

FOREWORD

December 1951. I first met Mrs. Douglas Mackiernan, the Vice Consul of the United States Information Service (USIS), in Lahore, Pakistan. She and I were the only two Americans attending a meeting of the Pakistan Newspaper Association. She was one of only two women attending; the other woman was clad in a black burka and worked for a Pakistan Urdu language newspaper. I was at the meeting in my role as the Bureau Chief of the United Press for India and Pakistan, as many of the newspapers were clients of my United Press news service.

She invited me to lunch. For her, a business lunch, because she wanted to learn what I knew about Pakistan reporters and editors. At the lunch, I learned she was a widow with twins who were living with grandparents while she was on her first tour in the diplomatic service. It was not a pleasant meeting. I wanted to know why she was in Pakistan and her two year old twins were in Boston.

A few months later she was transferred to the American Embassy at Karachi. As Karachi was part of my United Press territory, we met again briefly. Then in the spring of 1952, with a consular friend,

she took a vacation traveling to Goa, then a Portuguese territory on the west coast of India. Her route took her through Bombay, my headquarters. I saw her off on the train and met her when she returned. We had a few days to begin to know each other before she flew back to Karachi.

After a stormy courtship she agreed to marry me, and we were married on October 20, 1952. After a honeymoon in Europe, she returned home to get the twins, Mike and Mary, and we began our married life in Bombay. We soon added two boys and a girl. We were married for 56 years, traveling and working in India, New York, Jamaica, Miami and Omaha for United Press, *Time/Life*, *NBC News* (radio and television) and the *New York Daily News* and newspapers in Canada and France.

Although we worked and traveled the world together, Pegge never said much about the stories she had covered in her earlier life. It was only when, in her late 70s, she showed evidence of dementia and possibly Alzheimer's, did I learn of her personal diaries, letters and clippings. I found them in the basement of our home when we moved into an assisted living retirement center. In reading them I decided to publish them because of their beautiful writing and the story of her self-educated determination to become a brilliant and adventurous foreign correspondent. It is a beautiful history which I wanted to leave for her children and grandchildren.

Introduction

Margaret Witwer “Peggy” Lyons lived two lives. The younger daughter of a middle class Catholic family in Harrisburg, PA, she attended public schools. After graduating from John Harris High School, she went to New York to become a “famous” actress. Her mother had been a child actress and her grandparents were actors on Broadway. Her uncle, H.C. Witwer, was a World War I war correspondent and later wrote sports novels in the style of Damon Runyon. He also wrote scripts for movies in Hollywood and had acting parts in several movies.

In her own words at the time—“I had hoped to be the next Sarah Bernhardt but it was not to be.”

After a brief stint as a Powers model, and writing radio scripts for the *Woman’s Home Companion*, she returned to Harrisburg. After writing a series on furniture for an advertising section, she persuaded the publisher of the *Harrisburg Telegraph* to let her write, in 1940, an advice column for teenagers, “Teen Topics. She also took a pen name, Pegge with an “e” and Parker, “because everyone had a Parker pen.” Her daily column became so successful that she became a celebrity,

interviewing with the likes of General Jimmy Doolittle, the Duchess of Windsor, and Rita Hayworth.

After writing over 700 columns, she took her clippings to Washington in 1942 and was hired as a reporter on the *Washington Times Herald*. Within six months she had been promoted to Women's Page editor and soon became a "star" reporter. It was wartime, and Pegge wrote stories about training with the paratroopers, riding with the tank troops, and even slogging with the infantrymen. She also continued writing about women's issues, posed for fashion photos, and became a "celebrity" culminating in being a Camel Cigarette poster girl, though she never smoked.

Slow Boat to China takes you on her journey from Washington to Alaska to China and beyond...



SLOW BOAT TO CHINA



Washington, D.C.
1942-1944

1942

JULY 7, 1942—HARRISBURG, PA—“Miss Pegge Parker? One moment please. Washington calling.”

A whirl of “city desk... *Washington Times-Herald*... like your work... would you be interested... come immediately... straight reporting...” And there I was—assigned to the staff of a newspaper in the most dramatic city in the world—Washington, D.C.—the vital center of political, military and international news. A dream come true for a budding reporter, especially right now while the nation is at war!

There was no sleep in the Parker household last night. I had that excited feeling of “I-must-be-dreaming” until this morning, when I rolled paper into my typewriter and tapped “*Teen Topics*” across the top. The words seem to look at me as I tapped out my final columns for the *Harrisburg Telegraph*.

JULY 10, 1942—I made my last trip to the paper to say goodbye. I also bought a war bond for \$18.75 to keep a promise I had made to “help” a Washington publicity promoter, Meredith Howard, who got me a room in a guest house in D.C.

JULY 12, 1942—WASHINGTON, D.C.—Arrived by train and took a cab to the guest house at 1805 19th Street SW. Very disappointed—not at all what I'd been built up to expect.

JULY 13, 1942—Met my baptism of fire on the night staff of the *Washington Times-Herald* under noted city editor Wayne Randall. I was given re-writes, obits, and copy from the desk with instructions to “clean up a coupla paragraphs.” At the end of the first day, Randall stopped by my desk to talk with me. He was so reassuring and friendly that I found the courage to ask if he was pleased with my work.

His face went into deep creases. The hard, sharp eyes behind the horn-rimmed glasses shone.

“I was very pleased with your first story because it confirmed a hunch that you can write. I didn't have to change a line. That is very unusual.”

[Editor's Note: Reflecting on her time in the nation's capital in later years, Pegge believed that Randall had hired her because she wasn't a daughter of one of publisher Cissy Patterson's society pals or the many friends-of-friends with whom the staff abounded. “Crackshot hotshots not worth a damn” was Randall's comment. Kathleen Kennedy, the daughter of the American Ambassador to London, Joseph Kennedy, was one. Kathleen began as a research assistant to Frank Waldrop, the executive editor of the paper. Kathleen also assisted with reporter Inga Arvad's column, “Did You Happen to See,” which profiled government officials. Kathleen was then promoted to reviewing plays and movies in her own bylined column and took over Ms. Arvad's column when she left the newspaper. Pegge, by contrast, was a kid from the sticks of Harrisburg who walked into the newspaper with a clipping book under her arm. The clippings were two and a half years of her “Teen Topics” advice columns for teenagers. (A collection of the columns can be found in her book “Teen Topics, published by Concierge Publishing 2008.)

The Times-Herald was losing male staffers to the draft, and Pegge was a safely draft-proof female who seemed to want to work and learn a lot. She was very serious, timid, easily hurt and frightened, but very determined and pathetically humble. She had a number of beaux in the military who occupied much of her time with letters, phone calls and occasional dates.

Pegge made several visits home and always enjoyed reconnecting with Lois Fegan, her reporter colleague on the Harrisburg paper.

On Thursday, August 13, 1942, a month after Pegge had started working for the Times-Herald, she had a byline story in the Five Star Final on the FRONT PAGE: a story about “coincidental twins” (babies born to different families on the same day).

She was thrilled with the byline, for she was just 23 years old and had only two years of newspaper experience, with no education beyond high school. Thinking a brush-up on grammar would pay off, Pegge enrolled in a freshman English class at George Washington University. Because she worked the night shift at the newspaper, she was free in the daytime to attend class. Her first paper for the freshman English teacher was graded “Excellent.”

Pegge was sent to cover a rally but was too shy to talk with Edna Ferber, who attended the rally with Eleanor Roosevelt. Pegge described Mrs. Roosevelt as “very tall, dressed in white lace, her hair quite gray.”

On August 20, 1942, Pegge was tried out on the beat of the U.S. Senate. It was just a gamble, a trial run—could she be trained into the job until the regulars got back after the war? The regular reporter for the Senate beat, Frank Smith, thought “a pretty girl up here would get to know the boys and they would give a pretty girl tips and leads they wouldn’t give another male reporter.” That would be Pegge’s special plus for the paper. She wrote later, “It was a fantastic opportunity, quite, quite lost on me. I had no training, schooling or grasp of legal affairs or the role of Congress in wartime.”

A week later Pegge was still covering the Senate, and by August 31 she was on her own, without Smith.]

AUGUST 31, 1942—WASHINGTON, D.C.—Still in the Senate. Took over single-handed for the first time yesterday, but nothing much happens on Saturdays. Lunched with Frank Smith's nice wife and she tells me I'm the SWOON of the capital... the darling of all the guards, guides, elevator boys and cops! I never trolley on the rotunda that my vision is not bug-eyed, amazing. But if this is so why can't I capitalize on it to the extent of getting good slants of news? I feel myself gathering confidence and acquiring an insight into the ways of legislation. Glad I worked because my looked-forward-to weekend with Darwin in Richmond phooied into cancellation and I had nothing to do all day.

At 9 p.m. I turned U.S.O. hostess. Tall and girlish I was, in a powder-blue hat and pink princess coat.

"Good evening," I greeted the elderly directors like a nice girl. What a role I was playing being "Peggie Lyons."

I was told to write my name on a slip of paper and pin it on my dress—complete with "where from" identification. I was a little bewildered with tickets and slips and "where-can-I-check my coat" when all at once a sailor stepped up and took me in tow with unquestioning authority. He just managed the situation and me. He was all "gob" too—white ducks, flowing tie, and an eagle and chevron on his sleeve. I was disappointed that the Navy had me and not the Army or Marine Corps. Still, he's not bad-looking, I thought. When we got to the cloakroom his nice manners impressed me. The more we talked, the more interesting he became. Then I learned he studied pre-med at some western university. Loved classical music and had a curiously alert, enquiring mind. We danced carelessly and badly all evening but I found myself having fun. He excused himself once and was gone a long time. I had a sinking feeling that he had disappeared for good and was probably busy with other faces in other places. But finally he returned and said he had a 4 a.m. watch and would have to return to base. I went with him and his little rolling tough-faced sidekick "Stunky" and rode halfway downtown before we separated,

I with a grin that I'd added the Navy to my "armed services" and he with my address and telephone number. His name: TOM Sawyer. Not fiction but truth.

SEPTEMBER 4, 1942—Accomplishments since last I took up the pen: One romance and one byline. Career before love, so: I've been taken off the Senate and put back in the office. Things too slow up there to occupy three reporters. Yesterday, September 3rd, a women's conference was called in Mrs. Patterson's office and there, hiding behind a food editor, I studied the famous Cissy Patterson and what's she but a GRAND GUY. She was relaxed, responsive, receptive. We were addressed by first nicknames. Katherine Smith, women's page editor, was "Kathie"; others were "my dear." We were all "children": "Thank you, children, you may go."

"Mrs. Pat" as Mr. Randall calls her, is a perfumed, plainly but expensively dressed middle-aged woman with one of those "voices." She flips rose-tinted goggles on and off a nice round nose. Her eyes are wide and deep brown, dark glow in pale-pink puddles of wrinkles. Her hands were square and her fingers blunt, nails well manicured with a rose polish. Tension was high among the hired girls. Elaborate poise was politely perfect. Each offering of words had had a quick composition and editing before spoken for Patterson's ears. I got as far as composition and editing and hoped "she" wouldn't see me. She didn't.

But I fell heir to one of her suggestions: a series of articles on women in war jobs. All day I telephoned—everyone, everywhere. Women driving trolleys, piloting planes? Instructing in colleges? Finally landed a girl in the long-distance travel office of Bell Telephone. Much hectic last-minute confusion but got the story. Came back with NO IDEA what to write, what angle to write up, or anything. Oye! Randall was on the desk too. Your BETTER BEST Parker struggled and gradually a pretty good story thumped its typewritten

trail across two sheets of copy paper. When I'd re-read it, I gained enough confidence to show it to Randall. He read the lead and second paragraph. "s good, I like it." He put it on the desk and took pencil in hand. "By Pegge Parker" he signed it. Bless him. Oh dear God, bless this darling man who is the sky sun shines on. P.S. He even insisted I sign up for overtime and get paid extra. His praise was more than money—so I'm outrageously overpaid for today's work.

Now to my love affair. Bob Jenkins, the first soldier beau I ever had, called and came to dinner one night last week. He was to be a second lieutenant on the morrow at Ft. Belvoir. Would I celebrate with him and two friends? And would I get dates for said friends?

Finally arranged, and we met Jenkins and friends. He was one of the friends; name's George Fullmore. We went to the Shoreham, and George sat across the table from me. I thought him very engaging and nice-looking, but Jenkins was my date. As the evening wore on George and I found ourselves more and more conversant and held in a kin bond for books. It was fountain overflowing—stand-up depth going flood. Jenkins danced with George's date and the SWITCH was on. George and I danced later—and suddenly my heart had wings. I was dancing, laughing, YOUNG again—after weeks of wear, worry and emptiness. George—brains and near beauty—brought me home and the goodnight was a kiss we couldn't help, with many more to follow with whispered "oh honeys" and even "darling" which...

[Editor's Note: The next page of the diary is missing—Pegge might have deleted it at some time so we won't know how the evening ended. The diary was suspended in September after her diary entry of her date with George Fullmore. Pegge must have re-read her entries and decided they were not to be saved for posterity.]

The stories Pegge wrote for the Times-Herald must have caught the eye of the publisher. Among other stories, Pegge began a series on table manners for which she posed. Her photographer was the Post's Dimitri Wolkonsky. His name appears in her diaries because he was teaching

her Russian words. The next entry is probably from December 1942 or January 1943.]

My adored Mr. Randall was fired by Mrs. Patterson, and I am heartbroken for him. He came into the office the other day and I jumped up and ran over to him. He looked at me embarrassedly, the high-humbled before the worshipper, he was achingly unpretentious, a man out of a job. I wept for him. So happy to think I'm considered his friend.



Two of Pegge's featured articles.

Friday night I was getting ready to go home when Mr. Dewitt's secretary (he's a little god, archangel to Mrs. Patterson) called me into his office—would I take a long-distance call from New York? Mrs. Patterson wanted to have me do a story on Clare Boothe Luce, new Congresswoman. Flora had written a story on her, too. But orders were orders, and I was to do the piece. Flora was so upset she resigned. Not accepted—anyway, I was in a high nervous state all Friday night and Saturday. I started my chase—didn't get to Lady Luce but wheedled enough from the secretary to cut a story

out of whole cloth. Flora liked it, against her better judgment, and Mr. DeWitt said it was very good. (Relief and ten years shaken from these shapely shoulders.) I stand by for reaction tomorrow.

Next day: Reaction swell. Flora quit and I've been taking over. Working my typewriter with a hand pump. Yesterday I posed for some fashion pictures and with retouching they came out very well.

No new men in my life—none that mean anything—and the only thing I look forward to romantically is visiting Lovey in Atlanta when he's graduated from Benning (March 9, 1943).

[Editor's Note: "Lovey" is the nickname of Pegge's first boyfriend. He was a regular at the Lyons family's Saturday night dinners for the servicemen.]

After Pegge made her mark with her story on Clare Boothe Luce, she reported widely. She covered a sensational murder case in Annapolis, and she soon had her own daily column. She was sent on assignments to New York and Philadelphia.]



More photos from Pegge's fashion entries.



She Sets The Pace

THEN AND NOW—A few years ago, Mrs. Clare Boothe Luce came to Washington for a visit. She was wearing an "off-the-side" or doll hat, one of the first to be seen in town. Now Mrs. Luce returns to us again, but to stay a while. As the inset shows, she's here on a more informal head-gear basis. For her congressional appearances, so far, she's appeared in bows or kerchiefs — or both. Is she setting styles again? (See Pegge Parker's story.)



We Offer Mrs. Luce, Setter of Fashion

By PEGGE PARKER

Many things have come to pass in Congress but nothing to equal the beautiful, commotionous Clare Boothe Luce! There's a Connecticut Yankee for you. Convictions with courage. If ever anyone thought her to be the yes-nothing front of political string pullers, let him look upon her

shouldn't head amid a multitude of bald and bushy—and a rival gray-coiffed one. Soul and spirit of individual fortitude, souzaine, a sharp, a winkle - heretofore independent, vigorously expressed in the most woman - her dress - Kerchiefs and bows - purple for the special of Congress - colored, red and black vest - ribbons



Pegge Parker

For the press—think not this is margin for error. Madam knows what she's about. The black hood laboring and white High collar of Winifred Stanley may be all very Horie and Emily Post but was are not marked by decorum. And Luce is an ex-California has made influential friends. Her before had she - Miss Margaret playright - Mrs. Augustus DeLoe, Ford or John Fredericks maybe upon her hat brushed now. But after scouming in Hollywood to do the serial for "China" her main picture to be, the nasal outlandishness of movie set abandon caught our Clare and changed her.

Golden Wheat Crop

Not only in kerchief and bow, Her golden wheat crop of hair is now worn, middle parted, fore and aft, piled high in a full harvest of curls she hangs on top. Never has she wobbled her tresses thus. You see, even to herself, she's a trend, a one-woman example set.

Another West Coast conviction carried to new House Office Building, Suite 1411. Up to now the walls of the latter has worn expensive perfumes of exotic import like many another high scent lover. One whiff of California, please, however, has changed all this. Not only is her pretty person sprayed with the breath of nature's being, but Suite 1411 also. A lighted bottle with atomizer attached is kept handy on her desk on the expense of pine-carpet forests and the great outdoors may as well refresh the musk of Congressional in a white, and red-stuffed leather furnishings. We voluptuous revived situations, run long waiting constituents, and great word-of-mouth whippers that may lead to fragrant beds and even fragrant fashions.

Only the Jews

Only the "Jewish" "Hebrew" Jews have not gone California. We wager she struck gold in them "whopping earrings" worn for The Wednesday press conference long e're this. The last pearl ring she wore came from its oyster years back.

Not new but mention worth - is her favorite St. Christopher medal, worn every day during her campaign and for the Thursday session of Congress. Dressed in black, sitting quietly in one of the back rows, her firm hand and heart made a vivid splash of color. And smacking all convictions she dared to wear jeweled earrings in her little neck.

What is forthcoming for representative fashion we will tell later. Meanwhile, will the King The Bess Goodbye? "Swing secrets under Lady" chief.

Handwritten note:
 Five Star
 1943
 Gene

Pegge's article featuring Clare Boothe Luce.