

BY GEOFFREY NORMAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HUBERT SCHRIEBL

A Fifteen Round Writer

Bill Heinz: war correspondent,
sports columnist, novelist,
and
Vermont

On a lovely, balmy September day – the kind we see far too rarely in Vermont—I pull up outside the Village at Fillmore Pond on the outskirts of Bennington, Vermont, feeling what I assume are the common qualms. The place is, after all, full of old people. You can call them “seniors” all you want but it doesn’t change what they are—old people. Nobody likes to be reminded that he, too, will get old. And that’s if you are lucky.

But, then, if you want wisdom and you like listening to stories from older and, perhaps, better times, then you have come to the right place. Inside these walls, you’ll find thousands of years of wisdom, hundreds and

One of the great
storytellers of
American journalism
lives here and
I’ve come to
visit him.

hundreds of stories. In fact, one of the great storytellers of American journalism lives here and I’ve come to visit him. He was one of the first people I met when I came to live in Vermont, over 20 years ago. He was an idol of mine (I was trying to be a writer) before I met him and the longer I knew him, and the more of his work I read, the more strongly I felt that way. It was hero worship, I suppose, but that’s okay because, recently, the rest of the American reading public has caught up with me.

I leave the car unlocked (hard to imagine a car thief working this turf) and go inside. The lobby is bright and spacious and a few people sit on couches visiting. One man

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makes his way through the lobby, very slowly, using a walker. A companion moves along with him. I write my name and the time in the sign-in book and the receptionist gives me directions.

"Thank you," I say, starting down the hall and thinking how far this is from the turf where Bill Heinz made his name.

Back then, when there were more than half a dozen daily papers in New York City, he was known to millions of tough and discriminating readers as 'W.C. Heinz.' Many of them agreed with the assessment of some of his contemporaries and friends who included Grantland Rice, Red Smith, Jimmy Cannon, Paul Gallico, and Fred Graham; namely that among the giants who practiced their craft in the golden age of American sportswriting, Bill Heinz was the greatest of them all.

You could overwork all kinds of sports metaphors to describe what made Bill Heinz special. You could say that he could hit for average and with power; that he had speed and endurance; that he had the versatility to play any position. And so on and, tediously, so forth. But the thing about Heinz is that he was always so much more than a sportswriter. He wrote about sports, certainly, and did it bril-

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him financially secure (for a writer, anyway) he took a year away from the pressure of reporting and deadlines to write the novel he had been thinking about for years. He worked on the book—a story about a prizefighter and, more importantly, an honest trainer, for 11 months. Shortly before the publication of *The Professional*, a cable arrived from Cuba. Ernest Hemingway had read an advance copy of the book and pronounced it “the only good novel about a fighter I have ever read and an excellent first novel in its own right.”

The novel, while never a best-seller, became one of those books that generated a devout following of loyalists who pressed it on others and kept it alive by their ardor and word of mouth. *The Professional* was optioned several times for film and one screenplay was considered by the late actor Walter Mathau who said it was simply

Walter Mathau said
The Professional
was simply
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too good to ever be ruined by some movie maker. Too good to be made, in other words. The most dedicated of the book's admirers may have been other writers who recognized its seamless craftsmanship, its clean, spare language, and the way that Heinz did it without tricks. The most recent edition of *The Professional* comes, almost predictably, with an introduction by Elmore Leonard.

Heinz also wrote books about the world of medicine and was the co-author of a little volume of fiction that had been rejected by 17 publishers. The original text was the work of a doctor from Maine who had served as a combat surgeon in Korea. Heinz,



The 1932 Remington typewriter that he took to war is on his desk and he still uses it, though rarely.

who knew medicine and war and, more importantly, the art of fiction, saw what the raw manuscript needed in order to become a novel. The version that he reworked was published as M*A*S*H and it spawned, of course, a popular, iconoclastic film and one of the most highly rated, longest running series in the history of television. It also made Alan Alda the sensitive-man star of his time,

The version that he reworked was published as M*A*S*H* and it spawned a film and one of the most highly rated, longest-running series in the history of television

though you would have to imagine that Heinz, who always preferred guys who liked musty fight clubs, would have had a tough time staying in the same room with Alda who was a phony anti-phony. Heinz is the real deal.

He greets me, cordially, at the door to his tidy, one room apartment

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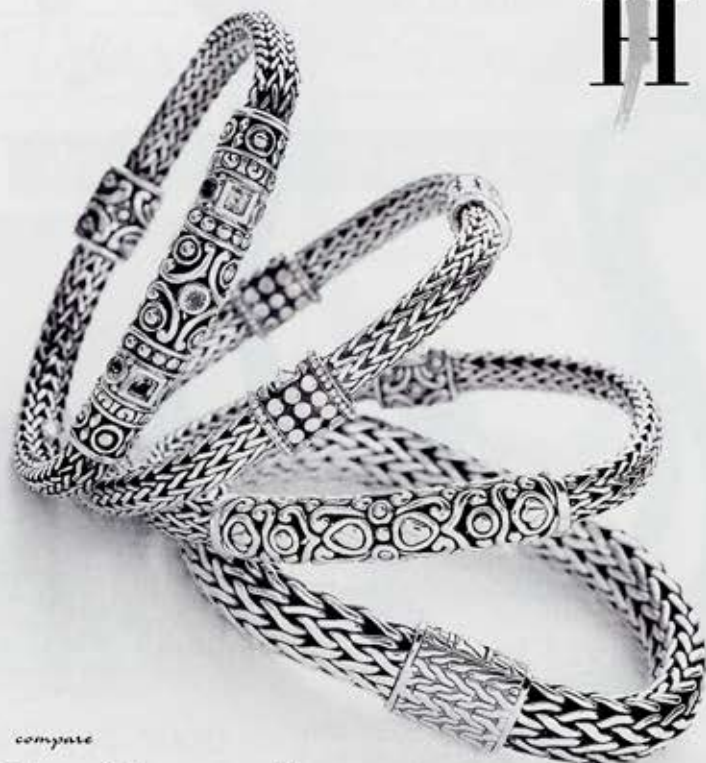
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on the first floor. The 1932 Remington typewriter that he took to war is on his desk and he still uses it, though rarely. He is stooped and he does not walk so much as shuffle, using a cane to get to his chair. Still, he offers to get me something to drink and his smile is genuine and you sense, quickly, that there is nothing feeble about his recall. I ask him about the great fights, and fighters, he once covered and he is off.

"Rocky Graziano," he says, "got

He liked to laugh and
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You didn't have to work
at all to imagine him
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rooms, bars, and gyms
of New York as
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occupied his own skin.

in trouble with this very powerful DA named Frank Hogan ..."

The story of Graziano's political woes leads, inevitably, to the ring and one of those epic brawls. Frail, now, Heinz cannot pantomime the fight and the punches the way he did when I first met him. My wife and I had just moved to Vermont from New York. A neighbor invited us to dinner and when he learned I was a writer, asked Bill and Betty Heinz as well.

I had read some of Heinz's great sports journalism, back then, including one of his newspaper stories that was collected in an anthology I carried around called *The Fireside Book of Baseball*. It was the only sample of Heinz's writing I could find on short notice to show my wife before we went to the dinner party. The piece



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was about a baseball pitcher who is sent down to the minors and is the last to know it. My wife loved the piece and told Heinz so. He was, as always, gracious.

But we both wondered, when we got home, why he was in Vermont. He seemed, even in semi-retirement, an utter New Yorker. He used phrases like "jerkwater town," and he clipped the words off like he was using shears. He liked to laugh and he had a way of puncturing pomposity. You didn't have to work at all to imagine him fitting in around the city rooms, bars, and gyms of New York as effortlessly as he occupied his own skin.

Heinz did his work on *M*A*S*H*, in 1968, a long way in miles and spirit from those venues. By then, he and his wife, Betty, were living in a house on some 220 acres they had bought on Nichols Hill in Dorset, Vermont. But Heinz unlike many of the writers who come to Vermont was not a refugee. For



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the Normandy invasion, the Battle of the Bulge and the last days of the fighting in Germany. He wrote about the ordeals and the courage of the ordinary soldier in the clean, unadorned prose that became his trademark. Some of his dispatches were recently collected in a volume called *When We Were One: Stories of World War Two*. They are as compelling today as they were when people following the war read them in the papers, back in Amer-

"Mr. Heinz, allow me to give you a piece of advice. Don't ever let anyone tell you how to write."

ica. Of the war, Heinz, who talks volubly about the rest of his career, says simply, "You couldn't write it badly."

When he came home, he was offered the job of covering something he believed he could write badly. "They wanted me to go to Washington and write politics."

He declined and asked for sports. At first, his request was refused. Hard to imagine why and, quickly, someone realized that there was a perfect marriage waiting to be consummated. He spent one day on the city desk and then moved to sports. In 1948, he got his own column. It was called the *Sport Scene*.

If those were great days for sports in New York, it was the age of Pericles for sports writing. Television was in its raw infancy and, at best, provided only flickering black and white images of distant men hitting a ball or each other. To get the feeling for the game and the players, you went to the papers and writers like Jimmy Canon, Red Smith, and Heinz who transmitted all the nuance and the drama of the games and the character of the athletes in a kind of street-lyrical language that was effortless to read and

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painfully difficult to write. Red Smith, one of them, said it best; "Writing is easy. You just sit down at the typewriter and open a vein."

Heinz, especially, became master of a technique—"fly-on-the-wall," it was called—where the writer takes the reader into almost intimate proximity with the subject, remaining virtually invisible throughout. It is easy to do badly. Heinz—like Smith and, especially, Frank Graham—did it beautifully. Two hundred and fifty times a year.

While the craft required an almost stoic discipline, the life was good. You would go down to Florida to cover spring training; out to Kentucky for the Derby; Chicago for Army/Notre Dame. You went on trains with sleepers where the sheets were clean and crisp and you ate prime rib in the dining car off heavy china. "Today," Heinz tells me, "they travel everywhere on airplanes and it's not the same. Airplanes are like flying buses."

Heinz and his friends were ring-side at the Garden for the championship fights and in the pressbox at Yankee Stadium or Ebbets Field or the Polo Grounds for the World Series. They hung around Stillman's Gym and listened to fight talk. They had tables at Toots Schor's.

In the late 40's, Betty and Bill started a family and moved to Old Greenwich, Connecticut. One of his neighbors was Red Smith. Life was good.

But the newspaper business was entering the long decline that saw New York go from 9 dailies to 3. When the *Sun* folded in 1950, Heinz was offered work at the surviving papers but he was tired of filing every day. "I'd been fighting three rounders and now I wanted to move up and see if I could go eight rounds. Maybe ten." Boxing was always his favorite sport to cover, his most comfortable milieu, and his language is still full of its locutions.

He and Betty had two daughters but he took a chance on his ability to earn a living doing longer work, for magazines, and in the 50's wrote stories that over the last three of four



years have been widely republished and led to a kind of resurrection to include, to his amusement, a piece in *Vanity Fair* magazine and another in *Entertainment Weekly* calling his literary rediscovery the "Comeback of the Season."

Three of Heinz's most memorable stories from the 50's are included in a massive collection called, *The Best American Sports Writing of the Century*. The century in question, of course, is the 20th. But the book could as easily have been called *The Best Sports Writing Ever*.

At noon, Heinz invites me to join him for lunch. He speaks to people in the dining room and he is, plainly, a favorite among the waitresses. One of them brings a cranberry juice, without asking, and takes his order. Beef stroganoff.

"Try the soup," he says. "They have good soup here."

He tells more stories while we wait for our food. Stories about the athletes I idolized as a kid and he covered when they, and he, were in their primes. Ted Williams. Jackie Robinson. Rocky Marciano.

He was covering one of the events that changed sports—the first Cassius Clay/Sonny Liston fight in 1964—when his own life changed terribly.


While he was in Miami, at the fight, his older daughter, Barbara, fell ill. Betty drove her to the hospital and on the way, Barbara said, "Mom, I'm going to die."

Betty told Bill to get to the hospital quickly but Barbara was gone before he arrived.

"That," he says carefully, "is what brought us back to Vermont. Barbie had a great year at a camp, in Dorset Hollow, the year before. She had been named camper of the year and

Was it Egypt, St. Petersburg, on the silk road.

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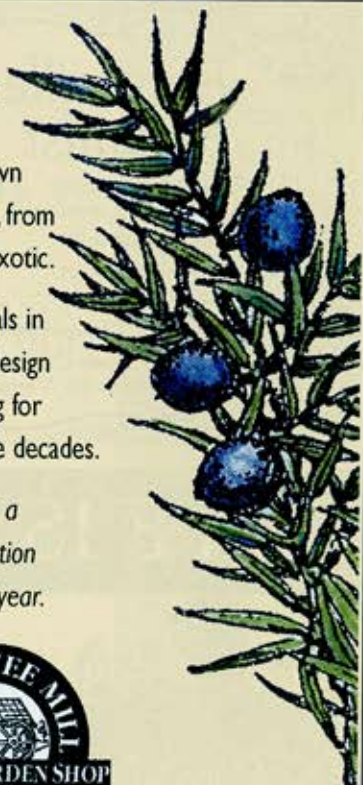
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she'd fallen in love. We took her ashes up there."

And a couple of years later, moved there themselves. First, to a place in town and then to the 220 acres on Nichols Hill. Bill kept working. He wrote M*A*S*H there. Richard Hornberger, his co-author would visit. "He'd hit golf balls out into the pasture where Junior Nichols' cows were grazing."

He also wrote what he considers his most underrated book, *Emergency*. It is a novel that weaves together many distinct stories. The nucleus of the book is a hospital emergency room. Heinz would spend his weeks at Albany Medical Center, researching the book, then drive home for the weekend. He had always been disciplined, almost compulsive, in his research but in this case, there may have been something a little more. It was never clear exactly what his daughter had died from. Toxic shock, perhaps. In some sense, he may have been trying to get at the mystery in the research and writing of that book.

"Some of those chapters," he says now, "are my best work."

He and Betty involved themselves in the community. In the Dorset Nursing Association and the Mountain Laurel School, which Heinz took on as a cause when the town of Manchester wanted to buy the building for what Heinz considered an unfairly low price.

"I didn't like anyone taking anything from retarded children," Heinz says. He wrote letters to the editor and campaigned relentlessly for the board to do what he thought was the right thing by the children the school served.

The controversy ended—to use fight vernacular—in a split decision. The town paid more than it had originally offered but less than Heinz thought fair.

"It was one of my losses."

In the early 90's, Betty developed Alzheimer's. After two alarming episodes where she wandered off alone, Heinz devoted himself to looking after her. The rediscovery of his work from four decades earlier, which

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began with an anthology edited by Halberstam and really took off when *Sports Illustrated* published a long profile about Heinz in September 2000, meant nothing to Betty and is something that Heinz, himself, finds gratifying but also amusing.

"You work hard," he says, "and you take pride in the work. But it's the work, in the end, that is the important thing. Not the person."

When Betty died early in 2002, Heinz left the home on Nichols Hill, where they had lived for 35 years, and moved to Bennington where we are finishing our lunch.

What about the property, I ask.

"We're working on a sale," he says, "and the proceeds will go to the University of Vermont Medical School's pediatrics department. When we made our first gift to the school, we walked out of the room and Betty said, 'This makes me feel so

"It gets back to the soldiers I wrote about. They were the heroes. Not the football players."

good.' That's why you do it.

"I've always thought that I was fortunate and that I owed something. It gets back to the soldiers I wrote about. They were the heroes. Not the football players."

Lunch is over and he is tiring. I thank Heinz for his time and he shuffles back to his room.

Some life, I think, as I slide under the wheel, start the engine, and pull out of the parking lot. The day seems even more brilliant than before.

Some life, for sure. It would take a W. C. Heinz to write it. ♦

Geoffrey Norman is a novelist and a contributing editor of the National Geographic Adventure Magazine and STRATTON MAGAZINE.

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