

Hot on the Line

Mindful of Dallas and Lee Harvey Oswald, Cleveland and Dr. Sam Sheppard, Miami and Candy Mossler—and of recent Supreme Court decisions on the handling of suspects—Chicago newspapers have treated the mass slaying of eight student nurses with reasonable restraint. Headlines and stories have been as cool as the event permits. Still, in collecting the lurid details, one paper has had a clear advantage. Chicago's *American* was able to unleash Harry ("Romy") Romanoff, 74, the last of the city's great *Front Page*, get-the-story-at-all-costs reporters.

Stories about his exploits are legend, and they grow in the telling. Romy on the telephone seems a constant source of confusion. Somehow, a homicide detective on duty at the dead nurses' apartment got the impression that he was talking to Cook County Coroner Andrew Toman, and he started spilling all the gory details of the crime—until he saw Toman walk into the room. Whereupon he slammed down the receiver in embarrassment. Somehow, Suspect Richard Speck's mother in Dallas got the idea that she was talking to a lawyer hired to defend her son. She gushed information meant to help build his case. The banner head-

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line over Romy's story read *FAMILY'S STORY OF SPECK'S LIFE*; there was ample detail on Speck's marital problems and his earlier troubles with the police. It was the kind of story that may affect the trial.

No Bylines. Romy, of course, admits to no impersonations. But admiring colleagues know him as "the Heifetz of the telephone," and with good reason. He has scarcely been out of the office in 30 years; yet, using a chameleon voice and a host of guises, he has scored beat after beat. He never gets a byline, never actually writes a story himself; he simply talks on the telephone, then repeats what he has learned from the conversation to a rewriter or another reporter.

When Texas City, Texas, caught fire in 1947, Romanoff got on the phone. "Should the area be declared a disaster area?" he asked. "What's needed down there?" The mayor, the Red Cross and top police officials, thinking that they were giving the White House a firsthand report of the damage and injuries, wound up giving Romanoff more information than any other reporter came close to collecting.

No Yankees. There is no end to anecdotes about Romy. When a fire swept through a Catholic hospital in Centralia, Ill., killing a number of patients, he is said to have called up the nun in charge, passed himself off as a representative of the cardinal's office, kept pumping her for details which he needed, he said, to plan supplies for the survivors. On hearing that Millionaire Fight Promoter Tex Rickard was seriously ill, Romanoff promptly rang up Mrs. Rickard. "This is Governor Len Small of Illinois," he intoned. "I am distressed to hear of the illness of my old friend Tex. Tell me, Mrs. Rickard, how is he?" "He's dying, Governor," the tearful spouse replied, and Romanoff had another scoop.

Romy Romanoff hasn't always been that devious. Once he called up a sheriff in Kentucky to get the details of a murder, identified himself properly. "I ain't talking to any damyankee newspaperman," shouted the sheriff as he banged down the receiver. "Why be truthful?" shrugged Romy as he contemplated the horrible prospect of no story.

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