

## WINCHELLESE

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WHEN the history of the American language during the twentieth century is finally written Walter Winchell will probably achieve his ambition of being credited with the popularizing of the word *whoopee* in noun usage. Winchell long believed he was the actual creator of the expression until he happened to read it in a dictionary. Under the heading, "Things I Never Knew Till Now," he admits

That Funk and Wagnalls New Standard Dictionary, just out, finally includes the word "whoopee." It states that "whoopee" was first used in a play produced in 1622, but what it doesn't explain is why over 300 years passed before "whoopee" was finally recognized and admitted to the language.<sup>1</sup>

If Winchell can not be credited with the creation of the word *whoopee*, there are plenty of other expressions which he has fathered and which are now current among his readers and imitators and constitute a flash language which has been called Winchellese. Through a newspaper column which has nation-wide circulation Winchell has achieved the position of dictator of contemporary slang. In the past such slangers as Ring Lardner and "Tad" Dorgan have rivalled his influence, but have not equalled it. In number of readers he is surpassed only by Author Brisbane.

Winchell owes his popularity to that perverse but persistent trait of human nature, an appetite for petty gossip about the great and near great. His trick is to forecast the marriages and divorces of people in the public eye with any savory details which may delight scandalmongers. This information he couches in the raciest language at his command. Some of the expressions for falling in love used by Winchell are *pushing it, sizzle for, That Way, Go for Each Other, garbo-ing it, uh-huh*; and in the same category, *new Garbo, trouser-crease-eraser, and pash*. Some Winchellisms for marriage are *middle-aisle it, Altar it, handcuffed, Mendelssohn March, Lohengrin it, and merged*. For expectation of offspring he uses *expecting a blessed event, Act of God, baby-*

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<sup>1</sup> April 10, 1930, in his column, "On Broadway," published in the *New York Daily Mirror* and syndicated throughout the country. The Oxford historical dictionary gives the following note on the first use of *whoopee*: c. 1450 *Mankind* 600 in *Macro Plays* 22. Whope! Who! Mercy hath brokyn hys neke-kycher a-vows.

*bound*, and *being stork'd*. Expression for divorce include *On the Verge*, *have it Paris'd*, *have it abrogated*, *curdled* (usually for merely falling out of love), *have it Reno-vated*, *have the seal shattered*, and *being melted*. One word of which he is inordinately proud is *phffft* which he uses for anything which acts like a wet firecracker. In case the divorcees, *his Ex* and *her Ex*, are reconciled they will either be *arm-in-arming it* or actually *re-welded*.

Winchell's native habitat is Manhattan Island, and especially Broadway, which appears in his writings under the kennings *Main Stem*, *Gulch*, *Hardened Artery*, and *Grandest Canyon*. His vocabulary reflects the life and mores of this street. Intoxicating beverages he calls *giggle water*, *whoopee water*, *silly milk*, and *laughing soup*. He loves to hear *torch warblers* sing *torch chunes* in *lah-de-dah* shows and *terpsichorines* and *torso tossers* dance in *revusicals* which might even turn out *floperoo*s. His prejudice against the Jewish race is evidenced by his frequent jokes on some *heeb* or *heebess* of the *Go-Ghetto* district. By a stroke of unconscious genius he called the largest *Joosh*-owned theatre in Manhattan a *cinemagogue*. The only person who has been able to irritate Winchell is St. John Ervine, the British playwright, whom he calls *Sinjin* and *St. Yawn*. Winchell hates, besides Ervine, *tall millinery* (high hats), *paw empawriums* (manicure parlors), and anyone who *xx's* people. Many of his associates are *Park Rowgues* (journalists) who work on *ante meridian rags* (morning papers). He seems to spend every *yawning* (morning) in night clubs enjoying *rat-a-tap dancers* and other *maple massagers*, but doesn't care for the *seals* (negresses) of the *sepia sin spots* (Harlem dives). In short, Winchell is a *Broadwayfarer* of *Timesqueer*, a minion of the *Daily Mirrrrr*, who makes his living by printing *t. d.* (the dirt) on some *swelegant towner* of the *Sussil Register* with plenty of *What it Takes* (money) who is being sued for *b. of p.* (breach of promise) by somebody's *headache* (wife) who will not settle *o. o. c.* (out of court).

The spelling which Winchell uses is a curious mixture of the phonetic and the unphonetic. Whereas the spelling reformers will welcome his days of the week, *Chewsdee*, *Wensdee*, *Thursdee*, *Fridee*, and *Satdee*, they no doubt will frown on his *phrau*, *phrail*, *phlicker*, *phavorite*, *phffft*, and *phormer Phollies phemme*. Some of his abbreviations which will pain the purists are *hosp* for hospital, *Para* for Paramount, *B'way* for Broadway, *b'fast* for breakfast, *b'down* for break down, *C* for a hundred dollars, and *G* (grand) for a thousand. His phonetic transcriptions are vulgar for the most part, and yet accurate

within the bounds of the conventional symbols which he must use: *Yurrup* for Europe, *ca-razee* for crazy, *onginoo* for ingenue, *moom pitcher* for moving picture, *choongum* for chewing gum, *hunnit* for hundred, and *certinney* for certainly.

The permanence of Winchell's influence on the colloquial English language in America can not yet be ascertained, but considering that he is read daily by almost five million people, one can hardly deny that there is an influence.