

Death of Joe H. Palmer

Joe Palmer had a heart attack in the early morning hours of October 31 at his home in Malverne, Long Island. The doctor told him to stay in bed until he could be given a more thorough examination. Shortly after 2 o'clock that afternoon there was a more violent attack. In ten minutes Joe Palmer was dead.

In the spring of 1934 Joe had written us from Ann Arbor: "Do you not ever let any of your children go in for advanced degrees in English. It doesn't matter whether they are bred for distance or speed; the course was built for an immortal, not for a being governed by time."

That summer, his mind still set upon the degree which would have made him Dr. Palmer, he worked for The Blood-Horse. He was among old friends. He found the daily round of duty congenial and stimulating. He relished Tom Cromwell's recollections of old men, old horses, and the stratagems of an older day. . . . In two months there was a decision to make.

One day we walked down Walnut Street, discussing the problem. Assuming that he gave up the degree and remained with The Blood-Horse, we gave him our best guess as to the probabilities, as we have a way of doing. He elected to stay, and far exceeded the probabilities, as he would have done in whatever field he chose.

Joe had been born in Lexington on October 18, 1904, and had grown up there and in nearby Georgetown, where his father had set up a camera shop. He was graduated from the University of Kentucky, took his M. A. degree there in 1928, and taught classes in English there and later at the University of Michigan, where he went to complete his graduate work. The Phi Beta Kappa key he wore (or rather, had) was something unique and wonderful to his later friends in the press boxes. His earlier friends, on the campus and off, thought little of it; for them it would have been something unique and outrageous if he had not had it.

The journalism of racing intrigued Joe at once. He moved carefully and inconspicuously while he studied the background of racing and breeding and enlarged his acquaintance with the current scene and the current actors. His confidence established, he soon became the liveliest writer in racing, with an extraordinary capacity for forging sentences into probes and scalpels for illustrating the anatomy and physiology of racing and breeding.

In October, 1935, when the American Thoroughbred Breeders Association purchased The Blood-Horse from its founder, Thomas B. Cromwell, Joe Palmer was made business manager as well as associate editor. His duties on the business side he handled well, but most of his time

he saved for research and writing. As his reputation grew, he began to receive offers from other organizations. Some of these he turned down without even knowing what salary he would have received. He was reluctant to leave Lexington, where he had many attachments and now had established a home. He had been married in the summer of 1935 to Miss Mary Cole Holloway, and they had two sons, Joseph Holloway and Stephen Noland Palmer.

Finally the offers from the outside exceeded his prospects at The Blood-Horse by such a margin that he felt he owed his family an obligation to accept them. In September, 1944, he became executive secretary of the American Trainers Association. But it was his towering ability as a writer which continued to direct his course. He wrote the annual *American Race Horse* series from 1944 until his death, never allowed his column in The Blood-Horse to lapse, and took on other assignments as a writer. In February, 1946, he joined the staff of the *Herald Tribune* in New York City, and, with more readers than ever before, was soon generally recognized as the best informed, the most incisive Turf writer in America, whose phrases had the rhythmic slash and thrust of Cyrano's blade.

Fiercely independent as he was, it was fortunate that the two of us could always look at the same assortment of facts in racing and come up with the same general conclusion, and this remained true long after we had lost the privilege of day-by-day discussion of the issues. It was fortunate for us because, though it was good to play Horatius at the bridge and swing a stubby broadsword at an imaginary world of error, it would have been no fun if Joe Palmer's rapier had been on the other side.



While he remained with The Blood-Horse, Palmer was the special delight of a rather small audience. Once established in New York and recognized by many as the most entertaining and most provocative writer in his field, he began to receive new demands upon his time. He went into broadcasting, special articles for the slick-paper magazines, extra columns for other publications. He was in demand as a speaker and master of ceremonies, and above all as a guest and companion.

In the summer of 1930 we had left New York and returned to Kentucky, on the theory that we would live longer, and more happily, outside the competitive tensions of the metropolis. It did not occur to us to be concerned that our friend was moving in the other direction. He was big, strong, resourceful, confident beyond the touch of worry, capable of turning out great stacks of work with amazing ease. He worked hard, he played hard, and though the work and play became progressively harder he tore on through with an everlasting gusto, and was never late with a line of copy.

He and his wife came to Lexington the week before his death for the Thoroughbred Club's dinner honoring John B. Campbell. Joe was master of ceremonies, sharp as ever, poised and charming, despite the cold that rumbled in his voice and beaded his face with the sweat of sickness. "I'll be all right," he said, and went back to the routine through which he strode like a Titan. Thursday afternoon he was at Jamaica. Late that night he got his first warning about his heart. Even then he did not accept it; he would be back at the races Saturday, he insisted. But the golden cord was broken. The keenest ear in racing would never hear the bugle again. The sharpest pen had probed its last illusion. Joseph Hill Palmer was dead at the age of 48, and like young Lycidas, had not left his peer.

In the newspapers, on the air, and in private communications were many tributes of appreciation for Joe Palmer's unique and irreplaceable skill and service. At the Empire City-at-Jamaica meeting the day after his death the flags were dipped to the strains of My Old Kentucky Home and the crowd of 30,000 stood to honor the writer whose lash had been used against both the crowd and the management, but so skilfully used that it tickled even as it cut.

The funeral was held the afternoon of Tuesday, November 4, at Lexington, and burial was in the Lexington cemetery. Dr. Jesse Herrmann of the Second Presbyterian Church conducted the services. The pallbearers were William Passen, Red Smith, George B. Leach, Gayle Mohney, J. A. Estes, and Van Cleve Stears.
J. A. E.

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