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ADDRESS OF MRS. LYNDON B. JOHNSON BEFORE
THE LUNCHEON AT THE ANNUAL CONVENTION OF
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS MANAGING EDITORS ASSOCIATION

YOU -- AND TOMORROW'S MAIN STREETS

Mr. Beebe, Friends:

There is method in my madness in accepting an invitation to speak to the most discerning audience in the world.

Frankly, I want to turn over some of my problems to you.

You see, a funny thing happened after the President's address on Natural Beauty. Everyone started doing something about it.

And, if you think your letters-to-the-editor columns bring a variety of opinion, I invite you to come read mine.

But, let me point out, all you have to do is print them. I have to answer them.

There are problems of zoning, of saving historic buildings, of enhancing the city's waterfronts and highway approaches that pour over my desk.

One lady wrote: "Dear Mrs. Johnson, I've been writing to the city commissioners for three years about my big problem. Now I hear you have a committee to make Washington, D.C. more beautiful. Can you folks come over here and clean up the rubbish and rats in my neighbor's yard?"

One earnest gentleman described at great length his ability to make a machine which could eliminate junk automobiles with a "Whoosh". Part of its design was a secret (which could be revealed if I invited him to tea).

Then a lady in Texas struggled hard to transform a small weed-choked island of city property into a lush growth of vines and flowers using the money she had saved from her grocery budget. For weeks, she donned her shorts and went out to weed and spade.

"From the women, I get compliments; from the men, whistles," she reports.

I won't take time to read you the thousands of serious letters from civic beautification committees, garden clubs and conservationists who report their activities. They are thrilling -- filled with ideas which we try to pass on.

And they are evidence that a big hometown story is underway. I'm willing to spend my energies to help make it count for our country, but quite frankly, gentlemen, I think you are in a better position to do something about it than I am.

I have been told by some of your members to be quite specific. So -- with your permission, may I manage your beautification news?

MORE

One of your distinguished colleagues, the late H. L. Mencken, once said he had spent his life watching the growth of the roadside jungles in our nation and had been forced to the gloomy conclusions that the American people do not merely tolerate ugliness, but have a positive passion for it.

I cannot agree with Mr. Mencken, but I do think that we -- as a nation -- have just begun to accept beauty as a necessity to our vocabulary.

Beauty is a fragile word. Once, its use was reserved for the tender little lady who did needlepoint.

Politically, it has been an almost embarrassing word. Few men of business or politics would talk of "beauty".

Those who did were apt to feel like a 16-year-old boy quoting poetry, self-conscious and foolish.

Or, it hung between the walls of galleries. It lay within the gates of parks.

Perhaps a combination of our affluence, our technology, and leisure time has given us the courage to use the word right out in public.

Beauty -- to the editor -- is the biggest story in his hometown. Probably the uncovered story. For we are just beginning to get concerned about the way the hometown looks.

To the businessman, beauty means helping the downtown area be orderly, attractive, pleasant and alive -- perhaps alive is the best word.

To the community leader, it means trying to attract new business with all the lures -- water, recreation, a happy climate for families.

In the war on poverty, as we have raised the curtain on some of our most blighted conditions, we have come to know how essential beauty is to the human spirit. You can find the human craving for it in small things and large. And you see the high cost of ugliness.

When I go into the poorest neighborhoods, I look for the flash of color -- a geranium in a coffee can, a window box against the scaling side of a tenement, a border of roses struggling in a tiny patch of open ground. Where flowers bloom, so does hope -- and hope is the precious, indispensable ingredient without which the war on poverty can never be won.

In our city areas, where people work, we may achieve a semblance of efficiency in a great, unrelieved complex of buildings which is no more than a gigantic filing cabinet for people and automobiles. But unless beauty is included in the rebuilding, the most important ingredient will be missing. We will not hear the sound of laughter which marks the soaring spirit.

The peril to tomorrow's Main Street is already at hand -- indeed, each day, we are losing lead time in acquiring the breathing room, the green spaces which will save our cities and their inhabitants.

The year 2,000 is not a distant, improbable date of interest only to the authors of science fiction. We are only a generation away from that magic number; many of you will be around to celebrate -- or to mourn -- the turning century. By that date, the estimated population of America will be 300 million. Eighty-five percent of them will live in urban areas. One-third of them living in ten metropolitan areas with populations ranging from 5 to 23 million.

This, then is the dimension of your biggest and most critical assignment, for what you do now will have much to say about how Americans live then.

You are the ones who can awaken, lead, and speak. You are the yeast of your communities.

Each day, the world is on tiptoes waiting to hear the news from India and Pakistan and Viet Nam. But there is a big story underway in your hometown, how it will grow.

Consider the reader. The news gives him cause to worry and offers little he can do EXCEPT worry. But the story of what is -- and what can -- happen in making his hometown more attractive can activate him into constructive help.

The climate for action has never been better. There is more imaginative thinking, working, planning on urban environment than ever before.

Let me just suggest a few things that help bring the hometown story to life. Many of them are already being done by many of you, but I would like to point out the things I consider most helpful.

1) Put able, knowledgeable reporters on the beautification beat. You can cover plans and alternate plans day after day, but finally little gets done unless the reader can visualize through perceptive reporting what they mean to him and to the state as well as his city. Good interpretation is needed. Some newspapers are already doing this and finding that it gives continuity to the story.

The alert reporter can often point to a spot where some shrubs and flowers will help bring color and beauty to the city. Not all efforts have to be big efforts.

2) Some of your newspaper seminars and state association meetings would do well to look into the wide range of stories that affect the growth and reshaping of cities.

They could establish contact for your writers with the experts -- the architects, planners, landscape architects, conservationists. There is a mine of interesting information there. And your writers can learn more about the technical considerations involved so they can evaluate them. Newspapers share with these experts a great interest in the well-being of their community.

3) Nothing helps so much as pictures which enable the reader to visualize what is taking place.

I remember counting 26 broken windows in a Washington school. There was not a shred of grass or a bush to relieve the prison-like look of the school. But when Washington merchants took on the task of landscaping these schools and enlisted the help of students, no more windows were broken.

The story and pictures have prompted an effort to add shrubs and trees to a long list of bleak institution-like schools.

People will respond to the plea to save a tree, maintain a park, beautify a triangle, retain the view of the river, if they know what is at stake and know it in time. Consider the lessons of your own experience: how much ground has been lost for beauty in your city because the public did not understand what was afoot in time, and was confronted too late with the ultimate discouragement of the accomplished fact?

I think also of what picture stories can mean in helping along the clean-up, paint-up campaigns that get underway in many cities.

Recently, in Washington, some members of my committee helped organize 37 blocks in a low-income neighborhood. They persuaded merchants to contribute \$3400 worth of paints and brushes, rakes, shovels and brooms to the cause.

One summer week, there were 1,000 boys and girls and 200 adults enlisted to clean out the trash. Sixty-five truckloads were hauled away.

The rakes and brooms are all set for the next neighborhood.

But most of all, I believe the effect would be on those who worked at it. I think they must have a new pride in their city.

Taking a visual inventory of the city may help the citizen know what needs to be done and what doing it means to the city.

4) I would suggest that your readers might like to hear what other cities are doing about their problems. City leaders and reporters might go to see what has happened in New Haven, in Hartford, in Peoria, Sacramento, Rochester, Norfolk. Seeing and telling the story of how these cities have coped with problems will help you find the answers to your own. How to make the most of the waterfront for the people? How to find the creek that runs through the town where open spaces can be purchased and carved out for hiking and bicycle trails? How can the city buy some of it while it is \$100 an acre instead of \$1,000?

5) And then, there is the specific situation of your own plant. I doubt that there are many editors present who can look out of his office window and be pleased with what he sees. You are located somewhere near the heart of what the planners call "Center City". It is true that your editions follow subscribers into the newer and pleasanter areas beyond the declining business districts -- where, incidentally, they go to reach what the city has lost -- some natural beauty -- trees and streams which get farther and farther away.

Some of you may count your readers in the satellite cities and the surviving villages. But it is downtown that one must seek the pulse of a city...downtown where you are. When a town dies, the newspaper is one of the first victims.

And when beauty returns to any part of a city, so does health.

I am aware that the statement is simple and the deed is not. There is much to be done. But the goal of rebuilding our cities into places to live in -- not places to escape from -- is a challenging one.

All over America, our great newspapers have a rare opportunity not just for normal civic leadership but for creative leadership in building an environment that enriches the lives of all the people of the community.

This starts with the man who carelessly throws litter out of the car window, but at its worst, it is large scale greed that squeezes out every drop of our environment.

It may mean fighting municipal vandals, prodding neglectful leaders, exhorting the public. But it is worth doing.

If our metropolitan newspapers do not care enough to fight for the very life of our great cities, who will?

The question is a fair one. And there is no doubt in my mind how you will answer it.

Thank you for asking me here today.

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