

CHAPTER XXIV

PUBLIC SPEAKING AGAIN

Meanwhile an unexpected phase of the work developed. Experience in public speaking had not been considered an asset for a research man. Mr. Latshaw explained that it was contrary to the custom of the Advertising Department of The Curtis Publishing Company for anyone to make a speech and it would be necessary for this talent to be buried in the back yard and forgotten. This was quite acceptable, for the making of speeches was something which had always seemed to intrude into other occupations and had never been consciously cultivated.

But during the preparation of the report on Department Store Lines, a request came from the National Wholesale Dry Goods Association - at that time the most important organization in the textile field - for an address on the Merchandising of Textiles. Mr. Latshaw thought this was too good an opportunity to pass up and decided to make an exception to the custom against speech-making and scheduled this one. In a day when such had not been done by a publisher, it seemed like a bold undertaking to address that august body on their own business in competition with other speakers, the highest minds in the industry.

But back of the endeavor was a year of patient study on the marketing problems of their industry and a lifetime of public speaking. The address made a hit. Perhaps, after all, a speech now and then might be a good thing. Ere long it was necessary to apply the brakes to prevent speech making from running away with the research job.

Over the period of the next eighteen years, numberless addresses were given on a great variety of subjects. When a request came from some

organization for an address on some strange topic, what simpler solution than to send the research man, to which the research man would reply that it would not embarrass him to talk on a subject about which he knew little - he had often done that before. If the audience was willing to take a chance, he would.

Perhaps one or two illustrations may entertain you.

The Boston Chamber of Commerce late in 1920 staged a big meeting for a discussion of business conditions, with Roger Babson, founder of the Babson Statistical Service, and the Curtis research manager as the speakers. Babson stipulated that he should speak first. Just before the meeting opened he switched and insisted, in spite of the printed program, that he speak last. This did not look so favorable, but was conceded.

The Curtis research speech was optimistic in tone and expressed a belief that even with conditions less favorable, manufacturers could help their sales by advertising. Babson was known to hold contrary views. He was always effective on the platform - as a speaker he was more of an evangelist than a statistician. He would start with a few minutes based on the chart index worked out by his organization and then swing vigorously into discussion of moral and religious phases of life. He would usually say some radical things which would occasion discussion and win headlines in the press.

This speech was no exception. He started by showing how a downturn of the index line on his big chart indicated continuance of bad conditions, gave a number of effective thrusts at the Curtis presentation and swung into a discussion of the moral and religious phases of depression, how a time of depression tried men's souls and made them more serious. Widows, he had observed, were more religious than wives who had not lost their husbands.

Following the talk, the crowd remained for questions. Babson remained on the platform and many questions were asked him which he answered well. At last a question was asked the Curtis representative whether he thought conditions would get worse, to which he replied that he could not answer the question yes or no, but if the presiding officer would allow him three minutes, he would be glad to express his views. The time was allotted and, going to Babson's chart, he declared that he might be more frightened at the recent down turn of the index line if he had not noticed that back here (pointing to the place) the index line turned down and nothing serious had happened.

Mr. Babson had observed that widows were more religious than wives who still had husbands - would he advocate that we reduce those happy wives to widowhood in order to make these women more religious? In other words, would he advocate that by spreading pessimistic thoughts we kill business in order to make business men more serious minded? This caught the temper of the crowd and for the next five minutes the speaker had more fun than he had had on a platform since the joint debate of college days. The crowd was entertained and long remembered the "debate", as they called it, between Babson and Parlin. Babson was a good sport - invited his rival debater to his home for the night and entertained him charmingly.

Earlier in 1920, when business was booming, a conference of the United States Chamber of Commerce was called in Atlantic City to discuss methods for getting up greater production. Prophesying better than he knew, the Curtis research manager predicted that production would catch up with demand and that the real problem soon would be sales. The convention had hardly adjourned before the crash came, and from that day to this the problem has been sales. Whatever could be sold could be produced. At that

time production departments dictated to the sales department - today the sales department dictates production.

Not all the talks were along economic lines. For example, a group of wealthy people in Chicago contributed \$350,000 to start a school of industrial art and invited Mr. Curtis to speak. Mr. Curtis could not accept. They invited Mr. Bok - he could not accept. They invited Mr. Lorimer - he never accepted outside speaking engagements - he devoted all of his tremendous energy to the marvelous task of editing The Saturday Evening Post. At this point someone suggested sending the research man - he will talk on the evolution of magazine art. The gathering was a distinguished one, held in the Palmer House. At the speaker's table were Mrs. McCormick, Lorado Taft and a number of the leading capitalists and artists of the city.

The first address was given by a representative of the Metropolitan Museum in New York who gave a scholarly exposition of the development of art, dividing art history into four periods of 140 years each. The audience sat about very formally in evening dress and applauded graciously. How would they react to an advertising man's presentation of magazine art? Perhaps they had had enough of stiff formalism. Maybe they wouldn't mind if one jazzed up the meeting a bit. Let's take a chance.

The crude advertisements of forty years before were contrasted with the beautiful advertising art of the day. "From the address this evening I am not clear whether there has been any progress in art during the past 140 years. As a matter of fact, I am not certain that there has been any advance since the Italian Renaissance and, to be real frank, I did not understand whether there had been any improvement in art since the age of Pericles, but when it comes to magazine art, I do insist that between Pearlline's scrub women and Babo's young lady with the pearls and the rose, progress has been made and that it has not taken 140 years."

This struck a responsive chord for those who had given liberally for an art school hoping that progress could be made. They forgot the stiff politeness of the occasion and when Grandfather got to displaying magazine pages to those at the speaker's table - "That is artistic, is it not, Mr. Taft?" "It looks as though you could pick those raspberries off the dish, does it not, Mrs. McCormick," the audience was having a bully good time.

"The school you are establishing will design beautiful things - beautiful furniture, beautiful tableware, beautiful draperies. What are you going to do about it? Wait 140 years for some future generation to find out that your school did something artistic or are you going to display them in the pages of the magazines that millions of people of your own generation may appreciate them and may applaud your efforts?"

The secretary said she had never seen Mrs. McCormick act so human.

A couple of years later Grandfather met Mr. Taft in the museum in Athens. "Oh," said Mr. Taft, laughing, "are you the man who made that address on magazine art? No matter how long I live, I shall never forget that address."

Just one more story. At the University of Wisconsin a meeting of business men of the state was called to discuss wastes in distribution. The morning program was led off by a man who had a doctor's degree from the University of Wisconsin. He was an excellent student and a brilliant speaker, but not much of a believer in advertising.

He knew that Grandfather was to follow him and fashioned his address with this in mind. The crowd was made up of people who were not advertising minded and he soon had them in full agreement with him. He spoke brilliantly and from time to time, as he made a telling point, he challenged Grandfather to debate it. Grandfather had forty minutes and much could be

said in that time, yet to meet his challenges seemed futile, for the audience instinctively believed with the other speaker and a discussion of the two talks was scheduled to be led by State Senator Hatton, a man antagonistic to advertising.

There was nothing of practical importance at stake, just a morning's playtime. Yet it would not be pleasant to return to one's Alma Mater and be worsted in debate. Was there any way to get Senator Hatton to attack the other speaker? Grandfather decided to stake all on one minute of peroration. For thirty-nine minutes without any reference, either open or veiled, to the other address and without touching upon any of the points to which he had been challenged to reply, Grandfather builded a story for the constructive use of advertising.

Then suddenly turning to the preceding address, Grandfather said: "With some of the conclusions of the preceding speaker we are in accord. But with his major premise we are completely in disagreement. For his major premise he declared - I presume he did not mean what he said, probably he intended to be facetious, yet he spoke with a seriousness that led me to think he wished us to believe the statement - at any rate whatever he meant, what he actually did say was, 'The consumer is a sap.' Now the consumer is not a sap. The consumer is king. The whim of the consumer makes and unmakes the manufacturer, the wholesaler and the retailer. Whoever wins the confidence of the consumer wins the game, whoever loses it is lost."

The strategy worked. Senator Hatton arose with tears in his eyes and a tremor in his voice. He was sorry he had lived to see the day when the consumer was called a sap on a public platform of the University of Wisconsin. What a terrible thing! and he launched into one of his political addresses on the importance of the consumer citizen. The speaker, who was

being bitterly chided, rose to offer a word of explanation. Senator Hatton would not listen. The speaker had called the consumer a sap - the Senator had with his own ears heard the words. It was a dreadful thing to have happened and again he was off on his stump speech.

Senator Hatton took all the time allotted for discussion, and the meeting was adjourned with the Senator still lamenting that the consumer had been called a sap.

Grandfather and the Curtis representatives hastened away to have lunch and a good laugh. Nothing of importance had been accomplished, but it had been a lot of fun.