

LISTENING IN/*George Vukelich*

Never Repeat Yourself

'In this business, your product is so public that if you goof off your readers know it.'

Bill Stokes was born in Barron, Wis., in 1931 and was raised on a dairy farm four miles out of town, where his folks still live. He wrote his first column for the Barron high school newspaper on "rumble seating." ("That really dates you," he says.) He served with the army in Korea, graduated in journalism from the UW-Madison and has been newspapering ever since. He's worked for the Stevens Point Daily Journal, the Wisconsin State Journal, the Milwaukee Journal (for 12 years) and, since 1982, the Chicago Tribune, where he writes three weekly columns about the Midwest. He is married to Betty, and they have five children and grandchildren. "I divide my time," he says, "between Madison and Chicago."

"Chicago has a great tradition of hard-nosed, fighting, 'give-'em-hell' kind of journalism—that includes the Tribune—and that's a little foreign to my style.

"I know there's been a lot of people who have said, 'What the hell is this country hick doing writing in our newspaper?' I know that was there when I

started, but I think I've been able to demonstrate that I can carry my own bucket of whatever it is with that crowd down there. I'm not intimidated by them.

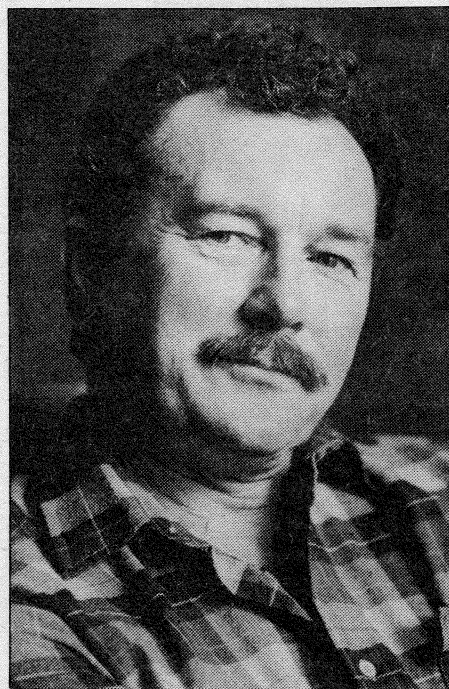
"I'm not intimidated because I'm confident that what I do works. I've proven that over the years, I guess, and so I don't try to do Royko-type Chicago stuff.

"Royko is just a great voice of, you know, the guy sitting at the end barstool and saying, 'Goddammit, this is what I think of this, and, by God, those dumb bastards did this. Can you believe that?' Royko is the world's greatest at this.

"My approach is different. So, for that matter, is Bob Greene's. I try to keep my columns mixed up—I don't have a specific beat. I perceive my beat as the Midwest, with emphasis, of course, on Illinois and, certainly, Chicago. I like to think my column is unpredictable. If you're predictable, you're in trouble.

"I read a hell of a lot of newspapers from Indiana, various Illinois cities, Milwaukee, Madison. When I find something, I like to go out and build a column around somebody who is doing something different or strange or inspiring or even *dumb*. Then, I take that and try to give a larger view, a larger application.

"I like to write humor, but I'm not trying to write like anyone else. When I first started in this business, H. Allen Smith was still around. He, of course, was a humor writer. I really liked his approach to things, and while I did read



Bill Stokes.

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a lot of him—his books are still up there on the shelf—I didn't try to pattern my work after him. I mainly respected him for the way he made a living off the foibles of the human race.

"This is a pretty tough league up here and I've never worked harder, but I also have never gotten more satisfaction out of my work. You know, when I came here three years ago, I was 50 years old, and the Tribune was a great thing to

happen to me because I was leaning back and getting bored.

"I live in just *dread* of ever repeating myself in print. I know goddamn well I could just go back and rewrite situations—and perhaps have, unknowingly—but I really live in dread of ever reaching the point where I say, 'Why don't you just go back in the file and pull something out and redo it?' Then I think, 'You've gotta hang it up.'

"In this business, your product is so public that if you goof off your readers know it. I mean, they are not dumb. It's a funny thing. If, for any reason, your production is not real sharp, your boss may not know it, the people you work with may not know it, but in this job, if you screw off, a million readers are gonna know it on Sunday.

"That's why even though I'm only writing three columns a week, those deadlines are more discipline than almost anybody has in their life.

"You have to have enthusiasm. You gotta have it. Boy, if you're not enthusiastic about what you're doing, then you shouldn't be doing it, especially where you're hanging out in front of people. If you don't have something to say, then you should keep your mouth shut.

"I guess my epitaph should be: *He always wanted to write novels.* I've been working on one for 20 years now. I'd like to produce one before I kick the bucket. As far as the column-writing goes, I just hope I will entertain somebody for a few minutes. That's all it is." ■