

DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES

For about two months I've been spending my mornings laboriously trying to learn how to layout a newspaper by watching InDesign tutorials produced by an adroit technician who has no idea how to teach. It's headache-inducing, depressing, endless. (Aside from that, it's not bad.)

My slightly elusive goal has been to take over the Metuchen monthly newspaper (whose publisher retired.) Sometimes this task feels overwhelming (generating 20 stories and 70 ads a month); sometimes it feels possible on a more modest scale. When the *Metuchen Mirror* stopped publishing, I found myself walking around town, radar still turning, noting interesting subjects that I might use for my monthly essay. And I'd have to remind myself: *There's no place for these now.*

In imagining a first page for our newspaper, Lynn and I wrote the following:

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Publisher Charles Foster Kane famously printed his two-sentence "Declaration of Principles" on page one of his first edition of the *New York Inquirer*. "I will provide the people of this city with a daily paper that will tell all the news honestly. I will also provide them with a fighting and tireless champion of their rights as citizens and as human beings." It's a lofty sentiment in *Citizen Kane* (1941), and it serves primarily in that film as an instrument of irony. Later, when Kane has become a monster of power, wealth, and narcissism, his friend Jedediah mails him the original "Declaration of Principles." Kane promptly tears it up, asserting to his wife it's "an antique."

It's an effective dramatic device, and a good reminder that lofty standards often take a beating in the real world. So let's announce that our declaration of principles is considerably less grandiose. We have in front of us a copy of the *Metuchen Recorder* from May of 1934. The *Recorder* was a weekly that describes its history as "40 Years of Weekly Visits to Most Metuchen and Township Homes." The slogan on the masthead reads "Facts, Not Fiction/Nor Partisan Propaganda/But All the Local News." We've reproduced the slogan, word for word, on this newspaper; it still strikes us, after all these years, as a flag of good intent.

The entire staff of the 1934 *Reporter* seems to consist of two people: C.A. Prickitt (editor) and Charles N. Prickitt (business manager.) There are no by-lines to any of the stories that fill its eight pages. There isn't a single mention that the country is in the teeth of the Great Depression. Instead, the newspaper offers a mildly whimsical voice and a genuine love of small-town detail. Dispensing quickly with the big stories ("Council Urged to Take Action Against Caterpillar Plague"), the newspaper dives into the much more appealing Personal Items of Interest: "Mrs. John C. Dolph of Northeast Pa. was in town on Thursday and attended The Quiet Hour Club meeting.... Mrs. R.C. Burr entertained her bridge club on Tuesday at luncheon. The winning ladies at bridge were

Mrs. Browning and Mrs. Ellis.... Mr. and Mrs. Harry Hopkins of George Street are visiting relatives in Indiana for a couple of weeks.”

To modern readers it’s a wonderful window into a long-lost world. Even the advertisers conjure the vanished universe that once populated Main Street. “Metuchen Fruit & Vegetable Market. Every Customer Must Be Satisfied. Free Delivery. New Potatoes, 7 lbs: 25¢; Old Potatoes, 8 lbs: 5¢.” “Leon Chin. Chinese Hand Laundry. Best of Work at Low Prices. 408 Main Street.” It reminds us that 33 years ago, when we moved to Metuchen, there was a bookstore, a clothing store, and a record store on Main Street. There’s still a theatre on Main Street—abandoned, roof leaking—but in 1934 it was actually showing movies: “Friday and Saturday. *Mystery of Mr. X* with Robert Montgomery. Laurel-Hardy Comedy *Dirty Work*, Silly Symphony *Night Before Christmas* and Metrotone News.”

All this delightful detail is our way of saying that we’d like the newly-incarnated *Metuchen Times* to acknowledge the memories of the past, and to, hopefully, capture in a bottle (for the future) something of the nature of small-town life in 2022. We want to inform and entertain; to paint in both the prose and poetry of specific detail what day-to-day life in Metuchen actually feels like.

A young Charles Foster Kane wrote to his guardian, “I think it would be fun to run a newspaper.”

We think it will be fun, too.

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Today I received a letter from the bank addressed to Max Cool Publishing LLC DBA The Metuchen Times. (DBA stands for “doing business as.”) The letter painfully reminds me that simply *registering* my imagined newspaper’s name required two months of battling with the NJ Division of Revenue in Trenton—a moldering bureaucracy whose “e-portal” automatically rejected any correspondence that contained a question mark or a comma. I finally had to ask Senator Frank Pallone’s office to intercede on my behalf to get the paperwork I needed. (They succeeded.) At any rate, this bank letter alerts me that I don’t have much of a stomach for conflicts. This is probably the reason I’ve spent most of my adult life reading and writing fiction.

As an excuse not to work on my computer, I go out for a tea in the afternoon with my old friend Tony. At the Starbucks on Rt. 27, I order a green tea; he orders an elaborate chai latte concoction, and then we sit in his car in Roosevelt Park and talk.

Beyond the windshield two parents pull their red ski-suited child in a blue toboggan. We remember playing in parks as children: slogging up the sides of hills clutching the fabric strap of an aluminum saucer—how we played all day, unsupervised, until our pants felt like frozen boards. We seem to talk a great deal about mortality—our mutual good fortune in having survived. We talk of all the people we’ve known who’ve died. I tell

him: “Living on a street with a cathedral, I see a funeral procession go by almost every day. It’s like those old philosophers who kept a skull on their desks to remind them of the brevity and insignificance of life.”

We spend a half hour in the car. A woman pulls up beside us and hauls out three empty 3.5-gallon water jugs. She threads her way down to the spring and fills them; drags them back to her car one at a time. A man walks a blue-eyed Siberian husky. It’s a leafless, white, and beautifully barren landscape that has absolutely nothing to do with newspapers, computers, and the NJ Division of Revenue. I fill my lungs with the winter air, and then slowly release the breath. And for a moment at least (toboggan, water jug, paper cup of hot tea) the tiny textures of life suddenly feel worth writing about again.