

Harold "Hal" Boyle

Journalist
1911-1974

By Daniel Coleman

Hal Boyle once wrote, when he revisited his childhood home, that he wished that God had made him a novelist. In the hands of a Thomas Wolfe or Leo Tolstoy, he reasoned, the stories he witnessed growing up would be appreciated by millions. Boyle never penned a novel, but distilled his understanding of Americans in war and peace into simple, usually humorous, and often moving prose. The newspaper columns he wrote daily made him one of the greatest writers Kansas City ever produced.

Harold Vincent Boyle (he later shortened his name to "Hal," which he felt looked better on a byline) was born February 21, 1911, in Kansas City. He was the third of five children born to grocer Peter E. Boyle and his wife Margaret (Gavaghan). Boyle so often repeated his mother's adage to "sit loosely in the saddle of life" that he must have heard it frequently in the family's 10-room house at 3116 Highland. While he dreamed of becoming an engineer or a doctor, his way with words earned him an early honor as the "Best Feature Writer of 1928" at Central High School, and led to a job after graduation as a night copy boy at the Kansas City office of the Associated Press. He went on to study journalism and English at the University of Missouri, earning his degree with distinction in 1932.

After college, Boyle continued with the AP, becoming an assistant city editor in New York by the early 1940s. But the true scope of Boyle's talent as newspaperman emerged when he landed with the first U.S. troops into North Africa and chronicled their clashes with German forces from Casablanca through Sicily, up the Italian peninsula, and later from the beaches of Normandy to Berlin. Boyle wrote a regular column from the battlefield, often accompanied by as many as 5-10 additional short dispatches in a single day. His courage under fire and sympathy for the troops led to some of World War II's most poignant reporting. He described the war as "the sweetheart with the lipless kiss," but wrote that there were "no words to tell of the cumulative terror of living in danger day after day, under courage-draining physical hardships of inadequate food, rain, cold, mud, and lack of cleanliness." In



May 1945, just a day before V-E Day, he was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for his work.

After the war, Boyle settled in New York and began turning out a daily column, interrupted only by further correspondent work in Korea and Vietnam. His writing in the 1950s, '60s and '70s described small victories and defeats of postwar America: the veteran's adjustment to civilian life, parenthood, aging. He was quick to point out his own insecurities ("actually I'm afraid most of the time") and cultivated a reputation as the "poor man's philosopher." When he lacked inspiration for a column, he mused on favorite subjects—his Kansas City childhood, obscure statistics or facts, Irishness—and dreamed up the humorous non sequiturs he and his friends called "murkyisms," e.g., "Be kind to your dear and true to your always." By the end of his career, Boyle had written over 7,500 columns and tallied more byline stories than any other AP writer in the wire service's history to that time.

Boyle was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) in the last year of his life and died of a heart attack at age 63 on April 1, 1974. Beloved for the underlying sympathy in his writing, Boyle once confessed that he disliked some people, in contrast to another great humorist, Will Rogers. "But," Boyle wrote, "I can say I never met a human being I didn't feel sorry for. I think this is a hard world and I think every human in it, at one time or another, has a hard time. The thing I admire most is people who face life with courage, loyalty and a sense of humor."

Sources

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