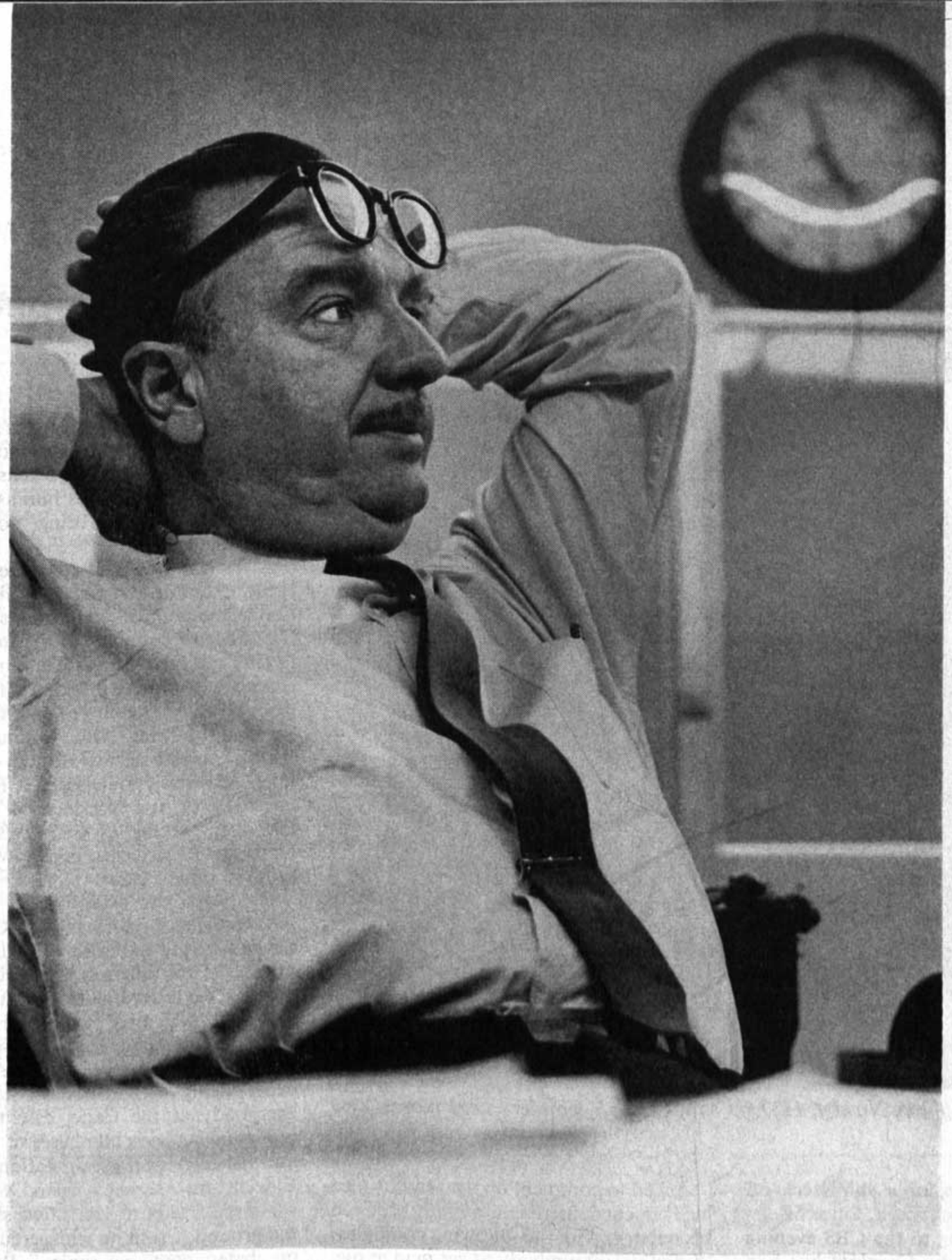

Ignoring a litter of wire-service copy on his desk, Cronkite takes a breather in CBS office.

The secret life of WALTER (Mitty) CRONKITE

by Lewis H. Lapham

Walter Cronkite is the toughest Monopoly player on New York's East 84th Street. His children, to their loss and sorrow, know him for a relentless adversary who rolls the dice with grim determination and frowns upon any interruption of the game. Their father plays to win.

His easy manner, long familiar to television audiences, is deceptive. The imperturbable calm conceals a fiercely competitive temperament which has helped make him the preeminent news correspondent for CBS television and one of the half-dozen most celebrated journalists in the country.

He is a stubborn but humorous man, far less solemn than his patient and drooping face would appear to suggest. He has been called "the epitome of the average guy," and CBS is pleased to nourish this illusion. If he is asked for comment, Cronkite, the only son of a prosperous dentist in St. Joseph, Missouri, will try to pass himself off as "just a guy who likes a breaking news story . . . not a personality." He pretends to feel slightly embarrassed among the numerous glossy devices of television broadcasting.

And yet, according to his wife Betsy, he is also a ham actor who "plays his best game of tennis when everybody is watching from the veranda." He possesses as sure an instinct for theatrical effects as any producer in the business. His sense of timing and his gift for the impromptu remark on camera would do credit to a vaudeville comedian.

Over the past 20 years, as a correspondent for the United Press and for CBS, the 46-year-old Cronkite has been present at innumerable historic events. In one recent year, in the line of duty, he traveled 300,000 miles by plane, auto, submarine and even dogsled. He has landed with invading troops on hostile beaches, conversed with queens and dictators, lived under the polar ice for a week, seen governments fall and atomic bombs exploded.

Even so, Betsy, married to Cronkite for 22 years, can speak of him affectionately as "a Walter Mitty"—a husband given to daydreams; a man bitterly disappointed if he receives anything practical for Christmas. He sometimes imagines himself running away to join a circus, or owning a small-town newspaper and writing editorials about the local water supply, or circumnavigating the globe in a four-masted schooner. He recently bought a 22-foot sloop, which he sails on Long Island Sound. Although he has not yet mustered the nerve to ask them, he would prefer his two daughters to address him as "Commodore."

Cronkite is renowned among journalists for his prodigious if sometimes erratic, memory. He can recall offhand, for instance, what happened at Smyrna in 1922 (the city was nearly destroyed by fire). Yet he seldom can remember people's names. Once he talked at fond length to an interviewer about his newborn daughter, "Judy." His daughter's name is Nancy. Judy was the name of the family cocker spaniel.

It is a wonder, say some observers, that Cronkite can maneuver through his own day in New York, much less explain convincingly to about six million TV viewers each weekday what has happened elsewhere in the world.

That day usually begins with a glass of cold milk and some toast. (He rarely drinks coffee, even during the election nights when he may remain in front of a camera for 14 hours.) His wife, a blond and vivacious woman who used to advise the lovelorn in a newspaper column, *Ask Hope Hudson*, carries the skimpy breakfast to his room on the third floor of their New York brownstone. Cronkite, however, refuses to take it in bed, a practice no doubt offensive to his Midwestern conscience. He drinks and eats while getting dressed.

His departure from home in the morning is an event of considerable dramatic interest to his younger daughter, Kathy. Cronkite is forgetful and frequently returns as many as four times to retrieve his hat or his watch or his briefcase. Kathy, 12, once wrote a play about him for her class at school. The entire action of the play consisted of a man going in and out of a house.

Sometimes Cronkite drives to his office in his Austin Healey. He bought the car on a sudden impulse in 1955 when, having just received an unexpected check, he marched into a lot and demanded of the surprised dealer: "What have you got for $1,685.90?" He has since become such an enthusiast that his wife now calls him "Fangio," an allusion to Juan Fangio, the former race-car driving champion.

He frequently takes part in road rallies in Westchester County and could have been killed in 1961 when the Triumph TR-3 he was driving in an international rally skidded off a road in the Great Smoky Mountains of Tennessee. The car pitched over an embankment and fell end over end into a lake 100 feet below. Cronkite emerged wet but unhurt. Ordinarily, however, he never exceeds the speed limit, believing that all truly good drivers are bound by a kind of noblesse oblige to uphold the rules of the road.

The bookshelves in his library are littered with sports-car models, which he sometimes runs around the floor on an electric track. He is also fond of electric trains and of all board games, most of which he now plays with his five-year-old

Master Monopoly player Walter Cronkite, flanked by daughter, Nancy, 14, and son, Chip, 5, ponders next move.

son, "Chip," who is not as wary as his older sisters of his father's killer instinct during games.

Cronkite arrives at his office every morning, at about 10 A.M., in a state of subdued anxiety, worrying that something important might have happened somewhere during his brief absence. He immediately begins to read the news bulletins clattering out of the Teletype machine that he had installed at the door to his office.

Stooping awkwardly over this machine one recent morning, Cronkite complained that he had a stiffness in his knees. He had attempted the night before to dance the limbo.

"I'm a real nut," he muttered. "I'll try anything once." This enthusiasm is characteristic of his approach to the news. He was known for his courage as a correspondent in World War II, as a man always ready to take a chance. He went on eight bombing missions over Germany, crash-landed in a glider at the Battle of the Bulge, and accompanied the first allied troops into North Africa.

"I was very brave," he says, "only because I did everything once, before I knew how hard it really was."

The narrow cubicle that serves Cronkite as an office, on the 29th floor of the Graybar Building in midtown Manhattan, affords a fine view of the United Nations buildings and the East River beyond. On his desk, together with an almanac, a dictionary, an atlas and a volume giving the correct pronunciation of words and names in foreign languages, is a list of cities in the eastern United States to which he can make a round trip within a single day. If the occasion warrants his presence—a mine disaster in Pennsylvania, for example, or a shipwreck off Boston—he will go himself. Since his assignment last spring to the CBS evening news show, however, Cronkite has had less opportunity to travel.

"I hate like hell to miss the big stories," he said, puffing on a corncob pipe. "When I was a kid reporter in Houston, Texas, I used to think life just wasn't worth living if I couldn't be in on the action."

He is nevertheless determined to make his show as estimable as possible, even though he is conscious of the weaknesses inherent in TV news.

"It can't be anything but a front-page service," he said, looking out the window. "There just isn't time enough to give more than a few headlines and then hope that people will read the next morning's paper. Compared to a newspaper the fifteen-minute broadcast, mine or anybody else's, is a paltry sideshow."

He proposed the hypothetical example of two men locked inside windowless rooms for a year, one receiving a newspaper every day and the other a daily television broadcast.

"At the end of that time," Cronkite remarked, "the guy who had been watching television would come out with a damn strange idea of what had happened in the world."

Although willing to speak frankly about the limitations of his own profession, Cronkite is reluctant to express adverse opinions about men in public office. He is a friendly and gregarious man—his wife calls him "a thwarted cruise director"—and his idea of a good time is to go someplace where he can meet 100 people he has never met before. (He has attended several policemen's balls for that reason.)

Asked to comment on the famous men he had encountered, Cronkite prefaced his remarks with the following apologies: "I don't want anybody to get mad at me. Of all the leading politicians I've ever met, there were very few I didn't like. I don't think that anyone can get to the top and be a twenty-four-carat phony, even in a Communist society."

His observations on President Kennedy reflected his characteristic caution. He said, "The great responsibility Kennedy feels because of his instincts and educational background is constantly endangered by a very strong temper. . . . One must be on guard against unintentionally offending him and bringing down an irrevocable wrath."

Of Khrushchev, Cronkite said, "He never failed to surprise me by being likable. Nothing he does or stands for prepared me for his joviality and seeming democracy."

Critics say he is dull

Cronkite's detractors usually criticize him for this unwillingness to advance an outspoken opinion. They complain that he is too polite, too bland, too dull. He considers the criticism unreasonable.

"Probably if I made a few more acerbic remarks, I might win a few more viewers," he concedes, "but I don't feel like being funny with the news; I don't think that's my place."

He does not seem in the least bland to the people who work with him. He is meticulous in his attention to minor details, is short-tempered and will speak harshly to bunglers. CBS correspondent Harry Reasoner describes Cronkite as "a rough guy . . . intolerant of any incompetence." Faith Adams, the secretary who brings in Cronkite's lunch of cottage cheese, pineapple and rye toast at one P.M. everyday, addresses him as "chief" and thinks of him as being "sort of an easygoing dictator."

Cronkite's opinion:

A former reporter for the United Press, Cronkite first acquired his reputation at the political conventions in 1952. His sober reporting from the stockyards in Chicago came as a revelation to audiences accustomed to thinking of television primarily as a medium of entertainment. By 1960, however, NBC, leaning heavily on the crowd-pleasing Huntley-Brinkley team, obviously outclassed CBS in its coverage of the presidential election. Cronkite, serving as CBS-TV's anchor man, was expected to go the way of all eclipsed broadcasters.

He proved an exception to the rule. And with his performance at Cape Canaveral during the orbital flight of John Glenn, he not only reestablished himself at CBS but also shucked off the pompousness that had nettled his critics. Cronkite prepared for the event with characteristic diligence: He insisted on experiencing weightlessness, talked to everybody at the Cape, assembled voluminous notes on all phases of the flight and visited every tracking station between Florida and Ascension Island.

As the rocket at last lifted slowly off the ground, Cronkite whispered, "Come on, baby; come on, baby." Which, of course was exactly the prayer on everybody else's lips in the country at that moment. Alistair Cooke of the Manchester *Guardian* summarized the consensus of critical opinion: "Mr. Cronkite made engrossing sense of the miracle otherwise beyond the comprehension of the hundred million Americans who were watching." Cronkite's fan mail suddenly increased to 600 letters a week. Mrs. Glenn, the astronaut's mother, said she particularly wanted to meet Mr. Cronkite.

Like Zsa Zsa Gabor or Lassie, Cronkite is "a celebrity." His arrival in a small town often commands front-page space in the local papers. Small boys tend to mistake him for the Vice President of the United States or the Secretary of State. His secretary, Miss Adams, an attractive brunette from Coral Gables, Florida, answers most of the letters from women proposing marriage or promoters wanting Cronkite to cut ribbons at supermarket openings. He refuses both kinds of offers.

Although strangers passing Cronkite on the street often nod to him, occasionally they will misplace the face. Cronkite was sitting in a stalled taxicab one day, when two young boys came over and peered in at him. "Hey," said the first, "it's Ron Cochran" (a news broadcaster on ABC). The second boy stared long and carefully at Cronkite. "No it ain't," he said, "that's just a guy who looks like Ron Cochran."

His name, face and prestige, however, are fully appreciated by those people

"I don't think that anyone can get to the top and be a 24-carat phony."

from whom Cronkite gathers his information. He makes his own telephone calls to politicians and government officials. In order to compensate for the recognized limitations of the evening news show, Cronkite has assumed the title and prerogatives of a "managing editor." He may assign various CBS correspondents to pursue specific angles on a given story.

At approximately 4:30 P.M., unless he is out of town or filming a sequence for *The Twentieth Century*, a weekly CBS documentary for which he is the narrator, Cronkite confers with Don Hewitt, the producer of the evening news. The show is seen in 75 cities at 6:45 (EST), and at 7:15 (EST) in 75 cities via a taped version. Hewitt is an aggressive and nervous man who chews cigars and calls other people "pal." He has short, dark hair, a round face, and the instincts of a professional gambler. Cronkite, by comparison, seems slow and shambling.

Cronkite usually writes as much of his own script as he can, hoping it somehow justifies his salary of $150,000 a year, which he considers "ridiculously high" for any journalist.

"I got paid $77.50 a week for doing more or less the same kind of work for the United Press in London during the war," he points out.

About 6:15 P.M., Cronkite shaves with an electric razor in front of a small round mirror on his desk, reading aloud the completed script for that evening's show and timing it with a stopwatch. His usual attire is a dark suit, a blue shirt, heavy gold cuff links and a conservative tie. His right hand sports an onyx ring his parents gave him upon his graduation from high school in Houston.

He leaves for the studio by 6:30 P.M., accompanied by Hewitt and two assistants. Talking of news developments—Cuba, Washington or whatever—they descend in an express elevator to the lobby of the Graybar Building and then proceed into Grand Central Station. Cronkite, who confesses to feeling like "a high-paid comic" in the midst of this entourage, walks with his head thrust well forward, placidly smoking his pipe. His script is folded carelessly into his coat pocket. The hurrying commuters fail to notice him.

Turning under a Grand Central arch marked TRACK 23-OFFICES, he arrives at a freight elevator and is there confronted with an obstacle of the kind that all reporters must learn to accept. The elevator is operated by an otherwise anonymous gentleman who is known simply as "the nasty guy." He delights in delaying people like Cronkite whom he knows to be in a hurry.

While Hewitt bangs at the elevator door, Cronkite scribbles corrections in the margin of his script, holding the sheaf of yellow papers against the wall. He remains unperturbed. At 6:40 P.M., having gained the third floor of the terminal office building, he pauses at a rusty washbasin near the end of a long corridor. He combs his hair before the cracked mirror and adjusts his tie.

Inside CBS Studio 42 he settles himself at the desk on the newsroom set and submits, resignedly, to the attentions of a man who powders his nose and applies makeup to his face and neck. Hewitt meanwhile establishes himself in the adjoining control room where, surrounded by lights, switches and special effects, he at once begins yelling at the eight technicians present.

The uproar in the control room is reaching its height, when Cronkite suddenly appears on four monitoring screens, calmly bidding his audience the standard, "Good evening from CBS news headquarters in New York." He thereafter recites the chronicle of the day's disasters, revolutions and political crises.

One night after a recent telecast Cronkite walked toward the exit doors of the studio. He planned to dine (at dinner, Cronkite will wolf down almost anything that passes for food) that night with his wife at a midtown restaurant that caters to show business personalities. "All my life I've lucked out," he noted. "I can't think of anything more fun or more worthwhile than being a reporter."

Was there anything he hadn't done that he still would like to do?

"I'd like to see Hong Kong, Oslo and Addis Ababa," he answered. "For some damn reason I've never managed to get to those cities."

But just then, as the elevator descended, another idea captured Cronkite, and he smiled wistfully, as Walter Mitty is said to have smiled. "Or maybe, it might be possible, you know, to go to the moon.... Can you imagine how great it would be to say to an audience, 'Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, this is Walter Cronkite, reporting for CBS direct from the surface of the moon'?" THE END