I could see the micro-film.

THE ECCENTRIC Before 1920

The Birmingham Eccentric began in a bedroom.

In 1875, George H. Mitchell, democrat, and Almeron Whitehead, republican, lugged a $90 press and a few fonts of type into the republican's bedroom. Their business was "calling cards—25 for ten cents." For three years they printed cards, argued politics and dreamed of conquering journalistic worlds about which they knew very little.

Their world turned out to be a weekly newspaper, **The Eccentric**, destined to hit the quiet, but as yet not distinguished streets of a Detroit suburb on May 2, 1878.

JULES VERNE, NOVELIST, and a bunch of Birmingham youths, individualists, were responsible for the Whitehead and Mitchell progeny being named **The Eccentric.** Some would tell you that times have changed in Birmingham. Things are essentially the same. Take the Eccentric Club, for example. This Eccentric Club of 1878 was composed of a group of young men, before referred to as individualists whose entire purpose in organizing was to vow that they would never marry.

Whitehead and Mitchell were members. The Verne organization inspired the club name. One evening as the club gathered to discuss the new venture of two members in good standing, Whitehead said, "What shall we call our newspaper?"

"Call it the "Birmingham Picayune", suggested fellow bachelor, Tom Flynn, trying to impress everyone that he had been to New Orleans.

"Sounds too peculiar," Mitchell said.

SOMEONE SUGGESTED NAMING IT after the club. They took a vote. The vote passed and Birmingham became the only town on earth to have a newspaper called **The Eccentric.** To be sure, it has occasionally been referred to as "The Birmingham Off-Center", "The Birmingham Oddity" and "The Birmingham Peculiar".

The Birmingham Eccentric, since that May day in 1878 has been issued over 4,000 times in 78 years of uninterrupted publication. It is the oldest Birmingham enterprise. Whitehead and Mitchell not only gave Birmingham its first and only newspaper, but played an important role in the development of the town. They started Birmingham's first bank and operated their general store at the southwest corner of West Maple and Pierce Street.

Whitehead and Mitchell, on the eve of the publication of their first issue were not without purpose. Gone were the days of printing calling cards. "Our Salutation", which appeared in the first issue explained their aim. In part, it said:

It is not without many misgivings and heartfelt appreciation of the manifold difficulties to be encountered that we issue this, our first number of the The Eccentric, which we design to publish every week for an indefinite period of time. One of our objects in undertaking this, our first effort in the way of journalism, is to furnish a live home newspaper replete with all the news of the day, but more particularly, the local items of importance occurring in Birmingham and the immediate vicinity, at a price so low that few, if any, can truly say, "I cannot afford to take a wide-awake home paper."

Since **The Eccentric's** political policy could have been split right down the middle by the affiliation of its editor-publisher owners, something had to be done. Whitehead and Mitchell never met in editorial combat in **The Eccentric's** pages. They simply printed parallel editorial columns, revealing their individual views and opinions.

THE FRONT PAGE of the early Whitehead and Mitchell paper in all the glory of its four columns, more resembled a gossip column than a front page as we know it today. The big space taker at the time was a running column called "Eccentricities" in which no resident's private movements were safe. Some of the label heads announced: "Terrible Hotness", "Raspberries in Season", "All Quiet on the Potomac", "Mrs. C. W. Whitesell of Stanton, Mich. is in town".

If today's **New Yorker** editors could get a look at some of the "big" stories, the comment might be, "Just give the news, please"—especially on this one:

—We are extremely sorry to inform our readers that we are unable to give full particulars at present of the famous Bigelow and Durkee fishing excursion to Strait's Lake last week. We went to the enormous expense of equipping a reporter and sending him along and the unfortunate young man has not been heard from since. We interviewed the above named gentlemen, upon their return, as to the whereabouts of our representative, and they informed us, with tears coursing down their cheeks that a mud turtle had swallowed him. They brought home the turtle to show for it.

One of **The Eccentric's** publishers liked poetry—his own. At times, if a Birmingham resident's name rhymed with something he had done, he was in for it. When one of the town's "best citizens" came into town to get aid in cleaning out his chimney Mitchell commented, without giving the name:

A smoking chimney and a scolding wife
Are the greatest torments of a life

IN THE WINTER when one villager slipped and fell, Mitchell covered it with:

He named all the fiends of Hades
And his language was not over-nice
As he walked off the stoop on his shoulder blades
The boards being covered with ice

In early youth, **The Eccentric** appeared as a great gray mass of newsprint. No pictures. No headlines. Not even labels of any substantial size. Two of the now six columns of the front page were given over to ads, but they were merely set in type, except for an ad in July of 1878 for P. T. Barnum and his "Greatest Show on Earth". By August 6 of the first year, several changes had taken place.

The price climbed from fifty cents per year to one dollar, the mast head was redesigned, display ads were found on the front page and general news from all over Oakland County appeared. "News of the Week in Michigan" was seen regularly and "patent insides" told of foreign affairs.

BY THE END OF 1878, the price had risen to $1.25 per year. The paper now had seven columns. Large display ads were found on the front page. Each Birmingham advertiser had his own spot in the make-up and the ads remained the same for weeks on end.

The masthead was completely re-designed in 1879. The price was back to one dollar but the masthead said, "$1.00 per year—in advance" and bore the slogan: "Devoted to our own locality. We labor for its interests".

The Eccentric's growing interest in community affairs was evident by 1886. Neighborhood gossip declined. Although agate type was used, stories on court proceedings, administrators' sales and village drainage system appeared. The front page carried obituaries and letters from readers. Merchants of Pontiac, Birmingham's larger neighbor to the north, saw the advantage of advertising in **The Eccentric.** Ads graduated from agate type to display.

ONE OF THE MOST PROMINENT of those front page advertisers was a merchant, one F. Blakeslee. Wallpaper seemed to be the entire sustenance of life for F. Blakeslee. Every week his ad appeared in the same place with the astounding offer: WALLPAPER! WALLPAPER! WALLPAPER! WALLPAPER!

By 1889, **The Eccentric** hinted at an exceptional future in job-printing. "Ears" boasted "Fine Job-Printing a Specialty". There wasn't anything unusual in the job-printing business then. But it was destined to rise from "calling cards—25 for ten cents" in 1875 to one of the largest publication plants of its class in the United States, and the largest in Michigan in 1956.

In 1928, **The Eccentric's** job-printing business represented 10 to 15 per cent of the total annual sales. That year nationally marked the beginning of a long-range slump in the printing business, but **The Eccentric** lived up to its name by ignoring the slump. The business continued to climb. Today the newspaper represents 29 per cent of sales and printing accounts for 71 per cent.

The Averill Press' range of work begins with single-color and extends through four-color printing of catalogs, manuals, special editions, brochures and house publications.

TODAY'S AVERILL PRESS, INC. has become a specialist in house publications and claims to produce more publications than any printer in Michigan. In many cases the Averill Press is the mailer for these publications and has been an important contribution to the local post office revenue, helping Birmingham's post office to gain its present rating.

Although much of the sales volume is accounted for by Detroit buyers, the area of service generally includes the southwest section of Michigan and extends north to Bay City and northwest to Lansing. Less than five per cent of its total annual volume is produced for Birmingham buyers.

But Whitehead and Mitchell were occupied with other things back in 1894. That year saw **The Eccentric** using headlines for the first time. Type size grew and the once single-line labels sprouted two and three decks. Still, the editors didn't think it necessary to number the pages. In 1897 F. Blakeslee and his "WALLPAPER" still held their own on the front page, but "Eccentricities" stepped back to make room for stories on the construction of a new school, a tax rise and concert review, all hinting at a new, a growing Birmingham.

IN 1898, WAR CAME to the nation and to **The Eccentric**, apparently hitting the nation much harder than **The Eccentric.** A one-column head with two decks made known:

"BIRMINGHAM—FIRST IN WAR, FIRST IN PEACE,
FIRST IN EVERYTHING"

but F. Blakeslee's WALLPAPER didn't give the war a chance. Nevertheless, Birmingham was awake—**The Eccentric** said so:

Our people are patriotic—Note the hunting about town. Nearly every store in our village has a flag or flags unfurled to the breeze—our government being at war with the fiendish Spaniards!

On back pages, the editors opened the "cans" and presented:

DEWEY'S BIG VICTORY
SAMPSON REDUCED MATANZAS BATTERIES

A full-page outline gave the history of Cuba and the second page of the May 6 edition of 1898 was devoted to war—woodcuts of the cruiser Olympia, Captain Dewey's flagship and a story saying that Spain's Asiatic squadron was annihilated by the American Fleet under Captain Dewey in Manilla Harbor on Sunday, May 1.

THE BEGINNING OF the 20th Century brought taxation questions, council proceedings, school news and the theater to the front page and humor to other pages —not that **The Eccentric** had ever been devoid of humor. In 1901, a full half page was devoted to cartoons, but the drawings were not needed. The captions could have stood alone:

Mr. Moth: "You must hate this terrible fly paper."
Mr. Fly: "I do, but I had an uncle who was dead stuck on it."

The Eccentric of 1901 had eight pages.

Headlines, though as yet not preceded by a banner, were big and bold. Some had grown up to a healthy 72 points. F. Blakeslee was still there in 1901, but had given up on his wallpaper. His ad was a meek promise:

We offer
new fall goods

In the first publication of the new year 1915, **The Eccentric** told what THE YEAR 1914 GAVE TO MANKIND, then began giving something of its own to mankind. The Whitehead and Mitchell union gave birth to a new column — WEEK'S NEWS SUMMARIZED FOR VERY BUSY READERS.

IN 1916, WHITEHEAD and Mitchell recognized women—in the columns of their newspaper. One of the first women's articles was ON THE SUBJECT OF BOUDOIR CAPS. With that and NOVEL THINGS IN NECKWEAR, they warned that soon **The Eccentric** would be circulating among Birmingham women. In 1916 a regular German language column appeared and WEEK'S NEWS FOR VERY BUSY READERS became NEWS OF THE WEEK CUT DOWN FOR VERY BUSY READERS.

War came again in 1917. On the front page of **The Eccentric** was the big story: HOW WE GET THE NEWS:

Day before yesterday a perfectly nice lady called us up, and with tears in her voice reproved us for not mentioning the fact that she had had a friend visiting her last week. We told her that we did not know she had a visitor. "Well, you should have known; I thought you were running a newspaper." Wouldn't that rattle your slats? Some people think an editor ought to be a cross between Argus and Ana Eva Fay!

—and on the second page:

U-BOAT ATTACKS U. S. DESTROYER
PRESIDENT URGES UNITED ACTION IN WAR FOR LIBERTY

In 1918, ads, not war, occupied the front page along with church notices, obituaries, theater notices and "culture". Someone slipped in a short plea to EAT WAR BREAD (made with potatoes) and on March 8, 1918, three of the edition's columns gave the names of contributors to the American Red Cross.

THE BIG HEALTHY HEADLINES took a turn for the worse and wasted away to captions again in 1919 when Whitehead and Mitchell stepped down and the name of F. E. Van Black took their place on the masthead.

For a short period, in its early years **The Birmingham Eccentric** was printed in Pontiac in the shop of Bill Poster. The type was composed and the pages made into forms in Birmingham, but the actual press work was done in Detroit until 1919 when Van Black contracted for the work to be done in Royal Oak at **The Tribune.** During these years the meager assortment of type and the small job presses owned by Whitehead and Mitchell were moved from the Whitehead bedroom to the second floor over a store on North Woodward Avenue (US-10), the main street in Birmingham.

Writer's Unique Style Traces History of 78-Year-Old Eccentric

THE ECCENTRIC After 1920

The next move was to the rear of a small building on Pierce Street now occupied by McCoy Tailors. It was in this building that George R. Averill, today's publisher and editor of **The Birmingham Eccentric** took over. Averill remained there for two years and then purchased the building at 220 North Woodward Avenue which is the newspaper's present home. Averill brought into this building the first linotype owned by an Oakland County weekly newspaper.

Coming from Detroit where he had been a reporter on the Detroit **Journal**, Averill knew little about advertising and merchandising and the mechanical side of the newspaper business. Averill soon took his first steps as printer, ad salesman, bill collector and janitor.

"It was a typical Michigan winter day," says Averill, "on February 14, 1920 when I assumed ownership of **The Birmingham Eccentric.** The entire works was scattered about this room in the rear half of the building on Pierce Street. There were two small hand-fed presses, two antique cabinets containing varieties of type that look like they dated back to Gutenburg.

"A battered make-up stone also lay upon the scarred frame-work. Two beat-up typewriters bravely beckoned to me—not a single bit of mechanical equipment to be used in setting type was among the meager assortment of equipment, nor had any been located in Birmingham."

AT THIS TIME, Birmingham had a population of 3,680 and its area was one square mile. Birmingham is four times that size today. **The Birmingham Eccentric** of 1920 consisted of eight seven-column pages, four with local news and four with "patent insides", a mixture of short stories and ads from Lydia Pinkhams to "the best in harness equipment".

F. E. Van Black, Averill's predecessor, had been a linotype operator for Whitehead and Mitchell. He had made an agreement with Whitehead and Mitchell to put out the paper. Averill says, "I bought up Van Black's interest and paid up Mitchell and started out. I began for the first time in Birmingham's newspaper history to cover all public meetings. For 15 years I seldom missed a village council or board of education meeting."

From February 1920 to October 1, 1920, the type was set on the then lone linotype in the office of the Royal Oak Tribune and the printing of each issue was done on their aged hand-fed Campbell press. On October 1, Averill and his staff began setting type mechanically in **The Eccentric** office.

ON JULY 20, 1923, Averill purchased a large, hand-fed combination newspaper and job-printing cylinder press. Four years later, as Birmingham and its newspaper grew, Averill installed a web-perfecting press. The commercial printing operation and the number of staff members increased. Today, the staff averages 95 people.

The change in the newspaper after Averill took over is obvious. The front page took on the appearance of today's journalists' idea of a front page. By May 26, 1921, gone were the ads.

Birmingham was growing and **The Birmingham Eccentric** recorded its progress. The early "20's" saw more and more people moving to Birmingham. Detroit realtors were quick to see the possibilities. News of Birmingham was undergoing a change. Gossip of the day was being replaced by issues of the day. Averill and his newspaper took their stand.

ROUSED FROM ITS TRADITIONAL easy-going way of life, Birmingham's village council began to wrestle with the problems of growing pains. New improvements had to be made.

Averill says, "Birmingham's dwindling water supply obtained by the old steam plant on West Maple at Baldwin finally gave way to electrically operated deep well pumps. But before this was accomplished, there were many local civic fights over bond issues."

"Those fights were real indeed and no verbal holds barred. People took sides and you were either "fer or ag'in". Indeed, scores of times, when elections were coming, the paper would be filled with dozens of letters written by citizens. Often there were so many of them that I'd have to print them in quite small type to get them in."

THE ECCENTRIC TOOK its own stand on the issues of the day and Averill says; "It and I were damned, even vilified by the few that had different notions, not to forget the few 'old-timers' who were against everything—but these were happy days of adolescent maturity."

When war came again in 1941, Averill and his staff geared coverage and comment to the needs of the community. An editorial on December 11, 1941 said in part:

Removed so far from the activities of the European and Asiatic wars that have been going on for several years, the people of the U. S. have had little more than an academic interest in the world conflagration, but with the treacherous offensive of Japan upon our own Pacific possessions last Sunday and with news coming in all week of naval engagements, our citizens are roused from their dreamy attitudes to one of reality and our entire nation is of one mind—

The issue of December 18, 1941 carried a seven column banners:

REGISTRATION STARTS FOR DEFENSE UNIT

Other short articles told:

DRAFT BOARD PICKS GROUP OF 15 MEN FOR PHYSICAL EXAM
FIRST CASUALTY HERE IS REPORTED
EXPECT $7,000 QUOTA IN RED CROSS DRIVE

. . . and on August 16, 1945, **The Birmingham Eccentric** laughed and cried as it announced:

FILL 'ER UP ORDER HEARD AGAIN AT GASOLINE STATION

While a black boxed story by Birmingham's mayor explained:

IN MEMORY OF BIRMINGHAM'S WAR DEAD

and **The Eccentric** wrote:

Yes, it was a great day Tuesday when Birmingham let go her pent-up emotions as President Truman announced that Japan had surrendered, marking the end of World War II.

The big siren sounded as the president closed his brief announcement that the surrender note had been received. Within minutes, cars began filling Woodward Avenue as hundreds of families hurried to the business area.

THE BIRMINGHAM ECCENTRIC looked back on these years as carriers delivered the 220-page Seventy-fifth Anniversary Edition along with the regular issue of Thursday, May 21, 1953. On the front page of the day's edition, editors explained:

In today's issue, you see our completed effort—an historical account of Birmingham and its surrounding area never before accomplished. In fact, we believe no other weekly newspaper anywhere has ever published so comprehensive an edition about its community. Certainly, no other weekly nor daily newspaper has included in such an edition, a special four-color section produced with its own printing facilities . . .

Back in 1886, when Whitehead and Mitchell were sleeping with **The Eccentric** type, the January 7 issue came out with the wrong date. It happened again in 1898 and on January 8, 1915, a picture was printed upside down, but these mistakes didn't affect the award-winning future. Through the years, George R. Averill has guided **The Birmingham Eccentric** toward larger development and improvement, stopping along the way only to pick up praise and awards.

FROM THE MICHIGAN PRESS Association, **The Birmingham Eccentric** has received numerous awards for excellent typography, general excellence in news coverage and community service. Several times it has received first prize awards for excellence of front page make-up from the University Press Club of Michigan at Ann Arbor.

In National Editorial Association contests it has been awarded top prizes for about every phase of planning and production of a weekly newspaper, including three first prizes for excellence in job printing. In a national contest sponsored by the Hoegenthaler Linotype Company, **The Birmingham Eccentric** won first prize for its plan of promoting merchandising and advertising for its local business concerns.

The man largely responsible for the growth and fame of the commercial printing department of **The Birmingham Eccentric** is Paul Neal Averill, George Averill's younger brother who joined the staff in 1926.

A FEW MONTHS AFTER his graduation from University of Michigan, Paul expressed the desire to assume responsibility of the advertising department. Possessed with a natural bent toward the science of selling and merchandising, it was not long before his abilities were evident in the increased volume.

Visioning the possibility of further development of the printing side of the business, Paul suggested that more effort be made to attract outside business. Paul was not wrong.

Today, **The Birmingham Eccentric** and the Averill Press rate among the largest and best of like enterprises in the nation. Included in its service to printing customers is a Detroit sales office. Day and night mechanical shifts of compositors and press men are maintained.

(Editor's Note: The printing department became so large that it was deemed advisable to establish it as a separate corporation. So on July 1, 1954, The Averill Press was born—and The Eccentric returned exclusively to newspaper publishing. George R. Averill is president of The Eccentric, with Paul as vice-pres., treasurer and business manager. Paul is president and treasurer of Averill Press, and George is vice-president. Ownership of both corporations is held by the two brothers.)

One of GRA's sons, as he is known to his staff, is associated with the Averill enterprises. George William Averill is managing editor of **The Birmingham Eccentric.**

In 1945 Averill added to the business' operating space by the purchase of the building at 234 North Woodward Avenue for a total of 17,500 square feet of floor space in the two buildings.

(Editor's Note: Just after Miss Anderson completed her historical assignment, **The Eccentric** announced purchase of a site on E. Maple avenue for its future new building.)

In 1921 **The Eccentric** masthead slogan promised, "FOR A BIGGER AND BETTER BIRMINGHAM". Averill kept his promise. Now, in place of the slogan is the simple statement:

SERVING THE CITIZENS OF MICHIGAN'S FINEST RESIDENTIAL AREA