

Traffic jam at the Port of New Orleans. Forty large ocean-going freighters wait around for berths and dumping of ballast.



The pilots maintain bachelor quarters at Pilot Town, divert themselves with long poker games while waiting for ships.

It is Capt. George S. Vinson's turn to take a vessel to New Orleans. Two other port pilots watch her coming up river.



# RIVER ROYALTY

By JAMES KALSHOVEN

THE PILOTS OF THE LOWER MISSISSIPPI MUST RUN SOME OF THE TRICKIEST CHANNELS ON THE AMERICAN COAST. BUT IT'S NOT TRUE THAT THEY TRAIN FROGS TO ACT AS FOG HORNS.

**F**OG blanketed the whole lower Mississippi from New Orleans to where the passes fan out like fingers into the Gulf of Mexico. It was a black fog that smothered whistles and made it impossible to see the bow of a ship from its bridge. Frank Jurisich, the river pilot who had come aboard to take an inbound ship up to New Orleans, knew from years of experience that the fog was invincible. The ship's master fumed, but Jurisich ordered the anchor dropped anyway. The signal of a fog-bound ship at anchor was begun: five seconds' ringing of the ship's bell every minute, muffled in this murk and sounding as doleful as a dirge.

Drift logs banged against the hull, and the ship's master grew momentarily more disgusted and nervous. He was in the midst of a fine tirade against the Mississippi, its famous fogs, his own bad luck and river pilots in general when he stopped short. "Hey!" he shouted. "Is somebody shooting at us?"

"Somebody is," said Captain Jurisich, and picked up the speaking trumpet. Aiming the trumpet into the fog as if he wished it were a machine gun, he spoke sharply and with vigor. He told a man named Henri that when he, Jurisich, returned from New Orleans, he would come ashore and beat this unspeakable Henri into an unprintable pulp. Back through the fog came a plaintive voice speaking a hybrid of French and English. "That you, M'sieu Frank?"

"It is," the pilot said grimly.

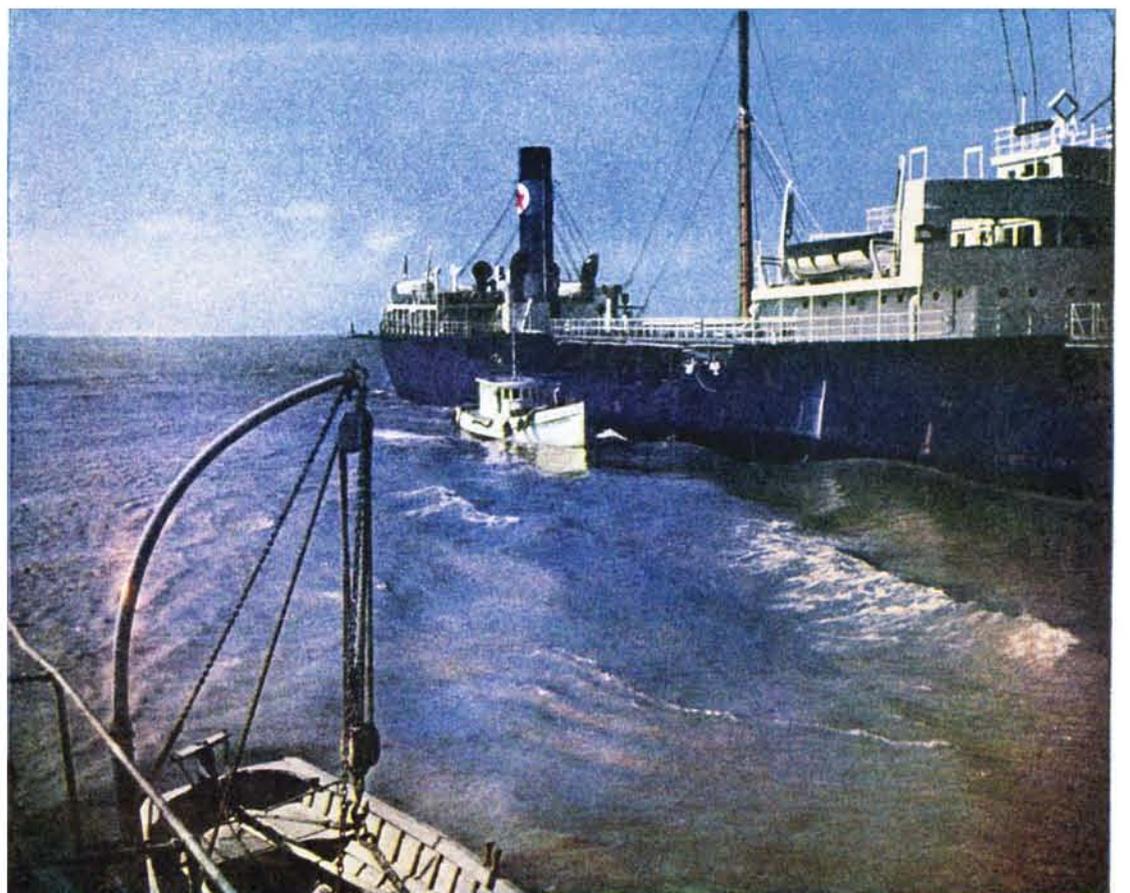
"But, M'sieu Frank, with the whole river to park *votre bateau*, you park in my front yard. Is that friendly? And that damned bell—it is for cows. My children wake and cry. My wife says, 'Henri, go stop that bell before Suzanne gets colic.' So I come."

"You tell Suzanne," said Jurisich, "that I'll bring her a pretty from New Orleans. And now stop that shooting."

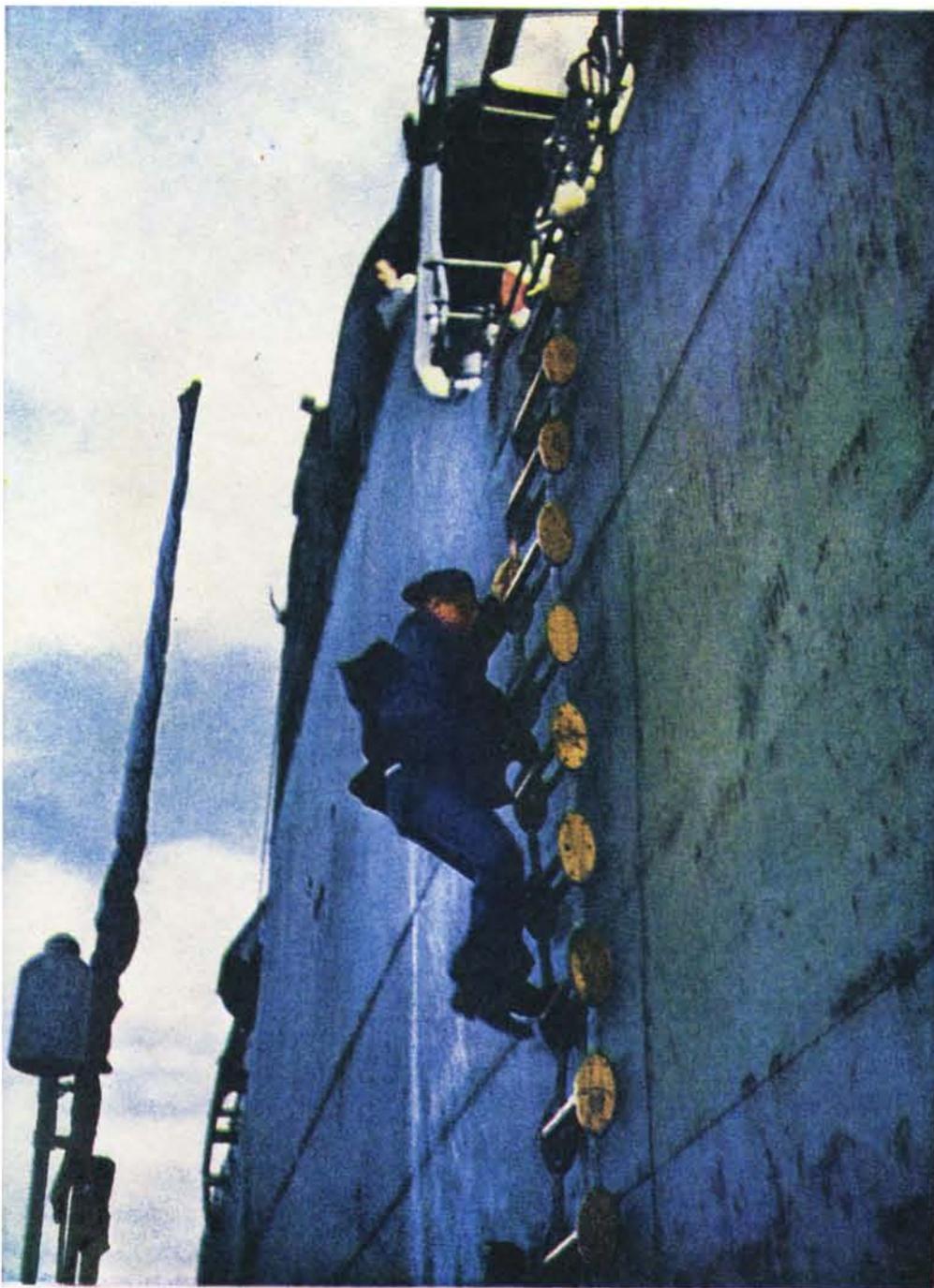
Jurisich had dropped anchor, but he was by no means lost. He knew the river so well that even in the fog he could tell precisely

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANK ROSS



Capt. John C. Proctor is dropped by a tanker he has brought through Southwest Pass to the Gulf. At this spot in 1942 twenty-five ships were attacked, seventeen sunk.



A risky climb up a rope ladder is routine work for bar pilot Capt. George Petersen. He will take this ship from Southwest Pass up to Pilot Town.



Capt. Warren Bowes lists ships due through the Passes. As his name has reached the top, it is Capt. John A. Cochran's turn to pilot a ship.

At Pilot Town, 88 miles below New Orleans, every ocean-going vessel on the Mississippi stops to change pilots. The long piers mark the headquarters of the two clannish, exclusive pilots' guilds that divide the lower river.



## RIVER ROYALTY

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where he was. For men in his line of work, this is an essential requirement. They are the "lower-river pilots," who pilot ocean-going vessels through the tricky 100 miles between New Orleans and the gulf. They compose a tight little aristocracy of skill and special knowledge, with fewer than eighty members, almost all of them at least first cousins.

This is not the Mississippi that Mark Twain wrote about. Twain did his piloting between Cairo and New Orleans. There the river flows between levees and, except at flood time, is well harnessed. But the levees end at Venice, Louisiana. From there on out, the Mississippi is free of all restraint and it does as it pleases. It is a river without permanent banks, spreading over the flat landscape like a glass of water spilled on a tablecloth. Land and water are not definite distinctions; what is land today may be submerged tomorrow.

It is a wild country for the most part, a region of crumbling banks and shifting channels, where pelicans waddle on the mud banks, neglected cattle forage on little islands and muddy water laps the lower limbs of leafless trees. On higher ground there are orange groves and an occasional colonnaded home. Elsewhere there are cabins with pig-rogues tied to the window, and wastes of yellow marsh grass. Lonely trappers' daughters used to run out to wave forlornly at passing ships. Perhaps they heard about the mate of one coast-wise vessel who fell in love with the girl he saw through his binoculars, tossed a note overboard in a bottle, made a date to meet the girl and married her. These lonely hearts vanished during wartime—they headed for the city and defense jobs.

Eighty-eight miles below New Orleans stands a ramshackle village which seems to begin at second-story height, with no first story. The dozen frame houses and the walks that connect them stand high on pilings to escape high water. Where the land is an inch or two higher, a single orange tree and two palms have survived. This was never a beauty spot, unless to the raccoons that promenaded its wooden walks at night; and like any other village, it grew a little shabbier during the war when materials for upkeep were short. This is Pilot Town, where every ocean-

going vessel on the Mississippi stops to change pilots.

Two pilots' guilds, exclusive and clannish, divide the lower river. Port pilots work the stretch from New Orleans to Pilot Town. Bar pilots take the ships out into the gulf or from the gulf passes to Pilot Town. Membership in the guilds is by invitation and it is won only after a long, unprofitable apprenticeship. The guilds resemble closed family corporations and only rarely confer membership upon outsiders. Before the war, the port pilots' guild numbered thirty-five. Wartime expansion brought this to forty-seven. The bar pilots travel a shorter route—fifteen miles to South Pass or twenty-three to Southwest Pass, and they were able to handle wartime shipping without enlarging their membership of thirty-one.

The war brought a financial wind-fall, along with a corresponding wind-fall of trouble and danger. Every ton of shipping going up or down the river contributes to the pilots' earnings. In 1941, something like 8,622,000 tons of ocean shipping docked at the port of New Orleans. In 1944, the figure was higher than 24,000,000 tons, and that was exclusive of Army and Navy cargo tonnages. Since their job is to snake big ships through shallow water, over channels changing every day, the pilots are paid according to the draft of the ship. Port pilots get two dollars a foot for their run north of Pilot Town. Bar pilots are paid four dollars a foot or three for vessels drawing less than ten feet. These rates are set by the state legislature. All fees are turned into the guilds, which deduct running expenses and divide the surplus evenly among the members. This helps explain why membership is kept low. The higher-paid bar pilots feel that they are a cut above the port pilots, and though the two clans meet at Pilot Town, they do not mingle.

There were times during the war when convoys crowded the Mississippi. Bar pilots used speedboats to dash from the head of a convoy to the tail, herding their cumbersome charges like sheep dogs. They made a lot of money, but not without risk. Ships had to enter the gulf through one of two passes. German submarines lay in wait outside. In the entire gulf, forty-four ships were attacked. But in one three-months period, twenty-five were attacked off the Mississippi passes, and seventeen of them went to the bottom.

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Sometimes ships were torpedoed as the pilots approached to take them into the haven of the river. On May 12, 1942, the 17,600-ton tanker Virginia was standing off Southwest Pass for a pilot. The pilot boat Jennie Wilson brought Capt. Joseph Flynn to take the tanker up the river. As Captain Flynn clambered over the Jennie's rail to a waiting yawl, those aboard the pilot boat saw the wake of a torpedo making directly for them. The Jennie has a shallow draught, and the torpedo went beneath her, although her crew swore they heard it bump against the keel like a porpoise. The Virginia was hit amidship and the blast knocked all hands flat on the Jennie.

Gasoline fell like a cloudburst, until it was ankle deep on the Jennie's decks. Fortunately, no one had been smoking and there was no fire. The gasoline was hosed away, and the Jennie moved closer to the blazing Virginia for rescue operations. Fourteen men were rescued, but twenty-eight were lost with the tanker. Later, the Jennie and another pilot boat, the Underwriter, saved 133 when the transport Robert E. Lee was sunk in the same area.

There came a time when ships could no longer hazard a stop for the pilot. He had to swing aboard on a slippery rope ladder as the ship moved along at ten to fifteen knots. The ordinary pilot boats were too clumsy for this maneuver, and no oarsman could keep a yawl alongside.

The pilots, operating under the wing of the Coast Guard, were given picket boats. These could cling to the side of the fastest ship, although in rough weather the little boats bounced around like ping-pong balls. Only one of the pilots was killed making such a transfer, although they are by no means young men.

Three out of four of the wartime boardings were made at night, the transfer being from a boat showing no lights to a blacked-out ship, with perhaps one quick gleam of a flashlight. Often green and trigger-happy gun crews chased the pilot boats away. Enemy submarines were more hospi-

table; early in the war they blinked the letters PT or G, with which ships call for a pilot, and at least one pilot boat fell for the dodge. Someone grew suspicious as they neared the submarine, and the crew halted to talk things over. A shell missed the pilot boat by twenty-five feet. After that, pilots answered no blinker calls without verification.

Convoys made the pilots a good deal of money, but were exceedingly tough to handle. At first the plan was to put the pilot in the lead ship, with thirty or forty vessels playing follow-the-leader. The strung-out formation had its disadvantages. If one ship went aground, it tied up a column of ships perhaps twenty miles long. Once, when a gulf hurricane kept convoys from leaving the river, there was a traffic jam, the pilots say, that extended from the passes to New Orleans.

Neither age nor experience determines which pilot takes a ship. He goes out when his name reaches the top of slotted boards kept at the stations. Thus it fell to the youngest of the river pilots to handle the biggest ship ever to go up the river, the 33,000-ton battleship Mississippi. The pilots usually like a big ship—one with plenty of power, answering handily to the wheel. Captain Henry R. Vogt drew a big one, however, that gave him trouble every inch of the way.

She was the crippled aircraft carrier Béarn, going into New Orleans for repairs, and the pilot sweated out what was perhaps the war's meanest steering job. Only one engine was functioning, providing barely enough power to overcome the current. The Mississippi current is full of whims, and may turn on itself in circles. The Béarn was disposed to do the same. And to make the pilot additionally miserable, a black fog came up.

Captain Vogt made it to New Orleans, but his troubles were by no means over. The river before New Orleans is tough and contradictory. The current on the inner and shorter curve of the great crescent there speeds past the current on the longer bank, forming swirls, whirlpools and eddies. River traffic was thick when Vogt

brought his carrier in, and the tugs which would now take over looked very good to him. But tugs couldn't get alongside; the overhang of the carrier's flight deck threatened to shear off their stacks. She was finally wharfed by putting barges alongside while tugs shoved the barges.

The best of the pilots bump bottom occasionally. The river may change a foot a day for several days. At South Pass, leading out into the gulf, the average depth is thirty-one feet. At Southwest Pass, it runs thirty-two to thirty-five. A tanker may draw thirty-five, so that a one-foot change is a serious matter. Spring is the worst season for this guessing game. Flood waters bring down tons of silt, which is deposited at the passes because the salt water from the gulf precipitates it.

The Louisiana fogs come swiftly and are unreasonably thick. When they come, the pilots use a primitive forerunner of radar. They blow the steamer's whistle and analyze the echo. Curves have one note, straight runs another. The echo bouncing back from thick trees is not the same as that produced by a high bank or the houses of a sleeping town. The pilots, who should know every clump of bushes along their routes, estimate their positions from this invisible scenery.

The pilots maintain comfortable bachelor quarters at Pilot Town, and fill their leisure with long poker games. Their families avoid the town; the

mosquitoes alone would rule it out as a residential district. The marshes are alive with migrating birds, and in duck season the pilots get excellent hunting without much competition. The life is pleasant enough for the pilots themselves, but a little Spartan for apprentices. A man needs a Federal license to become an apprentice, and no matter how many pilot's licenses he may hold, he cannot hope to join the bar or port guild until an opening is made by death or retirement. Even then, the newcomer must be voted in. While he is an apprentice, which may be for years, he receives \$100 a month; before the war, it was sixty dollars. He waits on tables, keeps the pilot boats in shape and toils at the oars if a pilot needs a yawl.

Meanwhile, he learns the special tricks of this kind of piloting, and they are many. A Japanese ship went down the river before the war, and her captain studied the pilot's work with interest. The pilot was gauging his distance from shore by the sound of the frogs. In a year the Japanese skipper came back, bringing a Tokyo newspaper. It contained a report the Japanese captain had made on American ingenuity.

"The Mississippi River pilots," it said, "are exceedingly inventive. They train frogs and station them at intervals along the bank to guide them. Japanese pilots would do well to investigate this method." THE END

# Keeping Posted

## Short Theme on School

STEVAN DOHANOS' cover celebrates an event children are said not to relish, the opening of school. But, by this stage of the summer, who cares what the children like? Those school bells are music—not to the kids, perhaps, but to parents. Ah, school days, school days. School that starts at nine and runs until three or four and keeps the children safe and sound, and somewhere else. School that runs five beautiful quiet days out of seven, and loads the kids with homework at night.

School is a wonderful institution, and by the last week in June every parent loves it. By August, when the children are climbing roofs, diving into shallow water, running into streets, playing with knives, falling out of trees, uprooting shrubbery and shouting their little heads off, the teachers could name their own price. School is undeniably good for children, but we're not thinking of them. We've thought of them all summer. Good as it may be for children, school is better still for their parents. It takes the children at a tender, impressionable, ear-splitting, breakable age, and that's all you can ask of any institution—it takes them.

## East, West, Home's Scarce

JOHN BURGAN, who wrote *PABLO'S CASH-ONLY GROCERY*, on Page 23, became a Californian for the simplest and clearest of reasons—he could find a place to live there. When Burgan came back from the Navy, his wife was working on a newspaper in Ventura, California. She had an apartment on a hill overlooking the sea. Both Burgan and his wife are Easterners and had intended to return to the East, but apartments were as scarce as cash in Pablo's cash-only store. Would they change all their plans simply to stay where they were sure of shelter? They would, indeed, and did.

That is how Burgan met the *paisanos*, whom he regards as "the most remarkable section of that remarkable collection of people in Southern California," which is remarkable in spades. The *paisanos* work on the cattle, lima bean, citrus and walnut ranches of Ventura County, but preserve a culture all their own, and a spirited independence. Burgan is especially fond of their music; Ay, Jalisco, mentioned in his story, is one of his favorites.

Thirty-three years old, Burgan is a native of Cambria County, Pennsylvania. After his graduation from the University of Pittsburgh, he worked on the *Democrat and Chronicle*, of Rochester, New York, and as a publicity man in Albany, until 1942. Then he joined the Navy and spent four years in uniform, more than two of them in the Pacific. He served first with a mobile unit attached to the marines, and later was staff communiqué officer for the Pacific Fleet, with Fleet Admiral Nimitz.

## Snakes on Main Street

THE town James Kalshoven writes about in *RIVER ROYALTY*, Page 26, is all but inaccessible, except, of course, by boat. Kalshoven got to Pilot Town in a Louisiana State boat kindly provided by Gov. Jimmy Davis, and journeyed down to the

Passes in the same craft. Frank Ross, who went down from Philadelphia to take the pictures, said bluntly that Pilot Town is located in country only a muskrat could love. There are mosquitoes bigger than flies, flies bigger than bees, and bees far too big for comfort, Ross said, but what depressed him most was the sight of water moccasins taking their ease on the boardwalk that is Main Street. An eight-year-old swamp boy, son of a trapper, killed snakes for Ross.

To get to Southwest Pass, Ross chartered a small seaplane. Late in the day, the pilot lost his way and landed Ross at an Army engineering station. A pilot boat came and got him. The only bright spot in the long hours he spent in and over the swamps came when they found a ship aground in South Pass—nicely illustrating the pilots' troubles.

Kalshoven teaches journalism and English in Loyola University, New Orleans. Before that, he worked for the Associated Press there, and dabbled in photography. Suddenly the war took most of the AP photographers overseas, and Kalshoven found himself doubling with a camera. Shortly he was the only AP photographer for Louisiana and Mississippi, on twenty-four-hour duty. When he wasn't freezing on the side lines of a football game, he was chasing down false rumors that quintuplets had been born to some trapper's wife in the swamps, and the teaching offer sounded like a snug harbor.

His first appearance as a teacher was a nightmare. "I've been in a hurricane on the Bay of Biscay on a propellerless ship," he said. "I've had my safety belt pop loose while stunting in an open-cockpit plane. But those were emotional zephyrs compared to standing on a platform before thirty critical undergraduates. I remember I talked fast and loud, so I would not be interrupted by questions I was sure I wouldn't be able to answer."

All during the war, New Orleans newspapermen kept hearing stories of the submarines lurking at the mouth of the Mississippi Passes, and of the toll they were taking of wartime shipping, before the outbound ships were out of sight of the United States. It was prime news, but none of it could be printed; it fell in the category of military secrets. Kalshoven vowed he would tell the story when censorship lifted. It was in piecing together these accounts, after the war, that he grew interested in the remarkable job performed, in peace or in war, by the lower-river pilots.

## Sheriff Chute

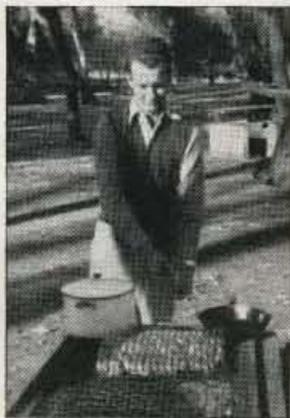
THE National Sheriffs' Association, after due deliberation, has decided to enroll Sheriff John Charles Olson, of Minnewashta County, as a member, in recognition of his good, if fictional, work in the stories by M. G. Chute. In notifying M. G. Chute of this honor, Charles J. Hahn, the association's executive secretary, also tendered an honorary life membership to the author, in spite of the fact that M. G. Chute is a woman. Mary Grace, which is the author's name, was for a time a deputy sheriff of Red Lake County, Minnesota, in a purely honorary capacity, having been appointed by another of Sheriff Olson's admirers, Sheriff Karl Kankel.

Mr. Hahn's letter arrived at an auspicious moment. Mary Grace's little daughter had just raised a question about what her mother did to earn her keep. "Daddy works hard," the child said. "Mum-mie just types." When the tyke finds out that her mother is a sheriff, Mary Grace expects a great deal more respect.

One more crack out of you, kid, and your ma will run you in for vagrancy.



James Kalshoven



John Burgan