Riding Circuits to Writing Editorials: GLENN FRANK

Born in Queen City, Missouri, Glenn Frank was among the greatest writers, editors, educators, and speakers of the early 20th century. He could have been among the great politicians of his time as well, but a tragic accident ended his brilliant career and noteworthy life, leaving the nation deprived.

Glenn Frank, the son of a middle-aged school teacher, was born on October 1, 1887. He grew up in Greentop, a small village about five miles south of Queen City. There he began his education under his brother, William Frank, who was also a school teacher. His nephew on his wife’s side, Tom K. Smith, Jr., explains Dr. Frank’s background:

“See, his background was a typical, rural Missouri family, working hard to get an education, working hard to be creative-ly . . . helpful in the state and in the country . . . He was a very interesting product of Missouri, and Missouri essentially can be proud of what they produced because he was a fine, bright, intelligent, honest, well-behaved gentleman.”

Young Glenn showed unusual talent for public speaking, delivering his first sermon at the age of 15. At the age of 17, he began a circuit ministry during the summer, traveling to several of the small towns around northeastern Missouri. With the money he earned from his sermons and loans from his brother William’s law practice, Glenn then enrolled in the Kirksville Normal School. From 1904 to 1909, he earned his high school credits as well as part of his college education at the Normal School while continuing his circuit.

During the time he attended the Normal School, Glenn was popular among the students, who respected his exceptional speaking ability. He took a variety of courses which tended to focus on the humanities. He was elected class curator and editor of the Senior Society. Arizona congressman John R. Murdock, one of Glenn’s classmates at the Normal School, told the following story in an interview for the Kansas City Star: “He has a way of getting things done. We had a dear old professor, A.P. Settle, who was a stickler for punctuation. One time I went to speak to him and found his desk covered with composition papers. As I approached, he said, not altogether kindly, ‘just look at that,’ handing me a 10-page document written in longhand.”

“On the first nine pages of the manuscript, I couldn’t find a punctuation mark anywhere, but on the tenth page, the last dozen lines were filled with periods, commas, question marks and exclamation points, with this note from the author, Glenn Frank: ‘Here they are, Prof. Put ‘em in where you need ‘em.’”

During the years he attended the Normal School, Mr. Frank sometimes held revivals at various churches, in addition to riding the six-church circuit. Russell Murfin, a resident of Kirksville, recalls that Glenn Frank stayed with his parents during one such meeting at the Sabbath Home First Methodist Church. “They remember him as a light-hearted type person that had a lot of fun,” he says, “He was a great kidder.”

Then, in the autumn of 1909, without sufficient funds or education to enter, Mr. Frank enrolled in Northwestern University. For five years his education had lacked continuity because he alternated preaching with attending classes at the Normal School. However, when he applied at Northwestern, young Mr. Frank insisted that he enroll as a junior in college. When the dean claimed that it would defy reason to admit him as a freshman, much less a junior, according to the Kansas City Star, “Young Frank turned away, saying, ‘That wouldn’t suit.’ ‘What would?’ asked the dean. ‘Enrollment as a junior,’Frank said. ‘Dr. John R. Kirk says I have the equivalent of a high school education and two years in college. He ought to know.’ ‘Kirk does know,’ the dean asserted. Glenn Frank entered Northwestern as a junior.” After two years of study, he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree. During each of the next four summers, he spent several weeks as a manager for chautauquas, traveling shows of cultured talent. These chautauquas came from Chicago to this region.

Anna Valentine, a Unionville resident at that time, described him in the chautauqua which came to Unionville, “Glenn Frank, the handsome, tall, dark gentleman, dressed with
At age six, Glenn was just beginning school as a student of his older brother, William.

a navy blue jacket and white serge trousers and white shoes. He would open up each meeting from the platform with a little speech of greeting, an introduction of the talent that was to follow."

He also spent these years working at Northwestern as the alumni secretary and assistant to the president of the university. But young Mr. Frank wanted success. He was already fairly well-known because of his many oratorical accomplishments, but Glenn Frank wanted wider renown. He also needed to earn enough money to be considered a suitable husband for Mary Smith, a fine-bred Southerner of the highest degree. Thus, when the rich, influential merchant Edward A. Filene of Boston offered him a job as Mr. Filene's private secretary, Glenn Frank found it very difficult to refuse.

Yet Mr. Frank, realizing the necessity of keeping his own identity separate from Mr. Filene's, whose reputation as a shrewd businessman was matched as a political activist, refused the initial offer. When a second offer arrived, however, he could not decline. So, in 1916, after becoming engaged to Miss Smith, Glenn Frank moved to Boston to work for Mr. Filene. He corresponded regularly with Mary throughout his time in Boston.

Mr. Frank frequently mentioned tiredness in his letters to his fiancée. His job consisted of a busy schedule, allowing little time to relax. He admitted that the doctors attributed his exhaustion and illnesses to stress, telling him to ease his efforts; however, Glenn Frank continued to concentrate on his work.

Glenn Frank also seemed to dislike some of the jobs Mr. Filene required him to do for the League of Nations movement. Mr. Filene had contributed $25,000 to the organization, the League to Enforce Peace, and he had Mr. Frank launch a pacifist propaganda campaign in its favor. Mr. Frank wrote to his fiancée, "I hope I can get away from this intolerable Filene connection in the near future." Later, in a note on that letter, Mrs. Frank added that "Frank didn't like writing books, speeches, etc. for Mr. Filene. But his work with Filene was a valuable experience."

As Mr. Filene's private secretary made personal representative, Mr. Frank met many of the most influential men in the nation. Among these men was the former President of the United States, William Howard Taft. Referring to the President, Glenn Frank wrote to Miss Smith saying, "He has taken a very gratifying liking to me." This statement appears to have been true of most of Mr. Frank's associates, all of whom seem to have liked his friendly, cheerful, hard-working attitude.

On June 2, 1917, at the Bofinger Memorial Capitol in St. Louis, Glenn Frank and Mary Smith were married by Bishop Daniel S. Tuttle. Mr. Frank was overjoyed, and congratulations arrived in the form of letters and telegrams from all parts of the nation. Everyone had high hopes for the young couple. Ophie Read, a novelist, expressed these hopes for Glenn Frank in a letter to the new Mrs. Frank. She wrote, "I believe it destined that he shall deeply impress the intellectual life of this nation."

Living up to expectations, Mr. Frank began to establish himself as a writer during his years with Mr. Filene. He contributed as editor of the Northwestern Magazine by writing various articles and later began journalism as an alternative income to his speeches and speech writing. Several of the books which he wrote during this period brought him renown among the nation's most brilliant people for his original statements and startling forms of speech. When he heard of the open position

Glenn Frank spent the summer of 1909 assisting Billy Sunday with his evangelical preaching in Marshalltown, Iowa.
of associate editor of *Century* magazine, Mr. Frank decided to apply.

Glenn Frank’s interest in *Century* sprang from the magazine’s high reputation as one of the most influential American periodicals. In September of 1919, Mr. Frank became the associate editor of the magazine at a salary of about $7,500 per year. The magazine encouraged Mr. Frank to continue lecturing, and he often earned an extra $10,000 a year, more than doubling his editor’s salary.

During this time, Glenn Frank began to earn his reputation as one of the nation’s top writers. He wrote on a variety of topics and had a flair for writing in vivid, fluent prose. 

Mr. Frank edited as well as he wrote. As editor, he transformed *Century* from an out-of-date traditional magazine covering many topics to an up-to-date interest grabber. Due to Mr. Frank’s great success as an editor, his employer decided to make him editor-in-chief, raising Mr. Frank’s salary to $13,000 a year. To say the least, Mr. Frank and his growing family were delighted.

On December 7, 1918, Glenn Frank, Jr., had been born. Glenn Frank’s young son was his joy, filling the Frank’s home with happiness. Said Ermil Frye, one of Mr. Frank’s associates, about Mr. Frank at the birth of his son, “Glenn Frank was a man of unusual emotional balance and equilibrium of temperament which, however, was visibly shaken by this new experience. And his voice, always vibrant with a thrilling quality, was even more brilliant as he related to me the great news.”

Glenn Frank’s potential was growing. One of *Century’s* leading authors, Zona Gale, wrote to Mr. Frank asking whether he would be available for the presidency of the University of Wisconsin. The Board of Regents at the university, of which Miss Gale was a member, was searching for a person who could aid the university in its pursuit of excellence. They wanted a progressive liberal who would bring the university prestige.

The Regents had already discovered someone who they believed would do the job effectively at the time Miss Gale wrote her letter, yet he rejected this offer. Miss Gale considered it the proper time to recommend Glenn Frank for candidacy. He had already expressed his interest in the position, and his reputedly liberal attitude in writing and speech insured him as a sound person for the presidency. Although Mr. Frank, in his writings, declared that a liberal’s place is not in education, his practices indicated that he actually believed otherwise. When offered the presidency, he accepted without the slightest hesitation.

In September, 1925, Mr. Frank became the official president of the University of Wisconsin. The presidency presented many disadvantages for Glenn Frank. The University of Wisconsin was ruled basically by politically installed Regents and had existed under a weak presidency for nearly a decade, during which time it had been merely maintained, never improved. Also, his income was cut by about $5,000 because of the limit the university placed on his speaking and writing.

The Board of Regents was originally pleased with its choice of a president. But President Frank did not truly concentrate on the administrative aspects of his job, instead traveling from place to place to give speeches in behalf of the university. The Board did not protest. They had given him permission to speak as the president in his contract.

One of the speeches President Frank gave during this time was for the Lyceum series at the Kirksville Normal School. Lola Bell, a college student who attended the speech, describes the occasion, “I remember the man. He was a handsome fellow . . . I would say not quite six feet tall, but close to that . . . he had a high forehead—his hair was beginning to recede—but . . . it was parted on one side . . . Dr. Kirk was so proud to introduce him because he had been a student there in the Teachers College, and he was proud to think he had gone on to do bigger things.”

President Frank also continued to write a syndicated newspaper column in addition to his many out-of-state speeches, both of which were slightly questionable under terms of the contract. These two questionable acts helped keep intact his reputation as a liberal.

Several scandals on the campus involving both students and faculty members convinced many of the Board that Glenn Frank was an inadequate president. On December 7, 1936, Governor Philip LaFollette, President Frank’s bitter political enemy, met with two anti-Frank regents, Harold Wilkie and Clough Gates, to discuss President Frank’s administration of the university, and they determined to ask President Frank to resign on December 9. They claimed that he had quietly agreed, while President Frank fiercely denied ever having made such a statement.

On December 16th, as the Board began its regular meeting, Mr. Wilkie promptly stood and read a list of charges against Glenn Frank. The room was chaotic. Students shouted, while the Regents argued among themselves. President Frank finally had a chance to declare that he would not resign.

President Frank’s hearing began in the morning on January 6, 1937, and lasted until the next day. After Mr. Wilkie’s and Mr. Gates’ charges, Glenn Frank spoke briefly in his own defense. The next day he resumed speaking, relating the hardships of his administration. He accused the Depression of being the major cause of any flaw in his administration and denied most of the statements against him. He reviewed his achievements and maintained his former position in all matters. The following day, after several speeches in President Frank’s
speeding along the highway in a Ford Sedan, his father writing a speech at his side and a sound technician in back. They were an hour late for an appointment at Green Bay, Wisconsin, where men were waiting to contribute funds for his campaign. Suddenly, a curve appeared in the road, and a pile of sand loomed ahead. It was too late. The car skidded, turned over, and continued rolling. Glenn Frank’s neck broke, and he died instantly in the midst of his career. His son, a reporter for The Madison State Journal, survived long enough to send the following uncanny dispatch to his paper: “Dr. Glenn Frank and a member of his party righted the overturned car and freed the injured woman. Another of the party called the police, a wrecker, and an ambulance. When help arrived the perspiring candidate went on to a speaking engagement at Glidden.” Despite his son’s loyal disclaimer, Glenn Frank had been killed. Even after his death, however, Glenn Frank placed third in the election for senator, in an unusual tribute from the people of Wisconsin.

Soon after his death, Mrs. Frank contributed his books and papers to the Northeast Missouri State Teachers College. Despite his residing in Wisconsin for several years before his death, Northeast Missouri remained his true home. Mr. Smith explained the choice, “Both the Franks and the Smiths were very... proud of the neighborhood. Enjoyed it, grew up there, loved it. And they felt that was proper. Much better than the University of Wisconsin, where... he was 12 years... but that wasn’t life. And life was in Northeast Missouri. And I think that’s the reason they were sent there and... hopefully kept there.” Thus, Glenn Frank’s history returned to his childhood home.

Dr. Hamilton Holt, President of Rollins College, said that “Glenn Frank might well have been President of the United States if he had lived.” Glenn Frank was a great man, who rose from a small-town Missourian to become one of the most eminent people of his time.

Photos courtesy of Pickler Memorial Library

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