

Gale Primary Sources

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The Paris Tribune at One Hundred

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I was, I believe, the last person to leave the newsroom of the *New York Herald Tribune* on April 23, 1966, the day it folded. I walked through the lobby down to West Forty-first Street and then went back upstairs and took home with me the stereotype mats of the last two front pages. No one would see their like again.

But of course I did, and so did everyone else. In Paris. For me, it was seeing a ghost. The breath went out of me the first time I came upon the Paris edition of the *Herald Tribune*—the survivor, one hundred years old this month.

Who could have guessed? The thing started only because James Gordon Bennett, Jr., was such a wild man. Not everyone believes the story that he suddenly decided to leave New York for Paris in 1877 because of the uproar after he drunkenly broke up a New Year's party by relieving himself into the grand piano in his fiancée's Manhattan home. No, some say he did it in the fireplace.

Wherever it happened, he did it. The engagement to Caroline May was ended and her brother horsewhipped Bennett outside the Union Club the next day. Bennett, thirty-five years old and one of the richest and most powerful men in the country, had gone too far.

So he went back to Paris. He had grown up there because his mother, who was from Ireland, couldn't stand the abuse that James Gordon Bennett, Sr., attracted as founder of the most controversial and successful newspaper in the United States. Except for

short trips, the younger Bennett never returned. He ran the *Herald* for forty-two years by cable from his homes and yachts around Europe and the Mediterranean.

Bennett succeeded—and failed—in great and arrogant style, a genius of sorts. Probably a mad one. In 1869 he sent a reporter named Henry M. Stanley to Africa presuming he could find the lost Scottish missionary Dr. David Livingstone. Once he sent a cable to his editor back in New York asking for a list of “indispensable” men on the staff, then fired everyone on the list. “I want no indispensable men working for me” was his full explanation.

Sending such cables, Bennett learned, was extraordinarily expensive. Western Union, controlled by Jay Gould, had a monopoly on transatlantic service and charged whatever it pleased. So Bennett, who was supposed to be the third richest man in America, went into partnership with the man some said was the richest, John W. Mackay, owner of the Comstock Lode silver mine, and they laid a competing cable. By 1887 the two companies were in a price war, and cable costs plummeted. That was the year Bennett started the *Paris Herald*. The new cable rates had made it possible to transmit copy between New York and Paris at a reasonable cost.

This most romantic of American newspapers, a century old and now called the *International Herald Tribune*, was a result of available technology. It still is, selling more than 170,000 copies each day in 164 countries. But that is getting ahead of the story of how one of the worst papers in the history of the English language, a wild

man's bauble, became the unofficial but very authoritative voice of America almost everywhere in the world—and ended up being loved in the bargain.

The first European edition—called just *The New York Herald*—appeared without ceremony in Paris on Tuesday morning, October 4, 1887. The lead headline for the four-page paper was THE NEW YORK LETTER, which covered everything from the doings of the Knights of Labor to preparations for the America's Cup. The sailing story was a natural for Bennett, one of the world's great yachtsmen and holder of a transatlantic sailing record.

The first edition was also filled with another Bennett obsession: names. One and a half columns were filled with the names of Americans who happened to be in Paris. For the thirty-one years of Bennett's reign, Herald staffers checked hotel registries for the names of foreign visitors and published them along with a list of the people who visited an office of the paper on Avenue de l'Opéra.

Bennett's own name, however, did not appear in his newspaper until just after he died, on May 14, 1918. But everything else in it was his. Before the first edition was put together, he called the staff together and told them: "I want you gentlemen to remember that I am the only reader of this paper. I am the only one to be pleased....I consider a dead dog in the rue du Louvre more interesting for the *Herald* than a devastating flood in China. I want one feature article a day. If I say the feature is to be black beetles, black beetles it's going to be."

Or if he said Theodore Roosevelt's name would not appear in the *Paris Herald*, it would not appear. And it didn't after the former President bolted the Republican party in 1912. Then, three years later, when the Lusitania was sunk by a German submarine, TR's name reappeared in the most dramatic, if unprofessional, way. The paper's report of the sinking ended with this italicized paragraph: "What is President Wilson going to do? What a pity Mr. Roosevelt is not President!"

In World War I, Bennett became an unlikely hero. He was an old man, dying really, but he personally took over the daily operation of the paper as the German army advanced on Paris. He published every day, even when French newspapers (and many of his own employees) had fled the city. Two years later, with the Allies on the way to victory—and the American Expeditionary Forces buying 350,000 *Heralds* each day—he went to his villa in the south of France to die.

During the last months of his life, he negotiated a \$50,000 loan from the Rothschild Bank for living expenses. He had spent \$40 million, a great deal of it on the *Paris Herald*, which never made a centime until the Yanks came in 1917. Millions went, too, for automobile races and balloon ascensions, two Bennett passions, and for his yachts, particularly the *Lysistrata*, built in 1901 at a cost of \$650,000 and staffed by a crew of 101— including an Alderney cow for morning milk.

Bennett's estate was not settled until 1920, when the *New York Herald*, the *Evening Telegram*, and the *Paris Herald* were sold for \$4 million to Frank Munsey, the owner of the *New York Sun*. By then the doughboys had

gone home and the Paris circulation was back at its pre-war level. But the paper was surviving—a knack it had through good times and bad, mostly bad, against a dozen other English-language competitors over the years.

And in 1924 the *Paris Herald* survived again when Munsey sold the *New York Herald* to the family of Ogden Reid, owners of Horace Greeley's old paper, the *New York Tribune*—creating the *New York Herald Tribune*. The Paris edition, though, did not change its name, because there was then a Paris edition of the *Chicago Tribune*.

The golden twenties meant Harding, Coolidge, Babbitt, and Prohibition on one side of the Atlantic, and Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, Gertrude Stein, and Henry Miller on the Left Bank of the Seine. The *Herald* stood squarely and solidly with Harding and Coolidge. It was the newspaper of the Right Bank. “Paris Clubland” was a popular *Herald* feature, documenting the genteel doings of the American Club and the groups at the American Church, the Episcopal Cathedral, the Rotary and the American Legion. Circulation rose to 39,000 by 1929 and advertising tripled—while the scruffier *Tribune* was catering to the Left Bank and filling columns with stuff by Miller, who was a *Tribune* proofreader, and by James Thurber, William L. Shirer, Waverley Root, plus the Hemingway crowd.

By 1930 the *Herald* had become profitable enough to build a new building on the Rue de Berri, just off the Champs-Élysée, and to introduce the first rotogravure magazine section in France. The day that confirmed the

Herald's respectability and new prosperity was September 20, 1927, when a fifty-six-page special edition celebrated the tenth-anniversary parade of twenty thousand American Legionnaires down the Champs.

There was barely room—and no *Herald* reporter assigned—for a small story that day under the headline FEW ATTEND ISADORA DUNCAN'S RITÈS. Actually five thousand people did turn out in the rain to pay final homage to the American dancer who represented the spirit of twentieth-century feminism and the avant-garde. But they probably weren't *Herald* readers.

Whichever side of the Seine an American newspaperman was working, Paris was a hell of a place to be in the 1920s. This is the way it was in the *Herald* offices during those days, according to an account by a rewrite man, Ken Stewart: “The night-side would straggle in about eight o'clock, well wine and dined, to take over from the day staff, which had leisurely collected the tourist registrations at the Right Bank hotels, recorded the comings and goings from the Riviera, interviewed arrivals on boat trains, listened to the talks on international amity at the Anglo-American and Franco-American luncheons.

“After a few preliminaries, we would drift out again to the corner bistro for coffee or liquor, then come back to deskeletonize the cables....”

“Deskeletonization” was at the heart of the operations of the *Herald* and the other English-language papers in

Paris. What it meant was expanding short (and shorthand) cables from New York into readable and interesting stories. Thus a few characters on dropping stock prices in New York became, in the *Herald*, “brokers tearing the shirts off one another’s backs during a hectic day on the Stock Exchange.”

The most famous of the *Herald*’s deskeletonized stories was one fabricated from a weather bulletin on the slowest news night of 1925, Christmas Eve. It seemed that there was typhoon activity near the tiny Pacific island of Yap, 500 miles southwest of Guam. That became a three-column headline over a long, imaginative story: TIDAL WAVE SWEEPS YAP, THOUSANDS FEARED LOST.

In 1934, when the Reid family bought the Paris edition of the *Chicago Tribune* for just \$50,000 and combined the papers, the name was finally changed to the *Herald Tribune*. There were times during those years when the Reids might have wished the name was different—because the Paris edition of the *New York Herald Tribune* had a distinct fondness for fascism, printing regular puffs for both Hitler and Mussolini.

The thirties were the worst of times for the paper Parisians called “Le New York.” It lost \$500,000 in ten years as circulation dropped below 10,000 and advertising became harder and harder to sell. But there was one kind of advertising that the *Herald Tribune* did manage to keep getting: ads for German and Italian resorts. Dozens of them each week—complete with swastikas.

Business is business, but for twenty years it was linked to news and editorials in the person of Laurence Hills, a Munsey holdover who was both managing director and editor under the Reids. “[Fascism] has always consisted essentially of a mobilization of moral force,” Hills’s paper wrote in an editorial of May 22, 1932. “The hour has struck for a fascist party to be born in the United States.”

Six years later, on October 30, 1938—after supporting Mussolini’s invasion of “chiefs like Sitting Bull” in Ethiopia and approving of Hitler’s marches into the Rhineland and Austria—the Paris edition had this wisdom for its readers: “The social policies of the totalitarian countries cannot be dismissed as valueless on the ground that they rest on a denial of freedom. The fact which cannot be denied...is that they make for greater happiness and contentment among the masses.”

Finally, in April of 1939, the Reid family ordered that henceforth the Paris edition’s editorials would have to conform to the policies espoused by the New York paper. The next year, Ogden Reid closed down the Paris edition in the face of German occupation. “I will not publish a paper under Boche occupation,” Reid cabled from New York on June 9, 1940, as the German army reached the city.

The most famous American reporter in Paris before the war was not Hemingway or Shirer but the *Herald*’s sports and gossip columnist, a tiny fellow named William “Sparrow” Robertson. Eugene O’Neill praised Robertson’s fractured prose: “Why, he’s the greatest

writer in the world. I wouldn't miss him a single day." Paris was the Sparrow's life, and he continued to make his rounds of clubs and bars as well as he could even after the *Paris Herald Tribune* ceased publication on June 10, 1940. At first he wrote a column every day, leaving it on the editor's desk in the dark, abandoned offices. The unused columns from a dead columnist—Robertson died during the Occupation—were there in a pile when the next paper came out, a four-page sheet dated December 22, 1944.

The "new" *Paris Herald Tribune* had a new young boss—Geoffrey Parsons, Jr., the thirty-six-year-old son of the New York paper's chief editorial writer—and big plans to expand outside France into, in Parson's optimistic words, "international significance beyond anything we can imagine." That actually happened, but not until about twenty years later—and after years of mediocre journalism, annual losses, tax evasion, and a little bit of thievery.

Anything seemed possible in 1945—and almost everything went wrong. The Europe that the Paris edition saw as its new market was an economic wasteland. Even with the United States government effectively subsidizing a large part of the circulation that soon reached 50,000 (the State Department was distributing copies to influential Europeans), the paper was losing more and more money because of mismanagement and the complexities of French currency laws.

Helen Reid, who had taken over from her husband at the *New York Herald Tribune*, probably just should have

folded the operation in Paris, but she loved the city, loved the paper—and was willing to pump in many hundreds of thousands of dollars to keep publishing. The size of the paper was cut—from twelve pages to six in 1950—and so was the quality. But the *Trib*, as more people were now calling it, was alive. And it had a new star: Art Buchwald.

Buchwald was a twenty-three-year-old ex-Marine who was using the GI Bill and an occasional class at the Alliance Française to hang around Paris, writing for *Variety*, the show-business newspaper. He talked his way into a twenty-five-dollar-a-week *Herald Tribune* column reviewing nightclubs, restaurants, and movies and just kept talking. And because he was very, very funny when he talked and could write the way he talked, he became everyman's American in Paris before moving on to Washington in 1962.

But other than that, the *Trib* of the fifties was mainly an undistinguished and profitless collection of highlights from the New York paper. Then, in a few dramatic years, the *Trib* and its world changed totally.

The *New York Herald Tribune*—what was left of the newspaper James Gordon Bennett, Sr., had founded in 1835—began its last eight years of life in 1958 with high hopes and great fanfare. The Reid family sold out to one of the richest men in America, John Hay ("Jock") Whitney, ambassador to the Court of St. James's and pillar of the Eastern Establishment Republican party the paper had served so well for decades.

The European edition of Whitney's new paper was about breaking even by 1961 and circulation was up to 58,000, when, in 1961, *The New York Times* decided to publish an international edition from Paris with the obvious intent of putting the *Trib* out of business there. "The Battle of the Boulevards" it was called, and the *Times* had the big guns. Its promotion budget the first year was \$500,000; the *Trib*'s was \$40,000. Within less than two years, the circulation of the *Times* was up to 31,797, compared with the *Trib*'s 50,624.

The *Times* was losing close to \$2 million a year on its international edition. The *New York Herald Tribune* was losing \$150,000 a year on its Paris edition. Something had to give—merger negotiations were held sporadically from 1963 on—but nothing did until the *New York Herald Tribune* ceased publication on April 23, 1966.

Inevitably, deprived of the *Herald Tribune* News Service copy, the Paris edition would follow. But it didn't. At a dinner at Art Buchwald's house in Washington, Walter Thayer, the president of what became known as Whitney Communications, turned to the woman seated next to him and said, "Why don't you buy into our *Paris Herald Tribune*?"

"What a fine idea," said Katharine Graham, owner of the *Washington Post*.

Within two weeks Mrs. Graham's paper owned 45 percent of the *Trib*—now the only "*Trib*." Cash and news began flowing from Washington. Less than a year later, on May 22, 1967, the international edition of *The*

New York Times folded and its owners bought a one-third share of the *Herald Tribune*. The deal created a tripartite ownership: Whitney, the *Post*, and the *Times*. The next day the surviving Paris English-language daily, grown into a European paper now, appeared under its present name: *International Herald Tribune*—with an underline reading "Published with The New York Times and The Washington Post." (The order was established by a coin toss.)

By 1968 circulation had jumped above 100,000. Suddenly, as in Bennett's time, the paper's growth seemed limited only by distribution problems. He had used yellow *Herald* trucks and even racing cars to get the papers as far out of Paris as possible. Later the paper had its own fleet of yellow airplanes. Bennett would doubtless be dismayed by the changes that have overtaken the *Herald*'s work force since his day—he was never much of a union man—but he would be extremely pleased to know that his paper has managed to keep abreast of modern technology. The same journal whose inaugural copy rattled out across the Atlantic cable a hundred years ago became, in 1974, the first newspaper on earth to use telephone transmission to begin facsimile printing in other countries. By its hundredth year the American newspaper that James Gordon Bennett, Sr., had liked to call his "village paper" was printing simultaneously in Paris, London, Rome, Zurich, Hong Kong, The Hague, Marseilles, and Miami (for the Americas). And there were plans, some very tentative, to print in Rome, Tokyo, Casablanca, Delhi, Stockholm, Istanbul, and Rio de Janeiro.

Bennett had been very choosy about his village neighbors. He edited his Herald for the rich and powerful, reporting on their comings and goings, fashions and fun, proud to claim that two hundred copies daily went to the czar's court in Russia. The rich and powerful changed over one hundred years and so did their interests—to market tables and oil prices, congressional debate and defense budgets. The Herald changed, too, over the years and now can claim that more than four hundred copies daily go to the Soviet Union. The *International Herald Tribune's* village is global.

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