
A DIARY OF THE CENTURY

TALES FROM AMERICA'S
GREATEST DIARIST

EDWARD ROBB ELLIS

CARICATURES BY THE AUTHOR
INTRODUCTION BY PETE HAMILL



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stores for Crisco to send some to my friends back in London."

We arrived at the theater. I helped Gertrude Lawrence out of the cab. Then I tipped my hat to her, and never before had it felt so good to tip my hat to a lady.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 1947 ■ Mae West's press agent gave me a ticket to a theater to see her on the stage in a comedy—alleged comedy, that is. This misbegotten soon-forgotten thing is called *Ring Twice Tonight*. I went, I saw, I yawned.

The plot, for want of a better word, concerns a female FBI agent posing as a nightclub singer. To avoid involvement in a murder, she holes up in an apartment. Her maid releases balloons inviting finders to come up and see her—don't ask me why—so she has to fight off one man after another. Mae West fight off men? Don't be ridiculous!

I had been lured into seeing this abomination with the promise that immediately after the performance an event of transcendental importance would occur on stage: Mae West would meet Mr. America. Could any reporter shun such a scoop? Does a horse run? Does a bell ring?

So after the final curtain I headed backstage, humming: *When a body meets a body . . .* A wry note, perhaps. I'd always heard that Mae West could coin naughty wisecracks faster than a kid scrawling on a wall, "Jeeter does it to Agnes!" I wanted to find out how well Mae could do this when no censors were poking their blue noses into her pink business.

You remember her lines:

Too much of a good thing can be wonderful!

I'm not good and tired—just tired.

Between two evils, I always pick the one I never tried before.

When I arrived backstage I looked around. Saw no censors. However, there was a cluster of autograph hounds and hangers-on and press agents and reporters and photographers. And then—there was Mr. America of 1946. His name is Alan Stephens. His suit was so tight he looked like a steak too big for its platter. With him was his date, Miss Legionnaire.

Off to one side was Mae West signing her name for her fans. She was an S-curve in a white gown. As the autograph hounds melted away, her press agent angled over and whispered into her ear. Mae glanced around, almost getting her eyelashes tangled up, and mused: "Where's this beautiful hunk of a man, Mr. America?"

Mr. America's press agent led him forward and said: "Alan, this is Miss West . . . Miss West, this is Mr. America."

She held out a soft hand, then pouted: "He has clothes on!"

Everybody laughed. Good old Mae, right there with a wisecrack!

Mr. America's press agent cried: "Oh, Alan'll strip down! We'd like to get a picture of the two of you together, Miss West."

"Deee-lighted!" she purred.

Mr. America, carrying a gym bag, disappeared behind some curtains. Mae West just stood there. Nobody said anything. Must have been two dozen people, but none spoke. The silence became thunderous.

When Mr. America emerged from behind the curtains, everyone erupted in artificial excitement. He was naked except for a pair of white shorts. His skin glowed a healthy pink. He was a mass of muscles, with shoulders bigger than a meat loaf, hips leaner than a sandwich, and he winced in embarrassment.

Mae West filtered a look through her eyelashes and gasped "Whew!"

Everybody laughed. Hadn't Mae whewed "Whew!"?

Mr. America rippled over to Mae West. She put a white hand on a pink shoulder that was becoming red. She giggled. Keeping her hand where it was she wiggled her eyebrows. Mae West was trying to think, so everybody kept respectfully silent. She compromised on a second "Whew!"

Everybody laughed.

Mae tried again: "You're a big hunk of—" She knitted her brows.

Her press agent walked past, whispering into her ear.

"—a big hunk of romance!" Mae concluded. And smiled a triumphal smile.

Everybody laughed. That Mae! A killer-diller with the wisecrack!

Photographers began pointing their cameras. Mr. America's press agent suggested that she lean against him, so Miss West, age 54, leaned against Mr. America, age 23. Then she put her arms around him. Miss Legionnaire was watching. Mr. America fidgeted, but at last twined his arms around Mae West.

"My, my!" Mae wisecracked.

Everybody laughed.

So the cameramen shot picture after picture and then nobody seemed to know what to do and at last Mr. America vanished to change into his light blue suit and when he emerged he took the hand of Miss Legionnaire.

The last I saw of Mae West she stood in the center of the stage. Her press agent was still doing all the talking.

SATURDAY, APRIL 19, 1947 ■ Paul Robeson is on a concert tour. The bass-baritone, perhaps the most famous Negro in the world, arrived in St. Louis

the other day and fell into a fight about segregated facilities in local theaters.

Angered by such bigotry, he announced that when his tour ends he will abandon the concert stage and the theater for two years in order to "talk up and down the nation against race hatred and prejudice."

The House Committee on Un-American Activities has said he is "invariably found supporting the Communist Party and its front organizations." He was just one among almost a thousand persons cited, among them former Vice President Henry Wallace and Harlow Shapely, the Harvard astronomer and Nobel Laureate.

Robeson's next scheduled concert was in Peoria, a city of about 105,000 people. When news of the House citation reached there the Peoria city council passed a resolution opposing the appearance of "any speaker or artist who is an avowed propagandist for Un-American ideology." A few brave citizens protested this blow to civil rights.

Peoria's mayor agreed to let some people hold a reception for Robeson in the assembly room of city hall. However, star-spangled patriots put so much pressure on him that a day later, he withdrew this permission. There were rumors of violence and talk of guns. Peoria had a reputation as a violent city and, as a former reporter there, I knew it deserved this reputation.

Eight detectives and six cops waited for Robeson at the railroad station, but he slipped into town in an auto. His concert having been cancelled, the singer wanted to tell his side of the story, but the local radio station would not let him speak on the air. All he could do was to meet a few people in the home of a union official.

He drove from Peoria to Chicago and checked into the Sherman Hotel. I called him there to ask for an interview and he told me to join him. When I walked into his suite we shook hands and he bowed me into a chair.

"You're pretty much in the news," I said, grinning.

Grinning back, he said: "Seems so."

He wore a gray suit and black knitted tie and his weight seemed to have increased considerably. Paul Robeson is a giant of a man—physically and intellectually. I had read about him in the *Chicago Sun's* library, across the hall from the United Press. Now, I realized, I was in the presence of one of the most distinguished and controversial figures of the 20th century. *Who's Who in America* had much to say about him.

He was born in 1898 in Princeton, N. J., the son of a man who had escaped from slavery. Shortly before Paul graduated from high school in

1915, he made the highest score in an examination that won him a four-year scholarship to Rutgers College—later Rutgers University.

He was only the third black student in the history of the college but popular with classmates. Standing six feet three, weighing 240 pounds, he was described as "massive, beautiful in physique, muscular, strong and handsome." He won the freshman prize for oratory. He won the sophomore and junior prizes for extemporaneous speaking. He won 12 varsity letters in four sports—football, baseball, basketball and track. In 1917 and 1918 he was named an All-American football end. In his junior year he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa and when he graduated he gave the commencement address.

In 1920 he began studying law at Columbia University, paying his way by playing professional football on weekends. He met and married a brilliant chemistry student, Eslanda Cardozo Goode. She persuaded him to take the lead in a play that ran only briefly on Broadway but launched his theatrical career. His wife became his business manager.

After getting his law degree from Columbia he joined a law firm in Manhattan but, rather indifferent to the law and extremely resentful of the attitude of white law clerks to him, he quit. More to his liking were the legitimate stage, the movies, singing at concerts and making records. He became a star on the stage in London and enjoyed an enormously successful concert tour of Europe. He spoke more than a dozen different languages.

Now, lighting a cigaret, he began telling me what happened in Peoria.

"This is more than a personal issue, believe me! Peoria was like an armed camp. But you can't understand what happened to me without understanding the background. You've got to know what's happened in Peoria in the past two or three years. There've been three railroad workers murdered there—and a railroad president. They just got the railroad started again. Maybe you read about it?"

I nodded yes.

Robeson said: "I was going to Peoria as an avowed friend of labor. I was going to sing *Joe Hill*—"

"Did they know in advance," I asked, "that you'd sing *Joe Hill*?"

"I've sung *Joe Hill* on every one of my programs for the past six years!" Robeson stared at me with bulging eyes. "But who was I going to sing for? There was a top ticket price of three dollars and thirty cents. The working man can't afford that. Who can? The men who hate labor. They knew I was going to sing about Joe Hill, and they're the guys who try to beat down labor, just as Joe Hill was framed and murdered by the copper mine guys!"

"Mr. Robeson," I said, "there are a lot of people who will want to know why, if you're such a friend of labor, you sing at a top of three dollars and thirty cents. Why not sing for one ten, so the working man can hear you?"

Leaning forward in his chair, Robeson boomed: "I do better than that! I sing for the working man for nothing. I sang here at the Henry Wallace rally, and I sing plenty of times for the working man for nothing. They know what I do for them."

"Getting back to the Peoria situation—"

"Christ, yes," Robeson exclaimed. "That! Well, labor would have taken over my concert, but my management cancelled it. I don't mean that my management was wrong, but the concert was cancelled. I want you to get one thing straight: The papers quoted me as saying, I was going into Peoria 'amply protected.' I never did say that."

"You had heard there were some threats made against you?"

"Hell, yes!"

"How did you know this, Mr. Robeson? Actually, what evidence did you have that threats had been made against you?"

"You know how it is," Robeson said. "Word of mouth."

"And, believing this, you didn't take the precaution of having any protection?"

"Well," he said with a sly smile, "I wasn't absolutely without an awareness of the situation." He threw up a huge hand to help him say the thing. "However, I wasn't, as the papers said, 'amply protected.' Maybe someone on my side in Peoria did say, 'Well, we'll see that Paul's amply protected.'"

My notebook slid off the arm of my chair. I picked it up.

Robeson said; "There's a lesson that must be learned from this Peoria affair." His eyes, so wide before, now were narrowed. "Americans seem to be on the go here regarding a Red Hysteria, but they don't understand the nature and the danger of fascism. I can't understand it. . . . For Christ's sake, look! Who besides myself was named by that House committee? Who? Who were they? Well, I'll tell you: Joseph E. Davies, former American ambassador to Russia, and Edward G. Robinson, the movie star. That's the company they put me in!

"The charges were completely unsubstantiated. I haven't been convicted of anything. There's been no jury trial. Well, where do I go from here?" He spread out his arms. "It was obviously unconstitutional!"

I said: "I want to make sure I understand you . . . You mean that the resolution of the House committee was unconstitutional?"

"No, no! Get me straight. I mean that the resolution passed by the city council of Peoria was unconstitutional."

Sometimes reporting is a dangerous trade. Even with the best of intentions, a reporter can misquote someone.

Robeson continued: "What if Senator Pepper wanted to go to Peoria to speak? Or Wallace? Or Eddie Robinson? And what if they were refused the right to speak? Then what if they came to Chicago, and what if they were refused the right to speak here, too. Where would we go from there?"

Robeson shrugged mountainously.

"What Americans must understand is that the police in Peoria were there to back vigilante bands of Legionnaires. And these vigilantes had lanterns, I was told. *Lanterns!*"

"You mean lanterns indicated a lynching?"

"What else could it mean?" he asked rhetorically. "And, you know, no minister, white or colored, had the courage to let me use his pulpit to speak!"

"How do you know? Were they asked?"

"Yes, they were asked. The whole city was in a reign of terror! The whole city was afraid to move. I've never seen anything like it since Franco's Spain. And who organized this reign of terror? The guys who own Caterpillar and the other industries in Peoria. They're the guys who are trying to beat the brains out of labor! It was the complete fascist technique. I've seen it used in other parts of the world. As far as Peoria is concerned, fascism has moved in there.

"The communists weren't in the streets. The police were out to protect the guys who own Caterpillar, the guys who own the industry and the wealth. There were threats against the laboring men and Negroes. If anything is going to take over America, it is the fascists!"

"Mr. Robeson," I said, "there's one question that must be asked. It's the sixty-four dollar question: Are you a communist?"

"I'll answer that," Robeson said. "I'm not afraid to answer it. But first you've got to see the thing against the big background. I project it against the background of the last war. There was danger of fascism then. We were fighting the fascists like Hitler and Mussolini. Russians were dying by the millions so that British and American soldiers wouldn't have to die. We got along with the communists then and we were thankful for them. Yeah, and we were thankful for the communists in France, who were fighting and dying in the underground movement against Hitler. And we were thankful for Tito of Yugoslavia, too.

"I label myself anti-fascist. I divide the world into only two groups—fascists and anti-fascists. The communists belong to the anti-fascist group. They're the only ones who have any claim to belong to this group in Amer-

ica. Now, when I say I am an anti-fascist, it could mean that I belong to any one of the anti-fascist groups.

"So far as I know," Robeson continued, "the communist party is a legal party like the Republican or Democratic party. The communists control a lot of the world today, and we have to get along with them. Either that or fight a war nobody could win. We've just got to get along with them."

"Mr. Robeson," I said, grinning at him, "this question may get us into casuistry, but will you *tell* me why you *won't tell* me directly whether or not you're a communist?"

Returning a grin, he said: "That's as far as you'll get in any definition from me. I've seen all too often what happens when someone labels you this or that—"

The phone rang. He answered it.

When he beamed his attention back to me, I said: "Mr. Robeson, I can understand in part how you feel. There's plenty that's damned wrong, and even I get sore about it. But after all, you, a Negro, have been able to climb high in the United States. You've made money and you've achieved fame. You're a Negro, and yet you've been able to do this here."

"Sure," he said, "but it's not important to me. It's not important that I am staying in this hotel. My success isn't important to me. My responsibility is greater than anything like that. Because of my success I'm in a position to do something about conditions, and I'll do all I can about them.

"I'm much more dangerous than other Negroes. Why? Because I'm educated. You tell us to get educated, and then you stop us on every hand. Why, I can't walk into a restaurant in Chicago! My dad was a slave and I have some cousins who are sharecroppers in Carolina, living off the soil. I feel for people like that. I'm interested not in myself but in the great mass of Negro people.

"Hell, why should I choose to live in America at all unless I were interested in doing something about it? Unless I were interested in the Negro people? I could make my living in any part of the world. It's absurd that anyone thinks he can pressure me into silence by cancelling a few concerts of mine. Why, I could play *Othello* in London next week, if I wanted to, and I could live for five years in the Scandinavian countries, just singing, and make a damned good living without even moving."

Closing my notebook, I said: "Well, I've taken up enough of your time. Thank you. I'd better get along." Robeson stood up as I arose.

"But," I said, "there's something I've been wondering about for a long time. Something I read about you in Alexander Woollcott's book *While Rome Burns*. Remember?"

"Sure," he chuckled, "I remember."

I said: "It was about your wife. Woollcott said she was of mixed Negro and Jewish blood. Jerome Kern had just composed *Old Man River* and had gone to your apartment in Harlem to show it to you. Then he wanted you to go downtown with him to sing it for Oscar Hammerstein, who had written the words. According to Woollcott, you turned to your wife to ask for two dollars for cab fare back home, but she gave you only one buck. You said: 'Aw, go on! Be all nigger and give me two!'"

"That's right!" he roared. "Aleck got it right! That's what I said!"

His huge body shook with laughter as we parted.

Joe Morgan, my new boss, and I had become increasingly unhappy with one another. When I won the Page One Award in 1946, Joe didn't mention it or congratulate me. Here is a letter I wrote to Boyd Lewis, my former boss.

TUESDAY, MAY 6, 1947 ■ Dear Boyd:

Jess Bogue hunched over my desk and said: "Joe wants to see you in the front office, Eddie."

I thought of Amy Lowell: *I stood upright too. / Held rigid to the pattern . . .*

Because I tried to break a pattern, last Saturday I walked a patterned path to a door leading to a patterned decision.

"Eddie," said Joe, "you're a square peg in a round hole."

Oh, he said I'm a nice guy, enterprising, polite, hard-working, pleasant, imaginative. But slivers stick out when I'm forced into a round hole. And, of course, Joe was right.

I could have fitted into the pattern. I could have become a hack. I could have written the style Joe likes: "An atomic scientist said today that— . . . A plumber said today that— . . . A wig-maker said today that—"

But I was trying to slice through a vicious circle: You can't write a sparkling feature story unless you're given a free rein, and you're not given free rein unless you write a sparkling feature story. No reporter can be better than his editor will let him be.

The past several months here I was being nailed into a coffin of conformity. I don't want to become a hack, will not become a hack! After Joe fired me I reread some feature stories I wrote for you. Some other guy must have written them. They had the bread of facts salted with the tang of imagination.

A reporter must never ignore facts. True. But I believe it is okay for him to find in facts a meaning beyond the obvious one. You and I used to discuss "the judicious juxtaposition of seemingly irrelevant details." Take