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# Someone You Should Have Known: Colonel Robert R. McCormick

by Lisa Mizock

In a town where news is king, you might say Tribune Company is a news kingdom, thanks to Colonel Robert R. McCormick.

Colonel Robert Rutherford McCormick, born July 30, 1880, was the grandson of Chicago Tribune founder Joseph Medill. As editor and publisher of the *Chicago Tribune* from 1912 until his death in 1955, he was an autocrat, running the paper with an iron fist.

His towering six-foot, four-inch frame, with his often expressionless face and vacant gaze, made him appear omnipotent to his employees. They accepted his autocracy completely -he knew his business.

"He was his own best story," said Richard Pendergast, McCormick's pilot during the Colonel's last two years. "He had an excellent news sense and really played a story out."

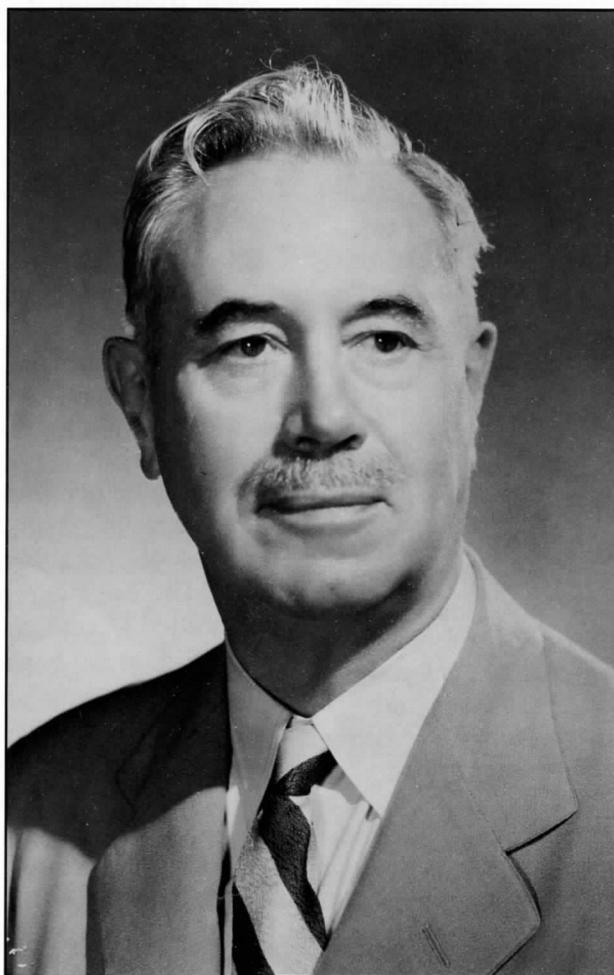
"He was definitely an autocrat," said Dick Orr, farm editor, who began at the Chicago Tribune in 1949. "Top editors worked directly under him and made it their business to find out what he wanted and they followed it to the letter."

McCormick was born in Chicago, educated abroad in his early schooling, graduated from Yale University, and earned a law degree from Northwestern University. A newspaper career was never considered, as his early career choices clearly indicate.

After graduating from Northwestern, he joined the law firm of what was formerly Kirkland and Ellis. His chosen field was

politics. At 24, he was elected alderman of the 21st ward and then president of the Sanitary District.

Considered honest and open-minded in a city that was corrupt and known for awarding contracts based on contributions, the Colonel hired auditors and signed contracts based on merit.



After five years with the Sanitary District, his political aspirations ended when his uncle, president of the paper, Robert Patterson, died suddenly in 1910.

The shareholders were tempted

to sell their stocks to the publisher of the *Chicago Daily News*, and McCormick was called in to stop them. Having spent quite a bit of time with his grandfather, Joseph Medill, he could not easily turn his back on the Chicago Tribune.

In a letter to his mother he wrote, "the Tribune has always been much

more to me than either a newspaper or a source of revenue. I talked them out of it on the grounds that I should go into the business."

With his cousin, Joseph Patterson, McCormick joined the Chicago Tribune, beginning a career that would endure and flourish throughout his lifetime. His new title was president and chief executive officer, and Joe became chairman of Tribune Company. The news kingdom was beginning to grow.

The newspaper industry at this time was fiercely competitive. The Record-Herald and the Hearst Examiner were waging a price war with the Chicago Tribune. They lowered the cost of their papers from two cents to one cent. The Colonel had an idea: if the Tribune could purchase its own paper mill, it could cut costs and come out on top.

In 1912, a little over a year after McCormick was elected president, the directors authorized construction of a mill in Thorold, Canada. The location was ideal, right near Niagara Falls. It had ample electrical power, rail facilities and

was conveniently located next to the pulp forests. As a result of his decision to control the production of newsprint, we now own two paper mills and have lumber rights to over 5,000,000 acres of timberlands in Canada.

A true patriot and veteran of World War I, McCormick became a Colonel in his pursuit of a story. He had an opportunity to cover the Russian front at the onset of World War I, since his father was the U.S. ambassador to Russia.

His mother induced the Russian ambassador to the U.S. to have him invited to inspect the Russian army as a distinguished personal guest of Czar Nicholas, commander-in-chief. However, this arrangement could only be made if McCormick possessed the rank of colonel, because reporters were not allowed near the front.

He obtained a commission of Colonel of the cavalry in the Illinois National Guard from the governor. He retained the title of Colonel, even after he was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel, after serving on the front lines in World War I.

On the Tribune's 75th birthday in 1922, it was Colonel McCormick who decided to run a \$100,000, world-wide competition for the best drawing of an office building. The contest looked for "the most beautiful building in the world, and a model for a generation of newspaper publishers," according to the Colonel.

Two hundred and fifty-four entries were received from 23 countries. The Tribune Tower, designed by a New York architect, Raymond Hood, was the winning entry, and was completed under his direction in 1924.

Tribune Company's news kingdom now had its castle and grew even greater that same year, when the Colonel purchased a radio station located in a handball court on the top floor of the Drake Hotel. McCormick renamed the

radio station WGN, for World's Greatest Newspaper, which was the Chicago Tribune's slogan until the late 1970s. Later, he moved the radio station to Tribune Tower and increased its power from 10,000 watts to 50,000 watts.

With the death of Joe in 1946, the Colonel became chairman of the board and vice-president of the News-Syndicate Co., the Tribune Company subsidiary which controls the New York News. He was also elected chairman of the board and vice-president of the Chicago Tribune-New York News Syndicate, Inc., which sells comics and features to newspapers all over the world.

Even with such extensive authority, the Colonel kept on top

***“Changes must continue. A dead hand cannot run the Chicago Tribune.”***

of every aspect of the business. According to Dick Orr, he was very detailed and involved in everything from farming to foreign affairs.

Dick remembered an incident when the Colonel was in London at the start of World War II, before the United States was actually involved.

“He would call here from England to find out the news since the British papers were censored,” explained Dick. “Once, he called city desk and asked where the British fleet was. The city editor told him he didn't know anything about it. An hour later McCormick called back and said, ‘do you want to know where the British fleet is? At the bottom of the sea, by God!’”

Although he often appeared aloof, the Colonel was sensitive to his employees' needs and had a soft spot for veterans.

When the United States entered World War II, Roy Cone, an engineer at WGN since 1943, remembered the Colonel sobbing at the news.

“I'll never forget him coming into the control room sobbing, ‘what are we doing for the men who are fighting for our country and freedom on foreign shores?’”

“He announced that everyone who went off to war would still get their salaries while they were gone and any family that had problems would be taken care of by the Tribune.”

Bob Paustian, plateroom supervisor, also saw his sensitive side, although not directly. As Bob recalled, “I was an apprentice earning 20 dollars a week and I was cashing my check at the cashier's window. The Colonel was right behind me and asked if I got enough. I told him no. When he asked me why, I explained that my expenses were 28 dollars a week. Two weeks later an announcement came out that no one would work for less than 50 dollars a week.”

The Colonel always had one foot in the future and innovative changes came quickly at the Chicago Tribune. His basic philosophy, which still holds true today, was “get every possible engineering advantage over your competitors.” The Colonel himself was a great contributor, having patented a unit and press folder design that many other newspapers eventually adopted.

He was a strong supporter of change and implemented many while he was in control. Shortly before his death, he was asked how long he thought the Chicago Tribune would survive unchanged. He guessed about 15 years. “Changes must continue,” he said. “A dead hand cannot run the Chicago Tribune.”

Austere, aloof, eccentric, all these words have been used to describe Colonel Robert R. McCormick. But no one can deny that in a town where news is king and change comes quickly, his vision continues to contribute to Tribune Company's long reign.