



Gilbert M Hitchcock: The Newspaperman

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GILBERT M. HITCHCOCK: THE NEWSPAPERMAN

By WALTER CHRISTENSEN

An address given at the 1936 annual meeting of the Nebraska State Historical Society in presenting a portrait painting of Senator Hitchcock to the Society.

It would be presumptuous of me to attempt to give an estimate or deliver a eulogy on the life and works of Gilbert M. Hitchcock. Since coming here this evening I have seen a number of people who knew Senator Hitchcock intimately before I was born. They followed his career as a young workman in Omaha, as a courageous young publisher, and as Congressman and Senator of the United States. I feel that nothing I can say would add to the stature of his statesmanship or to the esteem in which he is held by his fellow Nebraskans.

I represent here tonight a group of people who worked closely with Mr. Hitchcock, and who are still active in the ownership, management and operation of the newspaper which he founded in Omaha. They wish to pay this tribute to him not because of the statesmanship for which he is known in other states, but because they consider him a loyal son of Nebraska, a distinguished citizen of his own community, and a publisher of the first rank in America. It was as a publisher that we of the **World-Herald** staff came to love Senator Hitchcock. He was a newspaperman's newspaperman. The first issue of the **World**, which appeared upon the streets of Omaha some fifty-one years ago this fall announced that its one purpose was to print the news, all of the news, in a brief and comprehensive manner, and to keep the spotlight constantly upon the conduct of public affairs. Those of us who survive him know how well he continued through his career to follow those principles.

The appearance of the **World** was greeted with mingled feelings by its journalistic contemporaries. The Omaha **Bee** described it as one of those mushrooms which flourish and die in Omaha each succeeding season. A few years later, however, when the **World** was making itself felt as a newspaper, the **Bee** editor referred to the "elongated ears of the editor of the **World**", to which Mr. Hitchcock replied, "Long ears we have, my dear, the better to hear the news." More charitable was the reaction of the Lincoln **Journal**. "The **World**", it said, "is a newsy non-partisan sheet which will be kept clean and wholesome. While those are good words in general, it cannot operate in that way in Omaha." "All right," replied Mr. Hitchcock, "When the **World** fails in Omaha it will move to



Portrait of Gilbert M. Hitchcock

Lincoln." Happily the move was never necessary. The **World-Herald** and **Nebraska State Journal** are still separated by some fifty odd miles, and, I might add, still exchanging mutual compliments.

It is difficult to imagine today the commotion, and in some quarters, the consternation which greeted the first appearance of the **Evening World**. You couldn't imagine that a newspaper given over entirely to news and an independent policy would manage to survive the first dreadful year that its contemporary mentioned. You can't imagine a newspaper that was not devoted to partisanship and political plunder; which didn't propose to cover up the crimes and misdeeds of its friends, but to cite progress and glorious deeds in their stead. You couldn't imagine that this little newspaper, without any particular standing, could manage to exist standing solidly on its own feet. It created, I believe, a good deal of sen-

sation in that community at that time. I have heard Mr. Hitchcock speak of it a good many times. He stated the case himself in an early issue, "The **World** stands fairly and frankly upon a platform alone. It believes there is room for a newspaper of virtue in the state. It has no alliances of any kind." That particular paragraph was read to me from a yellowed clipping Mr. Hitchcock took out of his safe not more than a year before he died, and I was interested enough to make a copy of it at that time. It was a thing which he was very proud of, and which he considered set the key for the publishing years that followed.

Mr. Hitchcock and his associates made the attempt to operate an independent newspaper because they had supreme confidence in the merit of the product which they had for sale. That product was honest and unbiased news. If he were here I am sure he would be the first to confess that he had never been able entirely to live up to his purpose, and that he had during his career made a number of errors. He was as ready to confess his own mistakes and his own errors as any great man that it has ever been my privilege to know. His policies during nearly fifty years of newspapering were of the very highest, and almost invariably—I would say invariably, except for the very warm denial that I would receive from the Senator if he were here in person—for the best interests of his community. He made the attempt, and as I look about Nebraska today and see the very large number of fine newspapers that are now being published in this commonwealth—not only in large cities such as the one in which we are meeting, but in a great many smaller towns—and as I see that the editors of those newspapers have the courage and decency to fight for what they believe is the right thing, and to fight without fear of the reprisals from any worthy opposition; then, I say, I am very thankful for the life in this state of Senator Hitchcock. That is why tonight his former associates are pleased and delighted at the opportunity to present to the Nebraska State Historical Society a portrait by a distinguished Nebraska painter, J. Laurie Wallace, of Gilbert M. Hitchcock.