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ROOSEVELT UNIVERSITY

DIARY OF A CITY MANAGER

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
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BY

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## PREFACE

While going to graduate school studying Personnel, Organization, Administration, Finance, Systems and numerous other topics on both the theoretical and the practical level, there was one question that always occurred to me: What do I do when I am finally in charge of an organization?

I am sure that there are texts written telling what an administrator should do when he moves into a new situation: what things to look for, what things to change immediately, and what dangerous pitfalls to avoid in the first few months. But I never came across any literature that I felt gave an idea of the actual day-to-day problems, situations, personalities and feelings that confronted an administrator moving into a new position.

The Assistant City Managers in the Chicago area, myself included, got together on a monthly basis and



discussed topics of common concern and interest. The question of what it is really like to be a City Manager was frequently a topic of conversation. We all watched Managers operate on a daily basis. In our discussions we would analyze how various problems were faced: whether a particular Manager handled it correctly, whether he was a good Manager or not, whether he did most things correctly but had weaknesses in certain areas, etc. In my own mind I know the questions were always there. What would I do? How would I handle it? Could I handle it?

At one of our monthly meetings we were fortunate enough to round up three new City Managers in the Chicago area serving in their first position. Each one gave a brief description of how he obtained the job and some of the major problems he faced as he stepped into the position. The program was a huge success. It was filled with practical, down-to-earth problems and solutions. But I think the greatest success of the afternoon was that we all got a feeling for what it was like to come into a position of authority and responsibility; a position we all hoped to step into ourselves in the next few years.



When it came time to write a thesis as part of the MPA program, a number of areas studied during the course work came to mind as possible subjects for greater examination and analysis. As I reached the final stages of choosing a topic, it occurred to me that the single most impressive experience that I encountered as I prepared myself to be a public administrator was getting some inkling of what it would be like from three men who were just one jump ahead of me in experience and actual job position.

I thought that what might be most interesting, certainly for myself, and I hope for others who may have to read the thesis, would be to try to give someone else the feeling of what it is like to move into an administrative position and have complete responsibility for the first time.

Having decided that point, the next question was how I could do this. How could I get across the feelings that I would experience as a new administrator? How could I convey to readers what was going on in my mind on a daily basis as I stepped into a new situation?

I decided the best way to do this would be to write a

diary. At the end of each working day I would sit down and write what had happened that day. I would also try to write what I thought about a situation as it developed and also how I felt about it.

I also decided that three months of daily activity would be enough. In three months I would have established myself to some extent or be well on the road to failure.

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- The City
- The Job Interview
- The First Three Months

CHAPTER II. INTERNAL CONTACTS .....

- Personal
- Fiscal
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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis might have been a case study analyzing a specific problem area in city management, how it arose, the players, what steps were gone through in the process of resolving the problems and what were the final solutions. Case studies are useful in many ways but, by themselves, they do not give in depth insight as to the day-to-day problems of a city manager, particularly a new and young city manager.

This thesis is intended to fill a real gap in the literature in this field and, more importantly, to serve as a guide for those who plan careers in this field. It is intended to provide insight into the daily problems an administrator must wrestle with as he works toward their solutions.

A problem with the police, for instance, may develop on one particular day, go through a number of stages and not be resolved for two weeks or longer. Meanwhile, the administrator is not only dealing with the police problem.



He is dealing with all sorts of other difficulties which will not wait until the case study problem is resolved.

In many ways, the other problems play a role in determining the solution of the case study problem.

A decision may be reached in a case study that may have been too hasty, may be made without sufficient information, may be made while the administrator is busy with other problems or for some other reason that may make the decision defective but which at the same time explains why the decision was made.

A case study isolates the problem. By isolating it, the problem becomes somewhat removed from reality. A problem does not arise and follow a straight line of progression to a conclusion without being affected by the other problems that the administrator is dealing with.

The purpose of this thesis is to present a piece of literature in the field of city management that catalogues the broad range of problems that must be faced by a city manager. The purpose is to show not only that the problems of city management are abundant; but that the problems affect each other in their solutions.



They are problems that are dealt with over a period of real time. Some problems are handled immediately, some in a week, some in a month, and some may stretch over several months or years.

The first part of this thesis is an attempt to show this inter-relationship of problems by using a diary format. I present a brief introduction to the city itself. Following this is a day-by-day account of my first three months in the position. As a preface to the diary is a recounting of the job interview prior to my appointment.

After the diary section, I analyze specific problem areas in greater detail. My analysis will include both internal and external problems. The emphasis will be on telling what happened as it happened.

Footnotes are sparse, but their absence reflects the actual job conditions as problems arose, were met and finally resolved. I did not make reference to ICMA textbooks, APWA manuals or other scholarly works when confronted with a problem. Decisions were made based on my experience and the advice of others.



CHAPTER I

THE DIARY OF A NEW CITY MANAGER

The City

The city is a rural, midwestern town of approximately 7,000 people. It is about seventy miles from a large metropolitan area and about twenty-five miles from the nearest town exceeding 25,000 people. The town is basically agriculturally oriented. It is located in probably one of the best farm areas in the country. The farmers here are in the unique position of never having had a bad year. Some years have been better than others but there has never been a crop failure. This general affluence and optimism is reflected in the people in town.

Since World War II, the population has increased at the rate of 1,000 people every decade. With this rise has come a rapidly expanding industrial base, most of it home grown. Of the four major employers in town employing 350 people or more, three of them are family operations headed



by local men who have grown up with the business and seen it grow with them.

The first thing that strikes a person when driving around the town is the amount of industry in this rural area. For a population of a little less than 7,000 people, there are approximately 3,500 jobs available in town. Consequently, the town serves as a drawing area for more rural communities to a distance of 40 or 50 miles.

Farmers, however, still control the county and, in many ways, still exert a great influence on the city. There is a high proportion of old people in town. One in every seven persons is sixty-five or older. Most are retired farmers and their wives. Most are fairly well to do and conservative both financially and politically.

Physically, the city is beautiful. It has two lakes within the city limits. Dutch elm disease has not hit the area yet. Consequently, there are many tree lined streets which give the town a picture postcard quality.

It is also easy to note driving through town that there are a lot of churches. For a town of slightly under 7,000 people, there are twelve churches. With a heavily



German-Swedish population, there are three Lutheran churches and one each of a number of other denominations.

The people are old fashioned. They maintain a number of the old values. The problem of welfare is a greater one than the problem in Viet Nam in their opinion. The city code still says that people under 21 may not smoke in public and Women's Liberation is not going to be successful here for awhile.

The people, however, are friendly and go out of their way to introduce themselves. Most people think nothing of coming into a cafe, seeing a stranger, sitting down and having coffee with him. A person does not buy anything in a store without talking to the owner for a few minutes and a walk down State Street is punctuated with a number of hellos.

The atmosphere is much more relaxed than in a large city. That is probably a cliché, but it is true. That is not to say that things do not get done and that there is not frequently a sense of urgency. It is just that when duck hunting season opens it is time to go duck hunting and business be damned.



Wednesday night is church night. You do not schedule meetings. You do not have your business open. You do not do a number of other things because you should be in church Wednesday night, or at least not doing anything official.

The final thing to be noted is that this small, rural, independent town is more like a large city than a medium sized suburb three or four times its population. In a suburb many of the activities and concerns still gravitate to and are centered in the large city: the men work there, the entertainment is produced there, organizations meet there. A small town, on the other hand, has all these things right within the town. The organizations are smaller, the entertainment less sophisticated; but the full gamut of social, organizational, economic and administrative problems are present though frequently on a smaller scale.

The city has to provide all the services; whereas, in the suburb, they can be contracted for or shared with other governmental units. Consequently, in this city, under the control of the manager are the normal city services: the police and fire departments, street department, and parks and

recreation. There are also the sewer treatment plant, the water and light utility and the city hospital. None of this, of course, was known to me before coming for the job interview.

The item in the City Manager's Newsletter said: population 6686, salary open, \$2,000,000 budget, 55 employees, previous experience desirable.

The airplane ride was uneventful except for the landing. At least it was uneventful for the rest of the passengers. An airplane ride has 3 stages: the takeoff, the flight itself, and the landing. I am sure of the first two, but when the plane comes down I have to leave my stomach somewhere up in the sky. When we finally did land, I had no need for the oxygen and the fact of the seat; but my stomach was not feeling any too well. I thought I would buy a newspaper and have a little breakfast. I did that, and my stomach calmed down sufficiently.



## The Job Interview

This was one of the worst days of my life. The day started terribly as I had to get up about four in the morning, drive an hour to the airport and catch an early plane. Mornings are not my best hours. And getting up that early in the morning is enough to make me ill. However, after eating breakfast, grabbing some money, putting on my best suit, shirt and tie and making sure my shoes were shined; I jumped in the car and drove to the airport.

The airplane ride was uneventful except for the landing. At least it was uneventful for the rest of the passengers. An airplane ride has 3 stages: the take-off, the flight itself, and the landing. I do fine of the first two, but when the plane comes down I seem to leave my stomach somewhere up in the sky. When we finally did land, I had no need for the doggy bag in the back of the seat; but my stomach was not feeling any too well, so I thought I would buy a newspaper and have a little breakfast. I did that, and my stomach calmed down sufficiently

so that I thought I could go on and face the world for the rest of the day.

The interview was to be at lunch, so when I arrived in town about 11:15 A.M. I drove around a little bit and stopped at the library to see if there were any old budgets lying around and maybe a copy of the city ordinances, and to see what type of newspaper, if any, they had in the town.

After paging through that for awhile, noon approached and I walked over to the city hall quite confident that if the Mayor and Council had any sense and judgment of character the job would be mine.

I met the Mayor and we went to lunch. My bad luck streak continued. Small town restaurants generally are not known for their fine cuisine. This place, though well decorated, was no exception. When I sat down with the Mayor and six Councilmen and was introduced to each of them, I thought it would be an excellent idea to have a drink.

Being in a strange town and hoping to make a good impression, I decided I would wait till one of the other people ordered a drink. I waited for a few minutes and nobody ordered. The menus came and still nobody ordered a



drink. Finally the waitress came and they all ordered off the menu without any drinks. A pretty straight bunch I thought, and decided to proceed accordingly. I looked through the menu to find something edible and came across a roast beef lunch with mashed potatoes and gravy.

After answering questions for fifteen or twenty minutes, they brought the sumptuous repast in. The beef looked as if it had been hanging out in the back for a week or so, the mashed potatoes were lumpy, and the gravy had begun to set in a hard gel. Fortunately, they had not done much to destroy the corn, but the roll looked as if somebody had a big piece of dough in the back, ripped off hunks, and threw them in the oven. After eating a little, we continued the interview for about two hours.

It actually went suprisingly well. They seemed quite concerned about a big city boy coming to a small town. But I think I convinced them I could adapt to the situation.

After lunch the Mayor and one of the Councilmen took me for a tour of the town in a car. It was about ninety five degrees and the car was not air conditioned. My



stomach still had not settled down from the morning airplane ride. After driving around for twenty minutes I began to turn green. I turned to the Mayor and suggested we go back to the air conditioned office or they would have a sick applicant on their hands. He got a big charge out of it, thought it was really hysterical. To this day he insists I got sick because I was nervous.

However, after sitting in the office for about fifteen minutes, I recovered my composure or rather my stomach did. I shook hands and headed back to the airport. Driving the hour and twenty minutes back to the airport in an air conditioned, rented car settled my stomach completely and my only thought was to head for the restaurant, have a nice, leisurely dinner and wait for the 7:00 P.M. plane.

I parked the car, walked up to the desk, presented my slip and prepared to pay my bill. The bill came to \$38.46. Opening my wallet I discovered I had \$40.00, no checkbook and no credit card. After trying to get a discount and various other maneuverings, I had to pay the bill. This left me with \$1.54 to not only eat dinner on but to get



my car out of the parking lot back in Chicago.

I bought a candy bar and waited the two and one-half hours till the plane took off. All the time the thought was running through my mind that even if they offered me the job, I would never come back to this god forsaken place for all the money in the world.

The plane finally took off and I landed in Chicago. O'Hare was an insane asylum with wedges of people running for little mini buses to take them to the various parking lots. Women had kids under their arms and men were elbowing women to get into the buses.

I finally got to the car in the annex parking lot. The car started, and I headed for the exit with \$1.44 in my pocket thinking I would have to borrow a nickel or dime from various people until I could get out of there. I pulled up to the parking booth and handed them my bill. It was stamped and came to \$1.40. I didn't have to beg and I headed back home with four cents in my pocket.

The day was a total disaster. I had an upset stomach and an empty one on top of it. I had no money in my pocket and I wasn't sure I had the job. The only saving

factor was that I was sure I had done well on the interview.

It was my first interview for a manager's job. I had sent out about eight applications to various towns. This was the first one to see enough in the application to take a chance on paying my way for an interview.

I tried to be as honest as I could. If I knew nothing about a particular subject, I told them so. I tried to emphasize the things I knew and I tried to convey the feeling that I could do the job.

Saying you do not know something is difficult but it is better in the long run. I felt that if I got the job and had given the wrong impression of my experience and knowledge, I would pay for it later.

I simply tried to be myself which sounds trite; however, if I did get the job, I would have to work for and with seven men. If they chose me because of what they saw in two hours, I did not want any false expectations to be created which would come back to haunt me later.

Fortunately, after five other interviews chosen from twenty-six applicants, the Council made a choice a month later and offered me the job.

I accepted.



### The First Three Months

#### November 1 - Sunday

I checked in at the Mayor's motel at 7:00 P.M. and talked to him and his wife about half an hour, mainly pleasantries.

Two hour session with the Mayor beginning around 9:00 P.M. with a replay of the afternoon's football game in the background. Talked about all kinds of things from the Police Department to Councilmen to salaries, etc.

He gave a brief summary of each of the Councilmen:

Ralph Scheck--on one year--newcomer to town--purchasing agent for E.F. Johnson Co.

Joe Kozan--been on awhile-- a design engineer for E.F. Johnson--steady, competent

Roger Rucker--young, salaried inventory worker at E.F. Johnson--on for two years, elected first time at twenty-two as a reaction to town's disapproval of previous councilman's stand on an issue--up for election tomorrow

Dave Berg--drugstore owner--newcomer to town a few

years ago--in middle of second term--competent--had previous experience in last town

Joe Collins--long time Councilman--born and raised in town--installer for Phone Company--up for election tomorrow

Bill Doherty--retired telephone lineman--good friend of ex-assistant police chief, now a patrolman--conservative --on council for many years--up for election tomorrow

Problem in police department--Chief and assistant chief demoted six months ago--advertised for a new chief and interviewed a number of candidates--first choice turned down job--the others not too hot.

The Mayor was very friendly. He thought that one problem of the last Manager was his formality and aloofness. He suggested I call people by their first names if I feel comfortable doing it. He thinks the small things are important and I agree.

#### November 2 - Monday

A general open house was held from nine to eleven for all citizens to meet me. Spent most of the time drinking coffee, eating donuts and shaking hands. I had



enough of all three by noontime.

Spent a little time with the Mayor, City Attorney and an attorney for a woman from whom the city is buying land for a storm sewer drainage basin. It was decided to have a special meeting of the Council tomorrow to amend a resolution to eliminate an easement from the purchase contract. The matter is of some importance as the weather is getting colder and the storm sewer should be laid as soon as possible.

After lunch I called a meeting with all department heads for first thing tomorrow morning to get acquainted and set a few ground rules.

From comments around during the day, the police department needs some reorganizing, including a new chief soon.

Overall I think it was a good day. I think I handled meeting all the new people well and established a good image. No sweaty palms as yet. Seems to be plenty of work to dig into.

#### November 3 - Tuesday

Met with the ten department heads and had a brief