

Sharpe, William (Bill) Pleasants ^[1]

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by Jack Riley, 1994

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William (Bill) Pleasants Sharpe, press agent, journalist, author, magazine editor, and publisher, was born near Madison in rural [Rockingham County](#) ^[2], the son of William Pleasants and Minnie Isabelle Anderson Sharp. His mother was the daughter of a Confederate army veteran, and his father was an uncle of Susie Sharp, chief justice of the [North Carolina Supreme Court](#) ^[3].

Young Bill, who spelled his name Sharpe, was one of three sons and three daughters. When his family moved to New Orleans, he remained in Winston-Salem to complete the requirements for a diploma from Reynolds High School, class of 1921. He earned his expenses through such work as editing the school paper and reporting sports events for the *Winston-Salem Journal-Sentinel*. His energy and intelligence so impressed attorney Fred Parrish that he prevailed in seeking an appointment for Sharpe to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Already enamored of newspapering, Sharpe declined the appointment in favor of the job that led to a lifetime of writing and publishing.

After brief stints with the *Johnstonian* at Selma and the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, he returned in 1926 to Winston-Salem, where he remained with the *Journal and Sentinel* for eleven years, reaching the rank of managing editor. In 1939–41 he would return once more to Winston-Salem to publish and edit his own nondaily, *Thursday*.

In Selma, while deciding not to purchase the paper there, he met Sallie Herring, the oldest of six daughters and two sons of William Abia of [Lenoir County](#) ^[4] and Emma Gertrude Hardy Herring of [Beaufort County](#) ^[5]. Bill and Sallie were married on 11 May 1926 in Raleigh. The couple had four daughters: Betty Lou (Mrs. Ed Burt Bruton), Polly Ann (Mrs. Homer Lee Jenkins), Susan Herring (Mrs. Wayne Perry Zarr), and Sallie (Mrs. Andrew Matthew McCauley, Jr.).

In 1937 Governor [Clyde Roark Hoey](#) ^[6] appointed Sharpe to head the new Division of Advertising and News of the North Carolina Department of Conservation and Development. Breaking new ground beyond any the state had tried in travel promotion, Sharpe devised an operation that became a national model. War curbed travel and interrupted the fledgling campaign. Sharpe, ineligible for military duty, became the first director of the North Carolina Office of War Information, an arm of the federal organization; later he was public relations director of a Fairchild Aircraft plant in Burlington that was developing a new aircraft for wartime use.

At war's end he returned to promoting state vacation and scenic attractions with a zest that multiplied visiting tourist trade. In the summer of 1949 he became director of publicity for the Carolina Power and Light Company and two years later purchased *The State* ^[7] magazine from [Carl Goerch](#) ^[8]. For the next nineteen years he crisscrossed North Carolina to interview Tar Heel characters and to continue promoting travel into the state after his own fashion in his own publication.

Sharpe had served as the state's top publicist under four governors—[Hoey](#) ^[6], [J. Melville Broughton](#) ^[9], [Gregg Cherry](#) ^[10], and [W. Kerr Scott](#) ^[11]—and his energy and initiative had won nationwide respect of competing press agents who flattered him by copying his methods to counter his competition for tourists. He played promotion straight. Once, when Madison Avenue types asked him to have tobacco festival queens vested with leaves of tobacco, squirted with champagne, and pushed into a pool for publicity pictures, his response was "go to hell!" Travel editors respected him and accepted his invitation to return as "Honorary Tar Heels," a group that he formed to cement and sustain friendships.

Of his magazine he once wrote: "One of the purposes of *The State* ^[7] might be expressed this way: So that North Carolinians might better appreciate and enjoy their environment by becoming better acquainted with it." Towards that goal he also published several books: *Tar on My Heels: A Press Agent's Note Book* illustrated by photographer John Hemmer (1946); *North Carolina Counties* (1948); and *A New Geography of North Carolina* (4 vols.; 1954, 1958, 1961, and 1965). Profusely illustrated, the new geography presented profiles containing anecdotes, [folklore](#) ^[12], and legends of each of the state's one hundred counties. It found its way into most public schools and libraries and went into subsequent reprints. Academic regard for the four-volume geography was expressed thus by [Hugh T. Lefler](#) ^[13], University of North Carolina professor of history: "All those who teach and write about North Carolina will find it an indispensable book." In 1962 the work won Sharpe the Mayflower Cup, North Carolina's highest [literary award](#) ^[14].

Accentuating the positive, Sharpe inventoried the good things about the state, captioning a 112-page edition (his largest) as *The State's "What's Right About North Carolina Edition."* The Travel Council of North Carolina gave him the Parker Award for his "outstanding contribution to the promotion and development of North Carolina's travel industry."

Following his unexpected death, fellow editors across the region showered their accolades. *The State*, which had saluted him as North Carolinian of 1948 long before he ever dreamed of owning that magazine, featured him as North Carolinian of 1969 with cover pictures. Typical of tributes was WRAL-TV's "Viewpoint" editorial by Jesse Helms (later a U.S. senator)

saying Sharpe "so loved North Carolina that he became at once her press agent, her historian—and her conscience."

A Presbyterian ^[15], he was buried at Raleigh Memorial Park.

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Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press.^[26]

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