



Milt Phillips, outstanding state newspaperman, points to his product in the *Producer* city room.

## An Educated Citizen

Here is the story of a man who is fighting to better his community and state, and, happily, he is a confirmed optimist.

IF EVER YOU NEED, or want, to have a tete-a-tete with Milt Phillips, and you telephone him and hear him say, "Sure, come on over to the office at such-and-such an hour," then brace yourself.

For, chances are, whether Phillips has known you for some time or never seen your face in his entire life, he'll glance up from his desk far back in the city room of the *Seminole Producer* as you enter the building, and he'll call out: "Hello there, Joe, come on back," just as though he's been your good friend for many years.

Frank, straightforward Milt Phillips knows no strangers. He'll either remember you immediately, or guess who you are, or come right out and ask you. He's informal; he can see no reason for airs or stiffness when they might get in the way of the business at hand.

And he is seldom too busy to see someone who needs his help.

Recently he sat for more than an hour and allowed himself to be interviewed for this story. At that particular hour, his newspaper office was a study in business. Everyone there was working hard and fast, a

deadline staring nervously over their shoulders. Phillips' desk was literally covered with items which needed taking care of, and the phone kept ringing. Yet, he paused and talked of himself and explained the operation of the *Producer*.

He did not do this for publicity's sake. A photographer sat near him, recording the changing expressions moving across Phillips' face. Just then Phillips' junior partner, Alex Adwan, came over.

"This man," said Phillips, indicating the photographer, "has a bad subject. In pictures I look like the Old Man of the Mountain."

"Well," replied Adwan, "if he's talked you into sitting for a picture, then he's done better than your own staff has ever been able to do."

Milt Phillips is slim and of medium height. On this occasion he wore a red and gray sport shirt and gray slacks. His eyes, bespectacled, are penetrating, and his brown hair has only slight traces of gray. His features are strong, chiseled almost, and his voice is a deep, quiet, forceful sound. He smokes a lot (menthol ciga-

rettes), and doodles with pencil and pad as he talks.

His sense of humor runs through the shop. He'll walk into the back shop and joke with one of the circulation boys, then come up front, stop beside one of the typists and ask, "Mary Kay, have you written my column yet?"

On the walls are tacked bits of cardboard on which have been printed, "I'd like to help you out. Which way did you come in?" And, "Blessed are they who go around in circles, for they shall be known as Big Wheels." And, "If you work hard 8 hours a day, don't worry. By and by you will be the boss and work 14 hours a day and have ALL the worries."

Phillips has been working hard all his life.

"I was a country boy, born in Cleveland County (1898) out in the 10-mile flats, a real garden spot. Dad moved us to Norman in 1904. Then we 'starved out' and moved to Oklahoma City, and that's where I started my newspaper career, selling the *Daily Oklahoman* and the old *Oklahoma News*."

Phillips used to play grade school baseball against another boy named Ted Beard. Phillips called his own school area "Lick-skillet," and Beard and his companions—from Northeast Jackson County—termed theirs "Clabber Flats." In later years, both Phillips and Beard would get together and laugh about the wild names they had for their schools. Beard, now deceased, had by that time become Executive Secretary of the University of Oklahoma Alumni Association.

The family moved back to Norman in 1913, and Milt went to work for the old *Democrat-Topic*, a weekly published by his uncle, Willard S. Phillips. Actually Milt and his brother Tom both first saw the inside of a city room there.

"Also, I was agent in Norman for the *Oklahoma News* for several of those years," said Milt. "Pretty soon I had three routes, so I felt I was really going to town! Got my circulation experience there. All through high school I worked at that job."

While Phillips was learning journalism from the ground up, he was also learning what a difference education can make. Once, in need of a job, he tried to go to work for a company as a ditch digger. An eighth-grade county exam had to be passed before he would be acceptable. Phillips didn't make it.

He left high school to enlist in the Navy in World War I. "I was kicked out, though, at New Orleans because of a physical disability," he said. Later he enlisted in the Army and did fine; he'd studied a



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year at O. U. and received signal corps training which helped him qualify for the service.

Phillips' period at O. U., 1921-22, saw him taking pre-engineering courses, an unclassified student. "After all, I had no high school degree.

"In fact," he said, "I have yet to ever graduate from any school. I'm an uneducated citizen. Isn't that a heck of a note? At least twice in my life it's proven a bitter disappointment."

He was remembering a time when the lack of a degree kept him from qualifying for a federal agency position which carried with it almost twice the salary he was making then. And he was remembering a time when, during the second World War, he was called into the service on a reserve commission, then saw the government cancel the commission when it was learned he had no degree.

Phillips quit college to go to work for an electric company as superintendent and assistant manager. Soon after, he married Ruby Helms. A pretty, amiable woman, she was a native of Norman and she and Milt attended high school together. "I was president of the freshman class," said Milt, "and then she was president of the sophomores."

Ruby graduated from Norman High, attended Norman Business College, and was working in Oklahoma City when she and Milt decided to tie the knot. Today their family includes a son and daughter.

Phillips has surrounded himself with men who have had plenty of schooling. His three junior partners include two O. U. alumni and another from the University

of Missouri. "Their being here permits me to devote more time to civic activities," said Phillips, "and, I hope, in the not-too-distant future, to do a little fishing and sight-seeing."

One of the young partners is Phillips' son, who left O. U. in his junior year to go into military service. For most of his 3½ years with Uncle Sam, he worked in the mechanical department of the *Stars and Stripes* military newspaper. Last year he returned to study at O. U., then came home to Seminole to take over duties as associate publisher and director of advertising.

These three young men do give Phillips more time for Rotary, Masons, the Oklahoma Press Association (of which he has been president), American Legion, First Christian Church, Chamber of Commerce, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and others. They may also seem to fill a hollow space which Phillips feels when he thinks, "I'm an uneducated citizen."

Phillips is wrong.

Working for the community and the state, he has attained a relatively widespread prominence and respect which many would wish to have for their own. People discuss him constantly, but they are not discussing an "uneducated" man. They talk of a man who uses his head, who has learned—and learned well—through close observation and the maintenance of a curiosity about life and an interest in his fellow man.

A few weeks ago two men were talking about him. One—who had seen Phillips only once, by the way—criticized him. The other replied: "Well, think what you like,

but I've sat in on business conferences with Milt and watched him operate. I'd never want to be in the wrong and have him against me. He can smell a phony a mile away, and he goes after him."

Later, another—an insurance man—criticized Seminole, and he might just as well have struck out at Phillips himself.

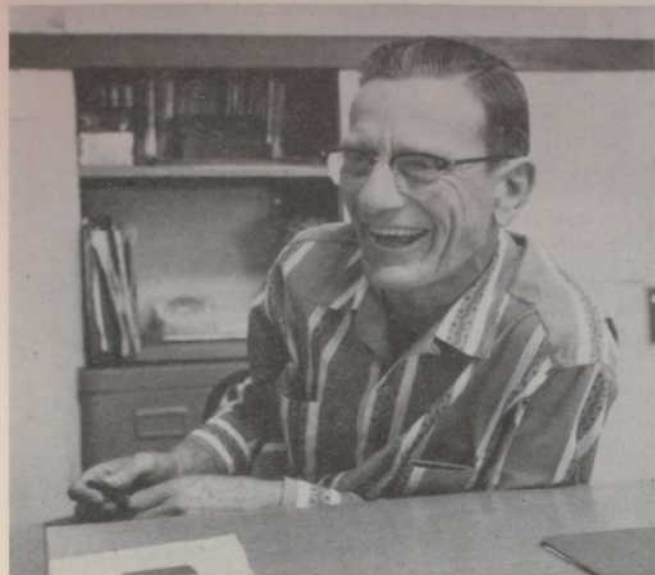
"It's a rough town," said the insurance man. "As far as I'm concerned, it's a bad town, especially bad to do business in."

Phillips disagrees: "I'm an optimist on my town, otherwise I wouldn't have continued to invest here. It has all the advantages. It will be a good town as long as its citizens want it to be."

Years ago Seminole was a roaring boomtown. Scores of wildcatters, dozens of oil companies and hundreds of persons interested only in making a fast buck moved in. Streets were mud bogs, activity was frantic. Towns such as this often are short-lived and finally disintegrate into something akin to ghost towns when the majority of the population moves on, following the fast buck.

Not Seminole, though: "It's one boomtown that built solidly enough. It developed in an era when transportation was becoming important, and its location in the state is good."

Phillips and other citizens are making certain that Seminole continues to better itself. Some years ago, when some of them realized that the day of oil field camps had ended, they began negotiations with Gulf Oil Company officials for its camp east of the city. Phillips and 156 others put up \$100 apiece as membership in a non-profit organization which they named the Semi-



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nole Industrial Foundation, Incorporated. Officers and trustees were elected, and Milt became president.

The Foundation bought the 80-acre camp, including the buildings, machine shops, equipment and warehouses on it. Then they leased part of it to three independent firms, and, as Phillips was interviewed for this story, a fourth was to complete a lease within a week. One of the companies expects to manufacture a type of Army missiles, another, truck clutches.

"The Foundation was \$20,000 in debt at one time," said Phillips. "Now it's down to less than \$5,000."

The important thing: "We're going to be a small industrial city with diversified industry."

But Seminole is not all that runs through Milt Phillips' veins. All Oklahoma is there, too. "Oklahoma's not losing too much population, not going to the dogs," he says, impatient. "We still have too many pessimists and not enough boosters."

For a long time many persons never thought of Milt without thinking of his brother Tom as well. In fact, some still do, though Tom passed away over a year ago. The two were considered an outstanding publishing team, and both served the state in various official capacities.

Tom was publishing a Holdenville newspaper when he and Milt decided to buy the *Wewoka Times* and the *Wewoka Democrat*. Afterwards, in 1946, they bought both the *Seminole County News* and the *Seminole Producer*. In 1949 the two latter papers were merged, and the final product is published daily.

When Tom became seriously ill, the

two brothers sold the Wewoka interests, and Milt bought Tom's interest in the *Producer*.

Today the *Producer* is a going enterprise and a strong voice in the community. But wanting more time for civic affairs and leisure, Phillips tries not to be chained to the city room. "Now I just more or less pinch-hit for the employees, look after a few business affairs, try not to have any specific or full-time duties for more than a few days at a time," he explained.

Mrs. Phillips, who for four years was business manager of the Wewoka papers, considers herself a pinch-hitter, too. When someone in the city room needs a vacation or gets sick, she comes down and goes to work on the news, the advertising or circulation.

"But," said Milt with a wink, "I've never been able to get her to learn any of the back shop work."

He raised up out of his chair at that moment and wandered into the back shop. Several women worked at typewriters which punch a paper tape; when the tapes are run through linotypes, they set the machines in action, producing slugs of type.

A makeup man stood over a "block," putting together bits of an entire page of news. He took a point rule, measured the type face of a headline, paused, took a swig out of a bottle of cola, and returned to his measuring.

Another man poured out hot lead, stereotyping. The city editor ran back and forth. The press churned, feeding out a long, long roll of paper across which was inked, "Arkansas Troops Defy U. S. Court."

Phillips moved through the noise and ac-

tion as another man would walk through his field of wheat, quietly inspecting and satisfied by what he saw. He was on familiar ground.

He led the way into the circulation room, which he himself is remodeling on weekends. "Out in the country," he said, "you learn to build what you need."

Then he came back to his desk and set to work. Behind it hung a bronze plaque saying, "Milt Phillips, President, 1953 Oklahoma Press Association." The phone began to ring again.

Milt Phillips was elected President of the Executive Board of the University of Oklahoma Alumni Association on June 8, and board members feel they secured exactly the right man for the job. Phillips never let the University out of his sights in the 35 years since he was a student there.

He has served two 3-year terms on the Association Board. He is a constant visitor to the campus, speaking at the Oklahoma Interscholastic Press Association meets, talking to classes of future journalists, answering their questions as fully and as honestly as he can.

He is keenly interested in young people; the other day he smiled, remembering a session two years ago when O. U. editorial interpretation students quizzed him unmercifully. "There was much interest," said Phillips. "I enjoyed it. Those students really got down to earth."

What Phillips meant was that the students were "with him," speaking his language, talking sense. For he considers Down to Earth a good place to be. There, one can see life as it is, and do something about it.