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THE PRESS

Chicago's War of the Losers

In addition to its other distinctions, Chicago has traditionally been a terrific newspaper town, with lively dailies rolling out breathless new editions all day long. As Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur related in *The Front Page*, competition among Chicago papers in the 1920s was fierce—and sometimes violent. Today's newspaper battle is less bloody but scarcely less frantic. Circulation campaigns are fought with radio and TV spots instead of hired toughs, and an exclusive is more often a series of sober public service articles about mental health than a blaring bannerline scoop about a trunk murder. But Chicago remains the only U.S. city with competing papers in both morning and afternoon.

Elsewhere, inflation and the inroads of TV and magazines have forced 42 daily newspapers to merge since 1960. Chicago, however, still has four major dailies fighting for the readers. In the morning, the Chicago *Tribune* competes with Field Enterprises' tabloid *Sun-Times*. In the afternoon, the *Tribune's* breezy sibling *Chicago Today* is pitted against Field's Chicago *Daily News*. The situation may be stimulating for the readers, but it is hard on the papers, particularly the afternoon sheets. Both lose money, and it is largely pride that prevents them from being fused into a single publication that might be profitable.

No Figures. All together, daily circulation of Chicago's papers has declined since 1960 from 2.4 million to 2.2 million, despite a 7% population increase in Cook County. No financial figures are available because both the Chicago Tribune Co. and Field Enterprises are privately owned, but it is known that the two morning papers turn a profit. During the past decade, the *Sun-Times* circulation has held steady at about 540,000, and is first in the city itself. The *Tribune*, despite a drop of 100,000 in the same period, maintains a comfortable overall lead at 768,000, due to a large readership in suburbia and surrounding states, and it carries almost half of all the daily ad linage in town.

In the afternoon, however, the picture is grim. Early evening television news programs have hurt afternoon newspaper sales everywhere in the nation. Besides, compared with morning papers, afternoon editions are costlier to put out because they require faster distribution for a big street sale, more labor for heavier press runs, and frequent front-page replates to provide up-to-the-minute, eye-catching headlines. *Chicago Today* recently passed the *Daily News* in circulation, 438,000 to 425,000, while the *News*, thanks to a higher-income readership, carries 72% of all afternoon advertising. But annual losses are nonetheless estimated at about $5,000,000 for *Daily News* and $7,000,000 for *Chicago Today*.

Wealthy parent companies can afford to pay the bills. Helped by its highly profitable *World Book Encyclopedia* and a children's series called *Childcraft*, Field Enterprises earned about $7,000,000 last year despite the drain of the *Daily News*. The Tribune Co. is even richer. Among its gilt-edged properties are the New York *Daily News*,* a string of papers in Florida, and TV stations in Chicago, Denver and Duluth.

For all their resources, neither the Tribune Co. nor Field has produced an outstanding newspaper worthy of a city as big and alert as Chicago. It has no equivalent of a New York *Times*, Washington *Post* or Los Angeles *Times*, although its papers augment their national and international coverage from all those sources. In the four Chicago papers, day-to-day reporting of topics as varied as business, the arts and social trends seems too often routine.

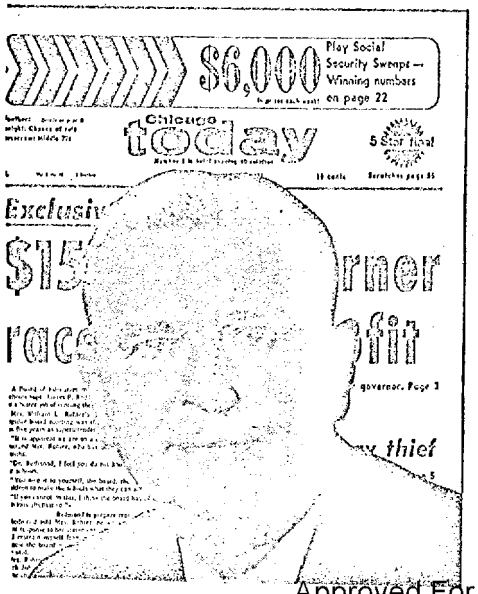
Farewell to Omniscience. The *Tribune*, still the self-proclaimed "World's Greatest Newspaper," uses its big editorial staff of 325 and a huge news hole to provide the most thorough coverage, including task-force treatment on how poorly Chicago is served by its nursing homes and courts. The paper is shedding the stodginess that had hung on well beyond the death in 1955 of archconservative Publisher Robert R. McCormick, and it now pays much more attention to the blacks and the poor. Says mild-mannered Clayton Kirkpatrick, 56, who became the *Trib's* editor in 1969: "If you accept the fact that readers today are better educated and more sophisticated, then you concede that you don't have an exclusive license on omniscience and that you have to accept other points of view." Still, the *Trib's* outspoken editorial page almost automatically voices a conservative viewpoint on most issues.

The *Sun-Times* bills itself as "the bright one" and is the most readable paper in town. Aggressive and socially concerned, it has traditionally covered the black community closely and has run series on such important local-interest subjects as welfare, mass transit and the state legislature. But its national and international coverage is sometimes skimpy.

Stepchild Status. In the afternoon, Field's *Daily News* is still a paper of some substance that can come up with a single-topic blockbuster on short notice. The day after President Nixon announced his proposed China trip, for example, it ran a first-rate roundup of global reaction. The *News* has a strong Washington bureau headed by Peter Lisagor, who is regarded by many journalists as the capital's best correspondent, but its seven-man foreign staff is smaller and less distinguished than it was a decade and more ago. Editor Daryle Feldmeir, 48, an amiable import from the Minneapolis *Tribune*, is well respected by his Chicago colleagues but hindered by a tight budget. In sum, the *News* is no longer the paper that regularly won Pulitzer Prizes. Staffers complain that cost cutting has reduced it to a stepchild of the *Sun-Times*, and professionals who once prized their jobs on a "writers' paper" gripe about injections of fluff and cheesecake as the *News* tries to recapture the circulation edge from *Chicago Today*.

Top draw at the *News* is Columnist Mike Royko, whose humorous and often devastating putdowns of the pompous are thought to sell as many as 50,000 extra copies a day. Royko carries great clout with management, and drove a hard bargain before signing a new five-year contract reportedly worth $250,000. He won a promise from Field executives that local staff would be increased, and promotion of the paper improved. "I've

TRIBUNE CO.'S GRUMHAUS



FIELD ENTERPRISES' FIELD

* Which by most measures has been doing better lately than the New York *Times*. Last year the *Times's* daily circulation declined 6% to 846,000, while the *News's* rose slightly to 2,130,000.

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