

Huey Pierce Long As Journalist and Propagandist

By Burton L. Hotaling

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HUEY PIERCE LONG began his eccentric journalistic career at the age of 13, when he began setting type for the *Baptist Monthly Guardian*, or wrote an occasional "piece" for the *Southern Sentinel* in his home town of Winnfield, La. During the next few summers and at odd times throughout the winters he worked on one or the other of these local organs.

Some time before 1916 he approached Marshall Ballard, city editor—now editor—of the *New Orleans Item*, and asked for a job as reporter. He was sent across the river as correspondent from the town of Gretna. As Mr. Ballard recalls the story¹ Long walked into the city room about two weeks later and said: "I'm quitting this job. I can make more money shooting craps."

From this time forward Long's journalistic bent manifested itself in various forms which eventually received national attention. Following are recorded the journalistic techniques he employed and the publishing enterprises in which he engaged.²

¹ Contrary to the version recounted in *Time*, Dec. 18, 1939, p. 46.

² The material in this account was gathered from persons closely connected with Huey P. Long and his work, and who, for the most part, had never before been inter-

Long believed that wide dissemination of political propaganda was tantamount to success in politics. During his brief student life at the University of Oklahoma in 1912, a Wilson-for-President Club was organized by students. Characteristically Long took up the cause of Champ Clark, Wilson's rival for the Democratic nomination, and made an attack on Wilson through the medium of a circular—a form of contact with, and information for, the voter that Long was to employ for the rest of his life.

In the summer of 1918 he campaigned for the post of railroad commissioner³ for North Louisiana, plastering the district with circulars. "My youngsters knew how to fold and mail campaign literature before they could walk, almost," he has declared.

When John M. Parker became the successful candidate for governor in

viewed on the subject. About half of the figures quoted in this article are taken from original records, and the other half sifted down from the best recollections of the people interviewed. Documentation for authority of certain statements is perforce omitted because of political conditions in Louisiana. There has been no attempt here at evaluation or critical analysis.

³ The Railroad Commission was the predecessor in law to the Louisiana Public Service Commission which was established by the Constitution of 1921.

1919, Long supported him, thinking that Parker would see certain legislation enacted. When this legislation was not put forth Long felt he had been unjustly treated. In a series of circulars, which he multigraphed in the office of the Louisiana Public Service Commission and placed on every legislator's desk, his anger got the better of him and the new governor promptly brought action for criminal libel.

In 1924, Long was reelected public service commissioner, and his reputation as a rambunctious politician and a clever lawyer spread throughout the state. And whenever the occasion warranted it—or Long thought it did—he would issue a circular against something or somebody.

Between September, 1927, and the end of the year, in his second campaign for governor, Long distributed more than a dozen printed broadside circulars with a total circulation of more than 1,000,000 copies. After he was elected governor, he rested his facile pen for a few months. But in less than a year he was impeached by the House of Representatives, and in an effort to get to the people with his personal message and accounting of the situation, he had printed and distributed several editions of circulars during April and May of 1929 totaling 900,000 copies.

After the impeachment proceedings had become a political fiasco, Long decided the only way he could get things done was to have a free hand in politics. As he slowly but surely took over control of all state boards and all state employes, he was sending out two to three circulars a week to his electorate, pointing out the desirability of the proposed

\$68,000,000 road bond amendment with which to build much needed roads and bridges and how much more effective he would be in the United States Senate than the incumbent, Senator Joseph E. ("Feather Duster"*) Ransdell. Through the late summer and into late fall, the total circulation of these circulars exceeded 2,000,000. Long was elected senator from Louisiana while his gubernatorial time had run but half of its four years, and his road bond amendment was approved by the people.

He continued to send circulars until the day he died, plugging his own candidates and threshing the others in contests large and small. It is well to note that with very few exceptions Long wrote the circulars which backed his candidates, even though they were signed with the candidates' names.

The total circulation of all Long's circulars for which there is a record was about 26,000,000. Seldom did a circular run less than 20,000. A great many ran to more than 100,000, and on at least ten occasions they ran to 500,000 or more copies each. The largest circulation recorded was that for a circular issued shortly after the Sands Point, Long Island, incident early in September, 1933—1,225,000 copies were printed and distributed. Long's last circular was published September 6, 1935, two days before he was shot just outside the governor's office in the state capitol at Baton Rouge. Its circulation was 425,000.

* One of Long's favorite political techniques which drew chuckles from all sides was to dub his opponent by some nickname which exaggerated a certain characteristic. In this case Senator Ransdell had a pronounced goatee.

LONG believed more strongly in the efficacy of his circulars, as far as can be learned, than in that of his newspapers. His system of getting them done was a last minute rush, typical of his journalistic, as well as his political, conduct. Briefly, the system worked in this manner. He would get an idea for a circular and pencil it, type it or dictate it. At any time of night or day he would call Joseph P. David, president and owner of the Franklin Printing Company, New Orleans, and say: "Dave, I got a circular for you. Come on over." Mr. David would turn to a special telephone list and call up the necessary machine operators and pressmen. For those who did not have telephones, he had a set of telegrams made up in advance which summoned them. Mr. David would then hurry to the twelfth floor of the Roosevelt Hotel in New Orleans, where Long had a suite of rooms, get the circular and take it over to his print shop.

Often Long would wander over, sometimes to read proof and sometimes just to sit around and talk. His corrections were always typographical and grammatical. Never did he extract or add anything beyond a few words in the text of the circular.

Mr. David, while still sleepily calling his men together, would always call one other person, the superintendent of maintenance of the State Highway Department in Baton Rouge, and say, "Huey's getting out another circular." If Long had the circular already written, Mr. David could usually estimate within eight to twelve hours the time necessary to get it ready. There were times, however, when Long's announcement

would simply be, "I'm getting out a circular. Come on down while I finish it." In that case, Mr. David, after a few experiences of waiting long hours, would never notify Baton Rouge until Long had finished writing.

The system of distribution from the time he was governor until he died was simple for a man with the political strength that Long possessed. Various unmarked trucks and automobiles would line up in front of the Franklin Printing Company on Poydras Street,⁵ and would get the bundles of circulars, already counted and marked, and speed over the state. The superintendent of maintenance had meanwhile called each parish (county) leader, who in turn had called each of his ward leaders, who in turn had called each of the precinct captains. The bundles were usually made up for parishes, broken down by parish leaders into ward bundles and passed out to precinct captains who acted as carriers.

When the cost of these circulars had run up to several thousand dollars, Mr. David would notify Long or someone else close to him, and the bill would be paid, in part or in whole, but always in cash.

In the middle of the impeachment proceedings, May 12, 1929, Long found time to write for a young friend a two page manuscript on "How to Study for the Bar; or Advice to Young Lawyers."⁶ It was printed for the first time in *The Pro-*

⁵ The building in which this firm is housed is overlooked by the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*: city room, 150 yards away in a taller building, from which many a telescopic shot was taken for use in the paper.

⁶ Long's brilliance as a lawyer was already well established.

gress, August 26, 1938,⁷ and the original has been framed beneath glass in the office of Robert S. Maestri, former state commissioner of conservation and present mayor of New Orleans.

In the fall of 1929, Long began casting about for a suitable subject for a thesis which he hoped would bring him an honorary university degree. A capable trial lawyer friend had worked over a compilation of Louisiana's numerous constitutions for purposes of ready reference and suggested this idea to Long, offering to him the work already done. Long, highly pleased, assigned young lawyers to assist his friend, and in 1930 had published for the state of Louisiana an edition of 1,000 copies of "Compilation of the Constitutions of the State of Louisiana (with amendments), 1812-1930." The book carried byline and copyright of Huey P. Long and was promptly sent to lawyers and libraries all over Louisiana. It is considered a valuable aid and is widely used as a reference work by the legal profession.

HUEY LONG'S first newspaper venture, *The Louisiana Progress*, subtitled "the people's defense," began March 27, 1930, as an eight-page weekly, published on Thursdays. There have been various reasons assigned as to Long's real purpose in starting this paper, but the best reasons seem to be these: (1) he had decided to campaign for the United States Senate and, with all other papers in the state against him,

wanted newspaper support, even if it had to be his own; (2) he wanted a big way to propagate his ideas and opinions, and to discredit the "lying newspapers";⁸ (3) he just naturally wanted to run a newspaper.

Long went to Col. James E. Edmonds, formerly managing editor of the *Item* and later the *Times-Picayune*, then conducting a public relations office, and had him undertake the task of negotiating the production contracts, organizing the staff and setting up the mechanical style and method of producing the paper. John Klorer, formerly night city editor of the *Times-Picayune*, was hired as editor. With him were George French and Morley Cassidy, both formerly of the *Item*, and Trist Wood, freelance cartoonist. They constituted, with one or two other writers, the editorial staff not only for this paper, but for the second paper, *The American Progress*. For the first five weeks the front page date line read, "Published every Thursday from New Orleans." On the sixth week the last phrase, "from New Orleans," was dropped and the masthead revealed that it was being published in Mississippi at the plant of the *Meridian Star*.⁹

The paper's first two advertisements appeared in issue No. 5 and

⁸ It is interesting to note that while Long fought the "lying newspapers" he cleverly sought to get stories of his activities in the daily press.

⁹ It has been said that Long's reason for publishing his papers from an out-of-state plant was to prevent libel suits which might tie up the paper; that he had assurances from responsible authorities in Mississippi that he would not be molested. Since this arrangement in no sense would have prevented the bringing of libel suits in federal courts, this reasoning is not logical. Perhaps the real reason was that no newspaper plant in Louisiana having the facilities would agree to print the *Progress*.

⁷ This was the newspaper published by former Governor Richard W. Leche and is not to be confused with Long's two papers, *The Louisiana Progress* and *The American Progress*.

amounted to about one column of space. Slowly the advertising picked up until by mid-summer the advertising took up about 40 per cent of the paper. The last and thirty-third weekly issue appeared November 6, 1930, by which time Long had been elected senator and his huge road bond amendment had been approved by the people.

Volume 2 began as a five-column tabloid monthly of twenty-four pages, dated December 2, 1930, and ran through a June, 1931, issue. During that time there was no particular need to reach the people weekly, and political news was relatively scarce. On July 15, 1931, Volume 3 was begun, in eight-column style, but still on a monthly basis. After five irregular issues the paper suspended with the January 12, 1932, issue, the forty-fifth of its life. This paper generally plugged two things: Louisiana and Huey Long. It had complete coverage of state and local political news. It always had a page or more of sports news, a good part of a page devoted to women's interests, a lively editorial page and a page of general filler material of humor and oddities in the news—freely clipped from other newspapers.

Long, as a young politician, used to visit his country folk, inquire about the crops and often spend the night in their homes. It was then that he began compiling a list of friendly names. When *The Louisiana Progress* was started he used this list as the initial mail circulation list of the paper. It contained more than 10,000 names and the paper was sent free to these people, a small number of whom sent in the subscription price of \$2 a year. Within a few months the mail circu-

lation rose beyond 50,000, and stayed there. At times, however, when Long felt his paper ought to get into a particular section more thoroughly, or even cover the whole state, the number of copies printed was increased to between 100,000 and 200,000, and occasionally the number passed the half-million mark. Long often took a personal hand in editing the paper. He would write an occasional story, always write some headlines or criticize others and often direct which stories and angles to feature.

There has been much said, and much confusion in the saying, about how Huey Long financed his newspaper. Careful checking indicates the system of the first *Progress*. From the start, the weekly production costs and payroll ran about 2,000 dollars. Advertising did not come in immediately, so the word went around that state employes would have to contribute their share. At the same time other employes were notified to turn in small subscription lists of so many names, varying from two to twenty for each employe according to his salary. Some employes managed to obtain honest subscriptions, but many simply sent in the required amounts of money and lists of names picked at random.

Without the cost of those extra copies, *The Louisiana Progress* might have been a fairly profitable venture. However, there were few months when income was above expenditures.

The advertising department had salesmen who went out and sold ads without any encouragement from Long to use pressure. The stories of pressure upon mercantile and busi-

ness houses which came later did not involve Long's newspapers.

After Long went to Washington, his economic ideas for curing the depression and giving every individual a home and a livable wage became real news. In 1933 he began to organize "Share-the-Wealth" clubs throughout the country. To aid him, he hired John Klorer and the former *Louisiana Progress* staff to operate a new newspaper. This *American Progress* appeared as a weekly on August 24, 1933, went monthly with the April 5, 1934, issue and continued so until after Huey's death.

While the editorial offices of *American Progress* took up the whole second floor of the office building at 822 Perdido Street, New Orleans, where Earl J. Christenberry, secretary to Senator Long, had his own law office and mimeographing business, the publication office of the paper was at the plant of the *Meridian Star*, as in the case of the first *Progress*.

Following each of Long's coast-to-coast radio speeches, there would be an avalanche of letters from individuals and groups of individuals wanting to form "Share-the-Wealth" clubs. These clubs were organized on a non-dues basis and membership blanks, buttons and a subscription to *The American Progress* were sent out from Washington by a corps of office assistants.¹⁰

As the lists of members were compiled in Long's Washington office, they were sent to the New Orleans

¹⁰ At the height of this listener response, more than 80,000 letters were received daily for twenty-four consecutive days. During this time a battery of forty-eight clerks and stenographers were busy on a twenty-four-hour basis taking care of "Share-the-Wealth" business. When Long died there were more than 7,000,000 members.

office of *The American Progress* and added to the subscription list. In this way, the mail circulation of Long's second newspaper rose to more than 360,000 an issue; and, as in the earlier case, on special occasions from 1,000,000 to 1,500,000 extra copies would be run. They were distributed in Louisiana through Long's system for circulars, and elsewhere through existing "Share-the-Wealth" clubs. Letters to the editor from every state in the union, with a big majority from California and the Middle West, attested to the wide national readership this paper received.

That Long was in Washington did not mean he relinquished any personal direction over his paper. Once a week he would call John Klorer, the editor, who would read the headlines and first few paragraphs of the stories. If Long did not like a headline he would compose another on the spot. If the lead story did not have enough snap or punch, he would compose a few sentences to show what he wanted. By the time the long conversation was ended, Long had a mental picture of what was in his newspaper and knew that everything from makeup to editorials was as he desired.

This *American Progress* took no advertising other than its own promotional material. For each issue, costs ran about \$6,000. Of the 360,000 mail circulation, not more than 100,000 paid the 50 cents or \$1 subscription fee.¹¹ Long did not want advertising, his former associates say, because he was out to attack chain stores and other commercial

¹¹ The subscription price was 50 cents a year for the first ten issues, went to \$1 for the next thirty-one issues, then back to 50 cents.

institutions. He insisted on sending the paper free to every "Share-the-Wealth" member whether the appeal for the subscription dollar was heeded or not. At the start, state employes in Louisiana complained of being nicked for subscriptions, under the system employed with the first *Progress*. But the protest appears not to have been universal, and there is no evidence that the practice was continued after the paper was under way.

To get funds to pay for the paper, Long turned to political friends. The paper, needless to say, was always heavily in the red as a business undertaking.

IN OCTOBER of 1933, Huey Long's second published book, his autobiography, "Every Man a King," went on sale in New Orleans. Long, early in the year, became convinced that so much was being said about him and against him that he would have to publish his own version of himself. As he put it: "If the newspapers, magazines and some biographers of this country and other nations find the public so interested in me that they continue to write and publish garbled accounts of my career, then perhaps I should write of myself."

Secluding himself as much as possible for six weeks he wrote in long hand and on the typewriter and dictated his book of 343 large-type pages. After the manuscript was prepared there was the problem of finding a publisher. After \$6,000 was advanced, a firm in New York finally agreed to publish the book, but just as the last plates were being completed, the firm suddenly announced

that it would have to cancel the contract because of its lawyers' fears of libelous matter. After numerous refusals from publishers, the plates were taken to a small printing firm in New York which turned out the unbound pages, and a bindery across the river in New Jersey put the book together and wrapped it in the gold-colored jacket which Long designed.

Mr. Christenberry, Long's secretary, took out papers as the chief incorporator of the National Book Co., Inc., New Orleans, and sales and distribution were handled through his office. In order to get book stores to handle the volume, Mr. Christenberry had to go from city to city, personally selling the large book stores and dealers on the idea that there would be a demand for the book. In a few instances the stores invited him to set up his own displays in their windows—opportunities he readily accepted.

The book was printed in an edition of 100,000 copies less spoilage. More than 20,000 copies have been sold at the regular price of \$1, and there are still copies on booksellers' shelves for which there are infrequent but continuing calls.¹² The book would have been a good business proposition if Long had not cut the price to \$1 and insisted on sending from one to five copies to each "Share-the-Wealth" club free. Nearly 70,000 copies were given away on Long's request.

¹² Here is a typical request from a man in West Palm Beach, Florida, received recently:

"Secretary general of University of Louisiana,

Baton Rouge, Louisiana

"Dear sir:

"Would you have the kindness to give me the title of the book or books, written by your great leader, the late Senator Huey Long, and where I could buy it or them."

During the summer of 1934 the editors of *Liberty* magazine in New York suggested that Long write an article for their publication. He dictated a piece and sent it off. On November 10, the article, greatly altered and cut, appeared under the headline "I am in the Doghouse; the Kingfish speaks for himself in the first Magazine Article he has Ever Written." There was talk that Long was paid as much as \$5,000 for this work, but actually he refused to accept any pay for it.

As the "Share-the-Wealth" clubs grew in number, some sort of manual was needed to guide members in their conduct and to give them inspiration and substantial authority to show that sharing the wealth would cure the economic ills of the country. A pamphlet answering those needs, prepared and published under Long's name in Washington, was called "Share Our Wealth; Every Man a King . . . containing authority, laws, statistics and published comments of leaders of all time." The research involved in this 32-page pamphlet was done by Long's secretary, Mr. Christenberry. Thousands upon thousands of these were printed and distributed to "Share-the-Wealthers."

After Long had become interested in Louisiana State University he entered into a period of song writing. One day he called in Costro Carazo, a well-known band leader who later became director of the University band, and said that he had the lyrics of a song to be called "Every Man a King" and wanted the music. He had a piano brought into his suite; Carazo sat down at the keyboard; and by trial and error, selection and rejection, the business of improvization

went forward, and thus the music was composed for "Every Man a King."¹³

Mr. Carazo then mentioned that he had a couple of good tunes; perhaps Long had some words to go with them. In a few days the lyrics for "Darling of L.S.U."¹⁴ were written, and a few weeks later words to "Touchdown for L.S.U."¹⁵ were completed. One day shortly afterward Long called Carazo in and said he had both the words and the music. Would Mr. Carazo put them down on paper for him? As Long hummed out his tune, Mr. Carazo transcribed what became "Miss Vandy."¹⁶ "Touchdown for L.S.U." is still one of the football songs at the university, "Darling of L.S.U." is often played at dances, but "Every Man a King" died out with Long and the "Share-the-Wealth" clubs, and "Miss Vandy" never was known. The songs, like most of Long's extra-political ventures, were not intended to make money, and as far as is known no royalties have ever been paid on any of the songs.

One day early in 1935, Long and his secretary were sitting in their Washington office and Long was frankly looking for some publicity stunt. Suddenly he slapped his thigh and hopped up out of his chair.

"I've got it," he said. "We'll write a book on etiquette."

The book, of course, was to satirize social procedures, and political ones too, but after the first chapter was written, Long was interrupted. Before he could get back to it again, he

¹³ M. Whitmarsh and Sons, New York. Copyright 1935.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Franklin Printing Co., New Orleans. Copyright 1935 by Huey P. Long.

decided a better stunt would be to write a book predicting what he would do when he became president of the United States.

He told his ideas to Mr. Christenberry and William K. Hutchinson of International News Service, then in Washington, and the two of them drew up a complete outline and set to work ghosting the book. Even the first few pages of "My First Days in the White House" indicate quite clearly that the style is not Long's. This fourth published work readily found a publisher, the Telegraph Press at Harrisburg, Penn. The pencil and charcoal drawings that illustrate the book were done by Miss Cleanthe Carr, a well known New York illustrator. The drawing that caricatures Long most extremely was the one he liked best.

A few days before he was shot, Long picked up the proofs on his way to St. Louis, and in so much of a hurry was he to see the book published that a young man from the publishing house came along with him to take the proofs back to Harrisburg. Exactly what happened to the size of the book is not known, but

the resulting 140 pages in large type are only about one third of the original manuscript. Whether Long got bored with the job and lopped off great portions here and there, or whether he wanted to save the material for Senate speeches, or whether he decided a small book would sell better than a large one, is not known. A newspaper man who accompanied him on that trip has been out of the country as a foreign correspondent for the last year and could not be reached.

The book was published posthumously in the fall of 1935.

Long's numerous speeches and radio addresses, as well as bylined articles he wrote for both of his *Progress* newspapers, all go to swell to a great volume the outpourings of a unique political career. Almost none of his radio addresses or his lengthy speeches on the floor of the Senate were prepared even by so much as a sketchy outline on a slip of paper. The poorest radio speech he ever delivered was the only speech he ever wrote. Long was at his best when he was thinking and talking extemporaneously.