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OTIS SULLIVANT IS A PROFESSIONAL

Oklahoma's peerless political scribe Otis Sullivant poses with his faithful 40-year-old typewriter in a rare photograph (Sullivant would rather be read than seen). The venerable L.C. Smith machine has turned out more page-one copy than any of its younger counterparts in the posh Daily Oklahoman newsroom. And the reputation of its master as a writer is legend. Says one colleague: "Otis is greatly respected for his accuracy and reliability. His stories have tremendous weight. People believe in them. You'd think they were chiseled on stone tablets—and for all I know, they are." *(Continued)*

His voice on the telephone was clear and strong, the voice of a man younger than his 64 years, as I asked him if he would agree to an interview for an article in the alumni magazine. "Sure, come on up and we'll talk, though I'm not sure why you'd want to. All you're going to find is a cynical old man who no longer has any heroes." We arranged a meeting for a morning later in the week, and an hour or so before the appointed time, I entered the Oklahoma Publishing Co.'s new building on NE Fourth Street in Oklahoma City to talk with a couple of the men who have worked with Otis Sullivant, and known him as friends, for many of the 40 years that he has been writing for *The Daily Oklahoman*. We talked about him over coffee; about his reputation as the state's best political writer; about some of his big stories; about his unassailable accuracy and his unimpeachable integrity; about his ability to gauge the mood of the voters at election time and his methods at arriving at his consistently unerring observations and predictions; about his family; about his farm east of Norman adjoining the Little River project; about the time while there when he was thrown by one of his horses, a mare named Ginger, in 1953 as he indulged himself in one of his few diversions—riding—and the state senate, in a moment of rare humor, countered the more respectful resolution passed by the house, which extended its sympathy for his broken leg and called for a speedy recovery, by offering its own resolution commending the horse. (Sen. Jim Rinehart cast the only vote against the resolution, explaining that since the horse had broken Sullivant's leg instead of his writing arm he, in good faith, could not vote to commend Ginger.)

One of the men told the story, which is perhaps apocryphal but which nonetheless captures the character of the man and thus is appropriately instructive, about the time a governor, one of Oklahoma's most powerful figures, was unhappy with some of Sullivant's articles, which he thought cast a less than flattering light on his administration. The governor summoned Sullivant to his office, and in no uncertain gubernatorial terms indicated his displeasure. He told Sullivant to stop. Sullivant's reply was laconic and direct: "Governor, I don't give a damn whether you like the articles or not," and with that he left.

When I asked one of the men about Sullivant's appraisal of himself as cynical and without heroes, he replied, "I think the only heroes Otis has are the people." The remark at first seemed corny, but I could see the man meant it. Later it seemed precisely correct.

I began an excursion into miscellanea: Is he a hunt-and-peck-man? (Answer: He uses both hunt-and-peck and touch methods.) Fast writer? (The inevitable answer: Yes, and always on deadline.) Shorthand? (Answer: No. He began with Gregg but soon abandoned it because it was playing havoc with his spelling.) I struck a responsive key when I asked about the kind of typewriter he used. We quickly adjourned from the first-floor cafeteria to the fourth floor and the newsroom to observe *the* machine.

The newsroom is something else. Hildy Johnson and his rakish cohorts of *The Front Page* would surely be struck incredulously, speechless by its splendor. It does not resemble the cluttered, dingy, maelstroms of activity Hollywood gave us and, oddly enough, which actually exist. The Oklahoman's new newsroom is carpeted, fully and tastefully in blue; it is laden with Formica; it

is windowless with automatic temperature control; it is very, very modern, extremely efficient, and just like any other large cavern-like office one might find in, say, an insurance company or some such business. But it's quite nice, and even the old reactionaries who hated to lose the former newsroom, the cramped, romantic relic right out of *Citizen Kane*, have made a happy adjustment.

We approached Sullivant's desk, indistinguishable from its uniformly exact companions except—wait. On his writing table, an anachronism. A black (yes, black and there are no *black* typewriters anymore) L. C. Smith sat, proudly and contemptuously too, I thought, flaunting its solid 40-year-old craftsmanship at the beige-and-white whippersnappers which sat bulkily and self-consciously in its venerable presence. It was a reassuring link with the past, and its older sister, I am told, likewise reassures and retains links at the Capitol, subject to the words and wishes of another highly respected political observer, Ray Parr (*Sooner Magazine*, Nov. 1964).

Just as we were carefully and respectfully replacing the cover on the Smith, Sullivant entered the newsroom, came forward, and introduced himself. Like probably most of his readers, I had never met him. Further, like many, I had never seen him, either in person or in a photograph.

I was quite familiar with his writing, of course. Every person who really *reads* the Oklahoman is. Though some may not venture past the asinine froth of Ann Landers and her ilk, many, and all of the shakers and movers of Oklahoma, know who Otis Sullivant is and read his columns. Tens of thousands, in fact, depend solely or at least heavily on him for insight into the machinations of their state government. Sullivant's style reflects the man. It is unpretentious, disciplined, direct, spare, knowledgeable. Each column is like an artisan's finely crafted piece of furniture: sturdily constructed, substantial, lasting, polished.

Surprisingly, for I do not customarily approach clairvoyance, he was very much as I had imagined him: tall (about six feet), slender, and erect. He is not given to smiling, and his appearance is therefore solemn, almost dour. His eyes are penetrating, not cold, and peer out from a pair of horn-rimmed glasses. His hair was once light it appears; it is now grey, closer to white really, sparse, and combed back. The man exudes incorruptibility.

The interview was held in a small conference cubbyhole off the newsroom, and the subject's apparent severity dissolved into unequivocal and relaxed cooperation. We spent a good part of the morning and the lunch hour talking about Oklahoma politics and reporting, and it was, in those deathless words, most "enlightening and entertaining." He is an arresting conversationalist, and his subject matter was enthralling. Propping his feet up, Sullivant led me through much of the state's political story, an exciting though often less than grand epic at which he has had better than a front-row seat: Otis Sullivant has been backstage for 40 of Oklahoma's 60 years of statehood. He has known every one of the state's governors, from Haskell to Bartlett, and the latter's is the thirteenth (of 19) administration under which he has reported. He is presently covering his twenty-first (of 31) legislative session. Through the years he has come to know most of the legislators and members of the executive branch, and he has in the course of his 40 years become an authority on government. A recent

newspaper article about him says part of it: "He has helped many young men develop; he has given them credit for accomplishments but hasn't hesitated to report the bad as well as the good. Sullivant takes pride in knowing as much about legislation, the purpose and background, as legislative leaders themselves. Legislators know they can trust him, and he usually has advance and inside information on proposals. He has learned all the inner workings and the activities of lobbyists and pressure groups. . . . He is familiar with the problems of welfare, human rights, road building, aid to schools, mental health, and all the other issues."

Yes, and he has chronicled and interpreted the unfortunately occasional scandals and impeachments which have pocked the history of the state; he has been privy to the peccadillos, the indiscretions, the failings of some; in short, he has witnessed and reported the governing of a state by its citizens. This would account for a tendency toward cynicism, would it not? Again I resurrected his telephone remark. "Let me amend that some. Say that I'm a realist. I have no illusions about the capacity of men for smallness and wickedness. I don't adore or idolize men. I've seen the rise and fall of too many, but I'm also an idealist. If I didn't think things were getting better, I wouldn't have continued."

Sullivant was born four years before statehood on the family farm near Norman which his father had homesteaded in the run of 1889. When he was two, his parents moved to town, and young Sullivant attended Norman elementary schools and graduated from Castle Heights Military Academy in Lebanon, Tenn. in 1920. He then entered the University to study journalism. After his junior year he quit school to accept a job with the Fort Worth Press. "We weren't as obsessed with getting a degree in those days," says Sullivant, "and besides, work was hard to find." He stayed in Fort Worth three years as city hall, police, and general reporter. In 1927 he returned home to look after his father, who had suffered a stroke, and to try to save the farm. On the fifteenth of September of that year he began his unbroken association with the Oklahoman as a general reporter. "I wasn't happy with my assignment, then fate took a hand. The second spot at the Capitol opened up and I grabbed it—anything to get out of what I was doing. Joe O'Brien was the main political reporter for the paper then. I remember my first trip to the Capitol. While we were going out on the street car, Joe saw a judge from another county, guessed what he was doing in Oklahoma City, interviewed him, and had a story before we had even arrived. At the Capitol he noticed a state senator standing at the entrance. The man was involved in a key bill. Joe went straight to him, and in minutes had another important story. It was a valuable introduction for me. It pointed to the value of being well informed and developing contacts. You can't hurry the latter. You must build a reputation for trustworthiness, for respecting a confidence, for judgment and fairness. And it takes time to be accepted. Outside the surface fun and excitement newspaper work is hard work, and writing is only a small part. The preparation, the collection of facts, cultivating sources, knowing where to go, whom to see, and what to make of it all are the critical parts of reporting. A newspaper is no better than its good reporters. They are far more important than an editor." The room appar-

ently was not bugged by any editors. No protest was forthcoming.

Shortly after arriving at the Capitol, an infamous event helped Sullivant decide to stay with politics. It was the "ewe lamb rebellion" of 1927 in which disgruntled legislators attempted to impeach the newly elected governor, Henry Johnston. The house called itself into special session, and Gov. Johnston activated the National Guard to prevent its meeting at the Capitol. A nocturnal rump session was held in the Huckins Hotel, and Sullivant was one of the two reporters allowed to witness proceedings. "I was a kid of 24, and it was fascinating and exciting. I was hooked," says Sullivant. "I hadn't intended to remain in Oklahoma City. My dream was to go to New York and write for the World (which later folded), the Mecca of newspapers at the time. Well, the senate decided not to accept the impeachment although two years later Johnston was impeached and turned out of office.

"In 1928, however, Joe quit, and I took his place. I came to stay a year, and I'm still here. I resolved to get out at age 30. I felt reporting was a young man's game, and I never wanted to be an editor or executive. The Depression came along, though, and I was making \$50 a week. Some lawyers and bankers weren't making that much then. Too, Bill Murray was governor, and it was fun. I stayed, and I wouldn't trade the years I've had. I know a lot of rich men, and I don't envy any of them. Lately though I haven't had any fast heartbeats on any stories, and I wouldn't give a nickel to do it again," he said, almost smiling.

Sullivant is his own man and has been for his four decades. His technique is to remain aloof from the leaders. "I've never tried to be a buddy to any governor. I prefer to shun any familiarity, which prevents a reporter from being objective, I believe. I pay my own way, and I protect my independence. I'm grateful to the Oklahoman, for they've left my copy alone. My observations have been contrary to the editorial conclusions on occasion, but my articles have not been interfered with. In 1944 Mr. Gaylord was for Dewey and thought he'd be elected. A front-page editorial to that effect and my story, to the opposite conclusion, appeared side by side."

In the fall Sullivant plans to retire, and he's looking forward to it. Though he is not a wealthy man—a newspaperman does not retire as a wealthy man—he has exhibited the same foresight in his private affairs that he demonstrates in his professional career and his retirement will be comfortable. He plans to spend time on his farm; he would probably live there were it not for the urban preferences of his wife Betty. He may write a book about the political scene he has witnessed and he may not. He will certainly be visited by his daughters, Sydney (Mrs. John Draper) and Alice Ann (Mrs. Charles K. Smith Jr.) and their families, which include two grandchildren. And he can reflect on an important, valuable, and renowned career as one of society's most indispensable members—the political reporter. Says Sullivant: "I've watched 40 years of Oklahoma politics, and it's been interesting and exciting. I'm glad I decided to remain. I have attempted to present the authentic picture for the people. A political writer has to be responsible to the people, and to them only." So Otis Sullivant *does* have heroes after all.—PG