

Clarence Streit in the words of a friend

BY VICTOR REINEMER

Three years ago, in Alaska, I read about a homecoming planned in Anchorage for one of the city's "old timers." He had lived in the city during the 1940s. I tore out the article for Clarence Streit to enjoy when I returned to Washington.

There, only a week before, Clarence had prepared me for the Alaskan bush with tales of his venture in that great land as a young man. One of the assignments he carried out in Alaska as a surveyor was platting what became the city of Anchorage. That was in 1916—70 years ago and some 30 years before the "old timer" of the 1940s arrived there.

The independent, frontier spirit which drew Missouri-born Streit to Alaska and other remote parts of the Rocky Mountains as a surveyor, prior to World War I, emerged early in his career as a newsman, and signaled his vision of united democracies.

Streit edited the *MONTANA KAIMIN*, the student newspaper at the University of Montana, as World War I approached. (As editor of the same student paper, after World War II, I drew inspiration from his already yellowed editorial pages.) Two days before President Woodrow Wilson's declaration of war, the

student body held a patriotic demonstration, and sent the president a telegram pledging its "enthusiastic support of your every undertaking."

Streit demurred. He voted against, and the next day editorially decried the mob-mindedness of the students and the blind obedience expressed in the telegram:

"If it had said," Streit wrote, "we are behind you in every move you make to aid the cause of democracy against autocracy, and we urge you to make the entrance of the United States into the war dependent upon the definite agreement of the allies to establish a league to enforce

peace after the conflict is over; and while overpowering the German government to oppose dismembering and economically crushing that nation and thus sowing the seeds of future warfare, I would have been among the first to say 'aye.'"

Nevertheless, Streit was among the first 50,000 American troops to reach France. In June 1918 he transferred from a railway engineers' regiment to the Intelligence Service and was attached to the American Peace Commission. There he had access to the daily record of secret meetings and confidential dispatches among government and military leaders.

Streit also dealt with the unsophisticated terrorism control techniques of that era—one of his duties was to "smell" the bouquets sent to President Wilson to see that they contained no bombs.

After returning to Montana for his B.A. in journalism in 1919 he went to Oxford to read history and economics as a Rhodes scholar. In 1921 he married Jeanne DeFrance, the perceptive Parisian who has been his principal strength and collaborator for 65 years.

Starting as a "temporary" for the *PHILADELPHIA PUBLIC LEDGER*, Streit covered the Greco-Turk War, coronation of Pope Pius XI, Mussolini's advent, the Turkish Peace Conference, Olympic games, abolition of the Moslem Caliphate, and the birth of the Turkish and Greek republics. After brief interludes with the *NEW YORK SUN* and *LONDON DAILY HERALD* he began his distinguished career with the *NEW YORK TIMES* in 1925.

His front-line dispatches on the Riff War in Morocco, and tours in Latin America and the cable desk in New York City, brought him the coveted assignment in 1929 as the *NEW YORK TIMES*



correspondent at the League of Nations in Geneva. There his peers elected him president of the international association of journalists assigned to the League.

Thus began the tumultuous decade that led Streit, while reporting on Hitler's rise and the democracies' disunity, to immerse himself in study of federal systems. He foresaw a war worse than those he had intimately known, and determined to do all within his remarkable powers to avert it.

Honing his arguments with fellow journalists in Swiss cafes, Streit reasoned that national sovereignty had become a fetish, and had magnified petty differences among the democracies. Leagues, pacts and alliances concluded of, by and for governments had invariably failed; but federal unions constituted of, by and for individuals had a remarkable history of democratic growth and prosperity. He observed that in many ways the democracies of the North Atlantic community had more in common by the 1930s than did the 13 colonies when they united in 1787.

By 1934 he had his ideas and arguments in a manuscript which he offered to publishers. No takers. He completely reorganized and rewrote the book, simultaneously renewing his research on federal and U.S. constitutional principles. The book was rejected, rewritten, rejected, rewritten—and again rejected, even as League of Nations impotence in the Ethiopian crisis deepened his convictions.

In July 1938, convinced that world war would break out in a year if the democracies did not federate, Streit privately published 300 copies of *UNION NOW*. He gave copies to influential statesmen. Finally, Harper's decided to publish the book, in March 1939.

Almost overnight, it profoundly affected statesmen and citizens the world over. Hundreds of thousands of copies sold. The Book-of-the-Month Club distributed it as a dividend. French and Swedish translations soon appeared.

The German translation was cancelled by the outbreak of the war which he had sought so hard to prevent. As the flames of war engulfed the seas and continents readers of the book banded together and formed Federal Union, now known as the Association to Unite the Democracies.

Churchill offered union to France, but too late; France was already crushed. Only after the war would Streit's supporters in government be able to take the initiatives that led to the Marshall Plan, NATO, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

During the 1940s, as president of Federal Union, Streit spoke at thousands of meetings, continuing his writing throughout. His tall, spare figure and friendly smile became a familiar sight on college campuses, in radio studios, and on lecture platforms the country over.

I well remember his visit to our Sigma Chi chapter house at the University of Montana in 1947. After dinner a group of us gathered with him in the library, lined with rows of pictures of chapter members killed in the war, including his nephew, Norman C. Streit Jr. '41. We talked five hours, about war and peace, freedom and union.

Yes, union now!—to ward off yet another world conflagration, to give individuals the freedom to attain their dreams, ambitions and potential. Or freedom just to translate the quatrains of Persian poets, as Clarence loved then and now to do, just as he compulsively composed and sang ditties about his beloved Montana: "Where the 'taters grow so great, you can't ship 'em out-of-state, Mon-ta-na, Mon-ta-na."

Federal Union began publishing monthly *FREEDOM & UNION* magazine, which Streit edited, in 1946. When I returned from a year in Europe in 1949 and needed a job I wrote to Streit, who invited me to his Washington, D.C. home to discuss matters.

It so happened, he said, that he needed an assistant in history, literature, philosophy, research techniques and journalism. Politics too, for by then the bipartisan move to call an Atlantic convention, led by Sen. Estes Kefauver, D-Tenn., was picking up steam.

By 1951, as my marriage neared, it became clear that I would need more money. Clarence said—so truthfully—that \$70 a week was all Federal Union could pay. We came up with the perfect blend of my and his short-term strategies; he helped me get a job at \$90 a week—with a newspaper whose publisher wanted an editorial writer who understood what the federal system and Atlantic Union were all about.

Since then, as the years and decades quickly passed, this Renaissance man has continually enriched the lives of old friends and their families, and of new reporters discovering what he learned generations ago.

It is spring today—no ice to contend with, as on our gathering January 21 and so many of those 90 birthdays. The blossoms abound by the Ontario Apartments where Clarence and Jeanne live. As you walk up the driveway, you may see that familiar figure, admiring beauty, inhaling life, and sharing both with old and new friends. Tarry there, and imbibe the frontier of freedom.