

WISE, CLASSY, AND SASSY

by Heather Helinsky

Before Oprah and Dr. Phil, Americans desperate for help and enlightenment turned to newspaper columns for advice. Luckily, three women in the 20th century answered the call and started an industry that shows no signs of slowing down. The newspapers of the 1800s were not looking to mend broken hearts, but sell more papers. *The Daily Picayune* in New Orleans was the first to discover, in 1896, a pioneer who used the medium to advise a nation through two World Wars: Dorothy Dix.

Elizabeth Meriwether Gilmer, later known as Dorothy Dix, had been pressured by her



Dorothy Dix

family at age 18 to marry her stepmother's brother. When her unemployable husband suffered several nervous breakdowns and was then institutionalized, Elizabeth moved to New Orleans and found success as a writer for

the advice column "Sunday Salad." By 1901, *New York Journal* publisher William Randolph Hearst recognized her talent and popular appeal, giving her a national platform with the advice column "Dorothy Dix Talks."

Gilmer's column focused on a woman's ability to be strong and independent. This resounded with her audience throughout the early 20th century, especially during World War II, when her columns were published in 273 newspapers and read by over 60 million people. She also published several books throughout her career, including *How to Win and Hold a*

Husband in 1939. In the preface to her 1926 collection of columns, she wrote: "Yet I have no pity for myself; no tears to shed over the past and gone sorrows; no envy for the women who have been spared all that I have gone through. For I have lived...I have drunk the cup of life down to the very dregs."

Another lady whose advice became an indispensable source of information was Emily Post. While America is supposed to be a classless society, Post's book *Etiquette* informed generations of Americans on social standards. Debuting in 1922, *Etiquette* spent 18 months on the best seller list, has been revised in seven editions, and now lives on through the Emily Post Institute at www.emilypost.com, with a blog called "What Would Emily Post Do?" Post's most lasting impact has been to give millions of middle class Americans the key to unlocking the secret code of behavior in high society.



Emily Post

Conversely, Ester Pauline "Eppie" Lederer, writing for 47 years as Ann Landers, distrusted the social elite. Relying on her Sioux City, Iowa upbringing as a "square Jewish girl," Eppie advocated life lessons, claiming that "There is the kind of education you get in school and the kind you get afterward. Both are important." Her column maintained high standards through Eppie's rigorous consultation of experts in the fields ranging from psy-



**Eppie Lederer
(Ann Landers)**

chology to religion to politics. However, it was Eppie's combination of humor and common sense that connected with her readers.

Eppie Lederer wrote during a time when progressively freer expression pushed the

boundaries of what was acceptable for a family newspaper. At the same time, she counseled millions during the tumultuous period of post-WWII: the Cold War, Korea, the Sputnik chal-

lenge, assassinations, Vietnam, the sexual revolution, and Watergate. As Americans waffled, Eppie held her ground.

For Eppie, her column entertained while acting as America's national social service agency. "I don't care why they read it, so long as they read it. A great many people have told me they started to read the column for laughs, and after awhile they realized it was a lot more substantive than they thought...That column has taken me into areas I had never thought about before: incest, genetic diseases, rape, drug abuse, schizophrenia, battered wives (and husbands), donating organs, and what happens to missing socks."

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