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Well-Heeled— Can't Dance

By Diana McLellan

Our "city" magazine, the *Washingtonian*, is 10 years old.

It was launched in October of '65 by steel heir Laughlin Phillips, who had just completed a successful 15-year stint in the CIA, (three of those years in Hanoi, two in Iran.)

It was sent sailing into the city and its environs on a tide of high hopes: to "make life in Washington more meaningful and rewarding for the surprisingly compartmented groups which make up the city's population: Civil servants, scientists, Congressmen, diplomats and natives . . . By bringing into focus the underlying issues; the key personalities, the basic trends, and the best hopes of the city, we want the magazine to help the city understand itself and develop its special character."



Along with high hopes for quality went humble expectations for circulation: a mere 25,000 was aspired to at the time.

IT WAS A TIME when city magazines were aborning over the country. New York, the pace-setting weekly, had leapt phoenix-like from the ashes of the New York Herald-Tribune. It had a core of first-rate writers and critics: Pete Hamill, Jimmy Breslin, Tom Wolfe, John Simon, Judith Crist, Gloria Steinem, and so on.

Philadelphia magazine had, shortly before, been snatched from the jaws of the Chamber of Commerce by publisher D'Herbert Lipson. It, too, evolved into a top-notch city mag — witty, punchy, daring. (Lipson is now attempting to do the same for *Boston*) Loc Phillips cousin, James Laughlin, had founded a successful California magazine called *Frontiers*.

The local mag, obviously, was an idea whose time had come.

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But has it come for the *Washingtonian*?

Financially, yes. Its latest audited circulation figure is 56,662 (Phillips claims it's really in the 60,000s). Ads pay the bills for any publication in this country, unless it's "funded," and the *Washingtonian's* revenues are sky-high. It moved solidly into the black in 1973. In fact, readers who fork over the usual \$1.25 per issue now get more ads than readers of any of the other 12 major city magazines in the country: 124.3 pages in the September alone.

WHO READS IT? It unquestionably has a fair share of "congressmen, diplomats." Scientists? It's conspicuous in dentists' offices around the Beltway. It's certainly snapped up from newsstands near the Capitol by eager Congressional aides and secretaries the minute it hits, and the better-heeled natives read it, too.

According to the figures the magazine currently uses to "sell" its advertisers, your average *Washingtonian* reader is in the fair flush of middle life, comfortably fixed, and two-fisted about the bottle. (Median age: 37.5. Median household income: \$22,300. He most likely drinks liquor (87 percent do) and possibly wine (33 percent.)

He is also sublimely unspoiled.

Not for him the urbane wit, socko headlines and layout, the irreverent monthly boost away from his boredom threshold that readers of *Philadelphia* or *Boston*, for example, expect and get.

"It's all ads and flab," says a newcomer to Washington used to meatier fare and fluffier souffles on his glossy-monthly menu, "and looks worse than the Navy News. When you come out monthly, your stuff should theoretically be 30 times better than a daily newspaper. Instead, it's barely as good."

Typical content varies from supernorner "service" stuff you can pick up with a quick trot through the Yellow Pages, through some good, if usually

dated (there's a six-week lead time on major stories) political or sports features, and, via how-to-have-a-roof-garden-or-find-a-nanny-for-you-house-plants stodge, on through to moderately meaty, if sycophantic, media personality profiles.

"I THINK THE *Washingtonian's* a good magazine. And it has the potential to be a great magazine," says its editor Jack Limpert, who first came to town in 1967 to edit O. Roy Chalk's bus give-away paper, the D.C. Examiner.

"City magazines, after all, reflect the city they're published in. This is a hard city to get a grip on, I'll admit. But I think that since the early '30s Washington's become a better and better city."

But a lot of the largely-white, middle-class people who subscribe to the *Washingtonian* long ago voted with their feet that the city isn't better and better, and maybe that's where the big misunderstanding started.

"I think the *Washingtonian* underestimates the sophistication of its readers," says one ex-subscriber. "And it has a ridiculous set of sacred cows. Certain newspapers. Certain personalities. What it needs is a good dose of irreverence."

It's true that the sense of we're-all-in-it-together fun and the sophisticated esprit that leavens the better city magazines is lacing here...

A few years ago, the magazine essayed a monthly contest of the type that delights the casual reader of *New York* magazine; it had to be abandoned. "The entries were just terrible" mourned an editor. "There just isn't that pizzazz here."

MORE RECENTLY, a rather funny parody of "The Ear" in last month's issue produced a deluge of mail protesting the magazine's gushy, banal new gossip column.

How could readers guess their magazine was suddenly being irreverent?

There is but one light-hearted and different drummer in the grim parade of frozen-food exposes and collect-beautiful-old-tools suggestions in October's issue: "Commuter's Survival Guide" by John H. Corcoran. The number of legs on the ground of the sculpted

horses on Washington's circles, he tells us, have nothing to do with How the Hero died: They tell how dangerous the circle is. "All legs on ground — a standard circle, no more dangerous than testing fire-crackers in the Alps in avalanche season. Use moderate caution. If you have a St. Christopher's medal on the dash turn it toward front ... Horse with one leg raised — traffic circle has been cited within the past five years by the National Association of Automobile Repairmen. Persons with coronary histories must carry permission slips from their doctors ... Horse with two legs raised — Known combat zone. Abandon car. Call your insurance agent, and notify next of kin ..."

GRATEFULLY, THE reader hurls himself into such oases among the jejune stretches of conflicts of interest in the GSI, a new way to take off pounds, more

than you want to know about the National Symphony and less than you want to know about Rostropovich.

The peculiar thing is that much good, magazine-quality, irreverent writing in the magazine is excerpted from new or upcoming books. A couple of chunks from "The First Time," revealing how such as Art Buchwald and Alice Roosevelt Longworth approached their loss of virginity, enlivened the September issue. Some inoffensive snippets from "Hope and Fear in Washington: The Story of the Washington Press Corps," profiling Scotty Reston, Helen Thomas and Eric Sevareid, grace the Special Tenth Anniversary Issue of this month.

This is substantial, smack-your-lips magazine writing; why, in this city, does it have to come from a book?

There's no lack of good writers here. There are lively free-lancers working, some of them for no pay at all, for such things as the tiny *Washington Times*. The city is abulge with the best reporters the country can send here. About four years ago, *Washington Post* writers were finally forbidden by their full-time employers to moonlight for the magazine. Star writers were grudgingly permitted to contribute for several years, often creating ironic issues of the magazine: In one section, the *Washingtonian* would pick away at the quality of *The Star*; elsewhere, in some cases, about 50 percent of its main content was written by *Star* staffers. (Finally, former editor Newbold Noyes forbade such footsie. Only when *The Star* went on a four-day week, it was considered kosher for *Star* staffers to moonlight for the extra cash.)

NO. IT'S NOT lack of good free-lancers. Windy copy is what happens when free-lancers are paid a dime a word, as *Washingtonian* writers generally are.

Then, a too-small editing staff — to be remedied, it's hoped, by the recent addition of a good new managing editor — has laden each issue with a truly astonishing array of gaucheries, typographical errors and rather endearing illiteracies, which any monthly publication should be able to catch during the snail-paced preparation process. ("Tourine" for tureen, for heaven's sake. "What's in the Jaw's cocktail?" indeed.)

The problem is that the *Washingtonian*, despite its *New Yorky* make-up, has the air of an amateur production in a professional town. D.C. is Powerful Mediaville. What's needed is a good, solid charge of irreverence.

It doesn't have to be frivolous. Irreverence extends to serious stuff.

The writer for *Philadelphia* magazine who exposed a powerful investigative reporter-on-the-take-from-officials in the City of Brotherly Love became a hero. Here, even if such a thing were ever going on, it's doubtful anyone would tackle it: Washington's got more-than-Brotherly-Love, and even a touch of incest; fear of offending the powers-that-be, be they media or mayor, can dampen the soul of a publication, just as it can of a city.

In a ho-hum article on "Making It" in this month's issue, the author quotes Henry Adams on an aspect of the Washington personality of the era: "He was

ashamed to be amused; his mind no longer answered to the stimulus of variety; he could not face a new thought ..."

Hmmm. Sounds like a magazine we know.

On the whole, I'd rather be in *Philadelphia*.