

## Margaret Roberta Russell, (1906-1988): A Brief Biography

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Editorial Note: This work is excerpted from: *The Life and Letters of Margaret Roberta Russell, (1906-1988): Newspaperwoman, Writer and Local Historian of Pitcairn, Pa.*

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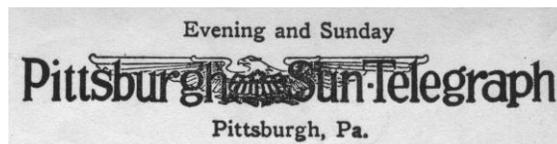
**Margaret Russell - 1928**

Born on June 14, 1906, Margaret (“Peg” to her friends) was the oldest of three daughters born to Thomas and Anna Russell of 568 Broadway, Pitcairn, Pa. She grew up in that small town where her father was an institution as the town’s long-time undertaker. After graduating from Pitcairn High School in 1923, she was hired as a secretary in the Purchasing Department of Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Co. in East Pittsburgh. At that time Westinghouse Electric Company’s massive East Pittsburgh Works was one of the Company’s largest operations, providing employment for thousands of men and women from towns like Turtle Creek and Pitcairn.

Eager to get on with her education, Margaret soon enrolled in Carnegie Institute of Technology, from which she graduated in 1928 with a B.S. in Secretarial Studies from Margaret Morris College, with a minor in English. Her earliest work in journalism began there; working on the student newspaper - “The Carnegie Tartan.” She went on to pursue her interest in journalism at the Pulitzer School of Journalism of Columbia University, New York City from which she graduated in 1930 with a B.S. in Literature.

### The Newspaper Days (1931-1937)

In 1931 young Margaret got her first journalism job as a cub reporter with the *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph*, a major Hearst Newspaper. (In time, she would complain of the low wages and joke of herself as a “slave of Hearst”). The Sun-Telegraph marked the entry of Mr. Hearst into the Pittsburgh newspaper field. His merger of the Pittsburgh Chronicle Telegraph and the Pittsburgh Sun into the Sun-Telegraph, was announced on August 3, 1927.



**The Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph shared the Publications Building with a number of other city papers**

Thus began a newspaper career that would take Margaret Russell from reporter, to feature writer, to editor and eventually publisher. Her duties covered all aspects of the newspaper business including: straight news reporting, feature writing, societies and clubs, woman's page, special sections, drama, business, promotional campaigns, rewrite, and radio programs. She wrote copy and headlines, ordered art, and oversaw the story write-ups in the composing room.

At one point she was assigned to answer the many letters the newspaper received. She answered all of them, and took particular care in responding to young people, like I.G. Aldrighetti, of Smithton, Pa., a high school freshman who in a 1932 letter, announced that he had "chosen newspaper work as my life's profession." In writing a paper for his Civics class he asked for information on the advantages and disadvantages of newspaper work. Margaret pointed out that the question was really a matter of personal opinion, and then went on with remarkable candor:

*"Generally, speaking, the advantage might be said to be an absence from the boring routine which usually accompanies work in less exciting professions, the interesting contacts with important personalities, the being "in the know" ahead of other people, the uncertainty – each new assignment is a new adventure, in a sense, matching your wits against an often reluctant, or not easily available source of information. The disadvantages are found in the difficulty to rise in the profession, the comparatively low wage, the improbability of advancement, your inability to call your own time or personal plans your own, (they must invariably be sacrificed if the "news" demands it, and it often does, the constant harried working under pressure to meet "dead-lines,"*

*which require being on your toes for long periods of time without breaking under stress...*”

As for the necessary preparation for work in the field, she went on to point out, that it included: “*education in a broad sense, a knowledge of, or at least a broad acquaintance with EVERYTHING.*” She then offers some words on professional morality. “*About your professional morals, be dependable, be trustworthy, make your word known to be good...try to avoid situations where you have to sell-out your friends for your paper. Never sell out your paper.*” She appends a final note. “*And lastly, never bother busy newspaper people about things you can figure out for yourself, or get somewhere else, if you want to join the journalistic fraternity.*”

In spite of her protests, the young reporter would “take the time” to answer those letters, no matter how sincere -- or how inane (as in this example from a certain H.M. Schaeffer from Leetonia, Ohio who asked for answers to some questions that were troubling him, e.g.:

1. *What is the difference between a meteor and a meteorite?*
2. *What was the beginning of Mrs. Goursey’s quarrel with Mrs. Barnes and how made it literature?*
3. *What is Shipley’s nebular hypothesis?*
4. *What King of England was born in the capital of Maine and what Queen of England was buried there?*
5. *What is the largest snake found in Ohio?*
6. *Of what medieval empress is it recorded that she dug the graves of her seven sons?*

He helpfully included a self-addressed stamped envelope for the reply. After trying her hand at a few of the more reasonable posers, young Margaret seems to have given up and referred this dedicated reader, to the dictionary, the Encyclopedia Britannica, and to his local library as a resources he might want to consult. She concluded by reminding him that the newspaper didn’t actually have a “Questions Editor.” (Perhaps, not entirely true? -- ed.).

### As Features Editor

A job that was to prove more satisfying than answering letters was her assignment as the paper’s *Travel & Resorts Editor*. It was a position that brought her into the growing tourism industry; she made valuable contacts with travel agents, cruise lines representatives, publicity directors, and hotel managers -- all eager for newspaper publicity. These contacts would prove useful as she later planned her own vacations; finding herself being welcomed as a press representative by places hungry for publicity.

Typical was the 1932 letter she received from Grace Lines in New York City regarding their Central American tours, including a story and photos on Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Recognizing that names of Pittsburgh residents sailing on its ships were of particular interest to the folks back home, they promised to make an effort to forward that information for hoped-for future stories. Similar correspondence came from the Great Northern Railway Company of Canada, the Windsor Hotel in Montreal, The Hamburg-American steamship lines, and the Elbow Room Resorts in Bermuda (where she was to spend several days at their invitation in 1936 with local travel agent, Anne Lazor). There were trips to hotels in Atlantic City, and on the occasional trips to New York, she drew on the good will of the newspaper executives who contacted friends in

the city for tickets to shows on her behalf.

Perhaps less rewarding were her duties as *Church Editor*. While she received her fair share of favorable comments on her work; she spent a lot of time fielding complaints from pastors who felt that their churches were not adequately covered or even ignored. Patiently she wrote to explain that the deadlines for submissions for publications must be strictly adhered to, otherwise timely notices could not possibly appear for the Saturday listings. As she liked to remind the churchmen, that was the newspaper business!

At one point the Church Editor found herself in the role of undercover investigative reporter. It began with a 1935 letter to the Sun-Telegraph from a pastor of a church in Wellsburg, West Virginia. He cited the efforts of a local judge (Lois Mary McBride) who was determined to clean up a marriage “racket” that had been going on for some time in that small city. It involved a few taxi drivers who were posted on the lookout for out-of-state couples who came to town for marriage. The marriage runners were then given kickbacks for channeling the couples to a few chosen ministers.

To investigate, Margaret was teamed up with news photographer, Eddie Salamony; the two were sent to Wellsburg, posing as prospective bride and groom. Their out-of-state license plate attracted immediate attention, and a helpful cab driver instantly showed up to escort them to the local courthouse for a marriage license. Although it was after-hours and the offices closed, they were admitted in through a rear entrance by a very helpful marriage license clerk. Since they were prepared to go up to the point of the ceremony before making their exit, they allowed themselves to take the cab ride to a local minister.

Once there, they quickly backed out at the last minute and, after identifying themselves as reporters to the cab driver, hastily retreated from Wellsburg. A subsequent review of the records found that a proportionately large number of the State’s marriages had been performed in Wellsburg, with a few select ministers doing the lion’s share of the business. The paper went with the story, and at the instigation of Judge McBride, a bill was introduced in the State Legislature outlawing such kickbacks, and thus ending the lucrative “marriage racket” of Wellsburg.

#### After the Sun-Telegraph Years.

In May of 1937 Margaret Russell and the Sun-Telegraph parted ways. Over the next few years she supported herself with part-time work, arranging publicity, writing press releases and supervising radio programs for various politicians in city and state-wide races. She wrote press releases for the Allegheny County Democratic Committee; served as the Executive Secretary for publicity and promotion of Allegheny County’s Sesqui-Centennial celebration, and handled publicity for China Relief such as arranging for a visit to the city by Yah Ching, a Chinese aviatrix.

During those years she also served as Pittsburgh representative for the Universal Trade Press Syndicate in New York servicing trade journals in a variety of fields, writing for: Automotive News, the Glass Digest, Milk Plant Monthly, Chain Store Age, the Department Store Economist,

Meat Merchandising, National Clothier, and many others. All this while continuing her volunteer work of writing pamphlets and speeches for charities, and speaking to community groups like the Pitcairn Girl Scouts.

Through her work on various political campaigns, Margaret became friends with local politicians and judges and was able, with their help, to get a coveted full-time position with Allegheny County. And so in 1939, she was appointed as a stenographer in the division of Claims and Investigations, of the County's Law Department.

But Margaret wasn't "all-work." Her social life revolved around the many friends she met at the paper and the contacts she made through her job. Some of her best friends were women she met through her job as feature editor. As a single woman who loved to travel, she arranged jaunts to New York City and holidays at various resorts where she, and possibly a traveling companion, could get away from it all.

She enjoyed traveling. And she was not above trading favorable publicity for lodgings as in a 1935 letter to a friendly publicity director at an Atlantic City hotel. Margaret cited the considerable publicity the paper had given the hotel in its travel features, and wondered if that might merit some consideration in a trip she hoped to make to Atlantic City. She raised the possibility of some consideration in the room rates for her and her traveling companion, "a girl artist from Pittsburgh".

During this period, in addition to her publicity work, she wrote number of specialized trade articles, which she submitted to various publications. She also was an inveterate letter writer, keeping up a detailed correspondence with friends she had met through the paper and the various women's groups and writer's groups to which she belonged.

At the onset of World War II, she began taking evening courses at Carnegie Tech to prepare herself for war work. She managed to gain a certificate in Instructor Training in War Production including coursework in Personnel Administration and Industrial Management.

She continued job hunting for that ideal position where her many talents could be best utilized. In 1942, she answered an ad for a secretary stenographer, in which she described herself as "single, mature, protestant, overweight, with two college degrees."

### New Challenges

During the period from 1942-1943 she handled publicity for the China War Relief Association in Pittsburgh, including news releases and letters in support of the war effort on behalf of President: L.H. Yee (George) Lee. She became personal friends with Mr. Lee and his family including a daughter "NewGee," who she befriended and supported, through many difficult years.

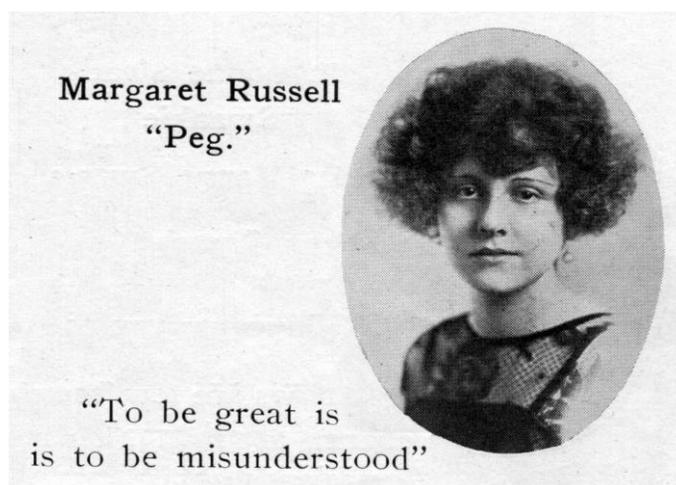
After the war, Margaret took a new interest in her home town newspaper - *The Pitcairn Express*. It dated back to 1893, as the first local weekly to begin publication in the Turtle Creek Valley. In October 1948, Margaret Russell bought the *Pitcairn Express* to become its new owner and

publisher. She did writing and editing for many years until she sold the paper to Gateway Publications in 1980.

Her work on that newspaper, renewed her interest in the history of her hometown and so she was glad to have the opportunity, in 1973, of contributing an article on Pitcairn's history for the souvenir book to be published for Pitcairn's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

The result was the first comprehensive piece covering the many aspects of Pitcairn's history showing an impressive mastery of the subject, set in a superb narrative structure. Indeed her efforts were recognized for that achievement when, in 1973, she won the *Pittsburgh Press Club's* Golden Quill Award for her work in compiling that history.

Although she lived in Pitcairn and in Pittsburgh over the years; in the 1940s Margaret moved to the King Edward Apartments in the Oakland section of Pittsburgh, Pa., where she lived for many years. Margaret Russell died on May 11, 1988, at age 81.



**The reflections on life of a teenaged girl in 1923**

The End