

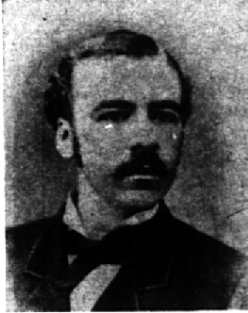
\$90 Began Eccentric In '78...

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following is a condensation of articles that appeared in the Birmingham Town Hall magazine entitled "A Wide-Awake Home Paper."

By JERVIS B. McMECHAN

In 1875 two young clerks in the village of Birmingham (population 800) scraped together \$90 and sent to Boston for a small Novelty printing press and a few fonts of type.

Within three years their ambition and enthusiasm led them to publish the first edition of a weekly newspaper and thus launch what has turned out to be an immensely successful publishing venture as



ALMERON WHITEHEAD

well as the oldest, continuing business enterprise in Birmingham.

The men were George H. Mitchell and Almeron Whitehead. At that time Mitchell worked for a local druggist and grocer named Frank Hagerman on Mill Street (now Maple), and Whitehead was employed in the Bigelow and Whitehead grocery store across the street where Captain J. Allen Bigelow also served as village postmaster.

WHEN THE printing press arrived from Boston, it was first installed in Whitehead's bedroom where the two men learned to set type and later attempted small printing jobs such as calling cards which they sold at the rate of 25 for 10 cents.

Through a three-year period their idea of publishing a newspaper slowly grew and by 1878 they were ready to try it, even though there was already another paper in town called the Birmingham Post.

In casting about for a name for the new paper, Whitehead and Mitchell decided to use the name of their "secret" club which consisted of nine young bachelors.

IT WAS CALLED The Eccentric Club, a name derived from the novel "Around the World in Eighty Days" by Jules Verne.

The first edition of the only newspaper in the world with this name, as Whitehead and Mitchell proudly claimed, appeared Thursday, May 2, 1878. It was a four-page issue, each page measuring 8 by 10 inches, and was offered at two cents a copy, or one year for 50 cents.

In addition to classified ads, the first page consisted of a series of short paragraphs under the heading "Eccentricities." These items recounted the day-to-day activities of local residents.

THE EDITORIAL in the first issue succinctly stated both the ambition and policy of the young editors.

It read: "Our salutation: 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 ECCENTRIC which we design to publish every week for an indefinite period of time.

"One of our first objects in undertaking this, our first effort in the way of journalism, is to furnish a live HOME paper, replete with all the news of the day, but more particularly the local items of importance occurring in Birmingham

and immediate vicinity, at a price so low that few, if any, can truly say, 'I cannot afford to take a wide awake home paper.'"

THE PAPER succeeded so well that in July of 1878 Whitehead and Mitchell bought out the Birmingham Post, and its editor, Mr. McConnell, departed for Midland to start another paper.

On its first anniversary, May 2, 1879, the paper officially became The Birmingham Eccentric, its subscription price was cut to \$1 and the publisher adopted a slogan: "Devoted to our Own Locality, We labor for its Interests."

Through the next quarter of a century the publishers remained singularly loyal to this statement of intent. While the paper expanded from four to eight pages, there was scarcely a reference to local government nor any of the problems that must have confronted the small community.

The advertisements, however, reflected the changes taking place in Birmingham. Whitehead and Mitchell were highly successful in attracting ads from stores located in Pontiac and Detroit as well as from local merchants.

THERE WERE national ads, too, for such products as Sapolio and Columbia Bikes, while the Ladies Home Journal was offered at 50 cents for seven issues.

No articles were ever signed, though it is probable that either Whitehead or Mitchell wrote all the copy in the early years.

Even though others must have assumed some of the responsibility for editorial coverage as time went by and the publishers became more involved with their many other interests, Whitehead and Mitchell never lost interest in the paper.

IN FACT, FOR more than 41 years the heavy black type proclaiming "Whitehead & Mitchell, Publishers" ran at the top of the editorial column. The two names disappeared without advance warning in the issue of July 4, 1919, when it was announced that the paper had been sold to Frank E. Van Black of Highland Park who had been associated with the Highland Park Times and the Hamtramck News.

In a box on the front page the former publishers stated that Van Black "will give the paper... the personal attention which it has always deserved and never received, and that he 'will give our readers the first-class newspaper which Birmingham deserves and requires in these stirring times of building and business, progress and pep.'"

THIS ANNOUNCEMENT publicly ended a remarkable partnership in the newspaper business.

In addition to his many other accomplishments, Whitehead was instrumental in building the St. James Episcopal Church. In 1877 Whitehead had married Emma Bodine who died in 1911. They had one son, Raynale, who later moved to Chicago.

Whitehead was buried in Greenwood Cemetery with full civic honors. Oddly enough, George Mitchell was not listed as a pallbearer.

MITCHELL ALSO lived to the age of 75, dying of a heart attack at his home at 110 Brown St. April 15, 1929, just a few hours after returning from a winter in Florida.

He was also married in 1877, to Hannah Corey. They had three children: a son who died in infancy and two daughters.

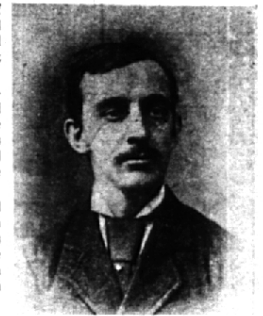
He, too, was buried in Greenwood Cemetery, near the grave of Almeron Whitehead.

WHILE THE NAMES of Mitchell and Whitehead remained on The Eccentric's masthead until 1919, the two actually had split their partnership in 1912.

Mitchell turned over to Whitehead his stock in the First National Bank (originally the Exchange Bank) in return for Whitehead's half-interest in the newspaper and the Telephone Building on Pierce Street.

It is possible that Mitchell would not have sold the paper to Van Black, but he was also serving as postmaster at the time and the postal authorities suggested that a postmaster should not engage in any other business.

LITTLE IS known about Frank E. Van Black. When he took over there were eight pages in each issue of the paper. His first move was to take all the ads off the first page.



GEORGE MITCHELL

A review of succeeding issues that year suggests that he was not able to attract advertisers. By September the paper was down to four-page issues.



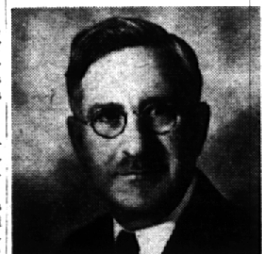
PAPER WAS LOCATED ON N. WOODWARD 40 YEARS. Spot now occupied by Demery's

...G.R.A. Changed Tempo in 1920

Without advance notice, a new publisher assumed control of The Eccentric with the issue of Feb. 20, 1920. He was George Rodgers Averill, who had previously been a reporter on the Detroit Journal.

The offices of the paper were then in the rear of the building on the west side of Pierce, just south of Maple. The assets of the 42-year-old paper were dubious, to say the least.

"The entire works was scattered about in this room," Averill later reported. "There were two small hand-fed presses, two antique cabinets containing varieties of type that look like they dated back to Gutenberg. 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



GEORGE R. AVERILL as he looked when he purchased The Eccentric in February, 1920. GRA maintained the "crew cut" was to economize on tonsorial visits, but the close-clipped mustache was acquired at 23, when he was a chief engineer on ocean-going steamers and wanted to look "older."

type was among the meager assortment of equipment."

The tone of his first editorial indicates that Averill was not daunted by the fact that he had to assume the jobs of printer, advertising salesman, bill collector and janitor, as well as editor and publisher.

IN PART it read, "Into this Utopia of Birmingham, then, we come—unknown to you, perhaps, but, withal, part of your little community; away from the great city and into the 'salt of the earth' we have wended our way and we know that nought but good shall attend our course of action."

Averill moved quickly to improve the paper and expand its service to the community. "I began for the first time in Birmingham's newspaper history to cover all public meetings," he wrote later. "For 15 years I seldom missed a village council or board of education meeting."

And a local historian has stated, "Gossip of the day was being replaced by issues of the day. Averill and newspaper took their stand."

THE PAPER was not always on the popular side in stating its position on local issues. "There were many local fights over bond issues," Averill has recalled.

"Those fights were real indeed and no verbal holds barred. People took sides and you were either 'fer or agin.' Indeed, scores of times, when elections were coming, the paper would be filled with dozens of letters written by citizens. 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."

In his third issue in 1920 a new slogan appeared in the paper: "Boost Birmingham Business." By

1926 the slogan became "For A Bigger and Better Birmingham."

THAT YEAR The Eccentric moved its offices to 220 N. Woodward, the present site of Demery's Department Store. George R. Averill's younger brother, Paul Neal Averill, joined the staff as advertising manager following his graduation from college.

By 1929 The Eccentric carried the largest volume of advertising of any of the nation's 10,000 weekly newspapers.

The Eccentric and Birmingham grew apace during the years G.R.A., as he signed his weekly column, was editor and publisher. In 1920 there were 3,690 residents in the village, which covered one square mile.

Today the population of the city is in excess of 27,000 spread over 4½ square miles. In 1920 the circulation of the paper was 2,141; today it totals 16,350.

AFTER 41 YEARS George R. Averill retired in 1961, selling his interests to his brother, Paul N. Averill and Henry M. Hogan, Jr. Today The Eccentric is housed in a large modern building constructed in 1960. There are more than 100 employees now, including six full-time reporters.

Measured against its peers, the 300 weekly newspapers in Michigan, The Eccentric has an outstanding record.

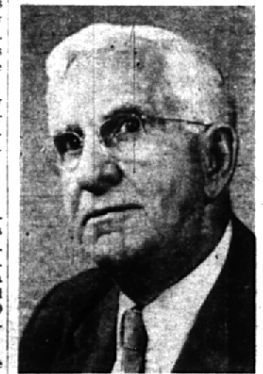
In seven of the last nine years it has received a top award for General Excellence from the Michigan Press Association, in addition to numerous other citations.

THE PRESENT publishers have continued Averill's policy of speak-

ing forthrightly on matters of community interest.

In early May this year The Eccentric marked its 86th anniversary. The original slogan, "A Wide-Awake Home Paper," has long since disappeared.

Today, more than ever, the community needs an articulate, even vociferous, newspaper to help develop an informed, responsible group of citizens. There is every reason to believe that The Birmingham Eccentric will continue in its vital role as the conscience of the community.



A RECENT PICTURE of the "Sage of Big Beaver" reveals the retention of most of his hirsute adornment, though the 42 years as head of The Eccentric aided in changing the hair from "golden brown" to "scintillating silver." GRA retired two years ago with the title Editor Emeritus. "Gives me more time for trout fishin'," he admits.