A BIG LIFE

(in advertising)

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MARY WELLS LAWRENCE

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—Stuart Elliott, *The New York Times Book Review*

A Big Life in Advertising

Mary Wells Lawrence

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To Harding

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A Big Life in Advertising

I was working at McCann Erickson for the money, for little black dance dresses that showed off my Norwegian legs, for my baby daughters' smocked dresses from Saks and for an apartment larger than I could afford—but then I met Bill Bernbach and he made a serious woman out of me. In the fifties in New York if you talked about "Bill" you meant Bill Bernbach. He was the talk of the town because he was creating a revolution in the advertising business, which was a glamorous business at the time. He challenged all the big advertising agencies that had become important since World War II, saying they had killed advertising, ads had become dishonest, boring, insulting, even insane. Worse, they didn't sell anything to anybody. The big agencies defended themselves; they said they made advertising scientifically, with sophisticated research. But Bill said either they were liars or they were stupid; their pitiful research reduced advertising to, basically, one poor tired ad that was repeated over and over again. When he really got going he would say things like, "The big agencies are turning their creative people into mimeograph machines!" and all the frustrated creative people in town would stamp their feet and cheer, "Yea, Bill!"

The advertising business, like America itself after the war, had built up the fiction of safety with its hierarchies and armylike respect for the boss. In the big agencies the boss was a group of executives called the Creative Review Board. Their research told them that America hungered for happiness and peace, so they produced advertising that was happy and peaceful. Children were always clean and smiling. Dogs were clean and smiling. Firemen, police, farmers and coal miners were clean and smiling. Everybody waved to each other in the ads. Beautiful women stretched out on the roofs of cars in their gowns and jewels and furs to make the cars look prettier. Bottles of whiskey wore crowns and stood proudly on red velvet columns pretending they were the Duke of Windsor. Bill was right; advertising was the land of the insane. There was never any direct personal communication, never any tension or drama or interesting information in them, but those ads, based on

spurious research, had been touted so long as scientific that Bill was seditious criticizing them.

He had galloped out of the Grey agency to set advertising free with a little gold mine of people: Ned Doyle, Mac Dane, Bob Gage and Phyllis Robinson. They opened an agency, Doyle Dane Bernbach, and set about changing the way advertising looked, what it said, how it sounded; they even felt free to change the product or the company that made the product if that was what it took to have a success. Bill gave lectures to the press. Radiating moral gravity, he would tell them that the big agencies had it all wrong: "Advertising is not a science, it is persuasion, and persuasion is an *art,* it is intuition that leads to discovery, to inspiration, it is the *artist* who is capable of making the consumer feel desire."

He utterly bewildered the big agencies. They asked each other, "Why is this guy making a ruckus and disturbing the peace? Who *is* this Bill Bernbach?" Pretty soon everybody knew who Bill was. It was as if he had cordoned off Madison Avenue and set up a stage where he called for advertising to be honest and candid, smarter and more interesting. He demanded bolder language, humor, wit and stylish design. He said, "All of us who professionally use the mass media are the shapers of society. We can vulgarize society or we can help lift it to a higher level." When Doyle Dane Bernbach's first ads began to appear, they were as effective as Bill promised they would be, and after that, in the advertising business, there was no turning back and Bill was the star.

Phyllis Robinson was his copy chief and when I went to my interview for a job with her I was not optimistic. I knew how the work I had done at the large, traditional McCann Erickson agency would look to Doyle Dane Bernbach. I was dying to work there, partly because everybody was dying to work there, it was the hot spot, the place to be, but also, although my mind was still a young and silly place, because I thought Bill's revolution was the most important event of my life. If he had been John the Baptist I could not have been more enraptured. I spent days creating pretend ads to suggest that I was more talented than what my portfolio of real samples had to show. I arrived much too

early. When Phyllis finally came out to the waiting room to collect me I had become frail, I could have fallen to my knees. She, on the other hand, was like the lead angel in an opera, tall, handsome, strong, brimming with energy and humor and purpose, an honest-to-goodness adult, she swept me into her office and turned her intelligence on me like a beam from outer space. Seeing how overimpressed I was, she eased down into the role of a friend and did all she could to help me with the interview. "Oh, this is interesting," she said, "yes, mmmm, good, tell me all about this," and I melted into adoration.

From this moment on

A week later she hired me. She said she persuaded Bill to go along by showing him a campaign I had created for International Silver for its silverplate flatware, knives, forks and spoons. They had inserted a bit of sterling at the places where flatware gets the most wear but they never told anybody about it. I decided to call that reinforced silverplate DeepSilver and persuaded a lot of brides that it was as good as sterling and a lot better than ordinary silverplate. Phyllis liked my thinking. Bill wasn't sure but he said yes. When I met him he took my hand, looked soulfully into my eyes and baptized me, saying, "McCann Erickson is a terrible agency so you are a big gamble from my point of view but Phyllis sees something in you." I have never forgotten those exact words of his because it took me a few years to get over them, he was full of himself at the time and I wasn't, yet. Then he lit up as though he had thought of a great practical joke to play on me and said, "Now you have to meet Ned Doyle, he handles the Max Factor account and you will be working on it with him, let's see what he thinks of you!" and he led me next door to the man who was the head of account services.

Ned Doyle, as Irish as he could be, watched me cross his office without expression, but then I saw him think "Huzzah!" and I knew he was

going to be a fan. He was a slender, older man with white-and-grey hair, cool eyes and a carved face. He was wildly flirtatious but in that safe, careful, old-fashioned way, and he liked everything about me except my nickname. "Where did you get the name Bunny? You can't work at Doyle Dane Bernbach with a name like Bunny. Get rid of it before you come here. Mary is a good name, I like Mary, from now on you're Mary." For a couple of hours we bantered, he wanted to see if I was tough enough to be any fun, and I learned a lot about the agency right away. Ned loved Bill, he said. Bill would not admit he loved—and needed—Ned. Bill was the genius but Ned was the businessman and Ned was also the gladiator in any fight for Bill's ideas.

Taken in pieces Bill Bernbach wasn't much. He was shorter than he sounded, he had a wary half-smile, cow's-milk eyes, pale skin, soft shoulders, he seemed to be boneless, but he communicated such a powerful inner presence he mowed everybody around him down and out of sight. In his peak years many people were afraid of him. I was; I didn't want to get too close. There was something volcanic, something unsettling going on; it was a little like being in the company of Mao or Che or the young Fidel. Many of us had hiding places at the agency where we could avoid him. One of his top talents, who worked for me later in my own agency, said he used to go to work at dawn to get his work done before Bill arrived in the morning and would be long gone before Bill put a foot into the place. It is true that even some of the surest men who were close to Bill drank more than they should have.

By the time I arrived the gods were firmly ensconced, the pantheon was established, the rituals, the sacred writings were already beloved. The Dei Majores were the originals, Bill, Ned, Mac, Phyllis and Bob Gage; they spoke a secret language. The Dei Minores were Helmut Krone and Julian Koenig, who were becoming famous for their Volkswagen advertising. There were talented others, the spirits and the elves, but the gods were the gods, everyone in the industry knew who was who.

Bill wrote few ads himself, but he had the great ideas and he had a sensibility that was rare in business in the fifties. Consider Avis, a car-rental company that barely existed before Bill got hold of it. Its stores

were usually in places you wouldn't take your mother. There was really only Hertz at the time. But Bill told the world that Avis was Number Two, making a mountain out of a molehill to say the least. He also told the world that because Avis was Number Two, it tried harder. Almost overnight Avis became perceived as a threat to Hertz—an awesome act of magic—and people began going to Avis because Avis tried harder than Hertz.

I once attended a meeting with some Avis dealers. Nobody was more surprised than they were to discover they were Number Two and trying harder than Hertz. Some of them flew into a rage because all the new customers they got from the new advertising were so *expectant,* they would march into Avis offices with the dirty ashtrays they found in their cars, dump the ashes on the managers' desks and demand their money back. It was nip-and-tuck for a while whether the dealers would go along with the new image and the expectations. "I couldn't even get a job at Hertz," one of them told me. "Now you people tell me I am better than Hertz? That I try harder than Hertz? Are you crazy?" But in the end they did go along, and the wonders never ceased.

When Bill looked at a product he saw it in its most successful metamorphosis. He saw the advantage in a disadvantage and could turn things around. When Volkswagen first appeared in the United States nobody would buy it. It was small. It was ugly. It was seen as a German car, a Nazi car, too soon after the war. Bill looked at the car and saw an opportunity to break all the rules in the automobile book. In the fifties God lived in Detroit and every advertisement for an automobile had His blessing; you could tell that by the religiosity, the weight of the advertising. America took its cars seriously, cars *mattered,* they weren't equipment, they weren't toys. Your choice of car revealed everything about you, your position in society, your dreams for the future, your secret self, even your sexual longings, and success meant, literally, being able to trade in your car for a new model every year, a concept that was kept humming by the Detroit automakers.

One of the Volkswagen ads put down that idea by saying, "The '51, '52, '53, '54, '55, '56, '57, '58, '59, '60, '61 Volkswagen," along with a simple picture of the unchanged, original Volkswagen. From the first

ad Volkswagen advertising was as entertaining as it was respectful of the reader. It communicated in the simplest way; there was just the Volkswagen itself and a plain, sans serif headline and a few easy-to-read blocks of inviting, informative copy. The headlines were self-deprecating, irreverent, funny, even a pun. But they were smart, each was memorable. One of the early ones said "Think Small" at a time when Detroit cars were big and getting bigger. My favorite ad confessed to an occasional mistake. "Lemon," the headline said. The story goes that Bill sold the ad to a German executive who did not want to admit he did not understand English very well. He didn't get the double meaning of the word "lemon." By the time it was explained to him it was too late to object; the ad was winning every award in advertising.

Detroit didn't understand those saucy headlines, those simple ads in the beginning. But it understood the effect they had. Automobile buyers loved the advertising, and in short order the beetle became the beloved icon for the intelligent man's car. Being small was seen as an advantage, modern, young, when that was the age to be. The advertising was contagious, it took off like a viral epidemic, everybody wanted to create ads like Volkswagen ads.

I was not Bill's kind of writer; I wasn't good at clever puns, I couldn't be cute and cool at the same time. My strong suit, theatricalizing life with dreams, irritated him. He was forever lecturing me about my moral responsibilities in advertising. When I tried to suggest that his way of turning disadvantage into advantage, as he did with Avis and Volkswagen, was just a different way of creating dreams, he would go crazy and I would go hide. I was lucky to work on accounts for women because when his ideas for Max Factor cosmetics didn't fly he gave up and decided that women had different psyches than men and he stayed out of most of my ads. After a while I got my arms around a lot of the agency's advertising for women because Phyllis was so engaged in the Polaroid account. The client was Dr. Edwin Land, the brilliant inventor of the instant camera, the sort of man who chooses work over life and has to be dragged from his laboratory to sleep nights or to have Christmas dinner with his family. He operated to a different beat than most clients. The first time he met with the agency he said, "My rule is that

first you must have inspiration, then you experiment with it, but if you succeed you must never imitate yourself. It is OK to experiment, OK to fail, nobody has a 1000 batting average, but when you do succeed, *move on,* do not waste a second of your life imitating your own successes!"

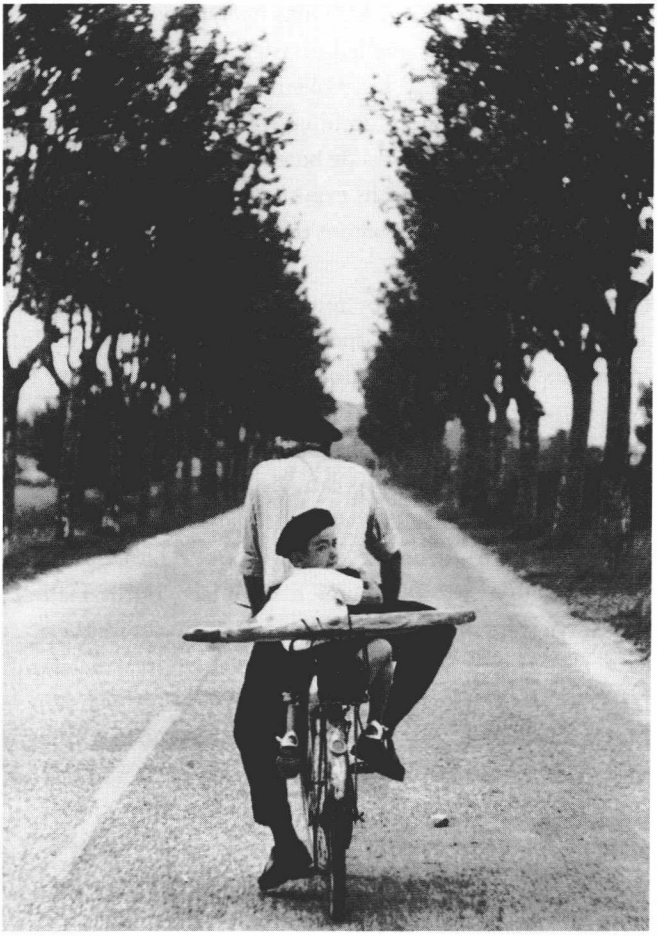
There was an imaginative, adventurous man who translated ordinary life to Dr. Land and Dr. Land to ordinary life, Ted Voss, and he adored Bill and Bob Gage and Phyllis, so working in that atmosphere with no fear of failure was duck soup for them. To explain the camera when it first appeared and no one knew what a Polaroid camera was or did, Bill and Bob created a black-and-white bleed spread for *Life* magazine—one mammoth two-page picture that presented the camera with the film in the back and the picture coming out. That ad didn't need a word. Polaroid advertising was never about words. It was about images that keep you enthralled with the miracle of a camera that could develop a picture *instantly.* In the early days Phyllis and Bob produced live commercials for the *Today* show and the *Tonight!* show. Steve Allen was their darling. He was a master ad-libber, he loved to ham it up with the camera, and one night his Polaroid went berserk and kept gushing out yards and yards of film. Steve kept talking as if everything was normal while the film fell all over his lap and then all over his feet. He kept a perfectly straight face but let his eyes go wild and the audience went crazy with that silly joy that funny accidents give you. It was terrific theatre; the audience gave Steve and his camera a standing ovation and the following day sales of the camera doubled. Booboos often sell better than perfection, perhaps because they humanize products and make people care about them.

When the high-tech SX-70 Polaroid was ready for introduction, Phyllis says, she wrote the words describing the marvels of the camera and then she and Bob looked at each other and said, "Who can say these words without sounding like a horse's ass?" They decided Richard Burton or Laurence Olivier could say them. As I recall, Richard Burton was out because his dogs had once messed up the carpeting in Dr. Land's house, so Laurence Olivier was the choice. Luckily, he needed money at the time and agreed to make the commercials, and they were a great success. They became classics and he used to say, "After all the Shake-

speare I've done, it will be Richardson [Ralph] who will be remembered for his Shakespeare, I'll be remembered for my Polaroid commercials." After those Olivier commercials appeared, actors who had thought it was beneath them to appear in commercials felt free to work in them.

In that blooming season at Doyle Dane Bernbach nobody cared about the French tourist account. Nobody at the agency wanted to waste precious time in France when the thrills were in the New York office. So I grabbed the account. I wanted to go to France, to India, to Istanbul, to the moon. I am and have always been an experience collector. In the fifties, before 747s and mass travel, Americans traveling to France went only to Paris. The French tourist bureau was eager to lure them into the countryside so they would spend more of their money in France instead of Italy or England. We were told to head for the countryside to see what it had to offer. One of my traveling companions from the agency, Bill Taubman, was a superb art director but he was one of those people who are terrified to leave home. He spent hours on the telephone in towns he couldn't pronounce moaning and groaning to his wife. He became paranoid, certain we were giving him the worst room in every hotel until, in desperation, we would all line up at the hotel entrances and allow him to select his rooms first, then we would stash our stuff. The administrator of French tourism would shake his head; finally he gave up traveling with us.

But our photographer was savvy. Elliott Erwitt, a Magnum photographer, is one of the worldly supershooters who win prizes for pictures taken in impossible situations, hanging out of planes or running from terrorists. He has laughing eyes and even laughing hair, so much joie de vivre that it shows up in his most serious photographs. He sees little smiles in life that most people miss. In his camera dogs grin and cats giggle and little old ladies flirt slyly with young, muscled hunks. He shrugged off the discomfort of our tours, but behind his easy manner he was always at attention, and watching him, I learned how to work in uncertain circumstances. Elliott is the one who took the signature photograph of the Frenchman and his son, both in berets, bicycling down a lane of platane trees, the boy clutching a big baguette, for our first ad. That picture is still France's symbol of its countryside.



Elliott Erwitt's iconic photograph of a French father and son was shot for the introductory ad of our campaign for the French tourist bureau.

We toured in a big dusty black car up and down France's hills and dales, sampling the very best the country had to offer tourists. When Bill Bernbach heard about those trips and that I was planning one to the caves of Dordogne, where I had been invited to photograph the prehistoric Cro-Magnon rock paintings in the precious caves of Lascaux before they were closed to the public, his eyes turned to crystal with

envy. He decided that he and his wife, Evelyn, would make the trip with us to see the caves. I smelled disaster. My French tourist bureau advertising group had a necessary bohemian side that cheerfully braved some of the worst hotels and plumbing; it took a while after the war for Europe to spruce up its countryside hotels with American bathrooms. I didn't know what the Bernbachs expected in the way of creature comforts, but I was certain it was more than we experienced in the small villages of France.

Keeping Bill Taubman happy roughing it was enough for me. So I tried to warn Bill and Evelyn that the trip would have its lean and mean moments. The blacker I painted the facilities, the surer they got that I was trying to keep the jewels of France for myself and that they must certainly go.

Our group left Paris in high spirits. We got through the Loire Valley and its chateaus smoothly, and with the Bernbachs around even Bill Taubman tried to be debonair. The paintings of Lascaux were so impressive I thought we were home free; in fact, in the Hall of Bulls Bill and Evelyn were so blissful I toyed with the idea I might get a raise out of the trip. But as we left Lascaux, Bill suggested that we change our plans and go straight to Cannes. He said he'd had enough country plumbing and antique mattresses. We were scheduled to photograph Le Puy-en-Velay, a spectacular sight. I longed to see it, so I lied and said the French tourist administrator insisted that we shoot Le Puy.

The trouble was that there were no good cafés and no real hotels in Le Puy then. The town did have a whorehouse, which wasn't all that bad, so we bribed the owner to rent us all the rooms, a fact we swore on blood oath to keep a secret from the Bernbachs and Bill Taubman. Evelyn Bernbach was a highly intelligent woman, but I had a hunch she would not be happy sleeping in a whore's bed.

We had dinner in a café that served only the unmentionable parts of a cow. I was so busy with Bill Taubman, who could not look at his plate—"What is it? Oh no. I can't eat *that*"—that I lost track of Bill Bernbach. In the morning he appeared looking wan and begged us to leave right away to find a clean service station. We made quick work of photographing the marvels of Le Puy. They, too, are volcanic. It is one