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EDITORS' NOTE

A lot of 'oops' and 'pardon me'

In this column Entertainment Editor Steve Gelman describes his associate, Staff Writer William A. McWhirter, whose article on think-tank entrepreneur Herman Kahn appears in this issue.

Unlike most writers at work, Bill McWhirter does not guard his revelations until he can get them on a printed page. As he researches a story he feels obligated to share each new vision, each new fact. He will charge at a colleague, his hands flailing furiously—chest high, palms down—as if he were pushing in the heads of a pair of hostile jockeys. And then, in a pitch of voice that must have first been heard when Noah discovered it had stopped drizzling, he will screech his inevitable preamble: "You just won't be-lieve this!"

As he searches for a focus, McWhirter is everywhere, like a young, gangling Great Dane, exploring tangents, experiencing, learning everything about his new turf. One Friday he left the office for a week in Boston on an education story; three days later he cabled in from Hawaii. Another time, when he'd gone off on assignment to a monastery, he reported back from the suburbs of San Antonio where, he said, he'd just discovered the most fascinating, down-to-roots American family—lovely kids, inventive parents and, you just won't be-lieve this, a talking myna bird who answers the telephone. Delivering himself of all this bewilderment, he has been known to drive associates to surreal exercise. One recently decided it would be most instructive to be able to peer inside heads. In Robert McNamara's, say, things would surely be compartmentalized; in McWhirter's, at that particular time, there would be all manner of matter whirling, colliding, offering up a lot of "oops" and "pardon me."

The dazzle is as valuable a part of the McWhirter style as his artistry of language, that blend of 1960s psychedelia and mid-'20s Americana. To complete his view of South Vietnamese politics (LIFE, May 3, 1968), for example, he interviewed political prisoners in Saigon by smuggling correspondence in and out with the jail laundry, and his impertinence did not in the least surprise the South Vietnamese. Any encore was conceivable, after all, from the man who on a prior Vietnam assignment had urged his parents and kid sister to come over from Kansas City and then, the proper host as always, made sure they savored all his new home had to offer—including a trip to the war itself, right out there in a battle zone.

To learn about Herman Kahn, who gets paid to solve the world's problems, McWhirter read his subject's books, listened to his lectures and moved into the Kahns' house, cooking breakfast for Herman and scrubbing the kitchen with Herman's wife. He also invited them to his own Manhattan apartment where his gentleman's gentleman served up caviar and champagne, and his fiancée said she was sorry they hadn't been there the night before when Bill had flames roaring in the fireplace and, because it happened to still be summer, the air conditioners roaring at the same time. "Bill McWhirter," Herman Kahn said later, "certainly has a remarkable ability to avoid the cliché."



BILL McWHIRTER

George P. Hunt
GEORGE P. HUNT,
Managing Editor

LIFE

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At the Democratic Convention

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CORRUPTION OF CHICAGO POLICE

Where Discipline Broke Down



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