



PRINT THE LEGEND; THE HOLLYWOOD FRONTIER EDITOR

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Western motion pictures and television programs produced during the twentieth century developed recognizable tropes for several stock characters that audiences could easily recognize. Among these was the character of the frontier newspaper editor, and the presentation of this stereotype was demonstrably different from the actual experience of newspapermen in the west. Comparison of the films with the historical record can reveal these differences and, in at least one case, a portrayal that is surprisingly accurate.

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In a scene from the film *My Darling Clementine*, Henry Fonda in the role of Wyatt Earp bemusedly asks Mac the bartender if he has ever been in love. “No,” answers the mixologist, “I’ve been a bartender all my life.” The exchange is humorous but also emphasizes the stereotypical presentation of stock western film characters. The cowboy, the doctor, the dance hall girl, and the blacksmith are all easily recognizable in westerns, and when their part expands above that of mere idle spectators witnessing street violence, audiences have certain expectations of their actions. Another peripheral character whose role is sometimes explored beyond passing mention is the frontier newspaper editor. Hollywood’s presentation of the ink-stained fraternity that chronicled the old west has been somewhat consistent throughout the twentieth century, and by taking a closer look at several key film and television productions that consistency becomes apparent.

By its very nature, newspapering on the American frontier left a record easily examined by historians. As printer/editors attempted to establish their business in cowtowns, mining camps, and farming centers they had certain adaptations to make based on their isolation and unique economic conditions. External criticism of the papers they produced gives visual confirmation of their struggles with supply logistics and labor demands. Paper shortages, type font substitutions, and the repeated placement of boilerplate and “standing matter” (preset blocks of type) are obvious clues gleaned from the physical appearance of the paper. The internal content of newspapers also tells a tale. The predominance of legal advertisements speaks to the dependence on government notices far beyond any that of any other advertisers, and the repeated placement of “dun notices” imploring both subscribers and advertisers to pay their bills reveals the difficulty of doing business in a cash scarce environment. The unrelenting town boosterism and unabashed political bias in frontier newspapers contrast sharply with the stance of impartiality that modern newspapers embrace as their ethic. But perhaps the most dramatic aspect of frontier journalism, and the one that Hollywood has almost completely ignored, is the widespread practice of “personal journalism,” the war of words that editors fought when confronting their rivals.

One would think that the same medium that invented the “showdown” between the cowboy hero and the villain would be as equally efficient in depicting a vicious duel of words escalating into violence

between adversarial editors. Libelous accusations and physical threats exchanged between competing newspapers provided entertaining copy for readers at the time, but in almost every western movie and television show of the twentieth-century, the editor character has been presented as the sole publisher in the town. This omission has resulted in a different representation for the movie newspaperman, and one that is simultaneously complimentary and contradictory of the actual historical record.

As other researchers have pointed out, relatively few twentieth century westerns feature newspapermen as major characters, and even these portray the editors with physical and behavioral traits that identify them as “others” in the storyline.¹ In the western film the editor is usually older, heavier, and better dressed than the cowboy hero, and his fondness for alcohol is occasionally implied. Unlike his historical counterpart, the cinematic frontier editor is devoted to an anachronistic dedication to presenting impartial, unbiased news. In addition, the western newspaperman is distinguished by his intellectual isolation from his fellow townsfolk and their recognition of him as a community leader. However, the most consistent stereotype for this character is his inevitable martyrdom which galvanizes the hero into taking violent action.

An important distinction between the genre’s treatment of local newspapermen and eastern writers needs to be made. In most films the local journalist is sympathetically portrayed, unlike the sometimes hostile treatment given to a writer engaged in spinning tales of the frontier for a distant, and presumably Eastern, readership.² As such, this study focuses only on the films with significant roles for local newspaper editors and provides examples of the character trope that formed in the twentieth century.

It is interesting to note the earliest significant film depiction of a frontier newspaper editor occurred in *Cimarron* (1931), the first western to win an Academy Award and a film remade a generation later with a similar interpretation of the editor’s role. Based on the bestselling Edna Ferber novel of the same name, *Cimarron* tells the story of Yancy Cravat (Richard Dix), a footloose attorney who establishes a frontier newspaper but eventually deserts his family, forcing his wife Sabra into the role of editor. At the outset of the film, Cravat reluctantly assumes the mantle of newspaperman after a local tough kills the publisher of the *Osage Wigwam*. The publisher’s martyrdom forces Cravat into the role of an avenging action hero and he guns down the murderer at the town’s first organized church service. As an editor, Cravat’s ability to shape community opinion by an anachronistic observance of impartial reporting is acknowledged, but most of his activities in the rest of the film center on his prowess with a gun or his work as an attorney. He later shoots an outlaw whose gang attempts to rob the local bank and uses courtroom histrionics, rather editorial action, to successfully defend a local prostitute. *Cimarron’s* pioneering depiction of a frontier editor is actually more a tale of gender relationships than western newspapering, but it did establish the requirement of the editor’s death or suffering for his community in all the films to come, including the 1960 remake with Glenn Ford in the role of Cravat. In that film, too, it is the death of editor Sam Pegler (Robert Keith) during the land rush that convinces Cravat to establish his newspaper.³

Westerns produced after *Cimarron* repeated the martyrdom requirement of the frontier editor role and none with more prescience than *Barbary Coast*. Filmed in 1935, this California gold rush epic pitted villain Louis Chamalis (Edward G. Robinson) against the entire town of San Francisco, with frontier editor Colonel Marcus Aurelius Cobb as an opposing force. Played by actor Frank Craven, Cobb sets the stage for the cinematic stereotype with his first scene in the film by stating “Newspapermen are either drunkards or idealists; I’m afraid I am both.” Cobb is never shown drunk or even drinking but is instead portrayed as a demoralized idealist when Chamalis forcibly censors the very first issue of the *San Francisco Clarion* as soon as it comes off the press. Forced thereafter to print only mundane local events, Cobb is prevented by intimidation from publishing the truth about Chamalis’s crooked roulette game even when urged to do so by the town’s leaders. It is a disgruntled gambling loser, Sawbuck McTavish (Donald Meek), who actually brings things to a head when he posts a handmade broadside exposing the swindle, something Cobb had lacked the gumption to report in his paper. McTavish and Cobb are both shot by Chamalis’s henchman while standing in front of the printing office, and in a dramatic death scene, Cobb instructs his editorial staff to muster the courage he lacked and print the truth, all while “Onward Christian Soldiers” plays sweetly on the soundtrack. The newspaper defiantly publishes the facts and is

distributed to the citizens of San Francisco by the armed men of a vigilance committee. Chamalis is eventually defeated through the power of the press (with little help from the curiously inept romantic lead played by Joel McCrae).

The frontier editor who dies to save the western town got another great performance in *Dodge City* (1939). This film, which starred the Hollywood power couple of Errol Flynn and Olivia DeHavilland, cast stocky, short-statured character actor Frank McHugh in the role of frontier editor Joe Clemens. From the very start, Clemens is shown as a pillar of the community and a fearless reporter of unbiased journalistic truth. Again, this editor is a sober crusader, using his control over the local media to either lambast the villains in the columns of the *Dodge City Star* or a series of prominently placed broadsides which hammer home the same points. Clemens is a confident man, perhaps too confident for his own good. When warned about the danger of publishing explicit evidence against the despicable gunman Yancy (Victor Jory), Clemens remains in his shop after hours and is assassinated. The editor's murder helps Flynn's character finally bring Yancy to justice because the villain's hand is stained from ink he picked up in the newspaper office.

The character of the frontier editor began to assume a recognizable cinematic trope by the early 1950s. The few westerns that included the editor as a stock character portrayed him as a different sort of insider whose intellectual courage comes to full fruition only after a sacrificial death. When the next western decided to make the local journalist the main character, this requirement presented a problem. Randolph Scott played the role of Ned Britt, a gunfighter who temporarily forsakes violence in favor of becoming a crusading frontier editor in the film *Fort Worth*. He accompanies a group of settlers to the Texas town where he is convinced by an old friend Blair Lunsford (David Brian) to settle and establish a newspaper. Britt is another confident, sober newspaperman, sure his publication of impartial truth is enough to "break" evildoers, including Lunsford who he suspects of lowballing Fort Worth real estate in anticipation of the railroad's arrival. But an editorial death must occur to galvanize the hero into action, and since the lead character of this film IS the editor, the writers of *Fort Worth* neatly substitute Britt's business partner, Ben Garvin (Bob Steele), as the sacrificial offering. Britt, to avenge Garvin's death and secure the future of Fort Worth symbolically straps his six-guns on *over* his printer's apron for the final showdown.

The year after wrapping up *Fort Worth*, Randolph Scott appeared in another western that featured a frontier editor character, *Carson City* (1952). Scott played "Silent" Jeff Kinkaid, a railroad engineer who returns to Carson City to build a railroad and reconnect with his half-brother, Alan Kincaid (Richard Webb), who works for a newspaper edited by Zeke Mitchell (Don Beddo). Mitchell is the strangest cinematic departure from the actual record of frontier editors because he rejects the historical role of town boosting to adamantly resist the railroad by insisting it will disrupt Carson City's peace and quiet. Asking the audience to believe a pioneer newspaperman would actually promote a stance against community development feeds into directly into the plot, however, because after Mitchell is killed by the villain, Alan takes over the newspaper and accuses his brother Jeff and the other the railroad men of performing the assassination. Eventually, Jeff solves the mystery, and the newspaper returns to its natural task of town boosting, rather than promoting an anti-growth message.

In all the aforementioned westerns, the frontier editor dies in order to galvanize the forces of good to triumph over evil. The influence of the newspaper itself is acknowledged as a molder of public opinion, but only the sacrificial demise of the editor himself serves as the catalyst for violent action. Another stereotypical trait of frontier editors or their printers, that of drunkenness, had been implied but not overtly shown in films until *Wichita*, a 1955 release about Wyatt Earp that starred Joel McCrea. When Earp retires from buffalo hunting and enters Wichita, he is immediately befriended by frontier editor Arthur Whiteside (Wallace Ford). In this case, it is not Whiteside's death that spurs the reluctant hero into taking violent action but rather the accidental shooting of a child. Whiteside's role seems to be in his moral support of Wyatt (expressed verbally if not in the columns of his paper) and chronic drunkenness that gives vent to his intellectual separation from the rank and file residents of the cowtown. During one of his inebriated musings, Whiteside reveals that celebrating, out-of-control cowhands were responsible for the death of his wife (and presumably the cause of his drinking) which helps reinforce Earp's decision

to take action. A surprising amount of screen time is given the character in this film, but his alcoholism is as much a part of his persona as publishing his newspaper.

The establishment of the frontier editor as a hard-drinking intellectual outsider who becomes a martyr came into full bloom in one of the best films of the genre ever produced, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. In 1962 legendary director John Ford paired two of Hollywood's leading male actors, John Wayne and James Stewart, in a tale one scholar has called the "most elegiac" of westerns due to its presentation of a tragic cowboy hero who will not survive in the civilized west he helps to create.⁴ The frontier editor in this film is Dutton Peabody (Edmund O'Brien), whose heavy drinking is somewhat of a common joke in the town of Shinbone. Peabody's intellectual isolation is underscored by an impromptu school founded by Stewart's character, Rance Stoddard, implying that literacy is not common among Shinbone's residents. But certainly the villain Liberty Valance (Lee Marvin) can read, since his rage over one of Peabody's accusatory columns is the motivation for a violent confrontation with Tom Donaphan (John Wayne) at the restaurant where Rance works as a dishwasher. While demonstrating both his alcohol addiction and his intellectual isolation from his fellow townsmen at a political meeting where he is elected as a territorial delegate, Peabody offers a modern journalist's protestation for the honor:

No! No you don't! No! I'm a newspaperman not a politician! No, politicians are my meat. I build 'em up and I tear 'em down. I wouldn't be one, I couldn't be one! It would destroy me! Oh, give me a drink! . . . Good people of Shinbone, I'm your conscience. I'm the still small voice that thunders in the night, I am your watchdog that howls against the wolves. I'm...I'm your father confessor... I'm...I'm...what else am I?

"The town drunk?" answers Donaphan jokingly.

Peabody's martyrdom comes after the political meeting when Valance and his henchmen enter the offices of the *Shinbone Star* and nearly beat the editor to death while wrecking the shop. It is this act that galvanizes Rance to forsake his embrace of the law and pick up a gun to face Valance, who he bests in a gunfight only through the secret intervention of Donaphan. Peabody recovers to give a passionate nomination speech for Rance at a second political meeting, clinching the latter's nomination as a territorial delegate due to his status as "the man who shot Liberty Valance." The film ends with an elderly Rance relating the true story of his political rise to another western newspaperman, and that editor's famous rejoinder that he intends to "print the legend" is one of the most oft repeated lines of any western film ever made.

After their heyday of the late 1950s and early 1960s, western movies began a slow decline in popularity, and film makers looked for new ways to interpret old stories. Some, like the "spaghetti" westerns made famous by Clint Eastwood, successfully experimented with the anti-hero format, while the "revisionist" subgenre explored ways to present contemporary issues as western metaphors. The Vietnam War proved a fruitful interpretive vehicle for films that used the Indian wars as a backdrop, such as *Soldier Blue* (1970) and *Little Big Man* (1970). The Watergate scandal and American appreciation for the part reporters played in exposing government corruption helped influence another film featured a frontier editor character, *Posse* (1975).

Posse was directed by and starred Kirk Douglas as Howard Nightingale, a politically ambitious marshal who hopes his election bid for senator will be clinched by his capture of a notorious robber. Nightingale's posse arrives in the town of Tesoto where Nightingale has several encounters with the local newspaper publisher Harold Hellman (James Stacy). Hellman is definitely an "other" physically (actor Stacy had suffered the loss of his left arm and leg in a 1973 motorcycle accident) and his intellectual isolation from the townsfolk is emphasized by his cynical distrust of Nightingale's political ambitions. Other than smirking sardonically while Nightingale makes a political speech, Hellman's work as an editor does not fit into the plot at all and when Tesoto eventually turns against the marshal and his posse it is due to their sexual exploitation and robbery of the town's leading citizens. Using a representative of the media to negatively reflect on the excesses of American politics speaks more to the political climate of the Nixon scandal than a historical representation of the frontier press. Overall, the editor in this film seems to have little purpose other than to give an acting job to a friend of the director.

Ironically, it was the western's migration to the small screen of the television that allowed for the most historically accurate depiction of a frontier editor in the late 1950s. Of course the serialization of any given storyline allows the film maker time to explore various themes that would be difficult to incorporate into a two-hour movie. Nevertheless, the one show ostensibly about, and even titled in recognition of, a western editor almost ignored the profession entirely. *Tombstone Territory* premiered in 1957 and required not only a suspension of belief from its viewer, but also a belief in an alternative historical universe. The show began every week with the stern-voiced narration of editor Harris Clayton Claibourne (Richard Eastam) who intoned the story about to be presented would be, "An actual account from the pages of my newspaper, the *Tombstone Epitaph*. This is the way it happened, in the town too tough to die!" This declaration of authenticity seems to transcend a mere fictional narration device but to actually confer historical standing to the teleplay. *Tombstone Territory* placed the fictional sheriff Clay Hollister (Pat Conway) in actual geographic settings interacting with named historical figures, but rarely used editor Claibourne's profession as a plot device, choosing instead to use his rich baritone voice to provide voiceover narration to each thirty-minute presentation. In ninety-three episodes only two specifically used the local newspaper as a major plot device, "A Bullet for the Editor" and "Coded Newspaper." A few other episodes used outside journalists, whose mission to exploit events to eastern rather than local readers predictably cast them in a negative light.

The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp, a serial which aired during the same years as *Tombstone Territory*, also made claims of historical veracity, which it delivered to a surprising degree over the six years of its broadcast. Starring Hugh O'Brian in the title role, the episodes traced Earp's career from Wichita to Dodge City and, finally, Tombstone, and in several the character of a frontier newspaperman played a significant role. In the episodes of the show's first season in 1955-56, Earp has multiple interactions with Marsh Murdock (Don Haggarty), the editor of the *Wichita Eagle*. Murdock is portrayed as a well-dressed, sober town leader as much as an editor, and his role in most episodes is that of a sounding board for Earp's decision-making process. The power of the newspaper in shaping local public opinion by presenting the impartial interpretation of the facts is a given, although Earp is not above the manipulation of the facts to achieve his ends. In one 1955 episode, "Frontier Journalism was Fearless," Wyatt convinces Murdock to lambast a candidate named John Clanton for Wichita mayor even though the editor protests, "I have quite a file on Clanton. I was hoping not to use it." As the threats of violence escalate against the newspaper, Murdock pushes too far and accuses Clanton's wife of drunkenness, a charge which gets the editor shot. He recovers to apologize to the woman and vow never to depart from journalistic impartiality again.

The episodes set in Dodge City rarely mention a newspaper at all, but there are a few notable exceptions. In "One Man Army," Earp is lured into an ambush outside of town by goading from a spurious free newspaper titled *The Rebel*. The sheet is produced by a completely anachronistic business owner, Inky Callum (Ken Christy) who operates an independent printing office that apparently never published a newspaper before. There is no mention of the town's regular newspaper to counteract the lies printed by Callum. In "Kill the Editor," the *Dodge City Globe-Times* is named as the town's sole newspaper and the new editor, Jim Murdock (Robert Patten) is identified as the brother of Marsh Murdock, Earp's old ally from Wichita. In the opening narration, viewers are reminded that "modern newspapermen dislike seeing the good old days portrayed by editors who were drunkards, incompetents, and scoundrels . . . Frontier journalism was a bitter struggle against lawless men who used horsewhips, fists, and guns to keep the facts from being printed." Even so, one of the first questions Murdock asks when taking over the newspaper are whether or not all his printers are drunks. As the story develops, a crooked reporter for the *Globe Times* attempts to frame Earp for the murder of a dance hall owner, and the marshal's insistence that Murdock adhere to the modern journalistic ethic of unbiased reporting almost leads to disaster. Again, there is no mention of a competing journal in the town.

When the setting of *Wyatt Earp* moved to Tombstone during the final years of the show's run, the cinematic depiction of the frontier editor reached its most historically valid form. The character of John P. Clum (Robert Stacy) appeared as both the crusading editor of the *Tombstone Epitaph* and the mayor of the town, just as his historical counterpart had done. In the episode titled "The Nugget and the Epitaph,"

Clum is recruited by Earp to establish his newspaper in opposition to the *Tombstone Nugget*, a journal dedicated to protecting the corrupt politicians and dangerous criminal organization headed by the Clanton family. Although this was the first time any film or teleplay had tackled the issue of dueling editors and personal journalism in a frontier town, the producers of the show felt compelled for the first and only time to present at the beginning of the episode a written disclaimer:

In the year 1880, Marshal Wyatt Earp was in Tombstone, Arizona Territory, and had dealings with John P. Clum, editor of a newspaper called "The Tombstone Epitaph," to combat the infamous "Ten Percent Ring." The dramatic episode you are about to see is based on historical fact and should not be associated with, nor considered an endorsement of or by any person, firm, or corporation presently existing.

This remarkable departure from the standard opening suggests that Wyatt Earp Enterprises, the show's producer, had concerns about possible legal action from both the competing *Tombstone Territory* show as well as the actual copyright holders of the *Tombstone Epitaph* newspaper title. As subsequent episodes proved, this caution had a visual influence on how the subject would be treated.

In "The Nugget and the Epitaph," the editor of the rival newspaper is not given a first name but simply referred to as Dameron (William Mims). When Earp recruits Clum to establish the *Epitaph* to counteract the lies printed in the *Nugget*, the new editor convinces him to arrest Dameron on a charge of "criminal libel," an actual crime in historical territorial Arizona but never actually pursued against a Tombstone newspaper publisher. Through his henchmen, Dameron tries to burn down the *Epitaph* office and fails, but then decides to smear Clum in his newspaper with a false affidavit as legal protection from future prosecution. Earp arrives on the scene, rescues the two Clum employees who are being coerced into signing the affidavit, and stuffs the spurious legal document into Dameron's mouth while growling "Print that in your paper!"

The dueling editors were the central part of a subsequent episode, "John Clum, Fighting Editor," which took a curious departure. In this episode, Clum is recognized as the editor of the newspaper on Earp's side, but the title of that newspaper is specifically never mentioned. The same canvas covered print shop is shown, but the name "Tombstone Epitaph" has been excised from the signboard out front, and when editor Dameron sends his goons to upend the wagon containing bundles of the latest *Epitaph* edition, the legend printed on the side is simply "Clum's Newspaper."⁵ After the sabotage, Clum angrily stomps into the *Nugget* office to physically assault Dameron, and later arms his printers with ax handles when he learns Dameron is sending another pair to wreck Clum's office. In spite of the self-censorship, the producers of the show presented the single most historically accurate aspect of old western newspapering when Clum complains to Earp about his impending financial collapse, "I got informed I don't get to print the county notices anymore!" This remarkable acknowledgment of one of historical frontier journalism's key identifying elements is nothing short of unique, although it is not mentioned again within the story. The episode concludes with Clum's exoneration from another "criminal libel" charge from Dameron due to Earp's clever detective work. For the balance of his appearances on the show, John Clum is portrayed more as Tombstone's mayor than a newspaper editor and the exploration of personal journalism. One other episode featuring Dameron, this time played by actor Charles Watts, shows the *Nugget* editor printing unchallenged lies about Earp that are backed by false witnesses. Earp's exoneration in "Old Slanders" is dependent on the reluctant help of chief villain Old Man Clanton (Trevor Bardette) rather than counteracting stories in the *Tombstone Epitaph*.

The frontier editor as portrayed in twentieth-century film and television established a pattern that audiences could easily recognize and respond to. A fearless "other," dedicated to the presentation of unvarnished factual truth as expressed by modern journalists, are the traits most commonly shared by the movie editors. While alcohol abuse is sometimes implied, that trait has not been as consistently presented as the editor's inevitable martyrdom to inspire action on the part of the film's hero. What the future holds for the cinematic pioneer newspaperman, and indeed for the western genre itself, is unknown. Frontier editors have appeared in at least two television serial westerns since 2001, in *Deadwood* and *Hell on*

Wheels, and while the characters in both films displayed a willingness to depart from the recognizable pattern set by their Hollywood predecessors, it remains to be seen how frontier journalists will play their parts in an admittedly shrinking genre.

Filmography

Cimarron (1931)
Barbary Coast (1935)
Dodge City (1939)
Fort Worth (1951)
Carson City (1952)
Wichita (1955)
The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp (1955-1961)
Tombstone Territory (1957-1961)
Cimarron (1960)
The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962)
Posse (1975)

References

1. Shawn McIntosh, "Six Shooters and the Fourth Estate," chapter in *Reading Deadwood: A Western to Swear By*, David Lavery, ed. (New York: L. B. Taurius, 2006), 35
2. David Lusted, *The Western*, (Harlow, England ; New York : Pearson/Longman, 2003), 42.
3. What makes *Cimarron* so fascinating for historians of western film, and of western journalism, is the fact that the story is based on the actual career of an Oklahoma frontier editor who became territorial governor, Thomas Ferguson. His wife, Elva, became the editor of their paper not through desertion, but because Ferguson wanted to keep his newspaper while serving at the territorial capitol and needed her to edit the publication in his absence. When novelist Edna Ferber arrived in Oklahoma to interview Elva for background on her novel, the editress was flattered and cooperated, but was less than enchanted with her fictional portrayal as a deserted wife. In 1937, an elderly Elva Ferguson decided to write her reminiscences of frontier newspapering, yet by that late date she confused her own memory of events with both the novel and the film, producing an autobiography that was demonstrably colored by both. Compare Edna Ferber, *Cimarron*, (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1930) 77; Elva S. Ferguson, *They Carried the Torch: The Story of Oklahoma's Pioneer Newspapers* (Kansas City: Burton Publishing Company, 1937), 35.
4. Lusted, 213.
5. Wyatt Earp Enterprises had successfully sued an unlicensed toy manufacturer that used the name "Wyatt Earp" on the packaging of its play suits, but did not use any mention of the show or its star Hugh O'Brian. The court ruled that the name of Wyatt Earp itself had such widespread recognition because of the show that the toy maker was in trademark violation regardless of the lack of any identification with the production. This ruling probably came back to haunt Wyatt Earp Enterprises when they tried to use the name "Tombstone Epitaph," and feared reprisals from the backers of the *Tombstone Territory* television series or even the newspaper itself, which was still very much alive in the "town too tough to die." See: WYATT EARP ENTERPRISES v. SACKMAN, INC., United States District Court S. D. New York, January 10, 1958.