

Centennial Reflections

Essays from the Oakwood Historical Society

Ralf Kircher - a witty, one-of-a-kind local writer

By Harry G. Ebeling

Fiddlesticks! - is a rather dated exclamation of frustration from another era. We remember it from our grandparents, but our grandchildren are denied the pleasure of hearing older folks burst out with such statements. In Oakwood, among older folks, we identify it with a column which ran for 20 years on the front page of The Oakwood Press by "Fagin Fogg" a.k.a. Ralf Kircher. It was a weekly gem which was eagerly awaited, and truly a predecessor to those of Erma Bombeck and D.L. Stewart.

Ralf Kircher, a local advertising executive, started writing columns for his college newspaper at Ohio University around 1928. And as he said, "that's what caused all the trouble". Trying to make a few bucks on the side during the Depression, he hid his name from his employer by using the pen name to hide his moonlighting. His son, Dudley recalled how he was amused by his companions on the bus by their comments about the column, which he dutifully agreed with.

His writings appeared in four books, published from 1941 to 1947 which I regard as collectors pieces: "Fiddlesticks", "There's a Fly in This Room", "Gypsies Have the Right Idea" and "Wrap it as a Gift". Gypsies has an introduction by Erma Bombeck which says that he wrote in an era that spawned other genius-insanity, such as H. Allen Smith, Robert Benchley, and Max Schulman – which is pretty big time – coming from Erma.



At any rate – which is the kind of transitional phrase that Kircher indulged in – let me reminisce about the columns, their wide ranging subject, the sheer innovation of being able to come up with material until 1954. He was not above repeating a column on occasion, but who could blame him – and he always picked good ones. He engaged the services of friends and contemporary writers to fill in while he was on vacation, then used them as a launching pad for responses. One from Congressman Harry P. Jeffrey recites a tongue in cheek recap of the stuff one can read in the Congressional Record.

He set himself up for later columns by publishing fake articles from his wife and his publisher, which allowed him to stretch a week or two out of supposed insults.

A long piece in *Wrap It*, is entitled “Are Children Here to Stay?”

The conclusion is, “...if we are going to have future generations with people in them, then we have to have children now, so for goodness’ sakes let’s make the best of it. But let’s not take them out to dinner.”

Among my favorites was his annual piece on Income Tax, the filling out thereof, and the responses from the IRS. Home ownership was a source of constant abuse. One is dedicated to the annual cleaning out of the junk drawer in the kitchen. The title of his book “Gypsies Have the Right Idea” comes from a long column on the trials of buying, dealing for, repairing, redecorating, and financing a home, versus renting. The lead article in the book takes one through dealing with architects, lot salesmen, builders, home loan officers, and – yes – wives, and their various bites at the apple.

He had no peer when it came to finding the soft underbelly of everyday transactions. On buying insurance his agent pointed out the need for the “time when you pass out of the picture”. He had to think of his wife as his “Beneficiary” and his son as his “heir”. On reading his home owners policy when received, he found that he was distinctly in a class with the Hope diamond and the gold reserve at Ft. Knox.

During WW II he stated “that if this country can win the peace by appointing committees and holding meetings, then the rest of the nations might as well toss in their gavel and go home, because America simply cannot be licked in that department”. He had a series of articles calling attention to the Salvage Committee entitled “Adventures of a Drip”, the first of which focused on the drive to get people to save cooking fats. After a confrontation with his wife, which he lost, on the uses of these fats in the manufacture of glycerin, he said that he was going to write a song “Drips Will Win the War”.

On golf, he reflected about Carey Middlecoff’s advice to be careful with every shot “except in case of a calculated risk dictated by a desperate situation”. In his average round he took about 100 calculated risks, and the situation was never anything but desperate.

After studying a catalogue of artificial fish lures, he decided that he could catch more fish with ornaments from last year’s Christmas tree.

Pets gave him a chance to roam wild without fear of hearing from the pets, but he often heard from the pet lovers. One such column appeared in a magazine during National Cat Week, and resulted in a “torrent of abuse...vitriolic letters by the hundreds, scores of cat snapshots....plus five prepaid subscriptions to “Cat Digest”. Others in the series were *The Dog That Ate the Dollar*, *A True Horse Story*, and *A True Mouse Story*.

The last three articles in "Fiddlesticks", his first book, are rare speeches Ralf made. "So This is a Noontide Club" is accompanied by the note that it was originally prepared for one club, but with new paint and variations in the chrome trim, it had survived many presentations. The last, "Why I never joined the Engineers Club". was excerpts from a speech on the 27th anniversary of that organization, which was a roast of this rather staid group.

When The Oakwood Press was bought out by The K-O Times, he continued to write, but not as regularly, and it was not displayed as prominently. One such piece was a put-on of Ann Landers. A writer whose husband was showing signs of regressing to his teen age years, said that she thought she would scream, and signed the letter FRANTIC. Fogg's advice – Scream. In another letter, a golf widow asked whether Jack Nicklaus was God. The answer was – Only in Columbus.

In 1950, he left Kircher, Helton & Collett advertising agency and went to New York, at no pay, to become the national director of the United World Federalists. He dedicated his talents to sparing mankind from another war through a world government with power to control the implements of war. The threat of nuclear war so challenged them that they thought such a super organization was the answer. He retired to Florida after leaving this fight.