

The Birth of LIFE - Earl Rickard

In 1936 Henry Luce had the motive, means, and money to publish a national picture magazine; so he did. The first issue hit the newsstands in mid-November. The magazine sold every copy and lost money for the next three years. The Magazine -- *LIFE*.

Luce founded *Time* magazine in 1923; by 1935 the magazine made a 2.2 million dollar profit. In the late 1920s Luce noticed that scores of quality business articles written for *Time* failed to make the magazine because of space limitations. He estimated there were enough articles for an entire business magazine; hence, in 1929, Luce created his second successful magazine -- *Fortune*.

The idea for *LIFE* was more visceral; Luce just had a hunch that a picture magazine with the right stories and presentation would succeed in the American marketplace. The advent of the small, mobile 35mm camera spelled the end of dull, staged pictures. Original, creative photography captured peoples imaginations; therefore, Luce forecast success for a magazine presenting such photos backed by well written stories. Nevertheless, production costs were expensive. To highlight pictures over text, the magazine had to be printed on high quality paper with a larger page size than standard magazines. Moreover, to make a profit without being over priced the magazine would have to sell for no more than a dime.

LIFE succeeded beyond Luce or anyone's wildest dreams. The first issue sold out the entire 466,000 copy press run leaving distributors begging for more. Within a year *LIFE* had a circulation of over a million.

But Luce, predicting *LIFE*'s circulation at 250,000, made one nearly fatal error: He sold advertising rates too low. The low rates combined with the expensive heavy coated paper needed to reproduce quality pictures caused a \$50,000-a-week loss. *LIFE* ran up a six-million-dollar loss before the magazine turned a profit in 1939, when circulation roared past two million.

The first issue, dated November 23, 1936, set the tone for one of the most famous magazines in American history. Regular features destined to become familiar to millions of Americans for decades to come debuted in *LIFE*'s first issue: the picture essay, art reproductions, "LIFE Goes to a Party," and "LIFE's Newsfronts of the World."

LIFE magazine's editors introduced their brand new creation with a page two picture of a doctor holding a newly born infant by its feet; the caption read "Life Begins." On the opposite page the editors described in "Introduction to this first issue of LIFE" how they had sent photographer Margaret Bourke-White to photograph the new Fort Peck Dam on the Columbia River. "What the Editors expected -- for use in some later issue -- were construction pictures as only Bourke-White can take them. What the Editors got was a human document of American frontier life which, to them at least, was a revelation."

The editors choose a wide angle picture of the dam for the first cover, but the story and pictures inside tackled what *LIFE* always did best, people stories with pictures. Bourke-White took compelling shots of dam workers relaxing with dime-a-dance girls at the local saloon; a town sheriff -- sporting a cigar firmly clenched in his teeth and a large caliber pistol prominently displayed in his belt -- standing with two businessmen in front of the Moose Market; three smiling children leaning against the town's welcome sign -- "Entering New Deal Speed Limit 25 Miles Per Hour."

Besides Bourke-White another giant of photographic art contributed to *LIFE*'s first issue, Alfred Eisenstaedt. His beautiful photos of little children at the nations only Chinese parochial school was the first of over 1,600 assignments for *LIFE* during the next half-century.

In the ensuing years Bourke-White, Eisenstaedt, and *LIFE*'s other top notch photographers used the magazine's pages to turn photography into great art. Nonetheless, *LIFE* remembered photography's forerunner -- painting. Long before *LIFE* proved a vivid picture is worth a thousand words, men and woman who worked with paint and brush had done the same, though not in the flash of a shutter. Accordingly, *LIFE*'s first issue spotlighted "Curry of Kansas"; thus launching a recurring feature on painters and their work. The article led with a picture of John Steuart Curry, his biography, and three pages of his paintings including, a Kansas tornado, circus elephants, and acrobats performing a triple somersault.

America's popular media always received coverage in *LIFE*. The initial issue highlighted "The First Lady of the American Theatre," Helen Hayes, movie star Robert Taylor, and the NBC radio network's tenth birthday.

"Greatest Living Actress"(a quote of Noel Coward's) profiled Helen Hayes and her starring role in the broadway play "Victoria Regina," which opened in December 1935. Hayes starred as Queen Victoria in over 300 performances for 330,000 customers, bringing in a million dollars in box office receipts. Pictures, some in color, show Hayes on stage portraying the Queen. A photo montage of Hayes' life with text followed.

Robert Taylor received the same words and picture treatment along with scenes of he and his co-star, Greta Garbo, from the soon-to-be-released MGM movie, "Camille." *LIFE*'s editors took the opportunity for a follow-up feature on 88 years of "Camille," printing photos of a nineteenth century performance starring Sarah Bernhardt and scenes from the 1917 silent film starring Theda Bara.

At the time of *LIFE* magazine's birth, network radio programming was reaching into every American home and automobile. The nation's largest radio network, the National Broadcasting Company, observed its tenth birthday in November 1936. *LIFE* helped them celebrate with an article displaying photos of some NBC stars: comedian Jack Benny, singer Rudy Valle, and radio reporter Walter Winchell. On the next page the magazine printed eleven pictures arranged in a circle around some text describing "handies" -- hand signals from the radio director to the performers: one finger on the tip of the nose -- "O.K. on time"; both hands pushing downward -- "softer"; the hand across the throat-- "Cut."

LIFE magazine's first issue started an American institution. By 1948 19% of every magazine dollar spent went to *LIFE* and 21% of Americans over 10 years old read *LIFE*. But in the 1950s television began to erode *LIFE*'s circulation and in 1972 *LIFE* ceased publication as a weekly. Special issues of *LIFE* continue to pop-up on the newsstands, but the magazine's glory days are long gone. When I was a little boy my mother would give me the *LIFE* magazine as soon as the mailman delivered it and I would sit on the floor and let *LIFE* show me the world. So did millions of others.

Sources: *Luce: His Time, Life, and Fortune*, John Kobler; *Luce and His Empire*, W. A. Swanberg; *LIFE* vol. 1, No. 1., November 23, 1936; *LIFE 50 Years: Special Anniversary Issue*, Fall 1986, Time, Inc.

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